

# A NEW FAITH

by

TinJar

# PART I

# 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 she closed her eyes. 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 ##

## PART II

# Chapter Sixteen

## ***About a decade before the murders in Sequoia...***

The same way the sun declined to set during the summer months, Kaija's flood of tears stubbornly refused to ebb. The lush green valley and the impossibly beautiful waters of the lakes stretching out like a necklace of aquamarine jewels, always a sight that soothed her during trying times, was simply no match for the grief ravaging her soul.

She sat cross-legged next to Jaska's grave for hours. Jaska, her reindeer, had been her favorite person by far. She couldn't imagine her life without him. She remembered her mother bringing the baby reindeer to her when she was a teenager. She had been a moody kid. A loner. His infectious playfulness had drawn her out of her cocoon. He had, literally, never let her be alone, always wanting to frolic with her in the wilderness.

Then just like that, he was gone. It felt as if her heart was irreparably broken.

She had been away from Jaska for almost a year, the longest ever in their decade-plus relationship. Through the long winter, she had yearned to get away from the garishly lit Oslo and go to her cabin near Skibotn. Finally, in the spring, the governments of the three countries - Sweden, Norway, and Finland - had agreed to the Sami proposal. Instead of handing over the northernmost regions of their countries to mining companies, the Sami were to be made stewards of their ancestral lands.

One hundred thousand square kilometers of land surrounding the Three-Country Cairn, the intersection point of the three countries, was to be handed over to the Sami to do with it as they will. After decades of struggle, the Sami were finally going to be reunited with their land, their waters, their trees, and their beloved reindeer. Kaija, a precocious twenty-five year-old PhD candidate studying anthropology, had led the Sami delegation through those months-long arduous negotiations.

Her elation at this outcome had known no bounds. She had been looking forward to the formal declaration. But before that, she had planned to slip away from her colleagues and spend two whole weeks with her beloved Jaska. He was the best listener ever and she had a lot to tell him. His twinkling eyes always made all her problems seem distant and trivial.

The sojourn had started well enough. Her cabin had survived another brutal winter and was in a surprisingly good shape. Within a day, Kaija had it all cleaned up and ready for her vacation. The same day, Jaska had showed up as if he had immediately sensed

that she had come to see him. Of course, he had! They were soulmates, after all.

It had been a glorious summer that felt even more joyous than usual because of the long period after which she had visited her wilderness respite. The warm breeze had smelled of clean water and humid soil. The plants and trees which had to make do with a very short summer, were bursting across the land as if they wanted to make sure that they took the deepest breath possible before the inevitable dark long winter buried them again under heavy snow.

The sun had always been there except when it was playing hide-and-seek with the thunderous clouds that would march across the sky. Kaija had lost track of the time of the day as she spent hours walking with Jaska and swimming in the lakes. Several heart-to-heart conversations had taken place and she had been looking forward to spending many such summers with him. Somewhere at the back of her mind, she had known that he was quite old and wouldn't be around for long. But still, she had deluded herself that he would be with her all her life.

There had been no warning at all, not that she had any contact with the rest of the world. There was no phone or internet service at her cabin. But more importantly, there had been no warning given by nature either. Around dusk, she had nodded off after a particularly wholesome meal of stew. Then the next thing she remembered was waking up drenched in sweat to the sounds of Jaska moaning in agony.

Dangerous heat waves had simultaneously been occurring in north America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Kaija would learn about those things much much later. At that time, though, she had been condemned to watch her beloved Jaska succumb to the debilitating heat.

She had fainted several times. Partly because of the heat and partly because she couldn't bear to see the suffering of her beloved friend. There had been nothing she could have done. There was no air-conditioning for the simple reason that her cabin was truly off-the-grid. She had used water to douse Jaska and herself to bring down their body temperature. But to no avail.

She had desperately fanned Jaska even though the humidity was so stifling that she could barely breathe herself. Shade had meant nothing. During one delirious moment, Kaija had felt that that was it - she and her soulmate were going to ascend to the heavens together. Away from this hellish weather. She had almost felt grateful for the relief that it would bring.

Alas, it wasn't to be. Jaska had become quiet after a while and then had gently slipped away while Kaija had fainted yet again. It was a while before Kaija had woken up and that too with the sound of buzzing flies. That is when she had known that her worst

fears had come true. Jaska was no more, but she had been spared.

The heat had eased off. An entire day had passed, as she had sat with his head in her lap grieving. The silent tears falling on his face had never stopped even for a moment. She knew she had to bid goodbye to her friend and promise him that one day they would be united again in the afterlife. She had buried him in the same meadow that he loved to prance around whether it was neck-deep grass in summer or knee-deep snow in winter. Through her tears she had smiled as she remembered the frolicking little reindeer.

She packed up her belongings, tidied up the cabin, and said one final goodbye to her best friend. The hike back to her car took almost five hours. She barely noticed the path as her thoughts continued to dwell on the tragedy for which she couldn't find any explanation at all.

Heat waves were not uncommon in that part of the world. However, they were never that intense and nobody had ever gotten hurt by them. They had usually lasted a day or two after which relief would arrive in the form of thunderstorms. It made some people run to the hardware stores to get portable fans and air-conditioners. But, most people simply waited them out. The animals had plenty of lakes in which they could cool themselves.

This one had been different, though. She had fainted and Jaska had died. A hardy creature like Jaska who lived through major swings in weather had succumbed in a terrible manner. What had happened?

Loss of a loved one was a new emotional experience for her. She had no idea it could hurt so much. Physically! It felt like someone had placed a heavy load on her chest. There were moments through her hike when she couldn't breathe. She stopped, bent over, gasping for every breath until the pounding in her chest subsided. She felt that her heart would just stop beating. She couldn't understand what was happening to her.

She reached her car and switched on her phone to see if there was any signal. Only one bar registered and the spinning wheel indicated that all kinds of notifications were being downloaded, albeit extremely slowly. She sighed and started on her hundred mile drive back to Tromsø from where she would take a flight to Oslo.

She was just going through the motions, she knew that. Soon she would have to focus on the most important day in the lives of the Sami people. She would have to meet with her colleagues from the International Sami Council to discuss the text of the announcement that the governments of Norway, Sweden, and Finland should have sent. She kept telling herself that later she would have time to grieve.

She switched on the music player hoping that it would lift her spirits a bit during the drive through the desolate countryside. The dark clouds that had been hanging around the horizon when she had started her hike, were on top of her head. The wind gusts picked up and rain was splattering on the windscreen every few minutes.

The light turned into a an ominous shade of green, blue, and yellow - neither dark nor bright - as if nature was trying to tell her something but was not sure what words to use exactly. The summery pop music picked up by the radio jarred against the view which felt like it was becoming sadder by the minute.

It was all probably in her head. And her heart. Then the incessant pinging of her phone started. "What now?" she thought as she quickly sneaked a look at the screen of her phone. There were hundreds of notifications of all kinds clamoring for her immediate attention. That was unusual, to say the least.

Her family, friends, and colleagues knew that she would be unavailable for a couple of weeks. In any case, they were used to her being incommunicado when she went into the wilderness. Rarely had they tried to reach her. They also knew that she was unlikely to get their messages because of sporadic coverage but more importantly, they knew that she would have switched her phone off for the entire duration she was at the cabin.

She pulled off the road at the next turn-out and grabbed her phone. At that instant, there was a prolonged flash of lightning that lit up the whole valley through which the road traversed. The terrifyingly loud thunderclap arrived a few moments later and her car literally shook from side to side as if it had been in an earthquake. She almost dropped the phone in surprise. *First the heat wave, now an unusually violent thunderstorm, whatever was going on with the world.*

Some of the initial messages seemed to be about her, asking her if she was okay. The heat wave must have alarmed her well-wishers. Of course, they had been right to worry - she had lost her best friend and was still unable to stop crying for extended periods. But then, those messages quickly petered out and still the notification count showed that there were hundreds more.

She started praying that they had nothing to do with the announcement about the agreement between the Sami people and the three countries. It wasn't. It was something so terrifying that she was chilled to her bones as she watched the videos and photos on the tiny screen of her phone.

That year, the summer in the northern hemisphere had been hot beyond comprehension. The temperatures had risen beyond fifty degrees celsius for huge swathes of humanity. So much so that they had no longer been considered as novel



occurrences. The media had stopped reporting the new records created daily in some place or the other. Only the climate and weather nerds had looked at that data in abject terror.

What had been far more scary about that August was that the wet bulb temperature had risen beyond thirty-five degrees celsius in several places with sizable populations. Worse, the night-time temperatures in many of those places had not dropped by much. Together, those two phenomena had caused deaths in unfathomably large numbers over the course of just one week. It was estimated, that at least ten million excess deaths had occurred across several countries. Most countries had simply stopped counting and announcing the number of deaths as they neither had the capacity to collate that data nor the heart to do so.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, a grand total of twenty million excess deaths had occurred over 2020-23 across the world. At its worst, 100,000 people had died in a week during those three years. In the initial months of the pandemic, the world, literally, had shut itself down to try and prevent the spread of the deadly virus. The success of the vaccines had been stupendous and prevented tens of millions of potential deaths. But what could one do with a heat event of the likes humanity had never experienced? There had simply been no time to do anything.

The initial reaction had been of utter disbelief. The reports of the tragedy had started trickling in first over social media and then in a torrent via mainstream media. What had stayed with viewers were the videos showing entire villages and towns strewn with bodies with no obvious signs of violence. People of all ages had simply keeled over and died. Their brains had shut down as the bodies could no longer cool themselves because of the deadly combination of the high temperature and high humidity.

The event had been so surreal that most people had promptly slipped into denial without even realizing it. All evidence had been refuted as fake. It had been in nobody's interest to accurately tally the number of deaths once the excruciating job of disposing of the bodies was over. In most of these places, the military had been called in to dispose of the bodies. The world had glimpsed the mass graves and mass cremations during the Covid-19 pandemic. This time around there would be no video records kept by anyone simply because no one had the ability to sufficiently distance themselves from the tragedy to hit the record button on a camera. Most of the military personnel who had been assigned this task were emotionally so broken that they would soon be discharged on medical grounds. The trauma would stay with them for the rest of their lives many of which were cut short because of suicides.

Kaija, already struggling to cope with Jaska's death, couldn't deal with this catastrophe at all. She simply stopped talking. Her eyes were empty, as if there was no heart or brain left in her body that would tell them what to show. There was nothing to show. The

body was an empty shell.

#####

She had no recollection of those first three days after she had come back from her cabin. The survival mechanism had kicked in and the mind had refused to record those horrible memories in order to protect itself from complete disintegration. Somehow she had managed to drive to Tromsø and catch her flight to Oslo.

On the fourth day, she was sitting in the corner of the conference room at the International Sami Council's office. She heard some voices. It seemed that some of her colleagues were shouting at each other. She was puzzled. The last thing she seemed to remember was leaving her cabin. *How did she get here? How long had it been since Jaska left her?*

More than ever she wished she could hug Jaska and bury her head in the fur of his neck to escape from all this. As these questions tumbled around in her mind, she realized that large fat tears had started flowing and she was again helplessly sobbing. The images in front of her eyes blurred and the voices started fading as all she could hear was Jaska's weak whimpering.

Simone hurried over to her and sat down next to her. She quietly hugged her for a long time and waited for Kaija's sobbing to subside. Slowly, Kaija's tears stopped and heaving one deep breath, she looked up over Simone's shoulders at her colleagues.

"I am okay now. Thanks Simone!" Kaija said softly as she extracted herself from the warm hug.

"What day is it?" she asked.

"We are two days away from the announcement!" shouted Hans.

It was a strange exclamation. There was joy in Hans' voice but his face seemed stricken. With a massive jolt, Kaija remembered the news she saw on her drive back to the city. *Oh my god! That had been no nightmare. That hadn't been her mind playing tricks on her because of her grief. It had been real. It had happened.*

She started shivering and Simone tentatively moved toward her again in case Kaija collapsed. Simone was puzzled. The expression on Kaija's face had been of shock and also of some sudden realization. But that didn't make any sense. She had just been crying.

“What happened Kaija? What’s going on in your mind?”

“I... I just remembered... that horrific tragedy. I... it all happened... didn’t it?” Kaija said, more a statement than a question, not aimed at anyone in particular.

“Yes. It is terrible. But if you just remembered it, then why were you crying earlier?”

“I lost Jaska. I mean... Jaska died when I was with him last week at my cabin.

He just couldn’t survive the heat.

I miss him so much.”

A moan escaped her as the pain in her heart returned.

“And then on my way back to Tromso, I stopped to check my messages and I saw the news...”

“Oh dear! I am so sorry to hear about Jaska,” Simone replied with moistening eyes.

In a trance, Kaija got up from the chair and walked to the window overlooking the courtyard. It was a bright afternoon. In her heart, though, the darkness had settled back in.

#####

The day before the signing of the treaty, Kaija managed to pull herself together long enough to finalize her speech. The heartache was still there. She was able push it into the background for those brief periods of time when she was talking with her colleagues or working on her speech.

In one of those rare periods of normalcy, the thoughts of the global tragedy swept through her already debilitated mind. All she could think about was the pain felt by the families, friends, and communities that had lost loved ones in the horrific tragedy. Millions had died just like Jaska. Tens of millions more had suffered through the heat just like she herself had. And hundreds of millions were now heart-broken just like she was.

Her pain would ebb over time or at least she hoped it would. It wouldn’t happen to her again as there would always be only one Jaska in her life. But for all those hundreds of

millions heartbroken people, the possibility of similar tragedies happening repeatedly was very high. In all likelihood, the ones who had died would be the blessed ones. The ones who had survived would be the cursed ones as they would have to live day after day through the heartache the same as Kaija.

Billions were living in places that were in the crosshairs of future climate disasters with almost no hope of getting any material support for coping with them. They were condemned to death or something even worse, living long enough to suffer through repeated catastrophes while also carrying the burden of unending sorrow for the rest of their lives.

How could the rest of the world be okay with this? Kaija's world had hitherto been a compact one. She had not really been aware of the world outside of the Nordic countries. In fact, she had never even traveled outside of that region. She had lived in a bubble that consisted mainly of Sami people. The pandemic had made this bubble smaller. Every now and then when she had to spend time in one of the major cities such as Oslo or Stockholm, she had run across people from other parts of the world. Sometimes she had ventured beyond her comfort zone and attempted to taste non-Sami food. But those occasions had been rare.

Those people who had lost someone in the global tragedy were complete strangers to her. She would have been hard pressed to even point those locations out on a map. She knew no names and she certainly wouldn't have been able to put a face to any name she may have come across in the news. But she was connected with those people in a very fundamental way. She knew their pain. She had experienced their pain. She knew who they had become after the catastrophe and what they were going through without ever meeting them.

#####

Finally, the day arrived. Kaija was the one who had made this day happen. She was the one who had worked tirelessly to cajole and press the governments of those three nations to allocate at least ten percent of their land mass to be autonomously managed by the Sami. Nights and days, weeks and months had passed in coming up with the arrangement as none of those nations had been willing to even consider such autonomy. But Kaija was that unusual combination of intellect, passion, and compassion who had made it a reality.

The Sami would be designated as the sole "Stewards of the Land". However, they would have no rights to exploit the natural resources in their domain. Not that the Sami had sought autonomy to exploit nature in the first place. On the contrary, the Sami had always held nature as sacrosanct. In fact, they had sought autonomy over their domain to limit the national governments from exploiting nature.

The text of the treaty had been finalized in late July just before Kaija went on her vacation. All that was remaining was the formal signing that would kick off a month of celebrations. Of course, in the light of the global catastrophe, there would be no celebrations of any kind.

On the morning of the day when the treaty was to be signed, Kaija sipped a cup of chamomile tea and some toast at the hotel's breakfast counter. In their excitement about the day, most of her colleagues had already finished their breakfast and were eagerly glancing at Kaija every few minutes to see if she was done. They were all going to walk over to the venue of the press conference - the plaza in front of the Nobel Peace Center.

Kaija was deep in thought. Simone assumed that Kaija was going over her speech. They had all read it and provided feedback to her. It was a good speech - dignified and replete with compassion for nature. The Sami could finally look forward to a self-governed future after centuries of being largely ignored by the dominant Scandinavian society. Kaija was exactly the right person to deliver that speech. The numerous compromises and assurances that Kaija had managed to wrangle from the three countries was quite an achievement from a purely diplomatic perspective. Simone thought that young Kaija could easily become one of the leading global diplomats if she decided to follow that path.

The only black mark against this achievement was the utter lack of interest shown by the Russians. They hadn't even bothered to talk with the Sami, let alone come to the table with the other three countries. The tensions between the Nordic countries and Russia had continued to simmer ever since Russia had launched its long and brutal campaign of annexing those countries that used to be part of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Norway had rapidly become a major provider of oil and gas to Europe which had decisively reduced the market for Russia's main export. That had severe consequences for the Russian economy and in turn the domestic politics. Since then, the Russians had simply embargoed all serious conversations with European countries.

Hans couldn't help himself and started nagging everyone to start walking to the venue. Kaija was the last one to get up from her breakfast table. She looked calm. Nary a sign of the nervous wreck she had been over the past week. She looked focused and grim. Maybe, she was summoning up all her strength for the day, Simone felt. Although, that wouldn't explain the intense sparkle in Kaija's eyes. Kaija rapidly strode up to her colleagues and then continued to go past them instead of slowing down to exchange pleasantries - almost as if she was on a mission and did not want to be distracted by anything.

#####

Quite a large crowd, maybe in hundreds, was gathered at the venue. The majority, obviously, were the Sami dressed up in their traditional attire. Of course, there were numerous supporters of the Sami in the crowd, too. There was some singing going on. But the exuberance was muted at best. Probably, most folks simply wanted to get through this event as quickly as possible. The global tragedy was, no doubt, continuing to weigh on everyone's minds.

As the clock struck 9 am, the various dignitaries stepped onto the stage. The Prime Ministers of all three countries had decided to bless this event with their presence instead of merely sending their respective Interior Ministers. The four women - three Prime Ministers, all in their first terms, and Kaija - sat down together at the table placed on the stage. The treaty document was laid out in front of them on the table. As per the sequence determined before the event, the Swedish Prime Minister affixed her signature on the agreement first followed by the Norwegian PM, the Finnish PM, and finally, Kaija.

There was a brief but raucous moment of applause as the press snapped pictures of the four women, proudly, holding the treaty together for the world to see. All three PMs were smiling broadly. But Kaija continued to look grim throughout the signing ceremony. If anything, her stare became even more intense. Simone was getting a bit worried. I hope the speech goes well, she thought to herself. *Fingers crossed!*

The three PMs delivered their remarks, again in the same sequence in which they had signed the treaty. While the remarks were all delivered in their languages, the content of all three speeches was more or less identical. It was mostly about patting themselves on their backs for finally managing to do right by the Sami. It would play very well on the evening news later that day and in the newspapers next morning. Their supporters would applaud them while their opponents would try to find ways to criticize them. Within a couple of news cycles, this treaty and the event would be lost in the noise.

After the Finnish PM sat down to yet another round of polite applause, the TV cameras swept over to Kaija. Just for an instant, uncertainty flashed over Kaija's face. It was quickly replaced by the grim look as she stood up and walked to the podium to deliver her speech. It would be among the most purposeful ten steps from the chair to the podium that the world would witness.

The dilemma that Kaija had been mulling over for the past twenty-four hours was resolved. She brought out a copy of the speech and laid it out carefully in front of her on the podium's table top. She pushed an errant strand of hair back behind her left ear. Then took a deep breath and tried to slow down her racing heart. Another deep breath and clearing of throat got the small audience fidgeting. She looked up from the paper, squared her shoulders, and announced forcefully, "we, the Sami, extend an invitation to all the people affected by the global tragedy to re-locate to our land where they are far

less likely to face the harmful impacts of climate change!”

## Chapter Seventeen

Camille Hansen had been standing all the way in the back when Kaija had made her sensational statement. Well - it was sensational for the people who were paying close attention to what was being said on the stage. Almost everybody else had only been listening to the speeches in an absent-minded fashion. Some, such as the journalists, were there just because they had been ordered to cover the event.

In any other country, a press conference where the Prime Ministers of three nations were standing on a podium would have been a major event. In the Oslo, it merely raised a few eyebrows. The mention of Sami people in the same breath as the three Prime Ministers made those precious few eyebrows go right back to their normal altitudes. If not for the ridiculous reactions of the three Prime Ministers to Kaija's statement, this would have been the non-event that everyone had expected it to be.

After a stunned moment of silence in the aftermath of Kaija's invitation, all three Prime Ministers had collectively lost their minds. They had sprang up from their chairs and physically pushed Kaija away from the microphone. She had stumbled for a few steps and then crashed down on the stage. The Prime Ministers then proceeded to mindlessly jostle with each other to get their hands on the microphone to say something.

After a few seconds of madness, they looked at each other and stopped fighting. The same unspoken thought seemed to have passed through their minds. The Swedish and Finnish PMs stepped back and the Norwegian PM took charge of the microphone. She cleared her throat but still she could only croak out, "please ignore what she said just now." Then she made a sign to her team to end this event and along with the other two PMs walked away briskly before anyone from the audience had a chance to react.

Camille and her fellow protestors had shown up for the event solely because of the three PMs and the TV cameras. They happened to be in Oslo that day and had nothing else going on. Camille had to cajole all of them into going with her to the event and do their usual schtick of shouting slogans and waving signs. She and her friends had been so de-spirited since the tragedy of the heat wave, that they had taken to getting high most of the time. At some point, Camille had been awake long enough to have scanned the local news. She had noticed that event and purely out of long habit, she had started preparing for protesting at it. The morning of the event, most of her friends had still been hung over. She woke all of them up and poured liberal amounts of strong coffee in them. None were in the mood to do any protests, but Camille's steady stream of encouragement and infectious optimism had got them going that morning.

As a teenager, Camille had enthusiastically joined the Fridays for the Future movement



that Greta Thunberg had launched several years ago. Initially, it had been fantastic. She had participated in the protests every Friday without fail and then some. She had become one of the top organizers of protests in Norway. She had also helped plan numerous protests all over Europe. Slowly but surely, though, she had gotten dismayed by the lack of change in policies.

The pandemic years had stymied their movement as all group activities were canceled. Barely had they started to get their act together after the pandemic, when the war in Europe had begun. A few good things did happen in Europe in the initial couple of years of the war, though. People switched to efficient heat pumps from gas/oil furnaces. Many others dumped their petrol/diesel vehicles and bought electric cars.

The climate disasters continued to unfold all over the world including in Europe. Rivers dried up and heat waves killed thousands. Floods destroyed entire villages and towns. Experts grew hoarse as they tried to remind the politicians to do more. The grim reports forecasting future horrors kept piling up and the world grew numb to the daily tragedies that were taking place at some place or the other. Yet, the stranglehold of the fossil fuels on the world stubbornly refused to relax.

The strident optimists would proudly showcase the successes. The weary pessimists had more or less given up any hope. The doomers spouted dark stuff that was almost tailor-made to bring down whatever little hope that existed in the minds of the few who were still thinking about these issues. Then there were those who had started contemplating the use of extra-legal force to enact the necessary changes. They were actually thinking of blowing up things such as oil/gas pipelines and coal/gas power plants. They knew that this approach could backfire and turn the masses against them. But they had run out of peaceful ideas to achieve their objectives. They were desperate.

In the end, some of these desperate folks found an outlet for their anger by deflating the tires of large SUVs and attacking works of art in the hope that their actions would catch the imagination of the masses. They hoped that, in turn, this would create a new bottom-up movement that could lead to bigger changes at the ballot-boxes. Of course, that did not happen. The elections in democracy after democracy were getting decided through the terrifying use of dark money that fueled the humongous growth of misinformation. Reasonable discourse almost vanished. People became too jaded to engage with any worthwhile topic.

Camille and a few like-minded folks had toyed with the ideas of destruction. But they just didn't seem to make any kind of sense when one started to think about the impacts of those actions. Although, the fossil fuel companies would be affected to a certain extent, the predominant impact would be on the poor who would get even less fuel because they couldn't afford it. She had defaulted back to organizing protests throughout Europe. It was an empty gesture, but still, it felt like she was doing

something rather than nothing. The heat wave tragedy a few days ago had snuffed out even that pitiful spark of enthusiasm. Everything just looked bleak.

It was during this funk that she and her friends were forcing themselves to go through the motions of protesting at yet another official event where the three PMs happened to be on a stage together. Camille had read about the event but by the time she and her friends had showed up, she had forgotten what it was all about. She hadn't even been paying attention to the speeches as she was busy distributing flyers and shouting her usual slogans. No one else in her group had been listening to the speeches either.

They all looked up toward the stage when there was the sudden silence. Camille glanced at the large screen where the speech was being projected. Maybe this silent moment was in remembrance of the recent global tragedy. She fully expected to see everyone on stage standing still with their heads bowed. Instead she could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw the three PMs physically assault the young woman who was giving the speech at the podium. She was livid with the unfairness of that action - justified or not. What the hell was going on?!

Without realizing it, Camille started running toward the stage to not only express her indignation but to try and help the poor woman who seemed to have collapsed on the stage. Subconsciously, she noted that none of that woman's colleagues had stepped up to help her. In fact, not a single person came forward to help. That was strange. To top it off, one the PMs mumbled something and then all three of them were whisked away by their security entourage. The crowd was not sure how to react to what had just unfolded in front of their eyes. The nimble people of the press were the only ones who had registered the words and actions. They understood the full import of it and instantly broke up in two teams, one headed to the stage to interview Kaija while the other rushed off behind the three PMs.

"What had this woman said that would elicit such a reaction from these famously peace-loving and polite politicians?" wondered Camille. It all seemed incomprehensible.

One of her friends joined up with her as she neared the stage. The press beat them to it and completely surrounded Kaija who seemed to be sitting now. Camille managed to barge through the gaggle of reporters and their camera-persons. She dropped down to her knees and asked Kaija if she had been hurt. Kaija shook her head.

"Did you really mean what you said?" a young man with glasses and unruly hair yelled.

Camille helped Kaija to her feet. She still did not have a clue about what Kaija had said on the stage a few moments ago. She held on to Kaija to steady her. She noticed that

the young woman's body was almost vibrating with emotion as her eyes blazed at the reporter.

"Of course - I meant every single word!" she snapped.

Then regaining some amount of her composure she repeated what she had said in a steady even voice, "we must offer refuge to the people who are most affected by the climate disasters. We cannot idly watch as millions and millions of them suffer and die. On behalf of the Sami people, I invite them to the land that has historically belonged to us and was today formally returned to us. It is the right thing to do. It is the only thing to do!"

Camille was awestruck by this young woman. She didn't even know her name let alone have any idea of who she was and what she represented. But the statement she had just made was so blindingly simple and straightforward, that it felt like she had been plunged into a bucket of ice-cold water. Duh! Of course, it was the right thing to do. Of course, it was the only thing to do. And just like that Camille found a way out of the depression that she and her friends had been afflicted with. The fact that the PMs had rudely and forcefully pushed Kaija aside meant that the resistance to Kaija's statement was staunch. In that instant, Camille decided that she would do anything and everything to make Kaija's simple proclamation a reality. Even as she was making this resolution, some of the cops who had been on duty at the event firmly separated her from Kaija. Then they formed a small circle around Kaija as they escorted her away from the reporters. Clearly, they had been ordered to do so by someone, albeit somewhat belatedly. That small delay in quelling Kaija's voice was sufficient to ensure that her idea would not die prematurely.

## Chapter Eighteen

The governments of Sweden, Norway, and Finland promptly tore up the treaty with the Sami. Not satisfied with that, they viciously leaned on the Sami to completely disown Kaija. Then the three PMs savagely reprimanded the Sami leadership behind closed doors for allowing this to happen in the first place. An official statement was read out by the Sami spokesperson where it was mentioned that Kaija had recently been impacted by a great personal tragedy because of which she had not been in her right mind and that she had never discussed her speech with any of her colleagues, friends, and family let alone with the three national governments.

None of the Sami were able to articulate their protests. What Kaija had gone and done was beyond their comprehension. The whole point of their movement was to protect the Sami land from the rest of the world. The Sami leaders had been absolutely bewildered by the complete about-face by Kaija when she had invited millions - maybe, billions - of refugees to come live on that same land. She MUST have completely lost her mind.

After the initial state of confusion, many had felt betrayed by her and were understandably livid. They had probably lost the opportunity to carve out a place for themselves for good. There was no way anyone was ever going to take them seriously in the future. They were very vocal in their denunciation of Kaija as they carried the faintest of hope that the treaty could still be salvaged.

Then there were the few who genuinely felt bad for Kaija. Poor thing - she needed help. But they were scared to reach out and give her that help because they were worried that they would be cast out by their community if they did so. So they stayed quiet. It didn't matter. The three national governments had decided to put an immediate end to this topic. There would be no further discussions with the Sami. Or at least that is what they thought.

Unfortunately - for those three governments and the Sami (not that their opinion mattered much) - Camille had very different thoughts about Kaija's announcement. It was as if Kaija had flicked on a switch somewhere in Camille's soul. The passion that Camille had fitfully tried to channel in the protest movements against the well-entrenched fossil industry had now found the right direction. She was going to force the issue of migration as a way to deal with the terrifying impacts of climate change.

Camille's initial impulse was to rely on loud and frequent demonstrations in front of the major government buildings in Oslo, Stockholm, and Helsinki. She used all her experience to help organize the biggest demonstrations that had two immediate effects. The first one was good. The demonstrations brought the world's attention to

Kaija's speech. While the video of that historic speech went viral, the real Kaija was nowhere to be seen. The second effect was the opposite of what Camille had been aiming for. The demonstrations unleashed such a massive wave of nativism that it threatened to completely drown Camille's nascent movement. The three nations had never seen such a toxic mix of racism, nativism, fascism, sexism, and many other kinds of ugly -isms bursting forth in their respective societies.

Camille was stung by the viciousness of the vitriol that was being flung at her for the first time in her life. She was used to the crassness of the online trolling from the fossil industry. She had developed a thick skin against that crap. But this was something entirely different.

It came from everywhere including her family and friends. Why were her parents shouting at her? Grand-parents? Aunts? Uncles? Random old men screaming at her as she walked down the street? The people that she had looked up to while growing up had instantly been transformed into rude assholes. The people that had been supportive of her advocacy against fossil fuels seemed to have lost their marbles and their sense of perspective completely. It was as if evil had captured their souls and turned them into demons that would lash out at her whenever she happened to be in their vicinity.

What had Kaija said that had caused such a revulsion among the society that she had grown up in? Initially, when the media had begun to cover the demonstrations, the governments had been worried. But as they saw the mood of their societies swing so decisively against Camille's movement, they gleefully joined in to torch it whenever they got a chance. Their spokespersons could barely keep their joy in check as they smugly held press conference after press conference to shake their heads at these troubled young people. They would not reject any opportunity to give interviews all over the world about how the young were being misled by unhinged leaders such as Kaija. Again, there was absolutely no sign of Kaija anywhere in all this ruckus. She had simply vanished since that fateful day. Some even assumed that she had been secretly imprisoned or even worse, executed and her body disposed off. No one, of course, tried to find out what really had happened to her. She was one of the most hated figures in Scandinavia.

#####

Camille and her friends decided to hit the pause button on their demonstrations. In fact, they went underground. Away from the spotlight, they wanted to take stock of the situation. In a few days, the media lost interest as there was no one left to beat up. Secretly, the governments heaved a sigh of relief as they had started to worry about the increasing support for fringe ideas that were a bit too close to outright Nazism. The last thing they wanted to see happen was the right-wing parties using this to expand their voter-base. It was best to use the disappearance of Camille's movement from the

public domain to cut off the oxygen to this issue. The outpouring of so much bile had also left a bitter after-taste for many people. It was best to forget this whole thing and focus on other issues.

Camille fruitlessly ruminated over her experience of the past few days. Despite the numerous heated discussions with her friends and the leaders of the movement, she was not at all clear why their near and dear ones had so definitively opposed the obviously kind gesture of providing a refuge to unfortunate people from climate-ravaged countries.

Camille called her favorite aunt to inform her that she was alive but planned to continue her incommunicado status for a few more days. This aunt had lived in the state of Georgia in the US during her graduate studies many years ago. She had witnessed the tumultuous struggle between the two political parties on the issue of voting rights. The white supremacists who were dominant with one of the parties wanted to turn the clock back to the pre-Civil War days when the blacks had no rights whatsoever. While the liberals in the other party wanted to put an end to the discrimination that minorities continued to face despite the painstaking progress that had been made over the decades.

During the call, Camille's aunt made a simple observation that maybe the native Norwegians were scared that their world would vanish if hordes of foreigners were allowed to live in their countries. Even if the reason for those foreigners to be in their countries is for pure survival and not as a conquering army. To Camille's aunt, this was such an obvious explanation that she mentioned it only in passing as they were about to hang up the phone. For Camille, though, it was like bolt of lightning reveals the entire landscape.

The perversity of the behavior of her near and dear ones disgusted her. They were fine with democratic and liberal values only when most of the voters were people similar to them. The mere possibility of majority of the voters being completely different from them, made democracy and liberalism untenable for them in such a visceral way that even they had managed to surprise themselves. Wishing away those democratic and liberal values was just as distasteful for them. After all, no one wanted to bring back apartheid. Kaija's speech had forced them to confront this choice without any warning - live with refugees who would vastly outnumber the natives and may have fundamentally different preferences OR live in an apartheid. No one wanted to face this choice. That is why they had raged at Camille's movement.

They really did not want to even think about this. Thinking about it made them feel bad about themselves. They hated the fact that they were unable to think of every human as being equal. They had always thought of themselves as these enlightened liberals who routinely castigated bigots. But when faced with the possibility that they would be outnumbered by people who did not look like them or talk like them or think like them in

their own country had brought to surface their innate bigotry. The bigotry that they did not know they had in them all along.

The story that they had been telling themselves and others where they were the glittering stars who looked beatifically upon the world was after all just that, a story. Just as unreal as a novel or a movie. And they truly hated that fact about themselves. It was no surprise then that they had hurled abuse at the person or persons who had forced this realization on them. The reaction of the three PMs on that stage when Kaija was making her speech now made complete sense to Camille. No one ever wants to be put in a situation where their hypocrisy is revealed to all, but most importantly to themselves. Especially, a hypocrisy that doesn't pertain to a trivial personal vice but to a fundamental belief about their essential personality.

Camille hastily convened the whole group and described her revelation to them. Slowly and then vigorously, everyone started nodding their heads in agreement as they thought about their own experiences over the last few days. This rang true. There was elation as they felt that they finally understood the main reason behind their pain. They were excitedly pointing out numerous examples that validated Camille's insights.

That sense of excitement started ebbing as it started dawning on them that knowing the source of resistance did not mean that they had any ideas for overcoming it. All that had happened was the anger they had experienced from their loved ones was no longer something mysterious. The hypocrisy of their loved ones made them feel terrible. Some felt so sick that they stepped out to throw up. Some were deeply saddened and started crying. Some became so angry that they smashed stuff lying around them as the veins in their faces threatened to pop. Camille grew silent as the emotions of her friends walloped her. Her jaw was clenched tightly as she stared unblinkingly at some point in the distance that only she could see. The unfairness of it all was so galling that she couldn't even find the right words to express it. She silently fulminated against the whole society.

She felt trapped. No longer were her main antagonists faceless evil fossil-fuel corporations. She was confronting people that she had known all her life. People she loved and admired. People that evoked powerful emotions in her heart. She had laughed with them. She had cried in front of them. She had begged them. As a child, she had innocently manipulated them. The very notion that their hypocrisy was akin to being evil would have seemed laughable to her. How was she going to persuade them? Would any words that she could muster together ever move them from their impregnable position? She couldn't really understand how the kindness and generosity and love that all these people had in them, that she herself had experienced countless times, had suddenly dried up so completely. What could she say to break through this wall that they had built seemingly overnight? Maybe... maybe, she thought that the time for words was gone. It was time for something visceral.

## Chapter Nineteen

When Camille had started organizing protests rather than merely being a participant in them, she had spent quite a bit of time learning about the history of protests. She had watched numerous documentaries and even some movies about famous activists.

One particular scene from an old movie, “Gandhi”, had stuck in her mind. It was the biography of an Indian freedom-fighter who had thoroughly rejected the violent form of protests. Decades ago, almost single-handedly he had motivated tens of millions of Indians to successfully use non-violent and peaceful protests which led to the defeat the British colonizers.

The scene from the movie that had hit Camille in her gut showed the famous Dandi Salt March. The British had imposed an unfair tax on salt. To protest that, Gandhi had marched for days on end to the coastal location of Dandi where he had defied the British by taking the salt without paying any taxes. Over the course of twenty-four days, thousands upon thousands of protesters had joined him in that march. All unarmed. All peacefully raising slogans against the draconian tax.

As the popularity of the march had grown, the British had panicked. They had to put an end to this march before it became a nightmare for them. Just as the protesters had been about to reach the salt works, the British troops had barred the protester’s path.

Then something incredible had happened. The protesters hadn’t stopped their march. They hadn’t attacked the soldiers. In fact, they hadn’t even prepared to defend themselves from the soldiers. Instead, the protesters had formed rows and walked steadfastly toward the troops. Fear and courage had competed in their hearts. But such had been the power of Gandhi’s idea of nonviolent civil disobedience that they had held each other’s hands and walked into a barrage of blows the British soldiers had mercilessly rained on them. As each row of protesters had fallen to the ground covered in blood, the one behind it had fearlessly stepped forward to take the blows.

Not a single protester had raised their hand against the soldiers. The soldiers couldn’t believe that it was humanly possible to not retaliate. This had been unprecedented. Camille had tears of rage in her eyes as she had watched row after row of people of all ages getting cut down by the soldiers. The freely flowing blood had drenched their mostly white clothes. Her fists had been clenched as she found herself screaming at them to fight back against this injustice. The protesters had easily outnumbered the soldiers and could have overwhelmed the soldiers if they had wished to do so. But the protesters hadn’t even tried to protect their faces from the vicious whacks of the truncheons. They had been so firm in their belief that they had somehow managed to



control their reflexive evasive actions.

The press that had assembled to cover this confrontation had been aghast at this spectacle. And then, the faces of the soldiers had come into focus. They had been the ones who had the weapons. But they had fear in their eyes. They had tears in their eyes as they followed their orders to crush the nonviolent protesters. And that was exactly the outcome Gandhi had been seeking. He had wanted the oppressors to confront the consequences of their actions. He had wanted the oppressors to change from within. He had wanted them to abandon the evil they were perpetrating.

The change would - then - be real and resilient. Force cannot create such a change even if it subdues the opposition because that action always leads to a reaction - as Gandhi had put it cogently, “an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” His goal had been to resolve the conflict once and for all by changing the hearts and minds of the oppressors. In that endeavor, if he had to personally suffer through immense physical pain, then so be it. These stories continued to inspire millions all over the world in subsequent years. The mass marches that Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. had led in the US to end segregation were explicitly based on the nonviolent protests pioneered by Gandhi. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela had been inspired by Gandhi.

Camille hadn't been able to sleep for days after watching that movie. That scene had played over and over in her mind. She had re-lived those emotions of anger and sadness again and again. Later she had read the stories of other freedom-fighters who had gone on hunger strikes when they had been jailed. One story in particular was that of Bhagat Singh, a young Indian idealist in his early twenties who had been sentenced to death for a non-violent act of protest. While in jail, he had undertaken a hunger strike to draw attention to the horrible conditions of the prisoners. One of his fellow strikers had died after rejecting food for 63 days. She was in awe of the incredible passion and courage that these people - as young as she was - had shown almost a century ago.

It was time to emulate those formidable acts from another time and another place in order to achieve the change that she was seeking here and now. The time for peaceful protests was over. Hunger strikes were required and not symbolic ones. The real ones where the strikers were willing to die if their demands were not met.

One quiet morning, Camille asked everyone to assemble in the open space in their camp. Calmly and precisely, Camille spelled out the proposal to undertake hunger strikes in order to force their governments and the public-at-large to accept climate refugees.

There was pin-drop silence as she concluded her speech. Slowly, several people nodded their approval. Camille's resolve seeped into the consciousness of all her friends. Every single person joined her in this endeavor knowing full well that some of

them may not survive. But then, what was the point of surviving in this world anyway. How could they live in their safe bubbles when millions suffered all over the world? If this was not a do-or-die situation then they didn't know what one was. If they were not able to back their fundamental belief with action commensurate with the seriousness of the situation, then they would never be able to face their conscience again. If this didn't force people to change their minds, then nothing else would. There would be no point in living in that world anyway.

No time was wasted in further discussions. Camille and her friends set up their protest at the same venue where Kaija had made her now famous speech - the plaza in front of the Nobel Peace Center. Two dozen people formed a small circle as they began their hunger strike. The rest of the group put up the signs stating their sole demand, "let the climate refugees in." On a separate sign, the group printed out a formal statement where they had noted that they were prepared to fast until death unless their demands were met. The statement was broadcast widely on social media.

More than a hundred years ago, a union leader had made a pithy observation about movements - "first they ignore you. Then they ridicule you. And then they attack you and want to burn you. And then they build monuments to you." Camille and her friends were about to find out how accurate that observation was.

Indeed, the government chose to studiously ignore the group of fasting youth for a whole week. These entitled bunch of kids did not have any idea what it meant to be hungry - the thinking went. Running out to do protests on weekends where the main activity was carrying signs and shouting slogans while shooting videos that would be posted on social media - that was all these kids were capable of. They didn't know what suffering was all about. Within a couple of days, they will go back to their rich parents whining that no one came to check on them.

In fact, the parents made the same calculation and ignored their children's hunger strike for two full days. But the kids surprised them and out of concern the parents showed up at the strike to convince their child to eat something and, of course, stop this nonsense. The wan faces of their children showed a calm and steely determination that they never knew existed. The entire group - those who were fasting and those that were there in solidarity - had taken a vow of silence. There were to be no discussions and debates, they had all decided. Their demand was crystal clear and so were the consequences of it not being met.

After a few rounds of persuasion, both individual and collective, the parents realized that the kids seemed to be resolute and unified. Not a single kid broke the vigil. Although, the parents thought them as kids, every single one of the fasting youth were, legally speaking, adults and there was nothing the parents could do by force.

The parents were getting increasingly worried as hours went by with no change in the situation. They had seen with their own eyes that the kids were deadly serious. They thought that maybe the kids will get over this tantrum if they got the attention they were seeking. So some of the parents who were well-connected with the media arranged for a press conference. The hope was that once the kids felt that they were heard loud and clear, they would end this stunt.

It was true, a fair number of parents indeed thought that this was a childish tantrum that their entitled kid was throwing. In general, they had been supportive of their kids' advocacy activities. But when the kids had picked up the issue of climate refugees, that support had evaporated. When the protests had ended and their children had gone away, the parents had assumed that they would smoke some pot and get drunk for a few days before getting back to their usual lives. The last thing any parent was expecting was this escalation where lives were at stake. If not lives, at least short-term health was at stake, thought a few optimistic parents.

The press had been ignoring this hunger strike for the simple reason that their audience had become tired of all the protests. There was someone or the other always protesting for or against something and there was only so much emotional energy the lay person could rustle up to engage with whatever that issue was.

The media's overall wariness also had another important reason. When Camille and her group had marched the first time around in support of climate refugees, the public backlash had been formidable. The media coverage - including, the critical one - had been deemed as providing support for Camille's ideas. The media had faced the brunt from advertisers and were justifiably reluctant to incur the wrath of their audience all over again.

It took two full days of entreaties by the parents to get a response from the media. The mainstream media decided to continue to ignore them making up all kinds of excuses so as to not sound cruel. The alternative media, in contrast, saw this as an opportunity to further cement its image as covering important issues, especially, those that the mainstream media chose to not cover.

A bunch of alternative media journalists showed up for the press conference right on schedule. They were greeted with a hastily put together podium where the parents of the fasting children were aimlessly milling around. The hunger strikers and their friends had continued with the vow of silence. It had been almost five days. Not one individual among those who were fasting had eaten anything. On the contrary, another half a dozen had joined them over those five days. All they had done was occasionally sip a few drops of water.

The impact of the fasting was evident as a few needed to lean against some kind of

support in order to stay upright. The loss of weight was noticeable. The parents were becoming more and more anxious. They had been consulting doctors about the implications of multi-day fasting and what they were hearing was equal part good and bad. The good part was that no one was in any danger of dying. These were all healthy people in the prime of their lives. Their ability to recover from this was excellent. The bad part was that there would be some adverse health impacts and it would take a good chunk of time to recover from them. The longer the fast continued the worse the impacts and the longer the recovery time.

After several minutes had gone by, the journalists became impatient and prodded a few of the parents to get the press conference going. The parents looked at each other questioningly and then they all turned to look at their children. They had told the children that the press was there to talk to them. But the children had merely pointed at the printed statement. Finally, one of the parents stepped up to the podium and began to speak softly. He said that he was reading the statement on behalf of his son who was among the people who were fasting. Then he indicated that the statement had already been circulated online.

The statement was so direct that the journalists didn't know what was left to ask. So they ended up ignoring the statement and made a beeline for the human element of the story. What were the names of the people who were fasting? What were their backgrounds? The parents had no choice but to talk about their children in far more detail than they were prepared to do. But they were the ones who had brought in the press in the first place. Their children had not even deigned to look at them or the press.

The journalists tried to find some interesting angles for their stories in the interviews with the parents. But almost no one tried to go and talk with the children. It was apparent that the children were not going to budge from their vow of silence. Still, the visuals of the obviously starving children were too powerful to ignore. In a few hours, several stories popped up online that described the lives of Camille's group along with heart-wrenching photos. Most of the journalists who had filed those stories did not expect to get many hits. They had mentally moved on to their next stories immediately after filing them. Somewhere, though, maybe it was the stark photos that did it, but something resonated with young people across Norway. In a short time, the echoes from those stories emerged all over the Nordic countries and then from many parts of Europe.

The next morning saw a trickle of youngsters from Oslo and surrounding areas making its way to the Nobel Peace Center. They had come to see for themselves if those stories were true. Over the rest of the day, the trickle grew and grew until it was a steady stream. Teenagers, college kids, and young professionals came in groups to the site of the hunger strike. Many had come simply because some friend of theirs was going and they had tagged along for the heck of it. But when they came and saw that

circle of young people who were quietly recording their ultimate protest, they were infected by the passion radiating from that place.

In that day alone, several dozen more people sat down to join the hunger strike. Hundreds more stood silently in support. Thousands more raised their voices both in the real and virtual world to emphatically state the demand of the fasting folks. The simple and straightforward logic behind the demand that had first appealed to Camille when she had heard Kaija speak, now seemed obvious to the rapidly growing movement.

Mainstream media was stunned by the scale at which this silent movement had grown overnight. They could no longer ignore this story. Finally, the big-name journalists showed up on the site and attempted to talk with the strikers and their supporters. Again and again, the strikers pointed them to the statement and persevered with their silence. Eventually, the journalists were forced to let go of the human element angle and focus on the demand itself. For the first time, the demand was broadcast in its entirety across the mainstream media not just in Norway but all over the world.

It stated:

“Europe and North America are both responsible for and the beneficiaries of the activities that continue to cause climate change because of which many regions in Asia, Africa, and South America have become uninhabitable. Europe and North America have vast tracts of empty habitable land. Therefore, Europe and North America must immediately make this land available for the resettlement of people from Asia, Africa, and South America.”

That's it. No mention of money. No talk of complicated policies. Only the demand to move people out of harm's way. In the immediate aftermath of the horrific heat wave that had killed millions barely a couple of months ago, it was impossible to argue against any aspect of the statement however much the so-called experts valiantly attempted to do so.

The impact of this simple idea was electrifying. Hunger strikes began in Stockholm and Helsinki. After all, it was the PMs from those two countries, too, who had pushed Kaija to the ground along with the PM of Norway. Camille and her friends had catalyzed movements in those two countries without any formal coordination. Again, the strikers consisted, primarily, of college students with broad support from school kids and young professionals.

Ten days had gone by since the first hunger strike had begun. Those who had started their fast ten days ago were visibly wasting away as their bodies had used up most of the stored fat and had started eating away at the muscles in order to survive. The

cheeks had sunk in. The eyes, when they were open, had that bright look that sought to convey their unwavering commitment to their cause. The families and friends were getting frantic as they watched their loved ones suffering. There was a touch of pride, too. These young people had the world at their feet. Yet, they were ready to die in solidarity for people unknown to them. Their humanity blazed through their defiant eyes. Their clenched jaws expressed their resolve. They would all live together or else, they would all die together. No more would there be the inhuman instinct of "to each his own."

Another couple of days passed. The doctors and nurses who were monitoring the strikers realized that at least two individuals were in immediate danger. As they prepared to move them to a hospital for advanced care, the strikers pushed them away and formed a tight cordon around those two indicating that the strike would end only when their demand was met. This was a delicate moment. The politicians had maintained a studied silence. They had calculated that the moment there was a genuine threat to life, the strike would collapse on its own. They thought that these kids would just not have the courage to see this through. But they had underestimated this movement.

One of the two individuals who was now in mortal danger died on the fourteenth day. He had last spoken with his parents a day before. He had been in high spirits even though he had no strength left to move. Then he lost consciousness as his mother cradled his head in her hands and cried quietly. She held him close to her chest all night as she realized that he was fading fast. She wanted him to live. But more importantly, she wanted to honor his simple wish. All he was asking for was to move people out of harm's way. In the morning, her husband noticed that their son was dead even though she continued to hold him in her arms. No parent should be so unfortunate as to see their child die. The sorrow of his death overpowered his father. Heart broken, he collapsed next to his son's body and died without a word. The mother had to be moved to a hospital as she fainted because of the twin tragedies. A silent shudder of grief rippled through the crowd. Tears flowed and every single person paid their respects to their fallen comrade. Their resolve strengthened and several more people began fasting. The message was crystal clear, "we shall not back down from our demand."

The government was unprepared for this development. Their first reaction was of shock and then that morphed into anger. The PM called a meeting of the cabinet and plans were discussed to use force, if necessary, to end the strike. This had gone too far. They had made a mistake in ignoring it so far. They had hoped that it would wither away on its own. Now they would bury it with such force that no one would ever dare to do something like this again. Orders were issued to the police and a few army units were put on alert in case the police were overwhelmed by the crowd. Ambulances were lined up and military hospitals were readied to bring in all those who were fasting for treatment, regardless of their wishes. If need be, the government would pass laws to ensure that these actions would be legitimate. All the other parties had quietly assured

the government that they would unanimously support the ending of this strike. None wanted this to ever happen again, especially, when they were in power. This could not set a precedent.

The problem was that these politicians had forgotten that the police and medical professionals who they had ordered to execute their plans happened to be people. Many of them knew someone who was participating in the strike. More importantly, many were quietly in agreement with the demand of the strikers. Again and again people were finding out that there was no argument that could defeat the inexorable logic of the demand. The two deaths had galvanized their empathy. So on the morning of the day when the strike was to be dismantled, the police and medicos handed in their resignation letters to the government and joined the strike. By some rough counts, there were at least three hundred thousand people at the site. Calling up the army units to break up this large a crowd was no longer an option. The politicians had lost.

On the twentieth day, as Camille opened her eyes unsteadily, she saw that the Norwegian PM was sitting in front of her trying to gently rouse her. Camille was so weak that she could barely stay conscious for more than half an hour at a stretch. Her body was completely shriveled up. No movement was possible without the immense use of will-power. So it took her a full five minutes to sit up and focus her attention on the PM. The anxious PM had no choice but to wait patiently. After a few moments of gasping from the effort to sit up, Camille's breathing steadied. She didn't say anything but simply waited for the PM to speak.

The PM knew that she had an impossible task. She sighed, to herself, and said, "we are willing to consider your demand, provided you end your fast immediately."

She could not bring herself to look at Camille when she spoke. She had been hoping that her bowed head would be taken as a sign of respect for Camille's movement. But what she was really keen on ensuring was that the indifference on her face, something she had not been able to shake off, would not be captured by the cameras. She waited for a couple of moments and then looked up as she realized Camille was not speaking. She stared at Camille. What was this girl up to? Why was she not saying anything?

Camille smiled at her amiably and then waved her hand at the board where the demand was posted. Then she added in a soft voice but with a stubborn expression on her face, "we are not negotiating. We are DONE negotiating. You either accept our demand or else we continue our fast." The microphone had picked up this conversation clearly and the cameras had captured a lot of vigorous nodding from the crowd. But everyone held on to their silence.

The PM's eyes flashed dangerously, just for an instant, before she managed to tamp down the emotions in her expression. She shook her head sadly, "you are not thinking

straight Camille. What do you want me to do? Just open up Norway for the hordes from all over the world? There will no Norway left. Then what? Anarchy? Chaos? Suffering and death? What will you and your comrades do then? Where will you go? You will suffer, too. You may die. Your family and friends - do you want them to suffer, too?"

However much the PM had tried to keep her emotions in check, she had ended up blurting out what had been in her heart all along. She had been blunt. No political aphorisms. No ambiguity. She had not slept well for several days as this crisis had her and the rest of the cabinet debating day and night among themselves and with politicians from other parties. She had even spent hours discussing with the PMs of the other two countries that had been present on the dais when Kaija had made her famous announcement. After all, Camille's movement had spread to their countries, too. They were also faced with the same set of issues that she was struggling to address.

The PM was not a bad person. She was a career politician. She loved the world of policy and politics so much that she had chosen to stay single. All through her career, she had tried to be on the correct side of issues. She fought for policies that benefited the most needy in Norway. But this had completely stumped her.

She served at the pleasure of Norwegian voters. What the likes of Camille were saying was essentially that she should not only look out for her own voters' interests but also for the people across the world. She had no disagreement with Camille about the unfair plight of the people suffering in other parts of the world. In fact, she generously donated to international humanitarian causes. That these people must receive help, was also something she fully agreed to. In fact, her proposal to Camille was going to be a huge increase in aid from Norway to all the countries that were hurting in the aftermath of the tragedy.

She just couldn't see her way toward even considering Camille's demand. She found it utterly childish. Yet, this demand, however intractable it seemed to her, appeared to have resonated with hundreds of thousands of people across the Nordic countries alone. Who knew how much support existed for it in other parts of the world.

In response to those blunt - and to the PM's mind, extremely difficult - questions, Camille smiled broadly and beamed at her. There was an intangible, almost incongruous joy on her face. Then Camille said, "well, none of us wants to live in chaos. None of us is keen on suffering ourselves. And... you know... what we are aiming for here is to ensure that those who are re-settled here do not suffer either. In fact, we want them to be out of harm's way. We want them to not only survive, but thrive."

The PM was entertaining thoughts on the lines of, "this girl has lost it. She is just



babbling now.” But something in Camille’s eyes held her from laughing out sarcastically at this statement. She waited for Camille to catch her breath after that exhausting series of statements. In a firm but low voice, Camille said, “all we have to do is figure out how they will live in our country harmoniously.”

She continued, “but first we have to accept that they are going to have to move here. Once we accept that, then we shall find ways to deal with the how. We are confident that with the vast land and wealth that we have in our country, we shall be able to figure out something viable for everyone.”

Camille reached out with her left hand. The PM, instinctively, reached out with her right hand. With quite a bit of effort, Camille leaned forward and held the PM’s right hand in both her hands. She brought her wan face close to the PM’s and said, “I don’t want to live in a world where millions may die because of our inaction. Would you want to live in that world?”

There were unshed tears in Camille’s eyes as she continued to hold the PM’s hand. She was not pleading. She was - just - sad as she sat there. Her body was wasting away. Her cheekbones poked out like tent poles stretching the skin. The fingers on her hands were like twigs. There was not much strength left in them. The resolve, though, had not diminished at all. She would die if her demand was not met. And dozens of other young men and women would die with her. The PM couldn’t bring herself to imagine that scenario.

The PM sighed to herself. She knew that she had lost the argument with Camille. Her shoulders slumped. With her left hand, she cradled Camille’s face and said, “okay. We shall find a way to save as many souls as we can.”

“Please can you now end your fast?” she asked quietly.

Camille nodded and the plaza instantly erupted into a celebration as everyone hugged each other with joy. The PM sat with Camille as the medical team came over to administer the recovery of all the people who were fasting.

## Chapter Twenty

That same day, the PM held a press conference to announce the creation of a committee to figure out how Norway would handle a substantial increase in the population of climate refugees. Inevitably, it came down to the question of numbers. The simple fact was that the total population of Europe and North America was less than a billion. While the collective population of Asia, Africa, and South America was 4-5 times that. Even if one considered only the subset of population that was trying to survive in the currently uninhabitable places, that number was easily greater than one billion. Given the speed with which the climate was changing that number would also rapidly grow.

The day the committee met for the first time, the nativist backlash erupted in the streets of Oslo. The naked fear of the “others” drove thousands of people to violently reject the idea of having to share their land with any foreigner. In sharp contrast to the hunger strike, these protesters were armed with whatever they could get their hands on. They were prepared to protect their homeland with force. The ugliest of the nativist rhetoric reared its head as the frenzied mobs openly threatened the government with violence.

Eugenics had long ago been exiled to the recesses of the civilized world ever since the end of the 2nd World War. But now, people were explicitly saying that the non-white non-Christian people of the world were paying the price for their own sins. The most rabid of the protesters would rather die than let a single refugee reach their shores. The hate-crimes against the non-white and non-Christian citizens of Norway escalated overnight. The law-and-order apparatus was quickly overwhelmed as it never had to deal with such widespread violence. The government was forced to declare a state of emergency and bring in armed troops to patrol the streets of the major cities. This move was backed by all political parties as none knew how to navigate this treacherous situation.

Arbitrary curfews were declared with 15-minute warnings to keep the violent mobs subdued. Armored vehicles were visible every few minutes. The scenario was disturbingly similar to the chronic one that existed in many of the unstable parts of the world. It was shocking to see this scenario unfold in the Nordic cities, of all the places in the world. The situation in Sweden and Finland had evolved in a more or less similar pattern to that in Norway.

The PMs of the three countries were huddling together every evening to figure out a way out of their collective predicament. There was no going back on the promise to accept a substantial - yet undetermined - number of climate refugees in their countries. Most of the folks whose fasting had compelled the governments to make that promise were still in intensive care units where the hopes of their full recovery vacillated daily.

Three in Sweden and one in Finland were in coma and the doctors had indicated that they were unlikely to survive. Their families were being asked to think about removing life-support.

Never before had any government been caught between two such extreme positions. On one hand, a vast number of their citizens led by the youth wanted to peacefully absorb tens of millions of climate refugees. On the other hand, a far smaller but exceptionally violent mob led by the old folks wanted to not only block any refugees from entering their homeland, but to throw out the existing non-white non-Christian citizens. So far, the violent nativist mob had not attacked the armed forces. But soon they might and then the armed forces would be forced to shoot at them which would lead to more anger at the government and the situation could descend into a vicious spiral of ever-increasing violence with no end in sight. If a solution was not found soon, the situation was likely to devolve in anarchy.

It was apparent that the overall public sentiment was in favor of accommodating climate refugees in a yet-to-be-determined manner. During yet another virtual huddle when the three PMs were miserably venting their frustration to each other, one of them muttered, “fuck the Sami.” The other two silently nodded their heads as they wrestled with the biggest crisis in their political careers. After all, if they had not humored the Sami in the first place, there would have been no treaty. If there had been no treaty, there would have been no signing ceremony. And then Kaija would not have made that speech. The speech that was now threatening the very foundation of their countries. Yeah, that was right — fuck them.

None of them were remotely proud of their hasty action in the middle of Kaija’s speech when they had pushed her to the ground and taken the microphone from her hands. That was bad. That was undignified. They all wished they could take back that moment. They all wished they had dealt with it in a diplomatic manner. It didn’t matter much now. They were meditating on their individual and collective plights when one of them muttered, “why don’t we just dump all the refugees in that Sami preserve then. Let them deal with it all.”

It was not clear who said it. But it jolted all of them out of the funk. At the same moment, they all looked up at each other via their computer cameras. Could THAT be the solution to all their problems? The same thoughts were rushing through their minds as if they had formed some kind of a Vulcan mind-meld from Star Trek. The same political calculations. The same compromises that could be viable. They stared at each other. Each one was daring the other two to find some fundamental flaw in their thinking and say it out loud. Then that brief shining moment of hope would be crushed again. A moment passed. Another one passed. None of them said anything. Then they all smiled in unison. This could work! Rather — this better work!

Excitedly they started putting together the proposal that they could take to their

colleagues later that night and if they managed to get the buy-in, then they would present it to their voters as soon as the very next morning. All the details were not clear to them yet. There were a few major problems. But the big idea was crystal clear. All three nations had anyway allocated a big chunk of their land way up near the Arctic Circle to the Sami. The treaty had been unceremoniously torn up right after Kaija had made that speech. Yet, in the process leading up to the signing of that treaty, the three PMs had built consensus across their countries in allocating that land to the Sami.

It was a fair bit of land — about five percent of the total land of the three countries. Even if two percent of that allocated land — about thousand square kilometers — was used to create a refugee camp, it could easily accommodate 20-30 million refugees which would be comparable to the total population of all three countries. The two key elements of the proposal were that the refugees would be confined to that plot of land and they would have no legal rights of any kind outside that plot of land.

This met Camille's demand of moving the climate-affected folks out of harm's way. With that proposal, no one could argue that the three countries were not serious about accommodating a substantial number of climate refugees.

"Out of sight, out of mind" should take care of the rabid nativists who were threatening violence. The refugees won't even be seen by anyone let alone become part of the society in any way. They had all been seeing the inevitable resentments that build up against non-natives however valid the reason behind their presence amidst their societies was. It had happened routinely. Sweden had revoked the visas of Syrian refugees and sent them back to their country at the end of the Syrian civil war. The Poles had been a picture of generosity and compassion when the Ukrainian refugees had streamed across the border to escape the Russian invasion of their country. But that compassion had faded as weeks turned into months and months turned into years. The anger had spilled out in fits and starts. Over time, though, it had congealed into a movement that had infected the entire polity. This proposal would be able to prevent that from happening.

There was no doubt in their minds that a lot of details would have to be worked out to make it acceptable by both sides. But there was a glimmer of hope now. They quickly reviewed the one-page draft of their big idea and then jubilantly high-fived to their futures. The next step was to convene their respective cabinets in the middle of the night and somehow persuade them that this proposal was not just a fantasy of theirs.

Most of the cabinet members were not sleeping well, if they were sleeping at all. The rapid destabilization of their countries was permanently keeping them on edge. They tried to catch a nap here and there between meetings or one-on-one discussions. When they were alone, they were at the mercy of their own minds which painted all kinds of dire scenarios that then would send them into an emotional tailspin. So, the call from their respective PMs, especially, in a voice that could barely hide the

excitement, was welcome. They quickly and quietly left their homes and assembled at the conference rooms in their office buildings.

With astute foresight, the PMs had also invited the leaders of the other parties whether in their coalition or in the opposition to the meeting. At any other time, the cabinet members would have been extremely unhappy with being in the same room as the opposition, especially, when they had no idea what their PM was going to say. But these were extremely unusual times and the political parties had completely dropped their adversarial stances as they all tried to figure out a way to bring normalcy back to their society. If the countries devolved into anarchy, then there would be no government and no need for political parties. They had to come together to deal with this crisis. Their careers depended on it. Even their lives. As it is, they had been getting mercilessly trolled. On top of that, their families and friends had received numerous ugly threats of violence.

The initial reaction to the proposal was of cautious optimism. The main pitch was that the three countries would offer a secluded and physically isolated piece of land for the settlement of refugees. The refugees would never become part of the host country in any way. It wouldn't be a prison, but the refugees would not be able to leave the settlement unless they left the country altogether. Inside the settlement, the refugees would have their own set of laws.

Hundreds of thousands of acres in the northernmost parts of the three countries were lying empty. There was no development of any kind. No resources to be extracted. Those parts were not even frequented by tourists. Hence, it had not been that difficult to hand over a portion of that land to the few thousand Sami. Most of the Sami lived in the cities, anyway. It had been a symbolic gesture, nothing more. Now, that same land - rather a tiny part of it - could be used for another symbolic gesture, re-settlement of climate refugees. No one could have any objection to that.

Once there was an agreement that this proposal could work well, the PMs made their second pitch to sweeten the deal. The settlement would be the responsibility of the United Nations. In other words, the cost of transporting the refugees, providing them with all the basic necessities of life, maintaining law and order, and ensuring that no one left the settlement would all be done by the rest of the world. The three countries would provide some necessary transportation infrastructure to support the settlement. But that would be it.

This was indeed a fantastic idea. None of the governments would then be responsible for the refugees. They would have an easy scapegoat to blame in case anything bad happened. Yet they could corner all the glory for being the first among the wealthy nations to accommodate a large number of climate refugees on their land out of the sheer goodness of their hearts. That sweetener indeed clinched the deal. The cabinets and all the political parties unanimously and enthusiastically endorsed the proposal.

This really solved all their problems.

Over the next week or so, the PMs put together a formal policy proposal and announced a joint press conference where they would present it to the world. The uneasy peace enforced by the military patrols in their cities provided them with the respite to polish up the proposal while simultaneously working closely with some of the top marketing agencies and political consultants to develop a sophisticated outreach campaign around the proposal.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Camille was now out of the hospital along with most of the other people who had been fasting. They were young and healthy. Hence, their recoveries were fast. They had won a major battle with the powers-to-be. Of course, the frequent curfews were a constant reminder of the violent opposition that existed in their society. But, there was reason for hope. The governments had not buckled in the face of this violence. Rather they had taken a tough stance by taking the help of the military to enforce law and order. The war was not over by any means. The recuperation period had been useful in figuring out how to ensure that the governments delivered on their promise.

Camille and a few of her friends showed up at the press conference. All of them were now famous and everyone at the press conference acknowledged their presence. The three PMs nodded at them as they made their way through the auditorium to the stage. A few key members from the cabinets of the three governments and the main leaders from opposition parties followed them on the stage and sat down behind the main dais. This was, clearly, an attempt to showcase the consensus for the proposal even before it was announced to the world.

It was a somber occasion, yet, the three PMs seemed to be suppressing a weird sense of excitement. Camille was puzzled by it, but decided to be patient. Neither she nor any of her friends had been consulted by the governments. According to social media, there were no indications that even experts of any kind were consulted by the three governments. So, it seemed that this was an entirely political proposal. Camille felt that that was not an entirely bad thing. All said and done, in her short life and even shorter experience of movements, it had become abundantly clear to her that technocratic consensus was far less important than political consensus to get anything done in the world. The fact that there were no experts involved was a good sign. The fact that all political parties were explicitly supporting the proposal was a good thing.

As the press conference was in Oslo, the Norwegian PM had been designated as the lead presenter. She enthusiastically stepped up to the podium and beamed at the cameras. The entire body language was positive. Then she tapped at the microphone to get everyone's attention and raised her right hand to indicate that everyone should take the seats and settle down. Once all the sounds quietened, she began her formal presentation.

There was no formal acknowledgment of the hunger strike that had forced the governments' hand in coming up with this proposal. Camille was not at all surprised by that. Neither did she mind it one bit. The PM had managed to pull a somber expression together as she started with the implications of the heat wave tragedy. She even shared a few pictures depicting the ravaged villages from Africa and South Asia. The

images were carefully blurred to ensure that death was not being depicted too blatantly.

Then the PM couldn't help herself and almost smiled. The fact that one is being charitable and that too publicly makes most people feel really good about themselves. They almost begin to preen in the attention that they get because of their altruistic deed. They don't realize that the fact that there is charity required means that something bad is happening. Of course, the PM was a lot better at controlling her expressions than most people. She was a consummate politician, after all. Then she made the grand announcement that the three countries were collectively making one thousand square kilometers of land available for the resettlement of climate refugees.

Several of the nativists were also attending the press conference and they immediately started raising loud slogans against this announcement. The PM let those slogans go on uninterrupted for a few moments and then she slightly nodded her head to someone at the back of the auditorium. That was the signal for the police that had been explicitly positioned around the auditorium to move in and remove these miscreants from the auditorium in as dignified a manner as possible.

She raised her right hand again to indicate that she wanted to address that particular concern. A map of the three countries showed up on the screen behind her. It had a blue and white circle marked out near that spot where the borders of the three countries intersected with each other. She pointed her finger at that spot and said that the designated refugee resettlement would be located in that circle. Then, she took a dramatic pause and made it clear that the circle was drawn to scale. This was the important part. Anyone looking at the map would immediately realize that this location was in the middle of nowhere and the circle looked tiny as compared to the rest of the land mass of the countries. The Mercator projection was shamelessly used to exaggerate the smallness of the land allocated for refugee resettlement.

Again, after another meaningful pause, she delivered the final piece of the proposal. The reason why the circle was painted in blue and white was because the three countries wanted the United Nations to take the responsibility of building an appropriate settlement for the refugees at that location and serve as the permanent administrator. The refugees would not have any legal status in the three host countries. They would have resident status only inside the settlement. If they left the settlement, they would be treated the same way as illegal immigrants were treated and would be immediately deported.

In essence, the PM summarized, the three nations were lending land to the United Nations for the sake of moving climate refugees out of harms's way and into a safe haven. With that she turned around and looked at the other two PMs and all the people sitting behind her and invited them to stand up and proclaim their unanimous support



for this proposal.

Most of the folks in the auditorium were trying to wrap their head around the proposal. A few of the nativists who had conveniently stayed quiet after the initial ruckus caused by their fellow-protesters now stood up to shout more slogans. But their heart was not really in it. The proposal had thoroughly addressed the basis of their opposition. If the refugees wouldn't even be physically part of their society then what would their objection be. They tried to find something intelligent to shout but gave up and sat down. This was exactly what all the people who were solemnly standing on the stage were expecting from the nativists. In their minds, they were toasting each other for coming up with this brilliant proposal.

Camille stood up along with her friends and everyone's attention instantly focused on them. After all, even though the folks on the stage had not formally acknowledged Camille, everyone knew that all this was happening because of that hunger strike. Were they going to be satisfied with this proposal? Someone brought a microphone to Camille and she addressed the auditorium from where she was understanding. She merely nodded at the three PMs who were expectantly looking at her.

She said, "we agree with this proposal. For the first time, we are seeing justice being done."

There was an audible sigh of relief from the stage. Okay then! It looked like the crisis had been averted.

Camille ignored that sigh and continued, "as a gesture of our sincerity, we propose that the resettlement should accommodate at least one refugee per citizen of the three host countries. Ideally, we should be prepared to use all the available land to re-locate every single human being who is adversely affected by the impacts of climate change or who would be affected in the near future. That number is at least as large as 2.5 billion as per the most recent expert estimate. But we recognize that this will be the beginning of the process, and so we demand that at least 25 million climate refugees be relocated to the settlement designated by the Prime Minister."

Every single politician standing on the stage had to - in their minds and never publicly - accept that this was brilliantly done by Camille. Again, they had underestimated the savviness of this young woman. Just the way the PM, in her presentation, had sought to minimize the size of the land that was being provided to the UN for the refugee settlement with the help of that map with the tiny circle on it — Camille had referred to the entire population that was in harm's way to indicate how small the number of refugees she was demanding to be accommodated was to it. Linking that number to the current population of the three countries was a stroke of genius. One thousand square kilometers was less than 0.1% of the total area of the three countries. In other

words, the existing population of the three countries would have 99.9% of the land while the refugee population of the same size would get only 0.1%. How could this not be construed as fair? No one could really argue against this utterly reasonable demand. Especially, the nativists who would have otherwise pointed out that bringing in such a large number of refugees would destroy their society.

The Norwegian PM exchanged a quick glance with the other two PMs. Twenty-five million was the upper bound for the refugee population that they had in mind. This was not a bad start to the negotiations, at all. She cleared her throat loudly to switch the attention back to herself from Camille. She said, "we are glad that the proposal seems acceptable. We shall now reach out to the UN to see if this is acceptable to them." She didn't mention Camille's latest demand but it was clear to everyone that this was now the starting point of the negotiations. In that moment the torch that Camille had inadvertently picked up from Kaija was passed on to another young woman who had recently joined the American delegation at the UN.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Rachel had no idea what the meeting was about when she entered the conference room. She was about 10 minutes late and the first presentation was already underway. Maya, one of the senior bureaucrats from the main UN Secretariat, was on her third slide. Rachel found an empty seat at the far end of the long oval table around which all of the participants were seating. Maya was a sombre middle-aged woman who had been loaned by the Barbadian contingent to the UN Secretariat. Rachel had seen her around and traveled with her once or twice on UN missions to Africa.

She pulled out her tablet and pencil. Then she borrowed a copy of the agenda from the young man seated next to her. He smiled absent-mindedly at her and passed it over. Rachel's boss, the US Ambassador to the UN, Mitch Harrison, had not bothered to send Rachel any details about the meeting at all. That was in keeping with his usual manner. He couldn't be bothered to attend any official meeting of the UN unless there was a photo-op involved. It always fell on someone on his staff to represent the US at official UN business where they were forced to make up some excuse for the absence of their boss.

For some mysterious reason, her boss had actually known about this meeting and deigned to send her a curt message saying that she needed to attend the meeting at 8 am in the sixth floor conference room. She was to take notes and report back to him. Of course, he had sent the message at 7 am on the day of the meeting. Rachel had to rush through her morning routine which meant that she was barely awake. Luckily, some thoughtful person had arranged for fresh coffee at the meeting. She had picked up a large cup of dark coffee before sitting down.

The heading on the agenda said, "Re-settlement of Climate Refugees in the Nordic Countries." No surprise that Rachel had been tagged for the meeting. Humanitarian relief efforts was her remit within the US delegation posted at the UN. She took a large sip of her coffee and tried to focus on what Maya was saying.

There were so many natural and manmade disasters happening all over the world that the role of the UN had been reduced to mainly bringing attention to the latest one. The UN would beg the member nations to offer some help - any help at all - to deal with the aftermath of the disaster. They would gamely try to appeal to the generosity and kindness of the member nations. They would try to highlight the global importance of the region where the disaster had happened in order to engage the transactional-minded member nations in some quid pro quo sort of way. And then, the next day and the next week and the next month they would do the same thing in the context of a new disaster in a different region.

Within a few months of joining the US staff that worked closely with the UN, Rachel's well of emotions had seemingly dried up as the daily onslaught of disasters and suffering showed no sign of ebbing. She became a generally passive bureaucrat who treated each new disaster as simply another task to be added to her ever expanding list of things to do.

Maya had moved on to the next slide and Rachel realized that her jaw was on the floor. The two bullet points on the slide indicated that the three Nordic nations had allotted one thousand square kilometers of land inside their own national boundaries for climate refugees. A whole fucking thousand?! Was she still asleep? This didn't make any sense at all. No country in the history of humanity had done anything even remotely like this. She pinched herself and looked around the conference table to see the reactions of the other participants. No one had even blinked. This had to be a dream. She fumbled for her coffee cup and took an even larger sip of the still too hot coffee. Of course that didn't help. The scalding hot liquid burnt her tongue. But at least that meant she was wide awake. Why wasn't anyone else surprised?

Then her vision became blurred as she read the second bullet-point - up to 25 million refugees could be re-settled on those thousand square kilometers. Something was really wrong now! She pulled out her phone and looked up the populations of the three Nordic countries that had apparently made this incredibly generous proposal. She mentally added up the three numbers on her screen and just stared at the sum. So... these countries were offering to double their population by taking in such a vast number of refugees? The only times when such vast numbers of people had moved across vast distances were during wars or slavery. And the way Maya was calmly moving on to the next slide, there didn't seem to be any war or enslavement in the picture.

Her lips were still scalded from the hot coffee, so this was all happening. Had she wandered into one of those parallel universes that writers and directors were forever foisting upon them these days? Anyway, why the hell was no one surprised in the room. Were they not getting the incredible nature of this proposal? Or maybe this was not even a proposal. This meeting was probably one of those meetings where participants are encouraged to engage in blue-sky thinking. Maybe that is what Maya was doing right now. Somewhere at the back of her mind, though, Rachel knew that was not true because Maya wouldn't randomly pick out these Nordic countries as an example.

Rachel was the deputy to the US Ambassador to the UN. Unlike her boss, though, she had worked her way up through the ranks of the diplomatic staff at the State Department. Most of the career staff, especially, the senior ones, had left long ago as they had seen the writing on the wall. She was among the few who had stayed back.

She was in her late twenties and still optimistic that the US would re-join the global community. She was born and raised in rural Texas. Blonde and blue-eyed, she had

been a cheer-leader in both high-school and college. Her parents were devout evangelicals and she was their only child. Maybe it was the cloistered life that she had experienced until college or maybe it was just her restless curiosity, but the moment she had enrolled in the University of Texas at Austin as a wide-eyed teenager, it felt as if she had found a wonderland full of people unlike her.

There were people from many different parts of the world. They spoke in strange accents and had weird customs. They had all arrived in this place to quench their thirst for knowledge. Like fish to water, she had taken to this life of exploration and experimentation. She had not only glimpsed the broad expanse of diversity that this melting pot offered, but had dived right in and immersed herself fully in the endless variety of ideas, thoughts, and experiences.

She had majored in philosophy and art with a minor in government studies. By her sophomore year, she had known exactly what she wanted to do after college. She had, in no way, been satiated by this brief taste of the world. She was going to join one of those international organizations and travel the world.

One of her faculty advisers in the government studies program had been a retired diplomat, Tim Scott. He had, mostly, entertained his students with stories from his vast repertoire of adventures as a career staffer at the US State Department. He had given up trying to make sense of the world and how it worked several years before he retired. He had known how it used to work, maybe even how it was supposed to work. But then, it had stopped working the way it used to. So in his last few years at the State Department, he had decided to simply enjoy the exotic locations that he was posted at. He was a UT Austin alumnus and when he was trying to find a suitable place to retire, he figured that a nice lecturer position at his alma mater would be the perfect blend of getting opportunities to tell his stories while also getting paid. He had claimed, frequently, that he was working on his memoirs that had all kinds of scandalous revelations. No one had seen a single word of the manuscript in the three years since he had begun teaching.

The one thing, apart from his stories, that he had retained from his days as a globe-trotting diplomat was his vast pool of contacts spread around the world. When Rachel had gone to him for advice about finding gainful employment in some international organization, all it had taken were a few emails from Tim to get her an offer letter from the State Department. It had only been a matter of time after landing in Washington DC that Rachel had maneuvered her way into the team that dealt with the UN which, in turn, had landed her in New York city.

If she had thought that Austin was a wonderland, then New York was - well - she hadn't found the right word for it, yet. It had been love at first sight. Sure, over the years, many of the city's flaws irritated her. After all it was an American city. Quite different from most American cities but still retaining enough of the problems that plagued all of the other

American cities. For starters, there were too many entitled white boys with way more money than they had any right to. They trashed the city all the time, both physically and vocally. Most of the folks in the city mocked them the few times they bothered to take notice of their latest shenanigans. But like moths attracted to a flame, these boys - yes, they were all perpetually adolescent males - kept coming back to the city for some attention, some validation, some adoration even.

Rachel was stuck working with a few of these boys, including her current boss, who had tried to leverage their wealth and social network into vaguely important sounding roles in the US delegation at the UN. Unfortunately, for them, they had not gained any respect whatsoever despite this so-called public service. They had all tried the same things. In the first few days of their posting at the UN, they had tried to act all important and attend meetings where they would launch into lofty speeches. Then they had tried to get appointed on committees where they could pontificate and patronize folks from other nations - especially, the poor ones. They had held press conferences under flimsy pretenses such as their committee going on a fact-finding mission or issuing a new report. They had never been bothered to read the report or actually travel with the mission. That had been too much work for them. The missions had been invariably to some poor part of the world which no one in the media covered. No photo ops. Nothing. Reading the reports had been even more tedious. Most reports ended up pointing out the bad things the US had done in the past and then concluding what the US could do differently going forward. The tone of these reports had varied from pitiful pleading to sometimes strident hectoring. Those mollycoddled boys had no time for that either. That is when they had stopped showing up at the UN unless the press was going to be there. Rachel, by then among the senior-most staffers, had also become the de facto representative of the US at the UN.

The questions dwindled and at the top of the hour, Maya concluded both her presentation and the meeting. Everyone started checking their phones as they filed out of the conference room. Rachel couldn't understand why they were all so blasé about it. She gulped down her coffee, stowed her mug on the tray, and hustled through the crowd to get to Maya.

Maya was texting and didn't look up until Rachel tapped her on her shoulder. She raised one of her artistically shaped eyebrows. She detested the American ambassador to the UN and didn't much care about the rest of the American delegation. She had seen Rachel in meetings and knew who she was. But she had never really talked with her, especially, one-on-one.

"This is a humongous deal!" blurted out Rachel.

Maya frowned.

“What is?”

“This proposal from the Nordic countries.”

Rachel’s words carried a slightly dubious undertone as she observed an entire lack of excitement from Maya. After all Maya was the one who had made that presentation a few minutes ago. What else was Rachel going to talk about right after that?

“Pray tell, why you think this is a humong... whatever that word is... deal?”

Rachel paused and tried to get the thoughts straight in her head before speaking.

“You do realize that this will be the first time in the history that any nation has voluntarily opened its doors for millions of refugees. Right?”

“So?”

“What aren’t I getting, here? Why are you acting in such an indifferent manner?” a slight tinge of exasperation had slipped into Rachel’s voice.

Maya put her phone into her satchel and looked squarely at Rachel.

“Because it means nothing. It is bullshit!” she said. She didn’t show it on her face, but she was bit puzzled by this reaction from Rachel. Was this young woman naive or was there something else going on, here?

“How? What was that presentation all about then?” more doubt had crept in Rachel’s voice.

Maya was not her usual cynical self that morning and decided to continue the conversation with Rachel in good faith. The participants for the next meeting were patiently waiting outside the door of the conference room. She motioned Rachel to follow her out of the room. Both women smiled apologetically at the folks outside the door and vacated the room.

“Do you mind walking with me as we talk? I have to get back to my office for a video call.”

Rachel nodded and hurried along to match Maya’s long strides.

“I know you came in late and probably missed the first part of my presentation. Let me recap that for you and you will know why I referred to it as bullshit.”

“The Nordic folks don’t want to integrate the refugees in their society at all. They have merely offered a parcel of land in the middle of nowhere, way up in the Arctic circle, as far away from their main cities as possible. Furthermore, they want the refugees to be strictly confined to that land parcel. The responsibility for administering this parcel is given to the UN. In other words, they have offered a glorified prison for refugees in one of the coldest regions of the world where habitation is all but impossible unless a huge amount of money is made available to build the infrastructure necessary for survival. They know that no funds are available with the UN and hence, nothing will materialize from their proposal. So... as I said earlier... it is all bullshit!”

Rachel was confused.

“Then why even make this offer?”

Maya looked to check if Rachel was kidding with her. But no, there was no sign of anything but sincerity on Rachel’s face. She looked genuinely confused by Maya’s explanation.

“Which part are you not getting, Rachel?” Maya decided to continue being patient with this young American woman. In her experience, the relatively good-natured young white Americans tended to be naive in their understanding about how the world worked outside of their hermetically insulated bubbles of abundance and freedom.

“If the Nordic folks don’t want refugees, then why did they even make such an offer in the first place? Why go through this charade?”

“Are you pulling my leg or just completely out of touch?” Maya said with a touch of irritation. Not that Rachel noticed it. Rachel just kept looking at her with a genuinely confused expression.

“Look, Maya. I just got back last week from Africa. I had been there for the past three months. Since the heatwave tragedy, I have been helping with the logistics for bringing in supplies to the UN refugee camps. The governments in many places have ceased to exist from an operational perspective. I have not had a chance to catch up on news at all. I don’t really know what all has happened in that period.”

Maya studied Rachel for a moment trying to decide whether to accept Rachel’s explanation for her ignorance. Now that she thought about it, Rachel did look quite ravaged. For starters, Rachel’s face and forearms were tanned deep brown and



covered with freckles where they were not tanned. There were also numerous pockmarks from insect bites on her hands and face. Rachel's eyes had dark bags beneath them from chronic lack of sleep. There was also an immense sadness in the way Rachel's shoulders were slumped.

She remembered Rachel as being one of those wholesome American girls. She was aware of Rachel's reputation of being an extremely social person who never missed an opportunity to hang out with UN staff and delegations from various countries. The version standing before her looked nothing like the one she remembered.

With a touch of bitterness, Maya thought that at least Rachel had the luxury to leave the catastrophe playing out in Africa. The Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans were condemned to suffer through the horrific aftermath of the heat wave. But she grudgingly acknowledged Rachel for doing what she had done to help out. Most folks from the US and Europe couldn't care less about poor folks in far away countries. Hell, she had seen wealthy Americans and Europeans being mostly indifferent to the pathetic plight of their poor fellow citizens living right in their midst. Now that she thought about it, Rachel had always seemed like an outlier among the usual Americans she had met.

Maya nodded at Rachel. They had reached the door to Maya's office.

"Come into my office. We can talk about this in there."

They settled down on the small sofa chairs.

"So you missed the big announcement and the hunger strike?"

Rachel had big question mark on her face.

"A few days after the heat wave, the leader of the indigenous people in the Nordic countries, completely out-of-the-blue, invited all the climate refugees in the world to the land of her ancestors. She made this announcement at the signing of the new treaty among the three Nordic nations - Sweden, Finland, and Norway - and the Sami people. The treaty was about handing over a large expanse of uninhabited land in the northern parts of the three countries back to the Sami people who have been living there for millennia. And before you ask, no - the Sami were not going to form their own sovereign nation. All they were getting was stewardship of their ancestral land."

Maya could tell from Rachel's expression that she was blown away by this piece of news. Rachel was gaping at her as if she had seen a unicorn. Maya continued.

“Of course, all three Nordic nations immediately pulled out of the treaty. The governments of all three countries hoped that this unexpected announcement would be quickly forgotten if they ignored it and acted as if it had never even happened. They forced the Sami Council to disown their leader. And that would have been that if not for a bunch of Norwegian college kids.

These kids picked up on the announcement and decided to force their governments to follow through on it. Initially, it didn't work. There was a huge backlash against those kids and they, apparently, vanished for a few days from the public spotlight.”

Rachel was absolutely fascinated with the story. Her large eyes were wide open.

“The kids then changed tack. Instead of their usual aggressive shtick, they decided to go in the diametrically opposite direction. They started a hunger strike. You know... like Gandhi? They just sat quietly and quit eating. No protests. No slogans. Nothing. But they put their lives on the line.”

Maya was now fully into telling this story to Rachel. She had read about this. She hadn't really discussed any of these developments with anyone. But in her mind, she had raised a toast to that little-known Sami leader and those Norwegian kids. They took a stand and somehow had made it stick. At least on paper, Maya thought. Describing all this to someone like Rachel was making her realize slowly that this was a very very unusual story indeed. Seeing Rachel's reactions, though, she found herself getting infected by Rachel's enthusiasm and optimism.

“I think a kid died of hunger. I don't remember all the details now. Maybe more than one kid died. Come to think of it, I believe the father of one of the kids who died also died. It was so shocking that the three Nordic governments had to stop ignoring the hunger strike and sit down for negotiations.”

As if the spell was broken, Maya sighed heavily and added, “yeah right... negotiations!”

Rachel was nodding her head. She could see where Maya was coming from. Almost as if she were talking to herself, she said, “what if we can find the money...”

Maya looked at her kindly and asked, “do you know anyone who has that kind of money to give away?”

Rachel looked up at her in dismay. Then something in her manner changed visibly. Her chin jutted out and she squared her shoulders purposefully. She drew herself up to her

full height as she got up from the chair.

"I will find the money to make this a reality. Even if it is the last thing I do. We have to do it! These people have no chance at all of surviving these disasters. Millions have died and billions will die in the future if we don't do anything. For the first time, one of the biggest barriers to moving refugees to safer locations has been lifted. However, cynically the proposal may have been structured, this is still a huge opportunity and we must grab it."

"I understand how you are feeling Rachel. But we have been down this path and it has always ended in complete disappointment. At some point in life, you need to accept reality. Stop kidding yourself. I am saying this not because I have become cynical. It is what it is."

Rachel was not seeing Maya, though. Her eyes were fixed somewhere far away in the distance. There was a sadness in her eyes as the memories of the suffering that she had witnessed over the last few weeks flashed across her mind. Then the expression on her face morphed into that of stubborn bull. The premature lines that had shown up on her face made her look old and wise instead of young and unrealistic. The jaw was clenched tightly and she defiantly stared back at Maya.

Maya found herself getting angry at Rachel. Because Rachel's resolve was inadvertently affecting her. She was getting swept up in Rachel's passion. And she knew that this attempt at finding the money to help people was also destined to fail like all the previous ones had been. She didn't feel like she had any more fight left in her. She was spent after more than two decades of trying at the UN, at the World Bank, at the IMF, at the COP, and wherever else she could think of. She had repeatedly sought money to help poor countries adapt to climate change. The wealthy countries made promises on which they ALWAYS reneged. Shamelessly! Mercilessly! Again and again and again...

Like pitiless stones, the wealthy nations had watched millions die over the decades because of climate change. The climate had changed because of the actions of the wealthy. It was a blindingly obvious situation of cause-and-effect. The perpetrators and victims were defined as clearly as possible. The entire moral argument was on the side of the poor victims. Yet, the compensation had never shown up. Even getting the wealthy countries to simply accept their historic responsibility had been impossible for years. They had eventually accepted it, but they refused to be held liable for it. The world was just so fucking unfair. There was no way she was going to ride this emotional roller-coaster all over again. Rachel was most welcome to go on that ride on her own.

Some part of Maya, though, felt sympathetic toward Rachel. She decided to not unload her baggage onto Rachel. She said, firmly, "Rachel, find even one country willing to put

up a few million dollars and then come talk with me about this. Until then, I am not going to waste my time on wishful thinking.”

Rachel nodded at her and left.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

It had been more than a month since Rachel's conversation with Maya. She was sitting in a meeting where folks were providing updates on the Nordic proposal. Maya was leading the meeting. In reality, Maya and everyone else at the meeting were simply going through the motions. The updates, sometimes in the form of flashy presentations, seemed to indicate progress. But there had been no actual progress because it all boiled down to the question of funding. Invariably, each country representative managed to couch their support for the proposal in the form of vague ideas that were contingent on something or the other. They were, of course, taking their cues from the Nordic proposal.

In Rachel's view, it was all quite depressing. She had devoted almost her entire attention to finding money for relocating millions of climate refugees to the Nordic countries. She had utterly ignored her boss during this period. She had done the bare minimum of what she was required to do as part of her various official commitments. She had met with practically every single country's representative at the UN to finagle some cash out of them. She had met many of them multiple times. She had made numerous presentations and countless personal entreaties. She had tried to even manipulate some folks by digging up dirt on them. All to no avail.

She nibbled at her bagel as the presentations sped along at the periphery of her attention. She was thinking about her upcoming informal meeting with her contact in the Chinese delegation later that morning. China was her last major chance, really, to get something for the refugee resettlement.

When she showed up at the Chinese delegation's office for her meeting, unexpectedly, her contact escorted her to the Chinese Ambassador Gang Zhao's office. Rachel had not been prepared to meet the senior diplomat, at all. And there she was, sitting in Gang's office sipping tea.

He was an elderly diplomat and had been representing China at various multi-national organizations for decades. He was unusually tall for a Chinese man of his age. His hair seemed naturally dark which is what tricked people into thinking that he was younger than he actually was. His skin was quite wrinkle-free and without any blemishes. The only thing that indicated his age being a lot more than it seemed were his eyes. They conveyed a calmness that could only have been attained through years spent in the trenches of international diplomacy and corridors of byzantine bureaucracy. His manner was relaxed and cordial. When he smiled, any sense of tension would melt away.

Gang knew that he had surprised Rachel even though she had not shown any sign of

it. He smiled at her and sipped his tea pleasantly. He wanted to give Rachel a chance to marshal her thoughts. He sat quietly waiting for Rachel to finish her cup and then politely asked her if she would like some more. Rachel shook her head and thanked him. He poured himself another cup and then looked at her, expectantly. Rachel received the signal loud and clear. She was the one who was supposed to initiate the conversation.

"Your excellency, thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me," she began formally.

Gang waved his hand.

"Let's dispense with the formality, please. I know you had been meaning to have an informal conversation with my colleague. For the sake of this meeting, I suggest that you talk to me as if you were talking to my colleague."

"Okay then!" Rachel thought, informal it is.

"Well, I am assuming that you are aware of the reason I had sought the meeting. I shall not beat around the bush. I am here to seek financial support from your country for making the Nordic proposal a reality."

Gang smiled, again. Although, Rachel noticed that this smile had not reached his eyes. They were not wary. They were... sad?

"I am glad that you have chosen to be frank with me. Thank you. One gets quite tired of the usual diplomat-speak in this place," Gang said with barely a trace of accent. He was known to be fluent in several languages. No one knew exactly which languages because he preferred to speak only in Chinese. This reputation of his had been established via the grapevine. In fact, Rachel realized, that he was speaking in an almost perfect Texan accent. Hill country Texas, at that.

"Before we get to my answer, may I ask the most obvious question - what financial support is the US ready to commit?"

Rachel's shoulders involuntarily slumped. The answer to this question was, of course, a resounding no. Right after meeting with Maya, she had caught the train to Washington DC to see her boss. And her boss had not even bothered to answer the question. He had simply guffawed. Then he had dismissed her from his office. She had then tried to bypass him and tried to get a different answer from the Secretary of State. All that had gotten her was a reprimand from her boss. The Secretary, a childhood buddy of her boss, had apparently been even more amused as he had chided his friend for allowing

staff to bypass him. As a last resort, she had tried to find someone sympathetic at the White House. No one had even bothered to respond to her query. She had tried the staff of the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and drew another blank. No one in the US government was remotely interested in that topic.

“Umm... we are working on formulating our response to that question,” she answered neutrally.

Gang shook his head, “...and here I was thanking you for being frank with me. Come now Rachel, just tell me the truth.”

“No one in the US government has even dignified this question with an answer,” she said as her head drooped down sadly.

“Good. I am glad that you are getting back to being frank with me. I was aware of what the answer to that question is even before I asked you, of course.”

Rachel sighed softly and waited for the senior bureaucrat to speak further. Gang took a few moments before he continued.

“This is off-the-record. I had them switch off all the recording devices in this room before you came in. I wanted to speak with you, candidly, if I may.”

He paused again for a few moments. This was obviously an effort for him. Although, Rachel couldn't figure out why it would be so. He had the upper hand in this conversation. He had effortlessly put her in her place. So why this circumspection and all the cloak-and-dagger?

Gang said, “I can see you are confused. That off-the-record aspect is more important for my sake than yours.

What I am about to say to you cannot be repeated by you anywhere else. Do you promise me that? I don't need anything else except your solemn word. In any case, if you do refer to this conversation, I will simply deny ever having it with you and I know that my word carries far more weight than yours.

But still... do you promise me that you will not repeat a single word from this conversation elsewhere?”

“You have my word,” Rachel was intrigued by the strange direction this conversation

seemed to be taking.

“Good. Thank you!

Officially, the answer to your question is no. But - unofficially, I, personally, admire what you are attempting to do, Rachel. And I would like to help you in whatever way a bureaucrat like me can do without drawing any attention to it.”

Rachel perked up a bit at the praise. She looked hopefully at him. He noticed that. He shook his head.

“Let me be clearer. My answer is no BECAUSE the US is not providing any help. If that were to change, then China will do its part.”

He could see that Rachel was crestfallen. The largest economy in the world - the US - had laughed her out of the room. And now the second largest economy was saying no, too. This was depressing.

See her reaction, Gang tried to reassure her, “I can assist you in provision of in-kind support, though.”

She nodded. She realized that that was the best he could do. She was getting ready to take his leave, when he said something puzzling, “even if we - as in China - wanted to provide funding, we wouldn’t be able to do so because we are broke.”

He had said this as he looked out the window. Rachel decided to stay put. Gang, obviously, wanted to expound on that last statement of his.

“This is why all the recording devices are off. This is not our official position. For the purposes of external communication, China is racing to overtake the US in terms of economic and military might. But that is all untrue.” He turned to look at her again.

He knew from the extensive dossier that the Chinese intelligence had on Rachel, that she was not an economic or military expert. They had characterized her as a fairly middle-of-the-road bureaucrat who appeared to be spending most of her time in coordination activities at the UN.

“You see, that official version was not far off from the truth a mere decade ago. We were indeed making huge strides - never before seen in the history of humanity - in an absurdly short period of time to re-take our position at the top of the world. We are indeed an ancient civilization and we were the most powerful nation for millennia before



the west usurped us in the last few centuries.

But our progress ran into a couple of major errors that we had made. And a couple of corrections the Americans and Europeans made. Our rapid growth in the last two decades of the twentieth century that continued into the first three decades of the 21st century was largely a consequence of the western capitalists exploiting our cheap labor instead of their own not-so-cheap labor. Actually, let me correct myself - we were not really exploited because we used the western capitalists to get rich, too. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. If at all there were any victims, they were the poor and middle-class folks in the US and Europe. Although, that is debatable because they did enjoy consuming all the cheap goods that we manufactured.”

Rachel was listening carefully. This all sounded about right to her. She had spent enough time at conferences and meetings at the UN to be at least superficially aware of how globalization had evolved since the second world war. She vaguely remembered people citing an important chart that captured the phenomenon Gang had mentioned. What was the catchy name of the chart? It was some animal. Oh right, elephant. The “Elephant chart” that had been created by some development economist.

Gang continued, “the problems began with Covid-19. The fragility of global supply chains and the rise of anti-China sentiment in the US to score cheap political points created an impetus for moving a whole bunch of manufacturing out of China and back to the US.”

The obvious question rose in Rachel's mind, if there was no cheap labor in the US in the 80s and 90s, then most certainly there was none in the last decade.

Gang correctly read her expression and answered, “the problem of not having access to cheap labor was solved by bringing in cheap labor to the US under a visa arrangement that neatly hid the bonded slave labor aspect of it. That and the liberal use of AI enabled the US to re-shore the vast majority of its manufacturing.”

He became wistful, “and that gutted our economy which was already struggling because of our rapidly aging population. Add the economic pressure of having to build up our military to counter the American belligerence to this mix and it is not surprising that we are broke.

The endless flow of dollars resulting from the gluttony of the US consumer rapidly shrunk. Worse, even other countries started buying from the US instead of us. And our society never really got a hang of this whole consumption business. We continue to be frugal even if our savings accounts are loaded. This left our massive manufacturing

capacity increasingly stranded.”

He sighed then straightened up again as he continued his monologue, “the west is self-sufficient in terms of the most important natural resources - energy and food. In fact, the re-shoring of supply chains has further saved the west on their oil bill. The cost of transportation has, practically, vanished for them. You should see the vast number of beached oil tankers, coal tenders, and cargo ships dumped on the beaches all across southeast Asia and Africa. They are useless. Even the containers are now being sold off to be repurposed for cheap housing in poor countries.”

Rachel was stunned to hear this admission. How could this have happened in such a short period of time and almost no one knew about it? Gang read the question on her face and answered, “it happened fast and anyway we have always been an extremely opaque nation, especially, to western eyes.

For all practical purposes, we have locked down our population to discourage any social instability. The silver lining is that joblessness is less of an issue because our working age population is shrinking. We are drawing down our immense savings to keep the elders happy. Luckily, as I said before, their needs are few and they see it as their duty to sacrifice their present for the future of the young. We are girding ourselves to be a country that grows smaller over time in every way starting with our population and then eventually our economy. Hopefully, we shall eventually stabilize into a middle-income economy. Ideally, without any major social unrest.”

He paused for a moment to let all this sink in.

“So now you must be wondering, why I am telling you this?”

Rachel waited.

“Climate change has hit us hard, too. Not much gets reported outside of China about it. But we have been severely affected. The heat wave tragedy spared us. We didn’t have any casualties because of that. However, floods, cyclones, and dust storms do leave a trail of destruction.

The point is that we are affected but relatively less so than some of the other countries. In other words, we have something that will be of potential value to other countries - habitable land. We have lots of it in the interior parts of our country.”

Rachel felt like she was getting a glimpse of where this all was going. But, Gang was being maddeningly slow to get to the point. She held her impatience in check. Gang

was carefully watching every expression on her face.

“We can see an outcome where we are able to see our land becoming an economic resource for us in the future. We just don’t see the pathway to it, yet. Which is where the Nordic proposal comes into the picture.”

Huh... what the hell is he talking about now. Yet again, Gang correctly read her expression. He raised his both his hands to indicate that he meant no offense.

“We are willing to lease our land to refugees for a healthy revenue stream that we need to continue growing economically.”

This was not making much sense to Rachel. Had the old guy lost his marbles? The climate refugees are poor. They had nothing. Where would they get the money to pay rent from? Infuriatingly, again, Gang precisely guessed what she was thinking.

“I know that the refugees have no money whatsoever. That is why some folks like me in China are curious to see how this experiment in the Nordic countries would play out. Would it be a socially stable refugee camp? Would it generate any economic activity?”

Aah... this was what he was getting at. He wanted the Nordic proposal to become a reality so that he could study it and learn from it. Wow! This perspective had simply never crossed her mind. She was not sure if it had crossed anybody else’s mind either. Except for Gang, of course.

“Umm... well... your excellency, if we don’t raise any funding then there will be no experiment for you to observe and assess.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“All the best in your effort, Rachel. As I mentioned earlier in our conversation, my nation is ready to provide in-kind assistance. For example, we could re-purpose all those cargo ships sitting idle right now for use as refugee transport. We could provide robots and other equipment for construction of the infrastructure at the camp. We could provide other things that our manufacturing prowess, much of which is sitting idle, can deliver in a short period. But we cannot provide any funding. Unless, that is, the US steps up. Then we may be forced to offer some funding to show that we are not far behind the US. The optics matter a lot to my government.”

This was quite a lot to process for Rachel. She thanked Gang and told him that she would circle back to him with updates at a later time.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Rachel was sitting in the bar below her apartment in Brooklyn. It was a Punjabi bar that served an eclectic collection of beers from different parts of the US. The dude - Hari Singh - who owned and ran the bar single-handedly was a handsome fourth-generation Punjabi. His ancestors had made their way to California even before California was part of the US. Through the generations, his family had labored on the farms and railroads; fixed cars in garages and gas-stations; and as dentists and pharmacists in the central valley of California. Over time they had married the white and the latino folks. The notion of being a Punjabi was practically meaningless by his generation. He was 1/8th white, 1/4th Mexican, 1/4th Chinese, and 1/2 Punjabi - whatever, all that meant.

The thing that had brought him all the way across the US to New York City was his passion of exploring alcoholic drinks from all around the world. The Punjabi men drank quite a bit of alcohol. This ancestral tendency coupled with the influence of the white ancestors who had roots in the wine country of California and the Mexican ancestors who had migrated from the Tequila growing region had ensured that Hari had developed a refined palate for alcoholic beverages. In high-school, he had quietly started brewing his own beer and then for a short-time dabbled in making wine.

He had considered going to college at UC Davis because of the world-famous Wine Institute. But college had not really been his thing. He was great at figuring things out on his own instead of sitting in a classroom listening to lectures. He had spent all his youth doing gigs all over California learning how to make all kinds of alcohol-based drinks. In a few years, he had realized that what he liked most was imbibing the drinks and more importantly sharing them with others. He had tried to open a bar in the San Francisco Bay Area. Unfortunately, that part of the US was way too snooty for his taste. So he had packed up his bags and moved to NYC.

He had struck gold pretty much immediately in the recently gentrified neighborhood in Brooklyn, Dumbo (short for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass). His bar was not quite hole-in-the-wall nor was it as large as a biergarten. Its claim to fame was the collection of beer he carried and constantly updated. And of course, his gregarious self was the biggest draw. Rachel had immediately gravitated to Hari's Bar (which was its unostentatious name) when she had moved to NYC. She even helped out at the bar if there was an exceptionally large crowd and she happened to be around.

That day, though, she was sitting listlessly. She wasn't drinking the beer, just playing with the almost full bottle. It was raining cats-and-dogs outside. Hari had tried to banter with her but gave up after half-a-dozen failed sorties. He had gone back to polishing the bar. He obsessively polished it any chance he got like every bartender that came

before him. It was their thing for some reason. Maybe they just liked to see it shine and had a revulsion for stains. He kept an eye on Rachel while he did that.

A couple of tables were occupied with folks who lived in the neighborhood. It was a quiet evening except for the torrential rain rattling on the glass storefront. He had missed Rachel while she was away in Africa. They had dated for a very short period of time. Then they had mutually decided to be just good friends. Rachel was just not a steady monogamous relationship type of gal. Not that Hari was looking for a long-term relationship either.

Ever since Rachel had gotten back from Africa, he had seen her alternate between despair and zeal. Over time the periods of despair became longer and more frequent. He, of course, knew what she was working on. Unfortunately, there was not much he could do except be there as her friend. Banter around. Try some new cocktails that he was tinkering with or open a case of wine from some far away place made with some weird exotic fruits. That usually helped snap her out of her gloomy mood. That was not working today, he thought, as he started polishing the shot glasses and re-arranging them for the umpteenth time that day. That was another thing that bartenders did almost reflexively - rearranging shiny clean glasses.

Ben swept into the bar shaking his umbrella and jacket as he dumped his satchel on the table that Rachel was sitting at. Hari waved at him. It was always good to see Ben.

"What's up with that wet rag?" Ben asked as Hari poured him the latest bitter he had procured.

"Dunno what's, especially, up with her today. I tried," Hari responded with the shake of his head.

Ben gestured at him to come join him at Rachel's table as he took a large gulp.

"Oooh... that hit the spot. I, so, needed that one!"

Ben nudged Rachel with his elbow as he slid behind the table.

"Anyone home?"

Rachel didn't even bother to look up at him or Hari who had pulled up a chair and sat down. Hari was trying to temper his instinct of polishing the table.

"Where did you get this one from? I like it. A lot! Make it permanent," Ben made a loud

smacking sound with his lips as he had another large gulp. Then he burped loudly. The folks sitting at the other two tables looked around and raised their glasses at the spectacularly disgusting sound.

“Can you please cut that out for chrissakes!” Rachel had finally found her voice.

“What the fuck is it with you guys!”

Now Rachel had participated in lots of who-has-the-loudest-and-longest-burp contests at Hari’s bar. So, this was completely out of character. Both Ben and Hari knew that. They exchanged a look. The whole men-women remark was also not something that Rachel did. Unless, that is, she had run into her boss that day.

“Okaaayyyy...” Ben let that hang in the air for a bit.

“Out with it... what did that jerk do today?”

Rachel looked up at both of them exasperated. She was teetering on the line between losing her temper at them and sobbing. But seeing the genuinely concerned faces of her close friends helped her avoid both those things.

“You know what I have been up to, right?”

“Umm... yeah... that refugee thing...” Ben said cautiously. He had glanced quickly at Hari to make sure that there was no new thing that Rachel was working on. Ben could be absent-minded at times. He was pretty sure that he listened to his friends. But he was not one hundred percent sure that he absorbed every thing fully.

“Earlier today, just before I was leaving my office for the day, that jerk called me to his office. He must have been drinking. I could tell from the way he looked at me. You know... like he was undressing me in his head. Fuckin’ asshole!”

However much this was a horrible incident, this was par for the course when it came to Rachel’s boss.

“He asked me what I had been doing the last few days. So I told him. I stood near the door and was holding it open just in case he tried anything stupid.

He clearly had something on his mind that he wanted to say to me. So I waited after I was done reciting the list of committee meetings that I had been to. I knew that was not

what he wanted to talk about.”

Rachel was feeling really dirty just remembering the incident from a couple of hours ago. She felt like going up to her apartment and taking a long hot shower and scrubbing herself with lots of soap to wash away that feeling.

“Then his face turned an ugly red as he said, ‘did I not tell you to not go behind my back, you goddamned dyke!’

I figured he must have found out about my offline conversation with the White House aide. No big deal. I knew he would throw a tantrum.

Then he just went off on a rant about how all the bitches like me are constantly trying to undermine real men like him.

Easy come, easy go. I started tuning all that out. It wasn’t exactly new material from him.

But then something changed in his expression. He didn’t seem angry anymore. I kinda felt scared the way he was staring at me. I was about to leave when he whispered, ‘you are really desperate to snag a few billion dollars for that pet project of yours, aren’t you?’

He laughed out loudly as he saw me squirm.

Then he added in a serious voice, ‘blow me right now and I will get you a meeting with the President.’”

Ben and Hari were revolted by the expression. Hari got up in a fit of anger. Ben’s knuckles gleamed white. How dare this asshole treat their friend in such an atrocious manner. How dare he treat any woman... any person this way. That fucker had to be taught a lesson.

Rachel remembered the malicious stare of her boss as he saw his words lacerate her soul. She had visibly winced. She was used to her boss behaving crudely most of the time. This was different, though. She had finally seen his unvarnished misogyny. It was hideous. She had swallowed the bile that had rose up in her throat and left his office. In a daze, she had walked back to her home and instead of going up to her apartment, she had gone to Hari’s bar.

“What the fuck! You have to sue him, Rachel. That asshole needs to not just be fired

but must be punished. This is nuts!" Hari said furiously.

"This can't go on, Rachel. Hari is right. You need to drag his ass to the court."

Both Ben and Hari knew that Rachel was not going to do anything about this. There was no one in the office to witness the conversation between Rachel and her boss. This was a classic he-said-she-said situation and no lawyer was going to even take her case let alone successfully prosecute it. The asshole knew that full well despite his obviously inebriated condition. There was no point in taking this up with the HR because that department was headed by the lackeys of her boss's friends in high places.

Sharing all this with close friends had been immensely helpful for Rachel. She had got the worst of her feelings out of her system. She squeezed their hands to show her gratitude. Then she went over to the restroom to wash her face. On her way back to the table where Ben and Hari were talking quietly, she picked up another bottle of beer from the bar. That ghoulish behavior of her boss had wounded her. But she knew that that wound would heal over time. The wound that would never heal was her absolute failure in raising even a single dime of funding for realizing the Nordic proposal.

She sat down and sipped some beer. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head indicating to Hari that this one was not up her alley. He pulled out his phone and made a note of it. After a few minutes of them silently drinking their beer, Ben cleared his throat and asked her about the fund-raising. She made a sad face and shrugged her shoulders.

"I ain't giving up on it... yet. At the same time... I dunno what else to try next. Not a single nation is willing to give any cash for this project. Most are themselves too poor to help anyone else, of course. They can't even do anything symbolic. That is how bad their situation is. The ones who have cash to spare are conveniently making their commitments contingent on the US stepping up to the plate. They know full well that the US ain't gonna do anything. So they get to be the good guys and the US the bad guy. Well... the US is THE bad guy."

This was no different than what Rachel had been talking about over the last 2-3 months of her efforts. Again, they sat drinking silently for a few minutes. The rain had eased up. It had settled into a sleepy drizzle. The other two tables had paid up and left. It was only the three of them left in the bar.

"I think, Rachel, there is one other thing that you could try," Ben said.

Rachel looked at him questioningly.



Hari had gotten up and was clearing the two tables. He wiped them down and was now again behind the bar putting things away for the night. It was not late. He was just not in the mood to keep the bar open after hearing about Rachel's shitty experience. He was sad how men, especially, men in power continued to fuck up the lives of women well into the 21st century. "Will it never stop?" he wondered. What will it take for people to get over this crap? Why couldn't people just get on with their lives and focus on the good things? Like a good beer or a sensational cocktail. It wasn't hard. Just... you know... to enjoy life.

"Umm... let's see... I think I have an idea. What are you doing tomorrow?"

Ohh... nothing, of course. It is a Saturday.

Why don't you come with me for a day-trip? It is a work trip for me and anyway I am going alone. I could use your company and you could get a break from all this. I will explain it all on the way."

"Where are we going?" Rachel was intrigued.

"Texas."

"No fucking way. Why would I want to go there!"

"I know... I know all about your aversion for the land of your birth. Just come with me. I will book your ticket and I promise, we shall be back tomorrow night. Anyway, we are not going anywhere close to your hometown."

"Fine..." Rachel said dubiously.

"Go home and get some sleep. The flight is at 7 am from LaGuardia. See you then."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Ben had been pecking away at his tablet throughout the flight while Rachel had dozed off. She had to get up at 4 am and she was not really a morning person. Also the time she had spent in Africa had messed up her sleep for good. She used to be a deep sleeper and could knock out an easy eight hours without waking up. The experience of the refugee camps and the relentless work meant that she was always in a disturbed state of mind. She would wake up numerous times because of nightmares. They had started fading away. However, deep sleep continued to elude her.

Their ride had been waiting patiently at the arrivals gate at Dallas Fort Worth airport. The spacious back-seat had pull-out tables, like the bulkhead seats in passenger aircrafts. They nibbled at their egg and croissant sandwich while sipping crappy airport coffee. Ben was tired, too. He had to work late into the night to prepare for this trip. Finally, after fifteen minutes of silent chewing and drinking, Rachel cleared away the remnants of her breakfast and stowed the table back to the side of her seat. She turned around to look at Ben who was eating his last bite.

“So... why am I here in this godforsaken land?” she began.

Ben daintily mopped his lips on the paper napkin and took one last gulp of his coffee.

“We are going to be doing a quick audit of one of the largest SOZs in the US.”

The words audit and the acronym threatened to put her back to sleep. She rolled her eyes like a teenager while Ben continued his spiel.

“Well, SOZs are what has allowed us, the US, to re-shore most of our production from all over the world - China, India, Mexico, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, etc.”

The mention of re-shore and China in the same sentence got Rachel's attention. Last time she had heard those two words together was in Gang's office. He had said exactly the same thing as Ben. She remembered her promise to not repeat that conversation to anyone.

She cautiously said, “yes. I think I know what you are referring to.”

“Do you know what they are, exactly?”

“Umm... factories... right?”

“Yeah... but do you know anything about them?”

She shook her head. Why on earth would she know anything about any factory in the bloody world?!

Ben checked the time. They still had another thirty odd minutes before they arrived at their destination. At that point he was going to get busy with the audit. While he did that, he had organized a tour of the facility for Rachel. He had vaguely mentioned to them that she was a new hire at his firm and that he wanted her brought up to speed.

Ben had been a freshman in college when the Great Recession had happened. He had been majoring in business, specifically, financial engineering. That was the hot new field when he was in high-school. He was good at math and this seemed like a natural fit for his talent. Plus there was the potential for raking in a ton of money in a very short period of time. What was not to like for a bright but poor kid from one of the dead-end industrial towns that were scattered all across the Midwest.

He still remembered that first fall semester when the financial world had come crashing down. He had managed to finish college within three years but had been saddled with a huge loan and limited prospects of making serious money any time soon. Sure, the federal government had done everything it could to save the financial sector. Unfortunately, for him and many thousands like him, the head honchos at the "saved" banks had decided to use the government largesse and the cheap interest rates to line their own pockets instead of creating new jobs.

He had bumbled around on Wall Street from firm-to-firm making barely enough to survive in the still very expensive city. He hadn't made even a small dent in his student loan during those 6-7 years. Then the new-kid-on-the-block, crypto, had arrived. He had been completely sold on the idea of how the government was full of crap and that this new technology was going to make him a millionaire. He had used whatever meager savings he had and even borrowed from friends and family to make big bets on crypto. The initial few years, especially, leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic had been fabulous. He saw his portfolio grow and grow. Prudently, he had cashed out some of it to pay off his college loan and buy a condo without the need for a mortgage.

When the pandemic hit, he had been sitting pretty on a steadily growing pile. Those months and months of working from his tiny condo during the pandemic's first couple of years had been exhilarating. Crypto had taken off like a rocket. He had begun making plans for cashing it all out. He was going to quit his job, buy a nicely outfitted Mercedes Sprinter van, and go enjoy van-life for a year or two. After that, he was contemplating starting his own crypto firm and try to become a billionaire. He had seen

college kids becoming billionaires overnight and he was pretty sure that he was at least as smart as them.

Alas, crypto had been too good to be true and the whole thing came crashing down as one scandal after another came to light right when the pandemic was becoming endemic. Those college kids who had turned billionaires overnight had been ripping off their investors and customers. And people who were supposed to keep an eye on them were instead busy writing paeans to those kids. Ben's fat portfolio dissipated like smoke right in front of his eyes. He had been so blinded by his faith that instead of cashing out sooner, he kept waiting and hoping for the portfolio to rebound. But the music had stopped and he was one of the unfortunate many who were left without a chair.

He had cursed himself for his over-confidence. The silver lining was that he had not quit his job. He and his girlfriend had broken up over the notion of living off-grid in a van. She was very much a city girl and didn't really care much for roughing it out for months on end. A glamping weekend was just about the most roughing out she was ready to do. Ben had vowed that he would never speculate in his life again and buckled down to do his job. He had no savings, but at least he had no loans. He had survived the pandemic bust more or less unscathed. His paper wealth had vanished but at least he was on a solid foundation. He decided to rebuild steadily and with as little risk as possible.

He was the "due diligence" guy for a boutique investment firm. The firm's speciality was investing the wealth of high net worth individuals mostly from the coastal states in the re-shored factories located mostly in the interior states. This was done in a way that the original investors could keep boasting their progressive credentials while making a quick buck - rather, many millions of bucks - from the factories that were almost a throwback to the era of slavery.

"Do you remember the early days in the pandemic when the global supply chains collapsed as country after country entered those crazy lockdowns? The massive shortages of all kinds of things..."

"Of course! I remember, my parents needed to replace their garage door when it was taken out in a tornado. They had to wait for months to get the replacement door shipped all the way from China. It was nuts! A stupid garage door! I think, even the wood was very expensive. My mom complained bitterly how they were forced to pay five times the normal because of some flooding in Canada."

"Right. I mean... sorry about the inconvenience to your parents and all that. It was far worse than that. Folks had trouble manufacturing and transporting N95 masks, PPE kits, etc. to just deal with the immediate needs of the pandemic. Then there was a

shortage of chips which are a necessity for most of the stuff we use in daily life. You know... cars, washers, toasters, whatever.

The haphazard lockdowns thoroughly messed up the global transportation system. Cargo ships and containers were stuck in wrong locations and the logistics had gone for a complete toss. Once the world figured out that aspect, there was a sudden flood of stuff coming to the US which was well beyond the capacity of the ports plus the cargo-hauling trucks and truckers. So we got shortages because of that. We fixed that over time. Just as we were settling down a bit Russia decided to invade Ukraine and the oil prices blew up. One shock after the other to the global supply chain was enough to force the American business owners and politicians to start thinking seriously about re-shoring as much as we could as quickly as possible. You may not know this, but the American taxpayers have been subsidizing this whole re-shoring business to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars."

Rachel listened patiently. Ben tended to be somewhat pedantic when he went into this "explaining" mode of his. He spoke in full paragraphs chock full of information. Most of the time, it was vital information. So she had learned to focus her attention when he was in that mode. This definitely seemed like one of those instances.

"The problem with re-shoring was that the cost of labor was too high to do so profitably. Sure, all that AI and automation was starting to show some real promise. But it was just not mature enough to make a big dent in reducing the labor costs. The American economy was running red-hot and unemployment was at its lowest ever level. The folks who were not working or even looking for work were wealthy enough to sit on the sidelines.

On top of that, as you know very well, being a Texan and all that, many Americans didn't want any poor immigrants blighting their neighborhoods. So we had all those dramatic deportations which scared away a whole lot of our cheapest and most diligent workers back to their countries. Heck, we even lost many boat-loads of highly skilled folks such as scientists and professors. The manufacturing sector that was just beginning to take off in the US ran into this wall of labor scarcity. For a while, a few states even tried to bring back child labor to get more workers for the meat factories and god knows what else. It was absolutely appalling!

Then a strange thing happened. I don't understand politics... you know that. In fact, it bores me to death. Show me numbers and I am a kid in candy-land. Anyway, my boss explained it to me a while ago. Somehow, the moderates from both the parties got together to formulate a new policy for bringing in cheap labor. For starters, they created these special opportunity zones or SOZs that were exempt from most of the usual laws and regulations - federal, state, and local, especially, the big ones that affected the profitability of manufacturing. You can imagine - minimum wages, benefits, OSHA, environment, etc. All were gotten rid off or reduced to bare bones. Then they

created a new visa category, specifically, for bringing in cheap labor from all around the world.”

“Voila!” Ben rarely used non-English words. This must be the punch-line. Rachel knitted her brows and concentrated hard.

“Suddenly, the US manufacturers had the best of all worlds. They had, practically, unlimited cheap labor. They had no major transportation costs... no containers... no cargo ships... no ports... no expensive oil for those ships... no logistics risks... no natural disaster risks... just nothing. They already had unlimited cheap energy... both clean and dirty. Warren Buffet and his ilk had bought out all the freight rail lines and upgraded them to run round-the-clock on cheap electricity.

The national security folks were not particularly happy because their main business was maintaining the US military presence in hundreds of bases all around the world. But they quickly adapted and got into the manufacturing business.

Cash from all over the world flooded into the US to invest in this incredible opportunity. My boss made out like a bandit. And dozens of other CEOs continue to do the same. Everyone wanted a piece of this pie. There was no stopping for the first few years as the manufacturing ecosystem got built out. It is starting to get saturated for some product segments. After all, we can manufacture all we want... but we can't yet manufacture new customers, can we?”

This was a bit of lame humor from Ben. He realized that it was not a good look and frowned.

“Okay... “ Rachel's voice trailed off. Was that the punch-line? She still couldn't figure out why Ben was telling her all this. More importantly, she was still quite irritated that he had made her fly all the way to Texas for listening to this lecture and driving around in this hulking car. She hated flying, Texas, and driving - all of it equally - from the bottom of her heart.

Seeing that mixture of bewilderment and irritation on Rachel's face, Ben exclaimed, “The point, my dear Rachel, is that instead of looking for grants to build out your refugee camps why don't you look for investors. If you can guarantee a return on investment (ROI) of say, 7-8%, I can even convince my boss and our clients to pony up several hundred million dollars for it. I can easily see several billion dollars showing up in practically no time if you up the ROI closer to 10%.”

He looked at her triumphantly. This was the big idea that he had yesterday evening at Hari's bar. After sleeping on it and then explaining it to Rachel, he became even more

convinced that this was indeed a brilliant idea.

“Invest in what? A refugee camp?” Rachel was thoroughly confused. Ben was not making any sense at all to her. That Chinese diplomat, Gang, had also left her hanging with his vague questions about the possibility of refugee camps generating revenues for China. What the fuck was all this crap? She was looking for financial aid for the poor refugees and these guys were looking to make money off them? She knew that Ben was not an asshole. He was a decent middle-aged white guy who meant well.

“Tchaah... Rachel... c'mon. Don't you get it?”

That refugee camp will be producing some stuff, right? I mean... people there will be doing something with their time. It is not as if they are just going to be sitting there twiddling their thumbs. That will create a revenue stream. What if you could use that to pay the investors who pay for creating the camp itself?”

Somewhere deep in Rachel's mind she felt that some sparks were trying to catch fire. She looked out the window trying to process it all when her eyes fell on what must have been a humongous white wall that stretched across the entire horizon. Whatever Ben had talked about for the last thirty minutes threatened to disappear as she stared at that wall. She turned to Ben with her hand pointing at the wall.

“What on earth is that?”

“Aah... that would be the largest manufacturing factory in the world. In human history, actually,” Ben said matter-factly.

“We are going there?” Rachel communicated this not in words but through wild gesticulation.

“Yup. I want you to see it and we shall talk some more in the evening on our way back to New York. Now I gotta check my email. I think, we shall reach in five minutes.”

Five minutes meant that they were still 2-3 miles out and yet the wall was clearly visible. Rachel watched in awe as they approached it. They took an unmarked exit that seemed to be going nowhere. The car slowed down in a couple of minutes as the driver came within a couple of hundred yards of the gate.

The driver flashed something at the security and they were waved through. They probably had far more security at the UN than this place. The wall was not particularly thick. It seemed to be made of iron and then coated with white paint on the outside. The inside looked the color of rust. It was tall - almost fifty feet straight up. A massive

coil of razor wire was perched on top of the wall. All this reminded Rachel of prisons and top-secret military installations.

There were no structures or trees within twenty-five yards of the wall. No one was going to be able to climb it unless they had some specialized equipment. Maybe tunnel underneath the wall. Although, if the wall was towering fifty feet above the ground then surely it must be buried several feet below the ground too. And then there must be some solid concrete foundation on which this whole thing would have to rest on. The tunnel would have to be mighty deep. And who knows how long it would have to be in order to get clear of the wall and the all-seeing state-of-the-art cameras hooked up with the best AI that money could buy.

The inside of the campus was laid out neatly in a grid. Some of the grid squares consisted of massive blocks of buildings, the largest she had ever seen. These damn structures were probably visible from space! The driver knew exactly where to go. There were not many signs along the roads. The few that existed were entirely graphic in nature. At a distance, she could see some taller buildings. They looked like dormitories. Clothes were drying out in balconies. That must be where the workers lived. Within ten minutes or so, the driver pulled up to a building made almost entirely of glass. This must be one of the administrative buildings. Both Ben and Rachel got out and did some stretching. They had been sitting on the flight and in the car for hours. Then Ben motioned Rachel to follow him into the glass building.

There was no reception, but Ben knew where to go. They chose to climb the stairs up a couple of floors and then Ben waved his tag at a plain white door. The door clicked open and they went in. It was a large office packed with cubicles. Each one was occupied and there was the usual buzz of a typical office. Ben walked over to the corner office and they were waved in by a short plump white guy sitting behind a standard-issue office desk. Nothing fancy anywhere. Just utilitarian office furniture all around.

"This is my new colleague, Rachel. And this is Chad, the chief accountant of the Wichita Complex." Ben made the shortest introduction one could make.

"Good to see you Ben and nice to meet you Rachel," Chad responded unenthusiastically and equally briefly. It seemed that accountants continued to nurture their apprehension about outside auditors, Rachel thought. He was clean-shaven and was wearing a half-sleeve button down shirt of some beige shade and a flimsy blue tie. The khaki trousers were all wrinkled as if he had been sitting in them for hours even though it was still early in the day.

"Ohh... right. The tour. Let me get that going before you and I get to work," Chad said as he picked up the phone and called someone. In a minute or two, a young blonde



man with sleepy eyes knocked on the glass door.

“Show her around... y’know our usual tour for first-timers,” Chad ordered the young man. The young man nodded and held the door open for Rachel. Even before Rachel had left the room, Chad had turned to Ben and asked him where he would like to start.

“Hi - I am Jake. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” said Rachel. This dude was really young. Maybe in his late teens. He was tall and had longish brown hair. He was wearing similar clothes as Chad. Maybe this was some sort of a uniform the employees had to wear.

“Would you like to get a drink or eat something? It will be lunch in an hour, anyway.

We can start the tour right after that. It will take us a couple of hours at most.”

The breakfast sandwich and coffee had not been much. Rachel was famished.

“Yeah... I would love to get something to eat first.”

By that time, they had come back down to the ground floor of the building. Instead of going out, Jake swiped his tag on another plain door and they entered a small cafeteria. He walked to the vending machine that must have recently been loaded with sandwiches and snacks. Everything looked fresh. He swiped his tag and motioned Rachel to make her selection. She decided to go for a panini that seemed to be packed with thick chunks of mozzarella and slices of tomatoes and bunches of basil. The bread looked like it had been taken out of the oven only a few minutes ago. She also selected a ginger ale to go with the sandwich. Jake settled for a bag of chips and a coke. They went and sat down at one of the tables to eat. There was no one else in the cafeteria at that time. Maybe it was too early or maybe they all ate at their desks. Rachel tore into her sandwich and washed it down with the ginger ale. Jake seemed to be staring at something intently on the blank wall behind Rachel. He seemed lost in thought.

After they finished lunch, Jake led the way out of the glass building. They went around the corner to a small parking lot and got into a small electric golf cart. It was a cool but sunny day. There was a light breeze. Jake continued to be quiet and distant. Feeling rejuvenated after that hearty lunch, Rachel decided to do what she was good at - ask lots of questions and listen carefully. Ben had not given her much of an introduction to this campus. He had left it up to her to figure out what was important and worth knowing about.

“Sorry, I forgot to tell you my name. I am Rachel.

What shall we be seeing today?”

Jake glanced at her blankly and then he gave her a shy smile as he realized that he had not been a good tour guide.

“Right - I was told to show you the floors of at least three factories and then a quick tour of the accommodations of the workers. Also answer any questions that you may have. To the best of my knowledge, that is. I am kinda new here, too. I joined about three months ago.”

Rachel gave him an encouraging smile in return.

“Which factory floor are we visiting first?”

“Let’s go see the one where we make all kinds of computers - phones, tablets, laptops, VR goggles, etc.”

Jake tooled around the campus passing by many open bays where loading and unloading activities were going on. He stopped at a large building that seemed to have no windows at all. Just huge walls and the roof. It was not very tall but it was wide and long. Wider and longer than probably any building Rachel had ever seen. It must be as long as an airline runway and maybe wide enough to accommodate two runways side-by-side.

Jake parked their cart and led her to a small door, again plain, and swiped his card near the knob. They walked into a blast of air which seemed almost strong enough to blow off their clothes and hair. It was probably doing exactly that. It was trying to get rid of all the dust on them. After walking through the blower, they entered another room where they put on blue suits that covered them completely and were perfectly sealed. The suits had their own oxygen supply. They were thin and Rachel had no problem hearing what Jake was saying.

Through another blower chamber and they stepped into the largest contiguous room that Rachel had ever seen. It felt like the room had no far walls. At least that she could see. The ceiling stretched away to the horizon, it seemed. The room was organized in the form of a typical manufacturing floor with assembly lines stretching into the distance. Rachel noticed all of this sub-consciously. She was transfixed by the sheer number of workers that were in the room. There must have been thousands of workers in that single room. All wearing colorful suits and busy assembling the intricate devices that were ubiquitous in the world. It was not as if there was pin-drop silence or anything

like that. It was just that she would have expected such a large number of people to make way more noise than what she was hearing. The machines buzzed and she could hear murmurs. And the line supervisors made their rounds on their Segways.

She and Jake just stood in one corner of the floor and gawked. Clearly, even though Jake had seen this already, it was still new enough for him that his awe was quite similar to that of Rachel. The closest assembly line to them was about ten yards away and one of the workers there took a small break from whatever intricate task she was doing. She had to look through what seemed to be a massive lens with an in-built light to perform her task. She stretched her neck in either direction. Then she stared directly at Jake and Rachel felt as if they knew each other. There were no signals but Rachel noticed that Jake had a goofy smile plastered all over his face. Was the dude in love with that girl or what!

The girl was quite clearly of Asian origin. She was pretty. Rachel let her gaze wander up and down the assembly line and she suddenly realized that more or less every worker seemed to be a woman. And most seemed to be Asians. At least as far as she could tell.

“Are all these... women? Why am I not seeing any men?”

“Ohhh... yes. I mean, no. Most are women. I think, the ratio is about four to one. Maybe more. Most of the men work in the loading and unloading sections. The assembly is pretty much all women.”

“Where do all these workers come from?”

“They come from all over the world. But I think, most of them are from Asia. Like... you know... Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc.”

Rachel started walking toward one of the assembly lines but Jake softly asked her not to go too close. She felt like a slothful giant standing in the midst of this sea of young women working away tirelessly. She had always found it difficult to guess the age of east and southeast Asian people. She was mesmerized by the almost metronomic rhythm of their work.

“How many phones do they produce? Like in one day?” she asked just to make some conversation. Jake was one of the quiet types. In any case, he was back to staring at that particular woman. Or was it a girl? Jake just shrugged his shoulders to indicate his ignorance.

"How old are these workers?"

"The youngest, I think, are about 15-16 and the oldest are probably in their late 30s."

Rachel whirled around and asked incredulously, "are you saying that this facility employs children?"

Jake just stared back at her. He was furiously thinking, "did he fuck up and say something wrong? Why was this chick getting all worked up? She looked like a government-type. Was she here on some official inspection? No. That wouldn't be the case. Chad would not have let her out of his sight then. She was with that other nerdy-looking guy."

"Uhh... dunno. Is that... like... bad or something?"

"Hell, YES! Why are there little girls working in this factory? Where are their parents?"

"I think - we should go back to Chad's office."

Rachel realized that she had shown a bit too much emotion in that outburst. She should have kept her mouth shut and simply observed the place.

"Naah... whatever. Let's get on with the rest of the tour. Not my problem... if these are kids," she said indifferently. Jake was thinking of calling Chad and checking in with him. Eventually, he decided to not do that. He didn't like Chad one bit. And this chick seemed to have simmered down anyway. Might as well do his job instead of raising eyebrows. He was the one who had blurted out the age like an idiot. He had been busy staring at Lan and not been paying attention to Rachel. His answer had obviously slipped out of his mouth, inadvertently. Not gonna happen again!

"Sure. Let's go to another factory."

The next factory was dedicated to processed food and the one after that was for household chemicals. Unlike the first factory, these didn't have assembly lines. Instead they had a lot of piping and heavy equipment that was being operated, again, by a whole lot of young women. In those two factories, they had to wear different kinds of suits. The ones that were there to protect them from exposure to potentially toxic fumes and liquids. The operations were phenomenally complex. Yet, they all seemed to be seamlessly moving along. After an hour or so, Jake turned their cart in the direction of the dorms.

No kidding about that! The residential complex looked exactly like college dorms. Each high-rise had hundreds - maybe, thousands - of apartments. Three people were allocated to each apartment. Each apartment had a small bathroom. There was no kitchen in the apartment nor were there any washers/dryers. There were huge industrial sized laundromat machines in the basements of each high-rise where people could wash their clothes. The cafeterias were fantastically vast. Each hall would probably seat at least five thousand people in one go. The open spaces spread out among the high-rises had parks, gymnasiums, movie theaters, malls, and restaurants. It was a ginormous self-contained city. Rachel took all this in as Jake showed her around as quickly as possible. Since the facility worked round-the-clock spread over four shifts, there were a few people hanging around the common areas.

Jake turned around the cart and started retracing their way back to Chad's office. Rachel was silent on the way back. This was quite some operation. She had no idea anything like this existed on US soil. She had heard about such factories and campuses in China and other poorer parts of the world. She was finally beginning to understand what Gang was talking about.

Jake and Rachel walked into Chad's office just as Ben was wrapping up his work. He made some final requests to Chad and then thanked him and Jake for their help. He nodded at Rachel and they walked downstairs to their ride. This time around it was one of those generic sedans that was used by taxi drivers. The driver, though, was the same as the one in the morning.

Ben saw Rachel eyeing the sedan and said, "it is a short ride on the way back. We are hitching a ride on my boss's private jet from Wichita City. My boss was meeting some of the investors there today. I was told to get on the flight to provide an update on the way back to New York."

## Chapter Twenty-Six

In less than half an hour, they arrived at a private airfield and were driven straight to the jet waiting for takeoff on the runway. It was a typical beige nondescript private jet that could fly way faster than a commercial airline. There were no frills included in the service. The co-pilot doubled up as the steward.

This was Rachel's first time in a private jet. Instead of observing the life of the rich and famous, she was busy getting surprised. Ben's boss was an older woman with twinkling brown eyes and silky white hair. She was wearing a sober blue business suit with a white shirt. She was talking with someone on the phone when Ben and Rachel got on the aircraft.

Once the aircraft had taken off and reached cruising altitude which happened rather quickly, Rachel felt, the co-pilot/steward offered them some perfunctory beverages and snacks. No fancy champagne and caviar was being served on this flight. Tomato juice and pretzels was what Rachel settled on. She looked out the window as Ben briefed his boss quickly. There were a few follow-up questions and Ben had to pull out his tablet to show her something. Ben's boss gave him some final instructions and then she turned her attention to Rachel.

"Who do I have the pleasure of flying with today?" she asked pleasantly.

"My name is Rachel and I am here because of him."

Ben's boss waited with a pleasant smile on her face. She wanted to know more about Rachel. Ben was still making some notes. He had not had a chance to make introductions.

"I am a part of the US delegation at the UN."

"Pray, what brings you to Texas? Don't tell me you hitched a ride with us today just to go visit family and friends."

She had detected the Texan accent.

Ben was done with his task. He put away his paraphernalia and joined the conversation.

"Let me make the formal introductions. Rachel, this is my boss, Emily Wood. She is the

founder and CEO of our company, Foresight Investments.”

Then turning to Emily, he added, “it was I who asked Rachel to join me today for the trip to the Wichita City complex. I think, I may have a solution for the problem that Rachel is trying to solve.”

Turning back to Rachel, he added, “until recently, Emily used to be an Economics Professor at the University of California, Berkeley. A long time ago, she had served on the President’s Council of Economic Advisers and the Federal Reserve Board. She also spent a considerable amount of time consulting for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during her academic years.”

“It is an honor and a privilege to meet you, Emily!” Rachel stood up from her seat to go shake Emily’s hand.

Emily nodded graciously.

“So what is vexing our delegation to the UN these days?”

Rachel looked at Ben and said, “well... maybe you should be the one to describe the problem since you claim to have a solution for it. I am still not sure what your big idea really is.”

Ben nodded and began, “a few months ago, in the aftermath of the heat wave tragedy, some of the Nordic countries offered a small parcel of their land for re-settling climate refugees.

Rachel, please feel free to jump in with additional details.”

“The size of the parcel is about one thousand square kilometers and they are willing to accept up to 25 million refugees. It is located way up in the north... in the Arctic Circle, I think. They also put some conditions on their offer. The refugees are to be confined to that parcel. And they want the UN to set up the refugee camp and operate it,” Rachel chimed in.

Ben continued, “the problem is that these Nordic countries only offered the land and nothing else. As you probably know, the UN doesn’t have any funding to take them up on their offer. Rachel has been spending all of her time over the last few weeks trying to finagle cash from different countries.

No one is ready to step up unless the US takes the lead. As you can well imagine, the

current US government has zero interest in doing any charity for people from other countries, especially, poor folks living in godforsaken places. I believe they like to use another more colorful word for those countries.”

“Of course!” Emily murmured to herself. One of the least popular items in the federal budget had always been foreign aid despite it being, practically, a trivially small number.

“My big idea for Rachel was to try and get investors to fund the creation of the camp instead of looking for charity from governments. If the UN could offer a reasonable return on the investment then investors would be happy to step up to the plate. I dunno... maybe 7-10% ROI should be sufficient to get some big players interested in this.”

“Now that’s a novel idea! I am glad, I have kept you around, Ben,” Emily exclaimed.

“Please do elaborate. Where would the UN get the revenue to pay off the investors?”

Ben became slightly defensive.

“Well... I was thinking that the refugee camp could be like the Wichita City complex.”

Emily raised an eyebrow while Rachel looked positively scandalized by this statement.

“Surely, you are kidding, Ben!” Rachel snapped.

Ben’s face reddened noticeably. He was not expecting this reaction from Rachel, especially, in front of his boss. And, especially, when his boss seemed to like his idea. It felt - well - disrespectful.

“You think that the UN should become a factory operator? A factory that employs teenage girls and then keeps them locked up in a compound? Are you nuts?”

Rachel liked Ben and he was her good friend. But this was plain absurd. She sputtered with more indignation and realizing where she was, she decided to shut up and fume in silence.

“Even if we keep the factory aspect aside, for a moment, the idea still has legs. Pretty solid legs, I think,” Emily said in a mild tone.



“Where would the revenue come from?” Rachel felt as if they were going around in circles.

Emily looked at her kindly.

“A city is a very effective engine for economic growth. Even without a factory, people do many things to make money. For example, arts and entertainment generate pretty solid revenues. So do professional sports. Restaurants and bars can be quite profitable. When several million people live close to each other, they eventually figure out what they are good at and what others are good at. That is when the magic of trade happens. Ever heard of Adam Smith?”

Emily was chuckling at Rachel’s obvious embarrassment.

“Even more magic happens when that same singer can sell their music to customers who are living in other cities or even faraway countries. Or the chef offers paid online classes to teach people from those faraway places. All those customers send money to that city.

Come now... Rachel. Cities will produce revenues. We have known that for a long time. How much revenue would a city that has been created from scratch generate over a period of time, that we don’t yet know. It will depend on the nature of the city and the people who live there. I think, Ben’s idea is worth exploring.”

“Umm... okay. Fair enough.”

Ben was grateful for his boss swooping in and saving his idea from getting thoroughly rubbished.

Emily wasn’t done though. Again in a mild tone but which distinctly held a clear rebuke, she said, “I think Rachel, you are also judging the SOZs too harshly. As someone who makes money from investing in them, I may be biased.

The lives of those teenage girls from Asia and Africa are immeasurably better than what they would have experienced if they had stayed back in their homes. I am not defending the SOZs in their totality. Don’t get me wrong. I wish we - humanity - could offer every individual a dignified life such as the one that you or Ben or I am getting. Unfortunately, we don’t live in a fair and just world. We live in a world where even relative improvements are important to recognize.

I remember the catastrophic floods in Pakistan that had submerged almost a third of their land for months on end. The destitution was unimaginable. One of the ways those

masses of displaced people tried to deal with their situation was by marrying off and sometimes even selling their teenage daughters off so that they could use the money to help the rest of the family survive. It was horrifying for the girls. I would rather those girls were living in an SOZ where they at least had basic physical security.

Wouldn't you agree?"

Rachel became pale. She was deeply affected by this observation. Like any privileged person, she had simply passed judgment without thinking. Worse, she had done so in a self-righteous manner. It was especially embarrassing because she knew better. She had traveled to many of the poorest and most deprived parts of the world. She was not one of those proudly ignorant Americans.

She kicked herself mentally for slipping into a patronizing attitude. She must do better than that. Not just in front of people such as Emily, but in a genuine and permanent way. She had to get rid of the blinders that come from wealth and privilege. With her head hanging down, she offered an apology to Emily.

Emily waved it off, "it happens. We can do better and we must constantly aspire to do better. But we need to be clear-eyed about the world we live in. So... what do you think of Ben's idea?"

They all sat around for a few moments imagining a fictitious city. Of course, their minds immediately went to their home, New York. Their city did generate vast amounts of revenue. The annual budget of the city was easily upward of a \$100B. They knew that the gross metropolitan product of New York was greater than \$2T, more than the GDP of the vast majority of countries while its population was close to 20M. At least, in a very very crude sense, the idea of people investing in a city sounded plausible. But there were so many unknowns.

"You guys are investors...", Rachel began cautiously.

"What would make this an attractive proposition for you?"

Emily glanced at Ben, "what do you think?"

Ben was a thoughtful guy. He took a few moments to toy around with the ideas flitting through his mind. He frowned a bit as he tried to figure out how to go about answering this question.

Emily gently prodded him, "maybe... we start with the aspect of costs?"

Ben's brow cleared and he nodded his head.

"Yes - we should start with reducing the costs of this operation. Uhh... I mean the refugee camp. Or maybe... we should just call it a city," he looked up in alarm at both Rachel and Emily as he fumbled around to find the right words.

Rachel decided not to bite his head off. Yet. She was getting an insightful demonstration of how Wall Street thought about people and civilization.

"The way I see it," Ben began, "the big costs in the lives of people of any city in the world can be put in three buckets.

The first one is housing. It is more or less entirely an outcome of scarcity. In most cases, this scarcity is artificially created through zoning laws. Invariably, it leads to higher costs than are necessary. In any case, the land offered by the Nordic countries is not a gift to the UN or the refugees. They are not transferring the property rights. They are not giving up their sovereign rights over that land. So - it is as if the land is being offered to the UN rent-free. So what if, the UN in turn constructed the housing and all the attendant infrastructure for the residents and offered it to them rent-free, too. No property rights. No property transactions. As the population grows and more housing is needed, it is constructed and allocated rent-free."

Emily silently nodded her head. Rachel didn't react. This seemed fair and pretty straightforward.

"The second biggest cost is healthcare. This is a tricky one. I mean, the UN can offer it for free to all residents. But it will still be a cost and it is quite substantial however much we try to minimize it."

Ben paused. He was wrestling with what he wanted to say but was doubtful that it would go down well with Rachel or even Emily for that matter.

"The healthcare costs of the various SOZs that we invest in are quite low," Ben said cautiously.

"That is because the people who work there are all young and single. The big healthcare expenditure is usually on older folks and little children. The age of our labor... uhh... I mean staff... ranges from high teens to late thirties. They tend to be healthy pretty much all the time and don't need any major healthcare services. And whatever they need we provide at the lowest possible cost making full use of AI-medical assistants."

Again, a pause to gauge the reactions of Rachel and Emily. There was nothing. But both had a somewhat grim expression on their faces.

“Another aspect that keeps our healthcare costs down is that most of our staff consists of women. And women tend to be more resilient and robust than men. Women also tend to take better care of themselves and each other. Far more diligently than men, for sure.”

Rachel had raised one of her eyebrows. Ben couldn't read her expression. So he decided to just go for it.

“To minimize the cost of this hypothetical city, I would suggest that the residents should mostly be young and relatively healthy women.”

He cringed preemptively as he tried to prepare for the onslaught from Rachel. He had recommended condemning the children, the old, and the weak to more misery while rescuing those who were the most resilient.

Surprisingly, Rachel had a broad smile on her face. In fact, she came over to his seat and gave him a quick hug.

“That is the best thing you have said all day today!”

Ben looked at her carefully. Was she pulling his leg? Was this sarcasm? Rachel didn't really do sarcasm. How in hell was she going along with this suggestion?

“Yes, this is an excellent idea, Ben,” added Emily meditatively.

She saw his disbelieving look and said, “you are a white man. Straight, educated, and wealthy. You simply have no comprehension of the life of a woman... even that of a white woman who is also straight, educated, and wealthy. It is orders of magnitude more difficult than yours. The life of a woman from a downtrodden community in a poor country is unimaginable for a person like you.

Don't take offense. But you just don't know how bad it is. In addition, there is the flat-out exploitation that young women are subjected to in places where their position is already condemned to be marginal at best. It is not just as labor, but as sexual objects. Rape is wielded as a weapon by men against women and the other men that they are competing with. Young women may be the most resilient, but they also are the ones that require the most rescuing.”

Rachel was vigorously nodding her head. The earlier rebuke from Emily and this fascinating aspect of health cost minimization that Ben had brought up seemed to have aligned fantastically.

“Old people and children have far more privilege and access to support as compared with young women in most societies.”

Ben heaved a sigh of relief. He had inadvertently managed to say the right thing. It would trouble him for the rest of his life, this fact, that he was simply unaware of the challenges that women face even in the 21st century and in the so-called developed parts of the world.

He added softly, “and women tend to be significantly more productive than men. So, if we are looking at the city to become a major generator of revenue in a short period of time, then women would not only adapt to that life faster than men, not only learn new skills quicker, but also deploy those skills more effectively.”

“What else?” Rachel asked. Low housing costs and minimizing healthcare costs. This seemed plausible. She would have to see some numbers. But these ideas were most definitely worth exploring further.

“Food is a big cost, especially, given the location of this city. I mean, within the Arctic circle and over an area of a thousand square kilometers, it is going to be almost impossible to have conventional agriculture. Most stuff will have to be shipped in over long distances. Wouldn't it?”

Rachel shook her head.

“Nah. Food is not an issue at all, I think. As long as they have a reasonably cheap source of reliable energy, we can have vertical farms enclosed in greenhouses and precision fermentation for other kinds of food products. I believe, energy is not an issue in the Nordic countries. They have cheap wave and wind energy coupled to abundant hydro-electricity. The foot-print for growing food would be quite small for those many people.”

“Great... then that takes care of the other big cost item that I had on my list. I mean, energy,” said Ben.

“Another cost that manifests in different ways, at least in the US, is the car-centric form of our urbanization. Too much money is wasted on cars and the infrastructure required to support them. In fact, if there were no personal vehicles in general and only mass-transit or micro-transit modes of transportation, then the overall foot-print of the city can

be massively reduced - narrower roads, no need for parking, etc. And of course, no energy needed to power those individual vehicles.”

Rachel nodded her head. Her pet peeve growing up in rural Texas had been those ugly pickup trucks being a necessity for life. The move to New York city had totally liberated her from that abomination. Yes, the hypothetical city could be like New York or any good and dense European city. Like Barcelona or Amsterdam or Paris.

“What else? Which other costs would we have to worry about?”

“Education is considered a big cost in the US for households. But I think it is mainly because of the inefficient way we go about offering it. I think, and I imagine, the people in this hypothetical city could probably learn most things virtually. They don’t need degrees and certifications from Ivy league schools to do their jobs. All they need are skills. The certification is merely to indicate that the person has the necessary skills.

Plus, if it is virtual then most colleges around the world would probably have no problem offering up their digital archives for free to the residents of the city. Also, I hear the AI-teaching assistants are fantastic. They can apparently achieve an extremely high-level of customization for each student without incurring any additional cost. That should help... I guess.”

“So... housing, health, food, energy, education... all these can be delivered at as low cost as possible to the residents. We shall have to nail down the details of providing them... both upfront costs and ongoing costs,” Rachel was murmuring to herself as she stared off in the distance. For the first time, since the heat wave tragedy, she was seeing a glimmer of hope. She was desperately going to cling on to it.

“Emily, you haven’t said much about this,” Rachel inquired.

Emily had been looking out the window. It had been mostly dark, probably, because of the cloud cover. The aircraft was getting closer to the densely populated region of the mid-Atlantic. Every now and then, a window would open up among the clouds and she would see the twinkling lights of some small town or large city flash by. She mulled over the idea. Turned it around every which way in her mind to see if she could poke any holes in it. So far, this was all conceptual. For the purposes of turning this idea into an investment-grade proposal, a lot of number-crunching would have to be done. The more she thought about it, the more she liked it. She turned around to look at the expectant faces of Ben and Rachel. She decided to force them into refining the idea even more.

“So far so good. You’ve done well in minimizing the cost of building and running this

city. I give that to you. I don't see any other places to cut."

Ben relaxed a bit. He had inadvertently become quite tense as he waited for his boss to give her verdict. It was not as if his job was dependent on this conversation. At least, so far. Even then, he genuinely admired his boss and had always sought her approval. For once, he had put himself out there with some new type of thinking. He had been worried that his boss might think it was not so good and somehow whatever impression she carried of him in her mind until then, would be diminished.

"Where do you get the revenue to not only cover the operating costs, but to start paying off the capital and a hefty return on top of it? Do the residents have their own currency? Who decides what they do? What sort of taxation exists?"

"I dunno about currency. I am no economist," Rachel replied.

"The residents decide what they want to do. They will all be given a grace period during which they have to figure that out. They have to find a way to earn. The allowance they all will get would be sufficient to cover their key expenses. Buying food, clothes, etc. It will be capped. At the end of the grace period, the allowance will start diminishing to a minimum amount.

Taxation will be progressive. They will all be aware that they are on the hook to pay for their own way and also to pay off their loan with interest. We shall have to be honest with them about that aspect. If the revenue stops, then the city shuts down and they will be sent back to their native places."

"What happens if the revenue falls short?"

"Short? Of what?"

"What do the investors do if the city doesn't generate sufficient revenue as per the contract? Does the UN just declare bankruptcy and the investors sell off the city to recover whatever they can?"

These were a lot of terms that Rachel had heard before but was not sure what they all meant exactly. Especially, that part about "selling off the city" made her concerned. The city was the refugees. There was nothing else there. No resources, no equipment, nothing that was going to be of value. It was not as if the investors could sell off condos from the city and recover their investments. Or could they? They might exactly do just that. After all, the city would have all the infrastructure. Wealthy people from around the world wouldn't mind having yet another place to hang out near the north pole. Heck, they could convert the city in some kind of a resort and not just recover part of their

investment but even make a handsome profit out of it.

What if, though, she was thinking furiously, the investors went after the refugees and decide to convert the city into another manufacturing campus similar to the one she saw earlier that day? What then? That would just not do. It would never happen. She wouldn't let it happen. The city wouldn't fail. It would not just survive but thrive. It would not only pay off the investors, but the additional revenue that it would generate would fund expansion of the city and maybe even the construction of similar cities for the billions of climate refugees in the world. They HAD to make this work! There was NO other alternative! The alternative future was too terrible to imagine! She had seen what a global climate tragedy could do. She had seen the rotting corpses in village after village in Africa.

'They will generate the revenue. I am sure of it. People always find things to do. Just the way you described it earlier. It not only happens in a large city such as New York, it starts happening even within a refugee camp. It happens rapidly, within days of the camp being opened. Adam Smith's invisible hand shows itself in no time. It has been happening for millennia. Humans are social creatures and we live in tribes. We automatically start figuring out what we are good at and what others are good at. Exchanges of all kinds appear in even the most primitive societies that have been studied.'

The pilot announced that they were about to land and everyone should put on their seat-belts.

Emily nodded.

"I am inclined to agree with you, Rachel. This could work. This could even be a success. Who knows. I would invest once you figure out all the details of this proposal."

Rachel was radiant with enthusiasm. Ben was very happy to see his friend back to her old self. He was glad he could help her. And getting this pat on the back from his boss was a fantastic cherry-on-the-top. Instead of this being a dreary day of travel and staring at spread-sheets and asking difficult questions to accountants who acted as if he was pulling their teeth out without the benefit of anesthesia, this day had turned out to be wonderful. He was tired. But it was all good.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

In the weeks subsequent to Rachel's fateful day-trip to Texas, a flurry of intense activity ensued at the UN. Maya was quickly on board with the overall idea that Ben had come up with. Rachel had fleshed it out further using a reasonable set of assumptions. It was sufficiently detailed that Maya could convene several working groups within the UN that could focus on key issues such as selection of refugees who would be offered the opportunity to relocate to the new City, administrative structure, urban layout, energy, food, vocational training, economic and taxation framework, law and order, and others.

Once the contours of the final proposal had been established by the various working groups, investors were brought in to vet the financial viability. The initial reaction was subdued. However, after several closed-door meetings led by Emily followed by a series of impassioned speeches by the representatives of the climate-affected countries at the UN, a small number of investors had stepped up to the challenge. Unfortunately, their pledges were not even remotely close to the estimated cost of building the city and operating it. The humanitarian appeals put some more pressure on the wealthier countries to get off the sidelines. None offered to pledge financial support, but in-kind support was offered by several key countries.

The in-kind support was mainly in the form of providing crucial equipment. The wealthier east Asian countries such as China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea offered the use of their idling fleets of cargo ships to not only transport the equipment but also the refugees to the City. Hundreds of these cargo ships would be retrofitted into passenger ships. These were no luxury cruise ships. They were absolutely utilitarian in their design. The goal was to safely transport several thousand refugees in one go from their home countries to the designated port in Norway, Skibotn. The last part of the journey from Skibotn to the City was to be undertaken via rail.

Hundreds of other cargo ships were assigned to the task of moving construction equipment and material to the City. The main construction activity was to be done by robots using 3-D construction techniques that had increasingly become the norm in countries such as Japan and China. The buildings were to be constructed with material that not only had to be construction-grade in terms of strength but one which also had exceptional insulation capabilities in order to protect the residents from the absolutely brutal winters of the Arctic.

The layout of the City was to be a standard grid that would facilitate rapid construction using robots. The added benefit was that the transportation system - electric trams - in the City would be easy to install and operate. The natural terrain was reasonably flat and there were no major hydrological challenges to deal with. The heating and cooling for the buildings was to be provided by a geothermal system. The pipes for both the

geothermal system and the water/sanitation system along with the electricity distribution system were to be all located under the grid of roads. The construction of a new hybrid wave and wind energy power plant was to begin simultaneously with that of the rail line connecting the City with Skibotn as both were pre-requisites for the construction of the City.

All the details were getting worked out thanks to the inexorable pressure exerted by the governing committee that was being led by Maya and ably supported by Rachel along with other motivated folks representing various other countries. The governing committee gave a crystal clear instruction for all the working groups - speed was of the essence. They often repeated the maxim, "the perfect should not be the enemy of the good". The experts were told to make their best recommendations in the context of substantial uncertainty. Everyone understood that they were trying something that had absolutely no precedence in human history. There were no right or wrong answers. There were only reasonably good guesses and those would have to do for the time being.

The lack of interest from additional investors, especially, big ones who were needed to make up for the huge gap between the estimated cost and the pledges had been unresolved despite the tireless efforts of many. The biggest concern raised by investors, especially, the ones who were solely in it for the money was about the collateral. They were simply not willing to believe that the risk of non-payment was small. They wanted some hard collateral without which they were unwilling to extend a single dime.

One day, Rachel received a call from Ben inviting her for a meeting with Emily. The meeting was to take place at Emily's penthouse on the upper west-side overlooking Central Park. Even though it was scheduled for early evening, it was most decidedly not a social occasion. Ben suggested that he meet Rachel at the closest subway station around 5:30 pm and then they could walk from there to Emily's.

Ben sounded cagey about the reason for this meeting. He hung up after they had agreed upon the logistics leaving Rachel a bit worried. Was something up with the investments that Emily had helped catalyze? Was Emily inviting her home to let her down gently? That would be an unmitigated disaster! The in-kind assistance would promptly evaporate if even the meager investments that had been lined up decided to dial back their pledges or even worse back away completely.

She went through her work day in a distracted state of mind. Finally, around 5 pm she stopped by Maya's office to let her know that she was leaving early that day. The working groups and Maya and Rachel had been working pretty much round-the-clock for the past month. So 5 pm was indeed early and unusual. Maya was on a call with someone and she simply acknowledged Rachel's intimation and got back to her conversation. The rapport between Maya and Rachel had reached to such a level in

the past month that Maya assumed Rachel had an excellent reason to be out of the office. Also, she knew that Rachel would talk with her if it was something important. They were conferring with each other a dozen times every day.

Rachel walked the mile and a half distance from the UN HQ to 59th and Columbus Circle where Ben was going to meet her. The route took her past the recently renovated Grand Central Terminal, St. Patrick's cathedral, Rockefeller Center, and Radio City Music Hall, and all the things that had made her fall in love with New York at first sight. The ice rink was open at Rockefeller Center now that winter was making itself felt.

All through the last month as the idea of the City was getting crystallized in numerous conversations and discussions, Rachel had started imagining, even visualizing, the City in all kinds of detail. Inadvertently, she imagined the City to be a lot like New York minus the annoyances. She was beginning to think how wonderful it would be for millions upon millions of young women to experience the life that she had been lucky to have been born into. In moments of self-doubt or despair, she reminded herself of that vision and got back to work in resolving whatever problem was vexing her. The vision gave her that extra energy to get through the difficult parts of her day, every day.

Right on the dot, Rachel reached Columbus Circle and waved at Ben who was already there waiting for her. He nodded and together they strode quickly toward the magnificent building where Emily's home was. The almost aristocratic-looking concierge courteously welcomed them and directed them to the elevator that would take them to Emily's floor. Ben had been there a few times. Yet, the building and the furnishings never failed to awe him. This was different than his small condo out in Brooklyn. He marveled at the stylish architecture and small art deco features sprinkled all around the lobby and elevator.

Emily was waiting for them. She lived alone and that evening she had given leave to her maid. She served them wine and invited them to sit in the living room where plates of sandwiches and chips had already been laid. Rachel noticed that Emily was trying to keep the overall mood light. Yet, Emily's brow got furrowed every now and then. That seemed to rub off on Ben as he also showed some signs of tension. But, Rachel decided to wait and let them lead the conversation instead of forcing it.

After a whole month of intense negotiations with an extremely diverse set of individuals working under immense pressure, Rachel had become quite good at reading the room. She had also become an expert in guiding one-on-one conversations and group discussions with a subtle touch. When to be quiet and when to prod was an art. She was getting really good at it. This moment asked for patience. It was already dark outside but as always the lights of New York blazed away. Emily had a few more sips of the Old Vine Zinfandel from one of her favorite wineries located just north of the Golden Gate bridge.

"I invited you today for a delicate conversation, Rachel."

Rachel kept a neutral expression even though the anxiety that she had been nursing all day was threatening to burst out. She was having a dry Riesling as she munched on the chips.

"I can imagine that you are feeling anxious ever since Ben set up this meeting. So let me first put your mind to rest about what I think you are worried about - the group of investors that I helped corral together are holding strong. We are not backing off and in fact, I wanted to tell you that we would like to increase our stake now that our team, ably led by Ben, has studied the UN proposal in far more detail. We have had a small team of anthropologists and economists work closely together to run some simulations of the City. The results appear to be entirely satisfactory as per our risk analysts. Right, Ben?"

Ben nodded enthusiastically. He relaxed a bit.

Rachel bowed her head to show her appreciation.

"But there is a rumor that I came across a few days ago which concerns me."

Emily seemed to be appraising Rachel as she paused.

"I am merely being pedantic in using the word rumor to describe what I have heard. I am quite sure that it is true since I heard it from at least three sources who I consider extremely well-informed about such matters.

Assuming it is true, there is not much you or me or for that matter anyone can do about it. This conversation is just a heads-up for you. Maybe, you will get some time to organize some counter to it. Although I doubt it.

So without further ado, I can see both of you are getting impatient, the rumor suggests that the full investment will become available to get the City built and running."

Ben stood up involuntarily and Rachel almost dropped the wine glass in her excitement. Emily let them have that moment of joy because she was soon going to pour a generous amount of ice cold water on it.

"There are conditions, though, that you are not going to like. That I most certainly don't like."

And there it was, thought Rachel. First the carrot and then the goddamned stick!

“What are they, Emily? I have been patient so far. Please don’t hold the suspense any longer.”

“They want collateral for their investment. And it is not just the physical assets but they want to include the people in it. At the first sign of a problem with the investment they want the right to convert the City into a manufacturing hub and the refugees into bonded labor.”

“Noooo...,” Rachel whimpered. She was stricken. This was the one outcome that she had dreaded the most. So far it had not come up in any discussion at all. Within the UN or elsewhere. The discourse around the City had been almost entirely benign in nature.

“Yes... unfortunately, that is their condition. Mind you, they will not only stick with it, but I won’t be surprised if they somehow contrive to mess up the City so that they can enforce this condition.”

“Jesus,” whispered Ben.

“Who are these people?” he asked no one in particular and started shaking his head as if it would make what he had just heard not true.

“Who are they? Why are they doing this?” Rachel asked firmly but also pleadingly.

Emily sighed.

“Well... you know them. These are the wealthiest people in the world. Their net worth is in tens of billions of dollars. Some are worth hundreds of billions. You know who I am talking about, right?”

Rachel and Ben nodded extremely slowly as they realized who Emily was talking about.

“The kind of investors that Ben and I work with are small fry compared to those. Our typical investors are multi-millionaires from the coastal American cities and European capitals. Our secret sauce is how we aggregate their funds and then spread it out among various investments in manufacturing hubs in the US. Most of my research and the contacts I made when I was in the government or consulting for other global

organizations provided us with the initial insights that drove our investment strategy.

I was thoroughly disillusioned by the lack of success of the policy ideas that used to animate me when I was young. I figured that before I retire, I could use my skills to at least earn a sufficiently good income for a somewhat luxurious retirement and to hell with trying to fix the world.

You Rachel, reminded me of my idealistic young self. I am so sorry that you are facing the disillusionment so early in your life. This is how the world has evolved over the last few decades.”

“Hold on a minute, Emily. Earlier you said that your risk analysts are happy with the projected returns from the City in the way it is currently designed. Right?”

“Umm... yes...,” Emily kinda knew where this was going.

“Then why are these investors also not satisfied with that same or maybe similar models? Why are they insisting on this condition?” Rachel was trying to find some sliver of hope. Something that she could grab on to and find that chance to negotiate away from the condition.

“I knew you were about to ask me that question. I guess, you don’t really know these wealthy people beyond their names and some details that are mentioned in their official bios. Let’s call them the plutes - short for plutocrats. What matters to them far more than their wealth, is the ability that wealth gives them to impose their will on the world. Their money allows them to control governments whether elected democratically or not. They cherish their ability to break entire societies through their decisions and they have indeed done so many times.”

“But they will be getting their return on the investment. You said so yourself,” interrupted Rachel.

“I don’t know how to describe this exactly. The plutes don’t have the same ideas that you, me, and Ben have about the world. They have a fundamentally different view of how the world works. Or maybe the more accurate description is how it should work.

Simply put, they believe that humanity is fundamentally hierarchical. A pyramid where there are a small number of people at the top who control everyone else as per their whims. And, to be honest, that version was indeed the dominant form of organizing human society for several thousand years. The patriarchal society is about men subjugating women. The religious organizations are about the priest telling the masses how to live, what to do, what not to do, etc. The monarchies are about one person

literally ruling over everyone else. The elite class is about a small group of people - based on some tribal characteristic such as race, caste, etc. - exerting control over the rest.

Look at the US - the so-called Shining-City-on-the-Hill as politicians love to say. What is its history? European colonizers invaded North America and slaughtered the indigenous people and took all the land and resources that didn't really belong to anyone until that time. Then to work that land and exploit those resources, the Europeans kidnapped my ancestors from Africa and brought them to the so-called New World. Bountiful free land stolen from others coupled with free labor meant that the US grew tremendously wealthy and powerful in a relatively short period of time.

The Civil War put a damper on this. But the dominant white race simply changed their methods. They started subverting the democratic institutions in order to maintain their hierarchy. They never really stopped despite women's right-to-vote, the two world wars that were explicitly fought to defeat monarchies and autocracies, the New Deal, the labor movement, the Civil Right movement, the Great Society, and so on.

There was a brief but amazing period in the sixties and seventies when the US was truly blossoming into a genuine liberal and progressive society. Things were moving in the right direction. My parents were among those who fought in those mass movements to make that a reality.

Alas, the evil morphed again. Starting in the 80s, the plutes took full advantage of the cheap labor available in other parts of the world that had recently been liberated from the yoke of colonialism. This gutted the opportunities for the vast majority of the people in the US. The plutes lined their pockets with extraordinary profits and then proceeded to use that cash to buy off politicians who kept reducing the taxes on wealth, gutting social programs, and deregulating the economy every which way. The climate disaster is to a certain extent a consequence of this capitalism-run-amok phenomenon.

The growth in income inequality sky-rocketed starting in the 90s and this would have led exactly to the conditions that Marx had predicted a century ago. The poor masses would rise up against the plutes unless something was done. But, the wily plutes had a few more tricks up their sleeves. They used distracting wars against terror and faux nationalism to keep the masses distracted. They used religion to keep the masses in a stupor. Whatever way they could dream of to keep the masses divided and fighting against each other is being used.

They simply don't care as long as they get the outcome they are looking for. They have been doing this all over the world. The same text-book is being used by authoritarians over the last few decades to impoverish the people while enriching the already wealthy. The technology - cable TV, internet, social media platforms, the AI tools, etc. - merely

enabled them to do so at a fraction of the cost than before. Except for a few pockets such as the liberal enclaves along the western and north-eastern coasts of the US and maybe some places in the upper midwest, they have successfully turned the clock back in the rest of the US to the era of slavery and patriarchy. It now comes under a slightly more benign guise, but it is still the same hierarchical structure that they have always been aiming for.

Gosh... you got me started on a full-blown lecture. It has been a really long time since I have seen the inside of a college classroom. Anyway... nothing what I have tried to say is new. Libraries are full of entire sections that cover this literature. I used to have inches-thick reading material for my graduate students on these topics."

Rachel and Ben were silent. They were moodily swirling the wine in their glasses trying to figure out some response to Emily's soliloquy.

"I can think of one counter-offer," Rachel finally spoke up in a measured tone.

Emily gave her a wistful smile. She admired Rachel's optimism and her faith in the inherent goodness of humanity. But she knew better. Humanity had never really been inherently good. There had always been exceptions to that rule and there would always be those - the ones who were good and sought to do good. Since they were exceptions, the rest put them on a pedestal and treated them as saints. The actions and words of these saints became the aspiration for the rest. At least, for brief periods of time in a few locations. Then it got swamped all over again by the inherent human nature which was mostly just plain selfish.

"What if we offer only the physical assets as the collateral? The City itself. Not the people. Just the buildings and the infrastructure. I am not sure the Nordic countries would agree to that. After all it is their sovereign land which they are lending to the UN for the express purpose of constructing this City. But maybe those countries can be persuaded to consider this arrangement. The plutes can monetize the City. For example, they could convert it into a gigantic tourist destination. The residential buildings could become hotels and so forth. Once the plutes make back their investment, the refugees would again be allowed to live in the City. For that interim period, the refugees could double up in half the city while focusing on jobs/businesses that cater to the tourists. I mean... it could be plausible, right?"

Rachel looked at Emily and Ben in turn with a hopeful expression.

Slowly but decisively Ben shook his head, "there is no way that the plutes and for that matter the Nordic countries would end your tourism-era and allow the refugees to settle down in the City again. The economics of tourism is such that the money they would make will be stupendous. They will not stop at the City borders, they will expand the



foot-print to monetize the vicinity through all kinds of tourist activities. It will just keep growing. They will all get addicted to the cash. This would be the exact opposite of what the Sami people fought for. They wanted to save this land from getting trashed by their countries. And they did succeed until Kaija made that famous announcement because of which we are all sitting here right now. The refugees will end up becoming the downtrodden labor force that we see in almost every tourist destination. They will be reduced to cleaning up after the wealthy tourists. That will be their fate. Not necessarily much different from working in a factory. I am not sure this counter-offer is any better than what the plutes have in mind, Rachel. I am sorry... but that is how I see it playing out."

Emily silently nodded her head as Ben finished talking and glumly hung his head. Rachel stared out the window aimlessly. The waves of crushing defeat washed over her. All her dreams of helping build a thriving new city for oppressed women from the worst parts of the world were going up in smoke. All she could hope for was that the City would succeed beyond her wildest dreams and the investors would have no chance of ever exercising their horrific condition. The City would just have to keep making copious amounts of money for many years to keep the vicious plutes at bay. Would they be able to do that? No one really knew the answer because such a City had never existed in human history. It hadn't even existed in anyone's imagination as far as she could tell. But she had to try.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Emily was right. The deal she had described came to fruition in less than a week. The draconian condition that was forced on the UN was to be kept secret from everyone, though. No one except a small number of relevant staff members at the UN were aware of it and they all had to sign extremely stringent non-disclosure agreements. The contractual documents were never shared with the public at large. But Rachel, Ben, and Emily knew. They couldn't do anything with that knowledge but sit helplessly on the sidelines as the contract was approved by the UN.

A major event was organized at the UN HQ where the deal would be announced to the entire world with great fanfare. The heads of states of dozens of countries planned to attend it in person including the President of the US. Maya's task-force consisting of the numerous working groups were told to finalize their plans within a month so that construction could begin right away.

A major detail that changed during that month was that instead of just one large City, there would be three cities. One per Nordic country. The location of the City at the intersection of the borders of the three countries didn't seem as viable as some other sites. None of the three countries wanted to volunteer to take on the full responsibility and so the compromise that emerged was that there would be three smaller cities instead of one large city.

Another compromise was made about the size of the cities. The three Nordic countries had left unsaid the actual number of refugees that they were willing to accept. The statement made by Camille at the press conference where she had stipulated 25 million refugees had been used as the ad hoc number upon which the UN staff had been basing its planning on. But when the 25 million-strong City became three cities, the two smaller Nordic countries panicked. If that 25-million refugee population was divided equally among all three countries then the refugee cities in their countries would end up having a larger population than their entire country. This was just not going to fly with the nativists in those countries. They threatened another round of violent protests. Trying to divide the 25 million by proportion of the three countries meant that the largest Nordic country would do the heavy-lifting in terms of infrastructure. Again, this was not acceptable to that country.

This was all petty bickering. But that was how politics usually played out. Finally, they settled on each city being large enough to accommodate about 3 million people. This was much smaller than what Camille had stipulated. Still, they decided to go ahead with it because the clock was ticking and Camille was afraid that if they delayed too much then the entire deal would fall apart and the next summer was only a few months away. Almost everyone around the world was afraid what new catastrophes that

summer was going to bring about.

On the day of the event, Rachel's boss was hanging out with the White House entourage and had somehow managed to get himself on the stage standing right next to the US President. He saw Rachel in the audience and shamelessly mimed the act that he had proposed to Rachel when he caught her eye. He smirked lasciviously as he saw her turn red with fury. Later, when he was walking past her after the ceremony, he leaned in and said that if only she had accepted his proposal he would have gotten the US to pay for the City instead of the investors who had imposed that horrible condition on the deal.

The construction of the three cities began immediately. In parallel, the selection and transportation of the refugees who would populate the three cities started in earnest. Both these tasks took the better part of three years. By the third anniversary of the global heat wave tragedy, the UN was able to declare that the three cities were settled.

Fortunately, no additional major tragedies took place during the interim years. The La Nina had something to do with that. There was, unfortunately, no dearth of smaller catastrophes that continued to ratchet up the overall count of fatalities all across the world.

At least, though, the UN could assert that while they may not have been able to do much to mitigate the changing climate over the past four decades, they had gotten a major initiative successfully launched to adapt to the rapidly changing climate. For the moment, they could catch their breath. Their work was not done, at all, as the likes of Camille reminded them almost every single day. A tiny fraction of people who had been in harm's way were moved to a safer location. There was still no plan to save the vast majority that remained stuck in the maw of deadly climate-fueled disasters.



## END OF PART 2 ##

## PART III

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## ***Back to the present...***

“... and that is why I wanted to talk with all of you,” concluded Rachel with a resigned expression.

Camille was furious. Sonia was incredulous. Kaija looked thoughtful as she dwelt on the nature of the contract and the poison pill condition that the plutocrats had forced into it.

“These bastards will never let go... fucking assholes... monsters...,” Camille exhaled forcefully. She was otherwise motionless. Her face was purple with anger. Her hands were rolled up in tight fists and the knuckles gleamed white in the soft light.

Sonia’s eyebrows finally settled down at their normal position and her eyes returned to the regular size.

She asked the question that Rachel was expecting, “this condition is bad. I am not sure what we can do about it. But why are you telling this to us? I vaguely know that the finances of Sequoia are quite good. I do study the city's budget, you know, every year during the voting week.”

Rachel nodded. She had gone over the financial situation of all three cities with Ben yesterday right after Emily had called her.

“Yes. You are right. In fact, you are understating it substantially. Not just Sequoia but the other two cities are also doing quite well in terms of revenue generation. According to the contract, there were to be no payments from the three cities for the first five years. You guys are not just on track, you are well ahead of it. The repayment schedule was spread out over 10 years with the size of the annual installment increasing every year. The way things are going - and I studied this yesterday with one of the financial analysts who I trust - you are likely to be able to pay off the entire investment including the profits to all the investors in 7-8 years instead of the full 10-year term.”

“Then what seems to be the problem, Rachel?” Sonia prodded again.

Instead of Rachel, though, Kaija answered, “the murders and the recent riot are the problem, aren’t they?”

She was staring at Rachel. Rachel sighed and nodded.

"Yesterday morning, I got a call from one of the investors. The good kind. The one who is in this for the right reasons. Who hates the bad investors - the plutes - from the bottom of her heart. She said that she was hearing rumors that the plutes are planning to use the excuse of the riots to invoke the poison pill. They are planning to assert that the chaos has created risk for their investment. And they don't want to bother waiting until the end of the loan term."

Camille was swearing fluently now. Rachel could tell that Camille's mind was preoccupied with potentially violent plans of retaliating against the plutes.

Sonia was stunned. Her shoulders were slumped in defeat. Kaija continued to look thoughtful.

"The money is not the real reason, is it?" she quietly asked Rachel.

Again, Rachel sighed. All the air had gone out of her.

"That's right. The real reason is that the apparent success of the three cities is causing ripples of discontent against the status quo in many parts of the world. The young people around the world are increasingly mesmerized by the life in the three cities. They are not liking their own lives in comparison. They are starting to demand that the rest of world emulate the three cities. And the plutes... well... they simply cannot accept that. They have been alarmed by these trends for a few months. The two murders and the riot are the first excuse that they have to nip this nascent demand in the bud. That is what all this is about."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Sonia thundered.

"Except for a brief period of time in the middle of the last century, human history has mostly consisted of an elite class ruling over the masses - whether it was monarchies or religious hierarchies or caste systems or colonialism. Pretty much most societies at least over the last few millennia have been patriarchal. In other words - women or half the population was oppressed right from birth. Then additional layers of caste, race, religion, wealth, and brute power were used to keep most of the men oppressed, too."

Ever since the short lecture Emily had given Rachel and Ben almost eight years ago, Rachel had spent a fair amount of time reading history from different vantage points. She had picked the brains of anthropologists, sociologists, economists, historians, political analysts, and other intellectuals whenever she got a chance. Initially, she had thought of Sequoia as, primarily, a refuge from the depredations of climate change.

Over time, as she learned more about human history and observed the evolution of Sequoia, she started realizing that this new city had the potential to become a civilization of an entirely new kind. Something that could be fundamentally better than everything that had come before it. Inadvertently, she had helped create something that could shift the trajectory of humanity in a positive direction. She was still not clear how it would happen. But every now and then she felt like she had glimpsed an insight about the future - a far better future than what most people could have ever imagined.

“That is the structure of society that most of us know. It didn’t matter if they were the oppressed or the oppressor. If they were the former then their goal was to become the oppressor. And if they were the latter then they wanted the status quo to continue indefinitely. The plutes that I mentioned earlier are the oppressors of today. The elite are their lackeys.

You could even say that someone like me who works for the US government is one of the elite and yes you would be right to characterize me as a lackey of the plutes because in effect I work for them. I don’t like it one bit. But I hope that by being part of the US government, I can support good things such as Sequoia in whatever way I can. At the least, I can try my best to minimize the harm that the US government can cause.

Although - if anyone would ask me right now if I would like to quit this job and move to Sequoia, I would say yes in a heart-beat. Simply put - I am jealous of the life you all have built in Sequoia.”

Sonia was looking uncertain. How could this be plausible? Could incredibly fortunate people like Rachel actually envy people like her? That was not the world that she had grown up in. It didn’t make any sense.

Rachel noticed her confusion and continued, “you may not know this Sonia, but there is a sub-culture emerging among the young folks in all parts of the world that is attempting to replicate the Sequoian way of life which is fundamentally different from the ‘oppressed masses and elite oppressors’ model. These youngsters initially tried all different ways to change the model through the usual democratic mechanisms. That is when they ran into the wall of resistance built by the elite. There was just no way to take down this wall. I am sure Camille has a ton of stories to tell you about those confrontations.”

She looked at Camille who was nodding absent-mindedly.

“So some of the youth have begun to simply abscond from regular society. One day, they just vanish from their homes... their jobs. No one really knows where they go. There are rumors galore about how ad hoc Sequoia-like villages are popping up in faraway wildernesses. No one really knows because these villages are off-grid and

they have no contact with the rest of the world.”

Sonia looked thoughtful as Rachel continued to expound.

“It is not a major phenomenon yet, mind you. But it is very much a tangible one. And the oppressors... the plutes have started taking note of it. They have started talking down Sequoia every chance they get. The real solution for them, though, is the end of Sequoia in its current form. That would eliminate the possibility, the hope, the aspiration among the youth once and for all. As Kaija correctly pointed out - it is not about the money. The plutes see a window of opportunity opening up with those murders and more importantly the first signs of unrest. They want to yank that window wide open and drive a tank through it. That is what all this is about.”

Sonia was back to being livid. But she was also trying to compose her thoughts. All the women that she was talking with at the moment were the good white people. They were on her side. On Sequoia's side. They had made it all happen. Camille had even put her life on the line for it. She was not mad at them. She was not sure who she was mad at, really. The bad investors? The universe? Her luck? This was all going horribly wrong. She just couldn't bear the thought of the future that Rachel had spelled out. If the bad investors invoked the poison pill then she would be slaving away in some stupid factory for the rest of her life. The freedom that she had gotten used to would all be like a lovely dream that she had to grudgingly wake up from.

She took a couple of breaths and marshaled her case for fairness, “do we not get a say in our future? Why is the UN not doing anything about this? If we are on track to raise the revenue to pay the investors then how can they do this to us. We haven't even had a chance to make the first full payment, yet. This is not fair!!”

“The world has never been fucking fair!” snarled Camille.

“That is why I said earlier - it is in your hands now Sonia. Solve the murders, ensure that there are no more riots and we can buy ourselves some time to start making the payments,” added Rachel.

---

The deadly ripples spreading from the initial event of Nadeem's murder had reached most corners of the world. Both the frequency and the amplitude was rising as the days went by. Santosh's execution and the mini-riot that had broken out in Sequoia immediately after, were turning out to be mere milestones in the saga that was unfolding everywhere. Tit-for-tat was the order of the day and it seemed that there was no stopping it any time soon.



Yet, the horror of Santosh's on-camera death and the mostly mild riot in Sequoia had utterly paled in front of the blood-baths that had taken place at different locations around the globe. Hundreds and sometimes thousands had died inhumanely. Some had died in an instant because of bullets, while others had been first tortured and eventually butchered in the most gruesome ways imaginable. The reactions of the governments had ranged the entire gamut from outrage to a muted "our hearts go out" kind. Over the years, many governments had learnt the hard way that sometimes letting the masses blow off their steam was probably the best option as compared with attempting to impose the rule of law because that often enough brought the government itself into the crosshairs of the masses causing far more and long-lasting damage to the society.

Tozi had a ringside view, albeit a virtual one, of these atrocities happening all around. She saw the aftermath in which the perpetrators of the assault openly gloated while the ones who had been victimized turn around promptly to plan their retaliation in ever more spectacular ways. At some point, a simple tit-for-tat would have been preferable instead of the upping-the-ante sort of development that was becoming apparent to her. The main thing that she had been told by Alia to monitor was the implication for Sequoia. To be precise, was anyone planning any more violent acts in Sequoia they needed get ahead of.

The problem was that she couldn't find any evidence of planning!

Well, that was a big surprise, she thought. She scrolled back through time and found ample evidence of anger and its inevitable metamorphosis into threats. But after that impromptu riot, there was a lot of silence among the most vocal denizens of Sequoia. Including someone like Shahid. He had strangely become tongue-tied in his public speech. Tozi mulled over this abrupt break in pattern. Then it struck her. They must be planning something and in order to keep that planning a secret, they must have shifted their communications exclusively to private groups. Also, since they were now into planning mode, they probably didn't have much bandwidth left to merely vent away online.

Even more disturbing was the fact that a whole bunch of Christian and Hindu Sequoians appeared to have also gone mute in the last few days. Were they also planning something of their own? This was getting uglier by the minute. Tozi fervently hoped that they would catch a break in the two murder investigations and get a chance to nip this in the bud. Then again, hopefully, the murders were not driven by any religious reason. If that did not turn out to be the case then solving them would only mean throwing more fuel on this inferno of tribal hatred that was blazing away on its own. She sighed wearily as she typed up her report for Alia and logged off for the day.

The tribal urge for violence against the “other” had always been simmering just below the surface in most parts around the world. The murders in the remote city of Sequoia had managed to touch a raw nerve in multiple places. Solving those murders was no longer a local law and order problem but something that shook the world leaders out of their stupor. Entire nations were suddenly at the precipice of instability and the representatives of those nations at the UN made sure that they described all those gory details at the special meeting called at the UN. All because of the deaths of a couple of lonely men in some far away city that most people had no idea even existed let alone locate it on a map.

They all were unequivocal in laying all the blame for those problems at the feet of Sequoia. Kaija had been called in as a special guest to this meeting and she knew that her face was plastered on a big screen in the room. Each and every speaker took special pains to look at her face and point at her numerous times during their speeches. As if, all these countries were the very picture of social harmony before the murders in Sequoia happened, Kaija thought. She was careful to keep her face as neutral as possible. Eventually, when most of the speakers had had their turn, she was invited to respond.

Prior to this special meeting, Kaija had numerous discussions with the staff of these political windbags. She was sure that the staff had briefed their bosses about the situation in Sequoia. Nevertheless, they had chosen to play to the galleries. The self-righteousness and all of the other usual balderdash was delivered in appropriate theatrical tones. Some had even managed to summon up tears as their voices “broke” when their emotions “overwhelmed” them. Lots of dabbing at the corners of dry eyes was to be seen.

At no point, though, was anyone even remotely interested in Sequoia. What had actually happened was never mentioned. What was being done by the Sequoian police was never discussed. Most importantly, the connection between the Sequoian developments and whatever tragedies had taken place in their countries was never established. At all! Kaija had made up her mind to not take these accusations lying down, especially, in such a widely broadcast event. Instead of defending Sequoia, she was going to go on the offensive.

She cleared her throat loudly and began:

“Thank you for inviting me to speak at this august gathering. It is a great honor for me personally, and also for the city of Sequoia to be here today!

I would like to go over some facts before I get to my main remarks.”

She looked up from her notes and stared at the camera lens as flintily as possible. She

was the only one who was calling in, the rest were all in the UN General Assembly's main meeting room. She meant to convey a long and pointed stare at all the people who were seeing her on the large screen in the meeting room.

"For the first five years of Sequoia's existence, there has not been even one death let alone a murder."

She paused to let that sink in. Again, she tried that pointed stare. If they were going to put her face on a large screen as Exhibit A, then she was bloody well going to use it to her advantage!

"Now we have had three murders within the space of a few weeks."

Another pointed stare. She wished she could have borrowed Sonia's skills of glaring scarily at the drop of a hat!

"Let me repeat - just three murders in five years! In a city of three million inhabitants! If this was the record for any other city in the world at any point in human history, the city's leaders wouldn't have stopped crowing from the rooftops about their achievement."

This had the impact that she had been looking for. Most of the snide murmuring in the audience had finally, been silenced.

"Now let's talk about the first two murders that have seemingly become the root cause of all the violence that all of you had taken pains to describe today.

Apart from the fact that both Qasim, the first victim, and Nadeem, the second one, being Muslim men, there is no evidence that the two murders are connected in any way, whatsoever.

Nothing. Zilch. Nada. Bupkis!"

Kaija had actually looked up those synonyms so that she could use them in her speech.

"More importantly, there is absolutely no indication that these murders were motivated by religion. Let me repeat that - nothing! No one has stepped forward to claim responsibility for them whenever religion is the reason.

Except for the last murder - of a police detective, that is. Santosh was explicitly

murdered in retaliation for the massacres that had occurred in Washington DC and New Delhi.”

The implication was crystal clear to even the dumbest politician sitting in the audience.

“Our police are working night and day to solve all three murder cases. We have numerous leads that we are following on. And we are optimistic that the perpetrators will be found and punished soon.

There is no doubt in my mind that those two murders have no connection to the violence that many of you are seeing play out in your nations.

To be absolutely clear. We are not responsible for that violence. In any way!

But still, as a fellow human, on behalf of Sequoia, I wish to express our heartfelt condolences to your citizens.

Now that we have established the facts of the situation, I would like to focus on the allusions that have been made today. Specifically, I am referring to the veiled and not-so-veiled threats of imposing some sort of martial law on Sequoia with the help of non-Sequoian forces.

We are eternally grateful to the kindness shown by the host nations and the various other entities that have provided support for the establishment of Sequoia and the other two cities. Every day, we say a prayer to thank our benefactors. Without that generosity, we would not even exist.

We are also fully aware of our obligation to the not so charitable support that has been provided. Namely, the investor community that has been lending us the capital to construct the three cities and operate them. We know that we are on the hook to pay back those loans. Not just the capital, but also the interest on it, as per the contractual agreement.

We know that! And in case we ever forgot that even for a moment, you would remind us of it.”

Again, the long stare! This was a barb aimed squarely at all those representatives who happened to be carrying water for the investors in addition to being the faces of their countries in the UN. It hit home as there was an immediate self-righteous reaction among several members in the audience. The faux outrage was expressed with one eye on the cameras that were broadcasting this meeting to the rest of the world. Kaija had no doubt that all those trying to shout her down were going to make a beeline to

their favorite reporters after this meeting and pour their hearts out.

“We also understand that unless Sequoia is stabilized as soon as possible, this investment would be threatened. We get that. We do. After all, we are the ones who are living in this city.”

She snapped at them and again tried her best to imitate one of Sonia’s patented glares.

“I - we - would like to request all of you to not be too hasty in bringing Sequoia under external control. I have been reviewing the revenue generation from Sequoia and we are most certainly exceeding all expectations in terms of our ability to pay off the investors. We have this figured out. Just give us more time to solve these murders and restore peace in Sequoia. That is all we are requesting from you.”

She paused for a moment to allow them some time to think about this. She knew that this was not sufficient. There were a few snickers and smirks in the audience. The investors had gotten very antsy over the past few weeks. Rachel had been regularly updating Kaija on that front.

“If things continue to spiral out of control, then we shall welcome whatever assistance you would like to offer,” she quietly added. She had to make an effort to dial down her fierceness while making this statement.

Finally, she looked up and said:

“Please. Please can we have three months to resolve the situation on our own?”

Thank you!”

The ball was in their court now. She had given it her best shot.

Fortunately, for her and Sequoia, the investors had not yet come up with a solid plan to take over the city. So, grudgingly, they acceded to her request. Kaija smiled grimly and thanked them again.

## Chapter Thirty

While Kaija was securing some more breathing room for Sequoia's police on the basis of optimism, the investigation team was not demonstrating much of that in the incident room. In fact, the mood was downright depressing as each team member gave an update in a morose tone.

Tozi had got the pity party going that afternoon. She presented a whole bunch of interesting leads based on her online research and the conversations she and Alia had with the Interpol experts. The problem was that none of those leads could be really followed up by the team because they were all physically located in either Syria or Sudan. And the conversations with local authorities in those places, heavily intermediated by the Interpol and UN staff, had been so muddled that Alia had lost her temper at one point. This, almost, never happened. Alia had apologized to the various folks on the call. It wasn't enough and she had to make up some excuse to smooth the ruffled feathers. Tozi was frustrated, too. The basic problem was that the local authorities were stretched too thin to devote any serious manpower to running down the leads. That is, when they evinced some interest in helping the Sequoians in the first place.

The last known whereabouts of Qasim and Nadeem were readily known because they were mentioned in their applications for selection to Sequoia. They had also been duly verified by the UN staff. Both had been living in temporary refugee camps at those times. The trouble was that those refugee camps had been disbanded in the interim period because of strife. The people from those camps had been scattered in different places. No effort had been made to compile records so that a particular person could be tracked over time from one place to another. "What was the point?" asked the local authorities. They agreed to issue some public announcements in the various camps. If anyone came forward with information, they promised to pass it on. That was the best, they emphasized, that they could do given the resources. Reading between the lines, it was clear to Alia that they were asking the UN and Interpol for additional funds. The UN and the Interpol had their own problems when it came to funding. So they acted as if they couldn't read between the lines.

Tozi's online explorations seemed a lot more promising. She had managed to pin down a few people whose photos seemed to have appeared with either Qasim or Nadeem. She had reached out to them, unofficially, of course to find out more about the two dead guys. A few of those suspected accounts were bots and she had got nothing. A couple of them seemed to be genuine. But the responders were being extremely cagey. She was going to pursue those leads further.

Sonia had been listening in. She was glad that Alia was continuing to go with her gut

feeling that the motive behind the murders may have to do with their pre-Sequoia past. The part that she was getting steadily more irritated with was that there didn't seem to be any leads turning up in Sequoia. She was not hearing much on that front. Still, she kept her peace as the discussion unfolded.

Next up was Carlos. He, painstakingly, summarized all the evidence from the various interviews that had been done so far. Nothing had turned up in forensics from the flats of the two victims. It was mostly their own prints and DNA. Nothing inexplicable. Since the clothes were washed in community laundromats, trying to find any interesting traces on their clothes was not worthwhile.

The point that Carlos made again and again, to the annoyance of everyone in the room, was about the lack of CCTV footage. There just weren't many CCTV cameras in Sequoia. Because the investors had not thought them worthwhile. It was as simple as that. Beating that dead horse was not going to get them anywhere. Yet, Carlos would point it out often, "if only we had that entrance or that street corner covered by CCTV, we would have the picture of the suspect to work with..." After the umpteenth such instance, Alia cut him off brusquely, "we don't have that! So move on!" He gave an injured look to her.

After Carlos, it was Nadia's turn. She gave an update on the follow-up interviews from the bar where Nadeem was last seen. The first round of interviews that she and Alia had done, had raised the possibility of a large black woman being a promising suspect. Whether she was sitting with him or merely next to him seemed to be unclear. Some of the witnesses had said that Nadeem and this woman were in such deep conversation and they must certainly have hooked up later. While others reported that it wasn't even clear that the two had even looked at each other let alone talk. They felt that hooking up seemed extremely unlikely. None of the witnesses wanted to say how drunk they themselves were when they saw those two.

A few witnesses who were smoking outside the bar had seen someone leaning on someone else and they felt that the person who was semi-conscious looked like Nadeem. But they couldn't be sure because it was kinda dark outside and seeing people lurch off with or without help from others outside the bar was unremarkable. When asked, who was the person helping Nadeem, some said that it was a large dark woman. Others weren't sure if it was a man or a woman.

This last point about correctly identifying who was a woman and who a man had long been troublesome for the Sequoian police. The fashion in Sequoia had evolved rapidly over the last couple of years as many folks had completely abandoned the cultural norms that existed in most parts of the world. More than that, the notion of gender itself had become fluid in those last two years. For starters, a lot of people had been able to simply be themselves. Growing up in incredibly conservative and harsh societies meant that they had conformed to whatever sexual identity and gender their parents

had assigned to them. As the freedom to be yourself became increasingly apparent in Sequoia, many people had started unpacking their true identities. Sex change operations had happened as the stigma associated with trans-people was non-existent in Sequoia.

Inevitably, the standard question that police asked when trying to solve a crime, “can you describe the person?” no longer yielded simple answers such as man or woman. Alia and her team had been stumped numerous times because of this. No one had any problem with this development, but at the same time, they had to figure out how to make sense of descriptions during investigations. So the standard question had become, “did you see the Adam’s Apple?” to try and get something worthwhile from the witnesses. This worked to a certain extent. For example, during warm months, the necks were more likely to be visible. During winter though, the necks were invariably covered up and this question became useless. Luckily, this was a warm night and some of the witnesses had confidently stated that the woman talking with Nadeem was indeed a woman because she did not have an Adam’s Apple. Beyond that point, it again became contentious: was she completely bald or did she have close-cropped hair? Since she was dark and her hair was dark, it was not clear at all. At least they had a suspect, Sonia thought!

What had become apparent from Vidya’s interview and later from other interviews, that Nadeem hadn’t shown any particular interest in women. Not that he had been seen hanging out exclusively with men, either. So those witness accounts of Nadeem chatting with a tall dark woman in the bar and they potentially hooking up, certainly seemed suspicious. That was a smart bit of triangulation by Carlos. Alia nodded her head and even allowed him an encouraging smile.

She thought of the tall black woman from the scene of the riot last week. She had that nagging feeling that she had seen her earlier somewhere. But she couldn’t pin it down. Was she being wishful just because there was a tall black woman being mentioned by some witnesses? Maybe, maybe not. But it was worth following up. She asked Carlos to cross-check with the witnesses from the riot to see if they had seen a large black woman. Maybe Shahid knew her. Although, it was going to be difficult to question him again. He had been quite hostile after the riot.

Nothing new had come up in Qasim’s investigation and hence, Alia wrapped up the team meeting and gave the next round of instructions to everyone. Sonia asked her to come to her office. That was when tempers frayed between them for the first time.

All night and the next morning, ever since Sonia had heard about the threat to Sequoia’s very existence, the tension had been building up in her body. The frustrating lack of progress in the investigation and Alia’s usual phlegmatic body language had finally gotten under Sonia’s skin. Usually, she admired Alia’s equanimity. Although, she would never admit that to anyone and, especially, to Alia. But now, she was angry at



Alia. How the hell could she seem so business-as-usual? Without any banter, Sonia launched into a diatribe:

“So, you do have a suspect? This tall black woman?”

“Yes - boss. But nothing much to work on beyond that basic description.”

“Well... how many tall black women are there in Sequoia?” Sonia’s voice rose slightly. She was trying to keep it under check but was starting to lose that battle.

“Umm... dunno boss. Thousands? Maybe hundreds of thousands?” Alia ventured. She had not yet noticed Sonia’s changing demeanor. She was still dwelling on the tall black woman. She could clearly see her face in her mind. Maybe she should get a sketch done with their in-house artist and circulate it.

“You don’t even know that?!” Sonia had lost the battle with herself.

“Wouldn’t that be the first thing to do? To list all the tall black women in Sequoia the moment we felt that this was a viable suspect?” she asked silkily. The voice was barely above a whisper, but it dripped with danger. Alia had now become aware of her boss’s dark mood. She looked up warily, trying to get a better read on this unprovoked anger.

“I will get on it, boss. Right away.”

Then Alia made the mistake of thinking out aloud.

“But what are we going to do with that large a number of suspects. We simply don’t have the manpower to bring them in for an interview. Anyway, what we have are their pictures from five years ago, when they came to Sequoia. They all, probably, look very different now.”

The whisper was gone. The full-throttle voice slapped her.

“I thought policing was doing what needs to be done. If we have a suspect and we have something to work with, then we follow up on it. We don’t just sit on it and wait for something to happen. At least that is the policing that I learned about. Do tell - what did you learn?”

Alia was not in the least bit afraid of her boss. That was just not in her nature. She was getting annoyed though. This was so unfair of Sonia. Why was she telling her to do something that was probably going to be incredibly time consuming and most likely not

lead to anything worthwhile anyway. And why was she questioning Alia's police training and investigative skills?! But she bit her tongue and kept quiet. No need to exacerbate the mood.

Sonia glowered at her angrily.

"Well - do you have anything to say?"

"I will get on it, boss. I will run all the various descriptions that we have through our database and shortlist some candidates for bringing in. The looks may have changed. But the heights wouldn't have. Probably, the weight would have increased in the past five years. And we can certainly play with hairstyles to match with the descriptions from the witness."

"Okay - fine! Go on... get going. And I want an update as soon as you turn up with that list."

"Sure boss!"

Alia walked out of Sonia's office. Outwardly she looked calm. But inside, she was fuming at this unfair treatment. She had been busting her hump on the investigation and her boss had decided to suddenly throw shade at her skills. If anything, Alia was proud of her detective skills.

## Chapter Thirty-One

In her heart, Alia knew that Sonia was right on all accounts. The investigation had run into so many dead-ends that Alia had lost count of the moments of despair she and her whole team had suffered through. Sonia was also right to pin the blame squarely on Alia. She was the lead investigator and Sonia had chosen not to interfere much in the investigation.

Tozi had been getting increasingly alarmed by the rapidly growing violent rhetoric on the various online platforms that she had been monitoring. Every morning, Tozi would grimly brief Alia about the things she was hearing and reading and watching online. The sense of fear was palpable not just within her own team, but across Sequoia. It was as if all the joy had been sucked out of the air by a giant vacuum and in its place gloom had moved in, uninvited and unwanted.

Alia had spent the entire week going over the notes of each and every interview with a fine tooth-comb. She had read and re-read most of them until she knew some of them by heart. Nothing. There was nothing in them that pointed in any particular direction. She and her team had cast a wide net and interviewed, she thought, pretty much anyone who had ever come in contact with the first two victims. The two guys - Qasim and Nadeem - were such loners that it was bewildering to see them dead. Who had they pissed off so much to get themselves killed?

Then in the afternoon de-brief, Sonia had literally chewed her out. Over the last week, Sonia's temper had just been under the surface, ready to be unfurled at the slightest sign of indignation. The anger was indiscriminate. Yet, Alia had the nagging feeling that Sonia was not really angry about the way the investigation seemed to be proceeding. The anger was tinged by something else. Fear of some sort, maybe? And more often than not, Alia got the sense that Sonia was not angry at her team but at someone else. This did affect the entire team negatively and, especially, Alia since Sonia seemed to be reminding her all the time that she was the lead investigator.

Alia was deep in her despair. But she was also looking forward to the concert in the evening. The same concert that Maria had to postpone because it had originally been scheduled for the day when Nadeem's body was found. Maria and her crew had found a new musician to take on Nadeem's part. Maria had been spending most of her time at the venue of the concert for the last few days. Part of the reason why Alia was feeling so down was also the lack of time spent with Maria. They were not a couple in a conventional sense. They just loved to spend their spare time with each other. They "got" each other. They could be quiet when they were together. They didn't have to say or do anything with each other. In fact, interaction of any kind was not a necessity for them. Being together in the same space was both necessary and sufficient for them.

Alia left the police HQ early enough to be able to walk across the city to the concert venue. Not that spending another half hour at work would have made much difference to her mood or to the prospects of solving the cases. Might as well get out and about before the long winter set in. It was already chilly enough to remind people that they needed to start preparing themselves for the onslaught of the cold that was just a few weeks away. The dense humid and static air seen during the peak summer months was long gone. It was not going to be back any time soon.

Alia liked the change of seasons. She liked that the weather changed. There was no particular weather that she felt was perfect. Her preference for weather depended entirely on her mood. There were days when she craved the hot rain when she could step into it and get all wet. On some other days, she loved staring out the window at the cold rain while sipping some exotic hot drink that Maria had whipped up.

It was a bit like how she felt about life. Change was the constant - she had read this pithy statement somewhere a long time ago. It sounded a bit too clever and trite. But still, it had resonated with her and stayed in her mind. It was the truth. Everything did change. Nothing stayed the same. Not the weather, not the people, not the surroundings, not the feelings, not the moods, nothing. If one didn't like something in particular, all one had to do was wait and something would change so that that feeling of "not liking" could morph into something else. She was happy with this nature of the universe. She would have probably been quite unhappy with stagnation of any kind. If only the current feeling of being unsuccessful in solving the three cases would change quickly, she thought to herself. She needed to catch a break and soon.

She was lost deep in these musings while walking by a row of shops some of which were in the process of re-stocking for the next day. Delivery vans had pulled up next to the entrance of the shops. There was a fair bit of dodging and weaving going on as pedestrians and delivery folks were both trying to navigate the sidewalk. One delivery van stacked tall with crates full of vegetables came to a sudden halt a few meters from her. The whine of the breaks sliced through the hubbub and snapped her out of her reverie.

What happened next, happened so quickly that no one had a chance to react. But to Alia, it also felt as if it was happening in slow motion - she could see how each subsequent act was going to unfold before it happened. The van driver jumped out of the cab and started quickly climbing to the top of the cab. Alia noticed that he was wearing the classic skull cap that Jewish folks wore. More importantly, he seemed to be worriedly scanning the crates as if something was loose. He scrambled up to the top of the crates - some four meters above the ground - and was cautiously checking the ties that kept all the crates securely tied to the flat-bed of the van.

She couldn't see exactly what he was doing and in any case he was in the corner of the stack farthest from her. It just so happened that she was at a distance from the van

itself and was an unusually tall woman, that she could see him at all. As he was bent, she saw one of the stacks of crates slowly lean out and then topple over right on top of a pedestrian who was standing there chatting with none other than Shahid.

It was all over in an instant, the topmost crate in the stack fell directly on the head of the man. There was a sickening crunch and Alia instantly knew that the skull had been cracked. The man's face was not visible to Alia but she could see the shock on Shahid's face. The man reflexively tried to turn around and raise his arms feebly in an attempt to fend off whatever was hitting him. But he might as well have been waving matchsticks to stop a train. The remaining crates rained on his body and without making a sound the man crumpled to the ground under their weight.

Alia had instinctively raised her hand to attract the attention of the van driver about this tragedy that she almost had a premonition of. She was shouting a warning about the falling crates when the tragedy - in fact - took place. She rushed over to the man and desperately started heaving off the crates lying on top of him. There was surprisingly not much blood and for a moment she felt that maybe he was going to be fine. Other onlookers rushed to help her, but Shahid was rooted to his spot, speechless. If anyone had been looking at him, they would have first noticed the fear. Then they would have seen the fear make way to a blinding rage.

Alia couldn't find any pulse. The man had died instantly when the first crate had struck him on his head. That's why there was not much blood. She called emergency services and told them calmly that they needed to send an ambulance. She reported the accident to the constable on duty. It was a tragic accident, as far as she could tell.

The van driver heard the commotion and leapt down from top of the stacks. In that unthinking action, he badly sprained his ankle but still managed to limp over to the dead body. He was trying to say something but the pain from his sprained ankle and his shock were competing with each other. A few garbled words leaked out of his mouth while he clutched his leg in agony.

Alia flashed her badge and created a rough cordon around the scene of the accident. While doing so, she pushed Shahid back. Shahid was purple with anger and shouted something which she couldn't catch over all the commotion. She reached the van driver and started asking him questions. She got him to sit down on a chair that somebody had kindly put next to him. The obvious relief he felt after taking the weight of his sprained ankle almost turned into a smile. It was not a smile but just his face adjusting from a grimace to a semblance of normalcy.

"Sir, please can you describe to me in your own words what just happened."

"I had been hearing something rattle over the last five minutes. I didn't think much of it

initially, but then I was worried that something may have come loose. I pulled over at the first chance that I got in order to check it out. I went up to the top and started checking the ties around the crates. For once, it was not me who had tied the crates. Someone at the warehouse had done it because I was busy going over the inventory with the manager. I usually check the ties, twice. But today, I was running late and I just decided to trust whoever had done that job for me. I was working my way through the ties when I heard all the shouting and saw that one of the stacks had come loose and toppled over this poor man. I am so sorry this happened. I really am. Oh god. This is so horrible!”

The words came out in a rush. Alia jotted down the notes and she had also switched on the recorder to ensure that this first statement - usually, the least unguarded one - was available for the team who was going to investigate this incident. She was almost certain that this was an unfortunate accident and that this statement and her witness account would be sufficient to avoid any formal investigation.

She was following up with more questions when the police and ambulance arrived. The medical examiner - it was not Leela - came and quickly made the pronouncement of death and went about her protocol. The police - three of them - started going around getting statements from witnesses as one of them came to talk with Alia and the van driver. Alia sent him the recording and handed her notes over to him. Then he quickly took down her statement. As he went back to confer with his team about any additional statements, the gathered crowd started thinning. The ambulance pulled away once the body was loaded up.

One of the police was interviewing Shahid and Alia looked from afar to check how that was going. She had interviewed Shahid in connection with Nadeem’s murder. In fact, she had gone through the interview notes from that particular one for what felt like a hundred times. That guy was volatile. He had a temper that he kept in check for most of the time. But it had been unleashed once already when he had gotten in that fight a few days ago in the warehouse district.

It had started a mini-riot then. It was quite clear that he was the instigator from all the various statements her team had collated about the incident. However, the prosecuting attorney had decided to not charge anyone for the incident. All the people who had been arrested that day had been released with a caution. Most of them had already been regretting their actions and had apologized profusely. All except one - Shahid. He had stayed defiant through the entire time he was locked up and he had been non-committal when he was cautioned. He needed watching over, Alia felt. As if to prove how accurate Alia’s reading of Shahid was, the constable interviewing Shahid had to step back as Shahid started screaming at her. Flecks of spittle were flying from his mouth.

“We are being systematically targeted by the infidels. They are trying to exterminate us.

We shall not take this lying down. We shall fight back. Just you wait!"

"Sir - please could you calm down and tell me in your own words what exactly happened?" the constable firmly but politely reiterated her question.

"I was talking with my brother - a fellow devout Muslim - peacefully, when that Jewish dog tried to kill us both. I saw that he was on top of the crates. He pushed them on us and my brother was killed. By the grace of Allah, I was spared. But I shall have my vengeance! They have been killing us for centuries. They even took away our holy sites in Jerusalem. They will not get away with this. That I promise."

This was such a blatant mischaracterization of what had happened that Alia almost thought that Shahid was kidding. Of course, he was anything but kidding. He was deadly serious. She noticed that the thinning crowd had halted in its stride and people were starting to press back. Shahid had also noticed that and as if a stage performer had found his drooling audience, he was relishing all the attention. He puffed out his chest and started gesticulating wildly as he shouted religious slogans again and again.

Alia stepped over quickly to where the constable was interviewing Shahid. Her size and her natural authority made an immediate impression not only on Shahid but the crowd that had begun to congregate around him. In a loud voice, that she knew would carry to the crowd, she told Shahid to calm down and give his statement to the constable. She looked around and assured everyone that the police would carefully investigate the incident. If there had been any foul play then the perpetrator would be punished through the due process of law. Luckily, the van driver had been taken away in the same ambulance to treat his sprained ankle. Else, who knows, Shahid may have incited the crowd to attack the driver then and there. Shahid backed away from Alia still shrieking his slogans. When it was clear that he was not going to stick around, the crowd also quickly dissipated. The three constables thanked Alia for her help in keeping the situation under control. They tidied up the incident site and left soon after.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Alia checked the time, she was barely going to make it to the concert. So she sprinted. The adrenaline that had kicked in when she was confronting Shahid and the restless crowd helped a lot. She covered the last kilometer in three minutes flat. She was waved in through the back entrance because of the special pass that Maria had given her. She wanted to wish Maria all the best before the concert and then head to the main auditorium.

She was still catching her breath when Maria swooped down from one of the lifts. In one smooth motion, Maria lithely swung off the fork-lift straight into Alia's arms and planted a quick kiss on her lips. Alia blushed exquisitely with this surprising display of affection. Yet, she had instinctively caught Maria. The crew roared with laughter at Alia's obvious embarrassment. Maria curtsied extravagantly for the crew and then frolicked away from Alia. Alia merely shook her head in amazement at yet another of her partner's spontaneous gestures of love. She rolled her eyes at the laughing crew and strode to the auditorium. Too many emotions were competing for a place in her heart at the moment - the frustration of the investigation, the fear of crazy people like Shahid, and the blissful love of Maria.

The auditorium was unlike any other auditorium that Alia had ever seen. It was, basically, one large empty cuboidal room that measured about fifty meters along each dimension. There was no stage and there were no chairs for the audience to sit on. Everyone was standing around wherever they wanted. Some were clumped in groups while some were standing on their own. Some of them had a bemused expression on their face. Had somebody pulled a prank on them? Alia didn't know any better than anyone but she was confident that this was no prank. She had seen Maria work tirelessly on this concert.

She had also seen Maria do endless calls with people from all over the world about the concert. She had a vague notion that this concert was being replicated live in several other locations. She had no idea how that was going to happen, though. There was also something about it being virtualized, whatever that meant. It had all sounded quite complicated to her. But she also knew that it would be something incredible. It was just who Maria was. She couldn't help herself make something beautiful. Her utter lack of inhibition without having to imbibe anything was a gift. It was going to be amazing and Alia was really looking forward to it.

The lights went out in the hall without any warning. It was pitch dark in an instant. A hush fell over the crowd. There were a few nervous titters from the audience and a few folks tried to say something funny. Nothing was visible yet but Alia could feel the air flow increase a bit. It felt as if something was coming down from the ceiling and settling



down all around her. A faint ululation had begun to fill the hall steadily increasing in volume. It reminded her of the ululation nomadic Arab tribes used. Maybe it was that. Maybe it was some clever wind instrument like the flute. She knew that Nadeem had been brought in for his flute-playing skills. Was she imagining it or were there some faint lights she was noticing in the corner of her eyes. She looked all around her and she kept getting the nagging feeling that there was some movement just beyond her field of vision that she missed every time she turned to look at it.

The gentle ululation had another layer of sound enveloping it. A string instrument of some sort. But it felt as if the wind was now merging with gentle rain as the beats of the string instrument varied in their cadence. The cadence was varying in such a way that her heartbeat almost started syncing up with it. When the speed increased, her heart beat faster and when it slowed down, she found herself taking deep breaths as her heart slowed down. Along with her heartbeat, she felt her emotions going along the roller-coaster. She was losing track of time and space even though she was wide awake and standing in a massive room full of people. The music never sank into dreariness. As if there was some sort of a floor to the emotional roller-coaster she was experiencing.

At one point, she realized that far more musical instruments were joining in every now and then. If she concentrated really hard, she could isolate the original layer of the ululation. And then the pitter-patter of the string instrument. There were violins and cellos and a piano. There were drums of different kinds or maybe it was all just one kind of instrument that produced these different sounds.

It was at one of the peaks in the musical journey when she was feeling the happiest that the shimmering started. Again, she thought she was simply imagining it. But now, there were a few gasps around her. This was real. It was not just in her head. She was seeing it. There was a sharpness to the shimmering blues and greens all around her and yet there were blank spots every now and then as if clouds were slowly lifting in order to fully unveil the shimmering all around her. That was when she realized that what had settled around the floor of the hall had been smoke from an artificial smoke machine. It had been pumped in when the room had been pitch dark and hence, they had not seen it but felt it. Now, that same smoke was gently being pulled off the floor and vented out of the room to create this feeling of clouds rising up. Oh how wonderful and light she felt. Almost as if all the weight on her shoulders had been lifted.

The music had subtly started syncing with the colors in the shimmers. Whenever the reds came into focus, the deep bass of huge drums would reverberate right through the floor beneath her feet. Whenever, the blues overwhelmed the sight, the flute would pierce through the music. Whenever, the yellows bled all over the edges of the landscape, the cellos and violas would fill the very space with their unguent notes. Alia found herself going through a whole reel of emotions. Before this experience, she had no idea one could ever feel so many things in succession. She didn't even know what

those emotions meant or if there was a word to describe them to another person.

She just found herself wafting through the shimmering that had now started occasionally resolving into sharper lines and forms. It was a symphony of forms ranging from kaleidoscopic geometrical shapes re-arranging themselves in sync with the music to more free flowing forms that reminded her of willow trees blowing in the wind. Similar to the beginning, Alia felt a bit more of airflow at one point and she instinctively looked around her for smoke. But there was nothing. There was only a steadily heightened sensation of everything. Things were coming into focus sharply whether they were visual forms and colors or individual notes and musical instruments. She found her heart responding even more willingly to all that was happening around her.

For a brief moment, she looked at the people standing closest to her and saw that they were all in a trance just as she was. She looked up and forgot all about the people around her. All she saw were the impossibly beautiful shades of different kinds of colors shimmering in and out of focus. Each shade emphasized something extraordinary and otherworldly along with the music flowing all around her. Where was she? She had a feeling of weightlessness. Or was it a feeling of being disembodied? Was her soul floating around in some celestial symphony of colors and musical notes?

Her mind was wiped clean of all thoughts except what she was hearing and seeing. It was impossible to articulate what she was feeling in a pathetically limited medium such as words. Imperceptibly at first, the smoke started creeping in from both the floor and the ceiling. This was a colder and wetter smoke as the music which seemed to have had reached a crescendo, started slowing down. The lasers that had been creating the shapes and forms were fading as various layers of musical instruments started to peel off. All that was left was the smoke and the mild shimmers as the sounds reverted back to the original ululation.

Alia had no idea when she had sat down. She glanced around her and realized that many people were sitting on the ground, too. Most had clumped together near the middle of the floor. A few were leaning on each other. The shimmering went away and the ululation faded away to complete silence and everything returned to pitch black. Alia was feeling exceptionally relaxed and at the same time remarkably refreshed. Every molecule of her body felt rejuvenated and exhilarated. She had never experienced anything like this. Slowly, tiny but bright lights came on, in the floor. The lights had formed arrows pointing the audience to the various exit doors. There would be no other light to jar the people out of their state of ecstasy.

She got up and started walking, still in a daze, toward the exit. She had no idea which exit led where. She remembered Maria and thought of finding her. What was she going to tell her? She had no words to describe what she had felt. She was just going to have to hug Maria hard and hope that her feelings got conveyed through touch! This had

been an absolutely magical experience and she couldn't wait to have these feelings again. Like being in a really hot sauna where every muscle is relaxed and then plunging in a cold pool of water which makes one feel instantly revitalized. All this but not just for the body. For the mind, the brain, for every particle of her very being. As if layers and layers of emotional and mental grime had been scrubbed and washed clean off her soul.

As she walked out in the corridor, it dawned on her that one of the inspirations for this show must have been the Aurora Borealis that they saw every winter. Those shimmering lights in the cold winter sky when seen by anyone for the first time appeared to be otherworldly. One never got used to them however many times one saw them. They were never the same and the experience was always unique. Maria was a genius! She had not merely put them on a video as people had been doing for decades. She had turned them into a breathtaking masterpiece that engaged the mind and body. She could hardly wait to see Maria and tell her all this!

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Alia stepped out of the building and was whiplashed from euphoria to tension. Wailing sirens and people rushing toward something enveloped all her senses. Her phone started buzzing the instant she switched it on. She quickly scrolled through the messages of her colleagues and dashed toward the location that Sonia had sent.

The concert had totally transformed her. Her mind was in an absolutely sharp state and her body vibrated with energy as she quickly covered the ground. She slowed down as she got near to her destination, the religious district. She could barely see from that far back in the crowd as to what was happening. She spied a ledge on one side of the crowd. Climbing on top of it, she ran as fast as she could without toppling into the surging crowd. She jumped over a hedge and then she was within the cordon created by her colleagues.

She flashed her badge and was guided to the command center. Sonia was sitting inside with a grim expression. She had a megaphone in one hand. She turned to Alia and asked her harshly where she had been all this time.

Alia said, "I was at Maria's concert, boss. I had told you that I would not be reachable inside that building. Sorry. What's going on?"

"This is it!! This is the beginning of the end of Sequoia. That crowd is lusting for blood. There is going to be violence and we are too few to do anything about it. We have been trying to keep them from each other's throats so far by having a contingent of our constables form a human barrier separating the Muslims from the rest. But I don't think that barrier is going to last long. It is only a matter of minutes before things start spiraling out of control."

Alia promptly said, "boss - I think I can talk these folks down from doing that. Please... may I go?"

"Are you mad? You want to go get yourself killed?"

"Yes - that is a possibility. But I am hoping it wouldn't come to that. In many ways, I am the one they are mad at. I am responsible for the investigation of the two murders. I haven't found the murderers. Maybe I can take the heat and allow them to vent their anger at me instead of each other. I can be the lightning rod."

Sonia was quite surprised by this. She had known that Alia was one of those utterly responsible people on whom one could rely on in the worst of all circumstances. But

seeing Alia offer herself up as a human sacrifice was above and beyond anything Sonia had ever seen. She nodded but her eyes were unable to hide the extreme reluctance with which she was giving Alia her permission.

“All the best - dear!”

She wistfully added, “I hope I see you again. I am not sure what to expect at this point. We tried gamely to make this opportunity count for something. But the vice-like grip that our past has on us will never let us be free. It seems to have all been for nothing.”

Alia nodded and leapt out of the command center. She cut a path through the gaggle of uniforms right up to where her colleagues had formed a barrier between the two baying crowds. The line of confrontation was right in the middle of the square around which four buildings stood - a mosque, a church, a Hindu temple, and a Buddhist pagoda.

It was clear that the Muslim crowd was the largest and the most vociferous relative to the mixed crowd consisting predominantly of Hindus and Christians. The religious slogans being shouted had melded into a numbing drone. Flags and large posters were being waved around. Some were also brandishing makeshift weapons such as kitchen knives, gardening tools, and construction equipment. Curiously, the ones brandishing the weapons appeared to also be the most diminutive of the lot. Their movements were half-hearted at best and it was quite apparent that they were unsure of whether this was a good idea.

Alia grabbed hold of a megaphone from the command center. She brought up the microphone as she stepped into a clearing made by the uniforms. She tapped the megaphone as loudly as possible in order to attract the crowd's attention. As the uniforms formed a circle around her and pushed the crowd back, some members of the crowd seemed cowed down by her imposing presence.

“My name is Alia Khan! I am a Muslim - born and raised. I am also the detective leading the investigation into the murders of Qasim and Nadeem. I request all of you to desist from any action that you may regret. I am here to talk with you - to your heart's content - about the status of the investigation.”

She paused for a full ten seconds. She had chosen to face the Muslim side of the confrontation and her back was toward the rest of the folks. In her mind, she was praying that some violent Hindu or Christian wouldn't attack her from behind.

There was something about Alia in that moment. She was tall and that might have had something to do with it. She towered over most people. She was wearing a long trench-

coat that accentuated her height and broad shoulders. There was nothing svelte about her. Anyone could see that she could take care of herself very well and some more. The trench-coat was dark with tiny white astronomical shapes on it. It was subtle, but that combination of green and white crescent moon and the stars almost felt religious at first glance. Maria, who had designed it, had no religious intentions, though. She had simply been experimenting with astronomical shapes for the past several months. For Alia, it was a comfortable coat just right for the fall weather - not too hot and not too cold. But it was, probably, none of these things.

It was, probably, her expression and stance that was making such a powerful impression on the crowd. It was an open stance, almost welcoming an embrace. No bunched up shoulders. The expression was frank. No furrowed brows. No arched eyebrows. She was transparently communicating her interest in engaging with anyone who wished to talk with her.

The crowd calmed down. Hunched shoulders relaxed and raised arms were lowered down to hang loosely by the side. Curiosity seemed to replace the equal parts of anger and fear that had been present on the faces just a few moments ago. A couple of people tried to say something but ended up talking over each other. After a few attempts of “you first” and a chuckle, one of them stepped to the front of the crowd and asked Alia, “after the deaths of three Muslim men in the last few days, how can you say that this is not a pogrom against us?”

“Sure let’s talk about that right here right now. But, peacefully! Respectfully.” Alia was so confident in making this statement that she didn’t even glance in the direction of Sonia before making it. Sonia had stepped out of the command center and was closely watching both Alia and the people standing right in front of her. She was worried about Alia. At the same time, she was also marveling at this young woman’s indisputable courage under fire.

This was a side of Alia that had always been hinted at but had never come forth until this moment. Alia was known to be this phlegmatic investigator. She was a quick study and a creative problem-solver. She had an air around her that encouraged others to do better than they otherwise would. She was secure in her skin and didn’t really exhibit any sign of being competitive or worse paranoid about whether someone would undermine her. She was a natural introvert who tended to follow her own counsel most of the time. But she was not anti-social. When needed, she would step up and engage with folks. She was never the center of attention and was never really even noticed by anyone until she chose to draw attention to her. And when she did, as she was doing now, it was hard to ignore her or write her off. The innate strength and intelligence shone through her every action and word.

“Qasim’s murder appears to have been a crime of passion. It took place in the wilderness camp where he was conducting his research. We have not found any signs

of premeditation. In contrast, Nadeem's murder was definitely planned and took place in the middle of the city. The death of Irfan that took place a few hours ago was an accident. I witnessed it first-hand. There was no murderous intent behind his death.

To the best of our understanding, all three deaths were totally unconnected. After weeks of investigation, we have not found anything to link Qasim and Nadeem. They came from different countries to Sequoia. As far as we can tell, they had never even met. They both had few social interactions. And those small social circles that they had, did not overlap. We have not been able to find any motive for their deaths as they hardly spent any meaningful time with anyone in Sequoia. Not a single person who had interacted with them has reported any sign of a confrontation that they had ever been in.

Neither of them were particularly devout Muslims. Nadeem had a prayer mat at his home but Qasim didn't have any sign of being a practicing Muslim at his home, office, or the camp where he was found. There have been no traces of them being particularly active on social media, although, that is something we are continuing to explore. Bottom-line, we don't have any reason to think that these crimes were religiously motivated. In my opinion, it is a coincidence that these three unfortunate men happened to be all Muslim.

I do want to highlight the fact that although we have not yet found the killers, the death of my colleague Santosh was most definitely motivated by religion. You may have seen the video of his gruesome execution. Santosh had absolutely no connection with either Qasim or Nadeem except that he was part of our investigation team. To the best of my knowledge Santosh was an atheist. Apart from his name and the fact that he came from India, there was no indication that he adhered to any religion at all. And that is why I implore all of you to think carefully and calmly before doing something violent.

Does that answer your question?"

Several people started whispering to each other. All of the things that Alia had stated had been in the public domain. All she had done was state them succinctly and unequivocally. The last part that she had said about Santosh was delivered in a stern tone unlike the reasonable tone in which she had described the investigation. A few people had been nodding their heads while she had talked. They had known all these things and the reminder served to quell their paranoia. Quite a few people had started edging to the back of the crowd. The tension in the air seemed to be melting away. There were no rejoinders and no slogans.

Suddenly, the crowd at the corner closest to the church started rippling away as if it had been perturbed by the splash of something big. People were scrambling to get out of the way of whatever was coming through. There were some shouts and the

atmosphere instantly turned ominous as yellow and orange flames came into sight. Alia dropped the megaphone and along with all the uniforms surrounding her, started moving through the crowd toward the flames. There was genuine fear reflected in the eyes of the people closest to the flames. The volume of the slogan, "Alla-hu-Akbar," was growing as the group carrying whatever flammable thing they were carrying surged toward the church and the temple.

Alia pushed through and came face to face with a group of 8-10 people that were wearing black turbans and carrying flaming tins of paint thinners. The pungent smell of the thinners was apparent through the ugly black clouds of soot that frequently burst out of those tins. Each tin had a long metallic string attached to the top.

The person in the front - a short and stocky guy - was really hopped up on adrenaline. He was shouting at the top of his voice. He had put down the two tins he was carrying and was going around wildly waving his arms to exhort the crowd to attack the church and the temple. In the blink of an eye, he picked up one of the flaming tins and swung it around himself like a javelin and hurled it on the door of the church. The thinner splashed around as he had swung it through the air, but luckily everyone had backed away enough to not have been hit by the flaming liquid. The church door caught fire instantly and flames started clinging to the walls around it as that guy hurled the next burning tin. Then he paused and ran around shouting something. It sounded like a high-pitched shriek and then his fellow arsonists started heaving the flaming cans on the temple and the church.

The bases of both the buildings were engulfed in flames. As expected, though, the buildings themselves did not catch fire. They were made of fire retardant materials and the sprinklers inside the buildings had switched on at the first lick of the flames. What was burning away was the liquid thinner that had coated the buildings. There was unlikely to be any structural damage to either building. The only thing they would require was some thorough cleaning and a paint job. As this reality became apparent, the stocky guy lost it completely.

His turban unravelled and they saw that it was Shahid. Alia desperately tried to catch his attention. The crowd at her backside - the Christians and Hindus - were now thoroughly pissed off that this charade had been allowed to go on for so long. A few rocks were hurled at Shahid's group and things were starting to get out of hand as a few scuffles broke out. Alia was trying to decide whether to extricate herself and her team from the middle of the ensuing melee or continue the attempt to keep the two crowds apart.

One of the rocks hit Shahid glancingly. He glared at the direction from where it came from and rushed to the last couple of burning tins. He picked them up in each hand and started whirling around getting ready to toss them in the crowd instead of the buildings. He tripped and instead of the tins flying through the air, his arms collapsed



around him and he was covered in the burning liquid. Like a delirious dervish, he was ablaze and twisting every which way. The crowd went quiet as they watched, in horror, this human torch lurch every which way screaming like a banshee. The gross smell of burning flesh hit the people closest to Shahid like a slap and they all turned away in unison covering up their face.

As if hypnotized, the entire crowd saw Shahid die in an extremely painful manner. Shahid's partners-in-crime were scared. They didn't know what to do. They just stood there, absolutely petrified. The screaming had died down to a gurgle and now all that could be heard was the crackling of the flames as Shahid's flesh burnt. Mercifully, he had died quickly. Alia gestured at a couple of her colleagues and stepped forward. She threw her trench-coat on the burning body and tried to snuff out the flames. It was ineffective, and all that happened was her coat caught fire.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

That's when she saw the tall black woman standing just behind Shahid's followers.

Where had she seen her?

The woman was looking straight at Alia. Several scenes flashed across Alia's mind. The first time she had seen this woman was on the morning they had found Nadeem's body in the park. Alia had gone back to the crime scene to check on something and had seen this woman lurking on the sidewalk across the street from the park. The second time was when Shahid had started the riot in the warehouse district. This was that same woman who had quietly backed away from the rioters and vanished. In the statements taken from the rioters, several had described her as being with Shahid when the quarrel had turned violent. When Shahid was asked about her, he had seemed genuinely puzzled. He had shrugged and said that he had no idea who they were talking about. This was the third time Alia was seeing her. This was no coincidence!

Then Alia remembered from the various witness statements that a large black woman had been seen delivering some equipment at the concert location a few days before Nadeem was killed. Her team had flagged this, but she had not seen any interview of the woman. They had not been able to track her down. What was her name again? Salma? No - Sara! Somewhere in the statements from the patrons at Shahid's cafe, there was also a mention of a tall black woman who had come in a couple of times to check out the exhibits.

Something clicked in Alia's mind. Maybe it was a detective's instinct. She just knew that Sara was the one she had been hunting. There was this moment of clarity when it all seemed to make sense. Alia couldn't have articulated why she knew that Sara was Nadeem's killer. But she knew. And she had learned to trust her instincts. There was something suspicious about the way Sara had moved or looked every time Alia had come across her.

Alia stared right back at the woman and in that instant Sara knew that Alia knew. Her expression changed in a flash. It rotated through fear, despair, and anger as Sara looked around for an escape route. She had to immediately get away from Alia! It was as if Alia was able to read Sara's mind like a book. Alia reached out her hand toward Sara and shouted, "Hey you... STOP!" But Sara took off through a gap that had opened up in the crowd behind her. Alia sidestepped the smoking corpse of Shahid and started pushing through the crowd toward where Sara had gone.

There was complete pandemonium. The cruel self-immolation of Shahid had broken

the spell the crowd was under. Everyone was now rushing away from the scene in whatever direction they could. Within a few moments the square had emptied out and the only people remaining were the police. Led by Sonia, they were rounding up Shahid's followers. They were in such a shock that they surrendered. Whatever Shahid had said to them had died with him. They hung their head in shame.

While Sara was tall and big, she was definitely not fleet-footed. Alia was swiftly gaining ground on her. Sara knew that she had acted foolishly in showing her face at the riot. When she first saw Shahid's online rant about Irfan's death, all she had thought about was how to escalate this into another riot to further divert the attention of the police.

She was ashamed to admit that the accident had evoked a momentary feeling of relief in her mind instead of pity for Irfan. What was wrong with her?! She loved to help people. So much so that she had made that the sole purpose of her life. The reason she was training to be a nurse and not a doctor was because she felt that a nurse is the one who truly cares for the patients. Doctors were like mechanics. They focused on the medical problem and not the person. The nurse is the one who looks after the patient with kindness. Nurtures them. And here she was feverishly seeking a way to escalate a tragic death into a far larger tragedy.

Shahid had been a mere tool in her hand. His almost child-like gullibility would have been endearing to her in any other context. But ever since she had first seen his paranoid reaction to Nadeem's death, she had taken full advantage of his fears by subtly feeding him ever more extreme provocations. At no point had she explicitly suggested any action to him. She had merely shared what others were doing on his social media feed. The magic of algorithms underpinning the social media feed had done the rest. Shahid had gone down the rabbit hole of jihad and had kept on going.

It was as if she had activated a robot with the flip of a switch. Every now and then she had to feed this robot to ensure that the robot continued to grow more and more violent. She had not been responsible for the death of Santosh in any way. At that time, she hadn't gotten a hang of the various things on social media. But, she had a strong suspicion that it was Shahid who had executed Santosh. She had seen glimpses of similar beheadings on his social feed.

It was not just that Shahid was like a scared child but he was also somewhat dim. In a man's body, this combination of fear and stupidity can be a deadly combination if appropriately manipulated. She and the social media algorithms had done just that. The problem was that she had overplayed her hand. She had explicitly egged on Shahid as he had picked online fights with the Jewish and Christian people. Sara was the one who had shared a couple of videos of mobs burning down churches in Pakistan on his social media feed. She had seen several other followers join him and to openly plan an attack.

It was almost impossible to find incendiary material in Sequoia. The sole energy source in Sequoia was electricity. There was no need for gas or oil at all. Using paint thinners was a brilliant idea of one of Shahid's followers. Even then, they struggled to come up with a way to ignite it. There were no lighters or matches lying around. Someone got creative and managed to use the induction stove to get some piece of paper smoldering and then used that to ignite the thinner. Full marks for effort and creativity, thought Sara. Too bad, it was not being deployed for something worthwhile.

At the last moment, she had decided to join up with Shahid's group and go to the religious district. She had been curious to see how far they were willing to go. She couldn't really believe that they would actually act out their plan. That curiosity had gotten her on Alia's radar. That was so stupid! She should have stayed back in the crowd to observe. But like a moth pulled to a light, she had been pulled toward the spectacle that was to become Shahid's death. Now she was in trouble. She had to shake off Alia, for starters. She was quite sure that Alia didn't know who she was, where she lived, and what work she did. She was also confident that she had not left any material traces anywhere when she had killed Nadeem.

All these thoughts were rushing through Sara's mind as she ran away from Alia. It was quite apparent that there were not many places to hide in Sequoia. She couldn't barge into any building as that would just limit her options. Stores, shops, and restaurants would be too crowded and slow her down. More importantly, there was no way she was going to out-run Alia. Damn that cop! Alia was literally bounding over barriers like a champion athlete. Maybe, she did that in her spare time.

Something flickered in Sara's consciousness. She knew this area vaguely. The religious district was close to one of the corners of Sequoia and just beyond it was the railway station. In her delivery work, she had been there to pick up and drop off freight pallets. The train was fully automated. It came from the coast to Sequoia and from there it made a full circuit of the other two cities along the sides of a triangle and passed via Sequoia back to the port. This was the sole freight connection of the three cities with the rest of the world. She knew that the train, usually, came from the port at night. If it had been going toward the port, then the geofencing alarm would have been tripped because she would be leaving the designated zone. Then Alia would know who she was and it would only be a matter of time before Alia put together the evidence to charge her with Nadeem's murder. But if the train went on to the other cities, then the geofence alarm won't be triggered and she would have a chance to vanish again. And an electric train would certainly outrun Alia. If only she could get on it.

Sara veered to her right and put all her heart in one last sprint to the station. Alia was like an automaton. She simply upped her pace. It was barely hundred meters to the station and Sara saw that the train had almost finished unloading and the robots were starting to close up the compartments. She summoned every particle of energy and ran like hell. Her very existence depended on her escaping Alia. Her life was flashing

through her mind when she reached the robots and with one last titanic lunge she leapt through a closing door into one of the compartments that had recently been emptied. She heard the door snap close and collapsed on the floor, completely winded.

Within a few moments, she felt the lurch as the train moved. She was still gasping for breath, but she was relieved. She had managed to escape from Alia's clutches. She had no idea what was going to happen next. She would worry about that later. Maybe, all she had to do was simply go around the train's circuit and get out when the train passed through Sequoia again. Or maybe she could start a new life in one of the other cities. She was not sure if that could work. But then, there were three million people in each of those cities. No one would notice a new face. Maybe, she could even go back and forth between the two cities for a few days and then when things had died down in Sequoia come back by the train at a later date. Yes, that felt like a reasonable plan. She started to relax.

The train must have been accelerating rapidly because Sara could feel herself being pressed back. That's when she heard the thump on the ceiling of her compartment. Maybe, it was just something flapping around the compartment. Maybe, it was a branch of a tree hitting the train. Who knew what kind of terrain the railway traversed, anyway. It was dark inside the compartment but there were some dim lights embedded in the walls - probably, to guide the robots around. As her eyes got accustomed to the misty interior of the compartment, she saw that it was quite large. About 20 meters long and 5 meters wide. It was mostly empty but there were a few pallets stacked up at one end of the compartment. She was - in fact - leaning against one of them.

There was another thump from the other end of the compartment. This one was unmistakable. It was no branch. Someone was trying to open the trapdoor set in the ceiling. Damn her! Damn her! It had to be Alia. Somehow she must have clung to the train and then climbed up to the top. Sara panicked all over again. She was trapped. The doors were closed and even if she could somehow get them open, she was too afraid to jump from the fast train.

She desperately looked around and noticed that there was another trapdoor above the stack of the pallets she was leaning against. She scrambled up and pushed hard at the trapdoor but it did not budge. Stupid! Stupid! It had probably never been opened in a long time and was jammed shut. She braced against the stack of pallets and pushed with her back into the trapdoor. Abruptly, the trapdoor opened and she almost got pulled out. The hinge was on the back-side of the trapdoor. With the airflow along the roof, the first tiny gap had been sufficient to snap open the trapdoor.

A blast of air hit Sara's face and she gingerly raised her head out through the opening. Instantly, her eyes started streaming because of the airflow. It was like being in a blizzard. It was not particularly cold but the air speed was such that it took her breath away. She debated whether this was a good idea. Just then, she felt a hand clutch at

her ankle. By this time, Alia had managed to get inside the compartment from the other trapdoor on top of that compartment. She had spied Sara's legs sticking out from under the trapdoor at the other end.

Sara kicked hard and felt the hand slip off. She hoisted herself up and out of the opening. She was leaning heavily against the open trapdoor and prayed that it wouldn't be ripped off. She crouched close to the surface of the roof and scrabbled around for something to hold onto. There was no way anyone could have stood on top of the train at that speed without getting knocked off. She was going to have to crawl. Her fingers found a handle a few centimeters away. She gripped it with both hands tightly and slowly leaned forward, away from the trapdoor. Cautiously, she took off her left hand from the handle and stretched forward. Even though it was not totally dark, she could barely see anything because her eyes continued to stream. She had to scrunch them so much that she might as well have closed them. That would have been infinitely better than trying to keep them open and see anything.

About half a meter away, her left hand snagged the next handle. Clearly, the top of the compartments had handles built into them. God knows why. Maybe it was for robots to crawl around when cleaning the outside of the train. She sighed, more in her imagination, than in reality. She had no idea how she was breathing in that buffeting slipstream. She may not be agile, but Sara was big and heavy. Her heaviness had been a disadvantage when she was trying to run away from Alia, but now it was keeping her from getting knocked off the train. And she was strong. The years of lugging around freight had built up her muscles. She had no problem in single-handedly hauling Nadeem around.

She put her head down and started climbing horizontally across the roof of the train. She knew that Alia was bound to follow her. She had decided to go against the airflow precisely because it would be harder for Alia to follow her. For starters, Alia wouldn't be able to see her clearly. More importantly, Alia could have used the air flow to her advantage in gaining ground on Sara. This way, Sara had instinctively felt that she had the advantage on the lean Alia. All she could hope was that Alia would be knocked off the train. There it was, again. She was hoping for an innocent person's death. Something was really messed up with her.

After a few meters, Sara mostly felt rather than saw the front edge of the compartment. Right at the edge of the compartment, Sara sneaked a glance behind and cursed under her breath. Yes, Alia was very much still in pursuit. Although, as she had expected, Alia was most definitely making heavy weather of the chase. Her lesser weight meant that her arms and legs had to do a lot more work than Sara's. Sara looked ahead and spotted the handles continuing on the top of the next compartment. She was going to have to stretch quite a bit, though, as the last handle on the compartment she was on and the first handle on the next compartment were easily more than a meter apart. More like two meters. This was going to be extremely

dangerous. But then, there was no other choice!

Sara grabbed the last handle with both hands and started pivoting her body around it so that she could grab the edge of the compartment by her leg. That way she could be perpendicular to the train and then stretch out her hand to grab the handle on the next compartment. The two compartments wobbled quite a bit relative to each other. It took her at least three tries to swing her free hand all the way across and catch the next handle. She finally caught it and for a few scary moments felt her body being twisted violently between the two wobbling compartments. She was forced to let go of the handle behind her and hoped that she could hold on to the handle on the next compartment with one hand with all the wobbling. She felt her body slam against the next compartment and put all her strength in stretching her free hand to grab the same handle with the other one. Somehow she got hold of it and pulled herself onto the next compartment.

There was no way she was going to try this again with the next compartment. She had to get into this compartment and hope that Alia wouldn't be able to survive this deadly maneuver from one compartment to the next. Better still, Alia would be too scared to even try. Sara shook her head to clear the blinding pain she had felt when her body had slammed against the compartment. She must have hit her head too.

The moment she came to the first trapdoor, Sara started hitting at the latch to get it open. She had a plan to deal with Alia. She was going to get in and then put some serious weight on it from the inside to make sure that Alia wouldn't be able to open it. If need be, she would hang on to the bottom of the trapdoor in order to prevent Alia from gaining access.

Alia had still not reached the edge of the compartment. Sara got the trapdoor open with a few choice blows to the lever and wrestled it open as the hinge was located toward the front of the train. She got in and slammed it shut. She was crouching on top of a stack. Finally, she could breathe normally. She gingerly checked herself for any broken bones or open wounds. Everything seemed okay. There were bound to be some ugly bruises tomorrow. But hey, she was black and bruises are invisible on black skin!

She couldn't find anything that could hold fast the trapdoor and decided that she was just going to have to use her own body weight to deny Alia entry. She firmly gripped the inside handle of the trapdoor, but relaxed for the moment. There was no need to hold tight until she felt the tug from Alia. Her panic subsided. She definitely felt safer now that she was inside the compartment and Alia was outside. The advantage was with her and she was going to make damn sure that she made it count for all it was worth.

At least a few minutes had gone by and there still was no tug from the other side of the trapdoor. Hopefully, Alia had been deterred by the deadly gap between the two compartments. Sara had never wanted anyone to die. Well, except Nadeem, that is.

For sure, she didn't want Alia to die. In fact, she liked Alia. This young woman, just like her in most respects, seemed to be a good person, trying to do the right thing. Do her job. Why would Sara wish her dead. Another few minutes passed and Sara had started to worry that something bad had happened to Alia. She wondered if she should take a quick peek to see what the situation up top was. But maybe Alia was waiting for Sara to do exactly that and the moment Sara pushed up the trapdoor, Alia would be on it in a flash and get it open. Ughh... this was not feeling right.

While Sara was imagining all kind of scenarios, Alia had correctly guessed that Sara would have barricaded the trapdoor and had proceeded as swiftly as possible to the second trapdoor located at the farther end of the compartment. She had pulled up that trapdoor and crept in quietly. She had to use all her strength to avoid having the trapdoor snap open in the slipstream and then slamming it shut against the airflow. She had landed on top of another stack and there was no sign of Sara anywhere. So far so good. She couldn't know for sure, but she still felt confident that Sara had not been alerted of her entry in the compartment.

Alia climbed down the stack and pressed flat into a dark corner. She had to get her heartbeat down to a reasonable level. The short but very strenuous journey on the roof of the train had her gasping. Her eyes had been watering all along. Catching her breath also allowed her the time to get her eyes dry and more importantly used to the gloomy interior space of the compartment. After a couple of minutes she slid along the stacks in the direction of where she expected Sara to be. Alia had pulled out a pair of handcuffs and kept them ready to snap on Sara's wrists if she was lucky enough to catch her unawares.

The compartment appeared to be more or less full. There were a few gaps where some of the stacks had been removed. Because of the stacks, Alia couldn't really see where the trapdoor was and what Sara's position was until she was almost beneath it. Cautiously, she peeked around the corner of a stack and looked up to see Sara's torso sticking out over the stack. Sara was lying on her back on the top of the stack. Her head and shoulders were sticking out as she had to stretch out and grab the trapdoor's handle from inside. Carefully, Alia formulated her strategy. She was going to have to climb the stack and then reach out to snap the handcuff on Sara's wrists without making a sound. If Sara became aware of Alia, all she had to do was drop down on top of Alia. And Sara's weight was sufficient to badly hurt Alia. So Alia, started climbing the stack a good couple of feet away from Sara.

The train seemed to be lurching a lot more than before. Probably, it had been doing this all along, just that Alia had not noticed it. She was worrying about other important



things - like not falling off and dying. Sara continued to be oblivious to Alia's machinations. When Alia sensed that Sara's wrist was within reach, she took a deep breath and stretched her arm all the way and in one smooth motion snapped the handcuff on Sara's left wrist.

Sara just stared at the handcuff that had appeared like magic. In that instant, three things happened - the train compartment bounced up yet again, Sara released her grip of the trapdoor handle, and Alia lost her balance. The result was that Alia who was still holding the other loop of the handcuff ended up yanking Sara right off the stack as she fell down. Alia let go of the handcuff as she tried to use both her arms to break her fall. Which she managed to do, but one of Sara's legs landed heavily on her back as she fell down next to Alia.

Like a cat, Alia sprang back on her legs and got in a defensive stance. Sara was utterly winded, both physically and psychologically. Somehow Alia had managed to get inside the compartment and handcuffed her without her being none the wiser. Wait though! The handcuff was on her left wrist but her right hand could still move freely. Ahaa! So Alia had fallen before she could snap the second loop on the right wrist. With that positive realization, Sara got up as quickly as she could and peered into the gloom.

A swift kick swung through her field of vision, narrowly missing her face. Sara roared and lashed out with her fists. There was a satisfying crunch as one of her punches connected with something fleshy. That was followed by Alia's grunt and then the next kick caught Sara squarely in her midriff. Ooof! It sent her crashing against one of the stacks. That hurt! Alia was trained and more importantly, not even remotely daunted by the advantage with respect to height, reach, and weight that Sara had over her.

Sara struggled against the collapsed box loaded on to the stack. As her hand sought something to grab onto and pull herself to her feet, she felt a wooden rod. She yanked it out of its package as she got up and hefted it in her hand. Both her and Alia's eyes had now gotten fully accustomed to the dim lighting inside the compartment. The survival instinct had fully kicked in and all of their senses were heightened. They saw each other as clearly as if they were standing in broad daylight. Each one was trying to assess their options.

Neither had any idea of how far the train was from its next stop. What Sara had gotten her hands on was the handle of a rake. She twirled the rake in her large hands and tried to take a swing at Alia's head. It was a bit half-hearted. Sara knew that the teeth of the rake were sharp enough to cause a serious injury, even killing Alia. And also, there was not much space to swing the long handle of the rake without it getting tangled in packages. She jabbed at Alia to keep her at a distance as she tried to gauge from the corner of her eyes if there was a way to box Alia in somewhere until the train stopped.

Alia was getting a bit frustrated to have to deal with the rake in such a tight space. As they circled each other warily, Alia almost tripped over something. It was the handle of another gardening implement. This time, a spade. With her right foot, Alia flipped up the handle expertly in her hands. Now both of them had weapons and little space to do much damage with them. It was a classic stalemate. Each waiting for the other to make that one fatal mistake that would give the other the advantage in this tableau. Alia tried a couple of feints with the spade, unsuccessfully. Sara was able to fend those off however ungainly it might have looked. She was not here to score points for style.

All she wanted to do was get away from Alia. Sara pulled back the rake in a sharp movement to try to get some momentum going, when the back end of the handle hit something hard and there was the sound of something breaking. And then the door of the compartment started opening. Suddenly, Sara's back was being buffeted with the air that was barreling into the compartment from the partially open door. The door seemed to be stuck after opening a few centimeters.

Sara was scared. In desperation, she lunged at Alia but the sharp edge of the spade in Alia's hand kept her pinned at the door. It was not just the wind gusting in, Sara realized. Along with it, big wet drops of rain were also getting in. For a second, she thanked her stars that it had not been raining while she was on top of the train. Else, her acrobatics would have been infinitely more difficult. Coming to her current predicament though, the rain was starting to make the floor slick and she had to make sure she was sliding on it instead of stepping around. A sudden bolt of lightning illuminated the entire compartment and especially, Alia's face. It was a ruthless face, calmly calculating the odds of different tactics to overpower Sara. The rumble following the lightning was not far behind and Sara's shoulders drooped a bit as the sound lashed her.

Sara tried again and this time she was almost able to slip to the far side, away from the halfway open door. But at the last minute her left foot slipped and with a cry she almost found herself doing a full-blown split. The rake slipped from her hand as she tried to recover her balance. She fell down awkwardly and could feel her quads hurting because of a pulled muscle. She kneeled down trying to grab the rake again. But it was too late! Alia had taken full advantage of her misstep and leapt forward. She kicked away the rake and swung the shovel above her head in a threatening manner. There was nowhere to go for Sara and nothing to do, but surrender. This time the lightning must have practically struck next to the train because the blinding light and thunder clap assaulted them both in the same instant. Their skin tingled with static electricity.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Sara bowed her head in abject surrender and raised her hands above her head. She was waiting for Alia to snap the other loop of the handcuff on her right wrist. A moment passed and then another. But nothing happened. It was as if time had stopped in its tracks. She slowly raised her head and saw Alia frozen with a faraway look in her eyes.

Alia's mind was indeed somewhere so far away and back in time.

Along with Santosh and Nadia, she had been trying to get Max to reveal the location where he had stashed the loot. Max was a garden-variety burglar who tended to rob people simply for the adrenaline rush he got from it. He was perpetually feeling unchallenged and hence, would create these elaborate heists every few months. Alia had already caught him thrice. On each occasion, he had given back the stolen property and in return was punished with a several weeks of community service including some hard labor in the Sequoia farms. Every time, he got done with his term, he would gamely try to lead an honest life. But the lure of the thrill was too tempting for him and he would again fall off the wagon.

At that time, he had stolen jewelry from a store. During his last punishment, he had gotten into the habit of reading books, especially, adventure stories. And as a tribute to his latest favorite book - Treasure Island - he had decided to not hide the stolen jewelry in the city, but had gone out in the wilderness to bury it. The idiot had thought it would be a wonderful idea to make an elaborate map on which X marked the spot where his treasure had been buried. But by the time he had gotten back to his apartment, Alia had caught him. All it took was one stern look from Sonia and Max had owned up to the burglary. He took way too much pride in describing how he had beat the security system and gotten into the safe where the jewels were kept. Long story short, he had been trying to remember the spot where he had hidden the loot while Alia, Santosh, and Nadia were fuming at having to trample around the forest for the last few hours.

Max had told them that it was near a clump of three tall pine trees next to a tiny pond. He just couldn't remember which clump it was. He vaguely remembered it to be in a shallow valley of sorts. After the fifth - or was it the sixth? - site that came up empty, everyone was getting cranky. They had spent the entire day with Max in this quest. But, Max had been having a blast with all this exploring. He genuinely liked Alia and her team, especially, Nadia.

Finally, Alia had told them to wrap up. A storm seemed to be brewing on the horizon. The last thing she wanted was for them to get stuck in all that mud in the middle of nowhere. They had started jogging to the trail where they had parked their electric all-terrain vehicles (ATVs). The incessant chattering of Max all day had made Alia weary in

other ways, too. She wanted to have just a few moments to herself before she went back to the city. She had asked Nadia and Santosh to escort Max back to his holding cell. She had told them that she was going to wander around for a bit.

As they were leaving, she had remembered that Santosh had a video drone in the kit strapped to his ATV. They had been too confident about Max remembering the location and hence, had not bothered to use the drone to scout the area from air. And as they had ventured further away from their ATVs, she had decided to not waste any more time in retrieving the drone. Anyway, Max was unlikely to remember things better with a drone. She half-thought that this was an elaborate ruse of Max's to spend some quality time in the outdoors with the gorgeous Nadia.

Alia had assembled the drone. She had not been that eager to continue working, but then she felt that this might as well be a good use of her time given that she was going to be here for some more time. She had switched on the drone and started guiding it with the remote in her hand. Max had been confident that the clump was to the left of the trail and hence, they had spent all their time looking for the correct location on that side of the trail.

What if that idiot had been wrong? Maybe he had been looking in the wrong direction! So Alia had decided to explore the area on the right of the trail. There was a hillock about half a kilometer away and nothing was visible beyond it. She had sent the drone soaring over the hillock and immediately she caught the sight of a clump of pine trees a couple of kilometers beyond the hillock. As the drone had swooped in closer, she counted exactly three trees and even better, there was tiny pond right next to them. Damn! This must be it! It had perfectly matched Max's description.

The storm had gotten quite a lot closer by that time. But Alia had been excited. This treasure hunt business had been quite addictive, she had to admit. It was problem-solving of a different kind. And she just loved problem-solving. Instead of trying to walk to the site and back, she had decided to take the ATV to check out the site.

She had driven carefully through the knee-high grass. Luckily, there weren't too many boulders and dips in the ground. She had strapped the drone's remote to the handle. Every few meters she would pause and plant a flag to mark the path. There was no way she was going to rely solely on the GPS to find her way back to this site in case it was the real deal.

The ground had turned out to be hard and more or less flat. The ATV had eagerly gobbled up the distance, in a more or less straight line. The vegetation had mostly vacillated between grass and shrubs. In fact, there had been no major trees in her straight line path. Within a few minutes she had reached the pond and Max's clump of three tall pine trees. Unfortunately, the storm had also closed in much faster than Alia

had expected.

She had gotten off the ATV and done a fast circuit around the clump. In almost no time she found the place where Max had hidden the loot. Not only was the ground disturbed, the idiot had gouged a big X on the spot. She had smiled at the abundant child-like enthusiasm of Max. There was no guile in him. No malice. He was just having fun. Every time he was caught, he would become all distressed when he realized that his thieving had caused someone pain. Then he would start apologizing. His big brown eyes would fill up with copious tears as he begged for forgiveness.

She had pulled out the shovel strapped to the ATV and after only a few vigorous heaves, she had struck gold. Max had been too lazy to dig deeper. It had looked like he had been more preoccupied with gouging out the X mark than actually hiding the loot. She had carefully collected all the jewelry and packed it in an evidence bag.

The wind had picked up and the sky had visibly darkened. The storm was, practically, upon her. A few fat drops of rain had splashed on her head as she had been wrapping up. Just as she had been about to fire up the ATV, the clouds had burst and rain had started pouring down in big sheets. She had been forced to seek refuge under the trees where the canopy was quite broad and thick. The ground beneath it had stayed dry for quite some time. But after a while, the rain had started seeping through the trees all the way to the ground. She was not going to be able to stay there long.

When the rain had eased up a bit, the ground had already become quite muddy. She had been unsure if her formidable ATV would be able to get through that mud. Then the rain had stopped. She had decided to use the drone again to check out the mud situation back to the trail before she headed back. The air had been thick with humidity and Alia had been sweating profusely. She had been busy guiding the drone as close to the ground as possible in order to get a clear picture. But after the third instance of the drone hitting a tallish shrub, she had decided to not take any more chances and maneuvered the drone up to a safe altitude.

That's when she had noticed the light coming from a lantern next to a campsite a few hundred meters away beyond another small hillock. She had seen some movement. Clearly, someone had been camping there. Since, camping for leisure was strictly prohibited, she assumed that it was a research team with the appropriate permit. Still, Alia had thought that she should check if their permit was in order or if they needed any help. She had also been drenched and could use a towel to dry herself before she got back on the ATV.

She had started the ATV and headed toward the camp. The ground was rocky. Yet, the ATV had absolutely no trouble navigating through it. However, she had to switch it off and walk the last few meters to the camp because of too much mud. There had been a

small triangular tent that was most likely used for residential purposes and a much larger boxy tent with two sides open where the work was probably being done. Light had spilled out from the boxy tent.

She had walked by it and seen a man bending over the table, carefully measuring something with some sort of instrument. He had not heard her walk up. She had cleared her throat and he had almost jumped out of his skin. So startled was he that he had dropped whatever he was holding and looked up. He had a similar build as Alia. His thick black beard was flecked with a few grey spots. He had been wearing a beret over his shoulder-length curly black hair and dressed in the classic camper's attire - khaki pants and shirt, both with lots of pockets that seemed to be stuffed with all kinds of things.

"Ohh... you startled me," he had exclaimed.

"Who are you?" he had asked with a shy smile.

"My name is Qasim," he had quickly added before she could respond.

"I am Alia. I am with the police. I was in the vicinity because of a case when I noticed your camp."

"Ohh... how wonderful! How can I help you?"

Instead of answering that question, Alia had asked, "do you have a permit for this?"

Better to get business out of the way immediately. Alia was very conscious of the time. A light drizzle had started again. She had wanted to leave before she got caught in another downpour.

"Yes - of course. Let me find it for you."

Qasim stepped over to another table set up next to one of the walls of the tent. There were several frames on that wall including one that carried a print-out of the permit. He brought it over to her. She checked it and everything seemed satisfactory. She confirmed the validity of the permit on her tablet by connecting to the central database.

"Looks good! May I ask what your research is about?"

"I am training to be an anthropologist. I am working for a research team based out of Oslo. We are looking for artifacts from human settlements dating before the last Ice

Age.”

He had been genuinely excited and his chest had all puffed up with pride as he had described his work. After the first couple of paragraphs, though, Alia had lost all interest in what he was saying. She had stayed behind for some alone time and now had ended up listening to another person who clearly had a lot to say. She had wandered around the tent as Qasim had droned on. She had glanced at the various things, presumably dug up, on the table. She had nodded her head, automatically, every few moments to show that she had been listening. Then she had stepped closer to the wall with the frames. There had been a few maps in addition to the permit and there also had been a few photographs.

Her back had been toward Qasim as she had scanned the pictures. The smallest of them had also been the most faded one. Something about it had vaguely reminded of something from her past. She had felt a familiar tingle at the back of her neck. There had been a faint whiff of danger in the air.

To look at the picture carefully, she had bent down and forward over the table. The light had not been good. But it had been sufficient to show a famous archaeological site in Qom where a young clean shaven boy had been standing next to a beautiful sculpture engraved in the pillar. Most of the sculpture had not been visible but what little of it that she had been able to see was sufficient for her to recognize it. She had known the site - it was an ancient relic from the days of the Persian empire.

More importantly, she had recognized the boy. Her blood had frozen and she had stopped breathing. Despite the stifling heat and humidity, she had felt cold. The hair had been standing up on her forearms. Her eyes had been wide open with panic. Qasim's voice had cut through as she had stared and stared at the photo praying silently that it was not real.

She had whirled around and barked at him, “who is that in the picture?”

“Which one?”

“This!” she had the frame in her hand.

Qasim had paused just that little bit more than had been necessary. The light had gone out in his eyes as he had stammered, “that's my cousin. It is an old photo.”

But that pause had conveyed it all. He had lied. She had seen through his beard and long hair. The same eyes. He had obviously gotten older and filled out a bit more. But it had been him. No question about it. Alia had known that she was looking at the man

who had executed her father and two brothers in the middle of the market in Iran, fifteen years ago. It was Basheer.

At some point she had started breathing again. Else she would have fainted.

She had casually asked him, “where was the picture taken?”

Qasim - or rather, Basheer - had a guarded look on his face.

“I am not sure where. Probably in the village where my cousin lived. I mean, lives.”

“In Lebanon,” he had added, pointedly.

He had been unable to hold eye contact with her.

Images had flashed across Alia’s mind. Images from the nightmares she had as a teenager. Nightmares that had lasted for months. Every night she had woken up screaming. Her mother had hugged her tightly as she had tried to soothe the tormented soul of her only remaining child. She had smoothed the hair on Alia’s head for hours until Alia stopped shaking and then fallen asleep.

She had remembered that day clearly! Alia had been in her father’s shop on a pleasant Sunday morning. She had been blissfully, scrolling through her elder brother’s smartphone when she had heard a ruckus outside. Her father had ran into the store and wildly looked around for her. “Alia-jaan... you need to get away. NOW! Use the back door and go home. Tell your mother to hide with you in the place that we prepared. Go now!”

Her handsome and strong father had been so scared. Her two elder brothers - Rafiq and Hasan - had also ran in to the store right behind him. Both had been terrified.

“They are here father. What are we going to do now?” Rafiq had whispered.

Her father had pushed her behind a sack of rice and had stepped out of the store with his arms raised.

“May peace be with you!” he had said to the five fighters who had been sitting astride the battered Toyota pickup truck.

The obvious leader among them - who had also been driving the truck - had smirked at



him and looked around the small lane full of shops. Most of the shop-keepers had been standing outside with their arms raised similar to Alia's father. They all had grim expressions on their faces.

One of the flunkies who had been standing next to the machine gun installed on the roof of the pickup's cab had shouted to nobody in particular, "we have heard that some of you have been providing support to the Kurdish scum! How dare you defy our orders?" He had turned his gun skyward and let loose a burst of gunfire - to emphasize his point.

The leader had looked bored while the yelling had gone on. Bullying these puny shopkeepers had been a pathetic use of his real capabilities. If only his superiors would see him as he saw himself, they would know that he was an awesome warrior who was destined for greatness. He was a true leader of men.

The leader had glanced in his rearview mirror and seen Basheer nervously chewing on his fingernails. He had sighed. This kid had been a disgrace to his team of killers. Always afraid. Always jumping up like a scalded cat when someone had called him. He had to either make a man out of him or encourage him on his way to martyrdom.

Almost reluctantly, the leader had switched off the engine and lazily got out of the truck. He had leaned on the door and beckoned Basheer. For once, Basheer hadn't jumped. Rather, he had gotten off the truck's bed and gone to the leader with sagging shoulders. His gun had been trailing behind him as if it was a scarf.

This won't do. No! This would certainly not do. He had drilled into his fighters that they must always be alert and ready. Basheer had already been punished numerous times for his slovenly demeanor. The leader had fingered his gun debating whether he should just shoot Basheer and be done with it. Unfortunately, that was not an option. The other fighters would rat him out to his superiors. He had decided to try one last time to make Basheer into a killer.

The leader had nodded at one of his fighters who was swaggering around the lane taunting the hapless shopkeepers. "Line up a few bastards," the leader had said to him quietly.

"We are going to have to make an example out of some and I would like to have Basheer do it on our behalf."

The fighter had looked up at the leader, clearly bemused by the thought of Basheer killing anybody. Then he had loudly snickered.

Alia had been watching this from her hiding place behind the sack. The window opening on the street had not been closed all the way. The gap had been sufficient for her to see what had been happening outside. But, no one could see her.

The fighters had lined up at least a dozen people including her father and her two brothers. The leader had whispered something in Basheer's ears. Then she had seen Basheer turn white as a sheet. He had walked up to the person kneeling next to her father. He had slowly lifted his gun to point at the person's head and hesitated. A brief but harsh order from the leader and Basheer had pulled the trigger. The head of that person had exploded like a watermelon with chunks of bone and brain tissue flying all over the place.

The other fighters had roared with joy and let loose bursts of celebratory gunfire in the sky. The leader had beamed at Basheer. That is when, she had seen Basheer's face transformed into a broad smile. He should have been ashamed at what he had done. He had killed someone in cold-blood. But all he had seemed to care about was the validation of his fellow warriors. Almost with a relish he had stepped over to Alia's father and shot him. Another huge toothy grin towards the leader and onward to killing the remaining people including Alia's brothers. Then Basheer had screamed in exhilaration! That was what Alia had seen. That was what she had kept on seeing in her nightmares night after agonizing night.

That same Basheer had been standing in front of her at the campsite several years later. That evil boy who had nonchalantly killed her loved ones had somehow showed up in Sequoia ready to destroy this new life that she had been building for herself. She could not allow this evil to continue its existence. In a trance, she had picked up the shovel lying next to the table. Seeing her expression and the raised weapon, Qasim had sank down on his knees to beg for mercy. Alia hadn't heard what he had said. She had not been herself. She had simply heaved up the shovel and in one stroke crushed Qasim's skull.

She did not remember what had happened next. She must have thrown the shovel away from her. She must have walked to her ATV and taken off. She had no recollection of her journey back home through the rain and the mud. She did not remember anything else from that night. She must have washed her clothes after she had showered. All the traces of the evil must have been erased from her person and more importantly, her consciousness.

It felt like it had been hours, as all those memories swept through Alia's mind. The realization that she was the one who had initiated the cycle of violence in Sequoia that had spread across the entire world in bloody ripples, was too shameful for her to bear. The shovel dropped from her hands and fell with a clang as she collapsed to the ground in front of Sara.

It was bewildering for Sara to see Alia, literally, wither away in front of her eyes. Alia clasped her hands together and murmured, "please forgive me. I am so sorry. I... I... am so so sorry. Please..." Alia lifted her tear-stricken face to look at Sara. That look of shame was something that Sara recognized, instantly. It was the look Sara had seen on her own face that night after she had gotten back from executing Nadeem. She had also begged for forgiveness in a similar manner.

Tenderly, Sara touched Alia's face, cradling her cheek.

"You poor thing! You killed him, didn't you? You killed Qasim and now you are remembering it."

Sara's voice was full of kindness and understanding as tears continued to stream down Alia's face.

The two of them sat together for a long time.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Both Sara and Alia were lost in their thoughts about what they had done and the terrible consequences of their actions. It was only when the train braked that they came to their senses. The lights from the city of Cypress were visible from the half open door. Wordlessly, both of them hid themselves in the shadows hoping that the freight-removing robots wouldn't come anywhere near them.

The broken door opening mechanism saved them. The robots flagged it as a malfunction that would be repaired by the human crew when the train went back to the port. The other three doors of the compartment provided sufficient room for the robots to maneuver around to offload the designated stacks. The broken stacks were left as they were. The robots were not programmed to clean up any mess. They were to simply flag it and then move on to the next task.

No person was around anyway. It was the middle of the night and this operation was usually conducted entirely by the robots. The distance between the cities was about two hundred kilometers and the train, usually, took a little more than an hour to cover that distance. The journey always initiated from the port of Skibotn that had been created, specifically, to serve the three cities. The first stop was Sequoia in Norway, followed by Cypress in Finland, then Juniper in Sweden and return to Skibotn via Sequoia. The total travel time for the circuit was approximately five hours including the stops for off-loading and loading the train.

After the initial shock of her deed had worn off, Alia's brain started re-asserting itself. The very first question that came to her mind was - why had she forgotten about the killing of Basheer until that moment? Or maybe she hadn't really forgotten it. Somehow her mind had managed to hide it from her. But she knew about it. That dream she was getting lost in repeatedly, that nightmare rather, had been hinting at the fact that she was chasing herself. The reason she didn't seem to be able to catch the suspect in her dream was because she was afraid to catch herself.

Something had unlocked that memory and brought it forth. Maybe it was the tumultuous day she had - dealing with Sonia's rage, the accidental death of Irfan, the mind-altering concert, the terrifying riot including the horrific immolation of Shahid, and finally, the scarcely believable chase across the top of the speeding train to catch Sara. All those upheavals had come practically on top of each other and at some point her mind must have snapped and all the defenses it had built to keep her protected from the memory of Basheer's murder must have been breached.

She suspected that the transcendent feelings she had experienced at the concert, in all likelihood abetted by whatever stimulants had been introduced in the air by Maria to

heighten the emotional response of the audience, also had something to do with her mind opening up again. After all, disparate things had indeed clicked together in her mind when she had seen Sara at the riot. She had all that data but had not been able to put it all together until that moment. Anyway...

Alia was an idealistic person. Always had been, as far as she could remember. Killing another person was as bad as it got in her books. And now she had done exactly that. Not as part of her law enforcement duties or in self-defense - but as a totally unprovoked attack on another human being. She was guilty of a crime both in her own eyes and those of the law. The law that she had sworn to uphold. As soon as she reached Sequoia, the first thing she would do was to go to the police HQ and surrender herself, unconditionally. She would voluntarily confess to her crime in as much detail as she remembered it. That was it!

The second thing she would do was to charge Sara and lock her up in the overnight holding cell. No, wait! That couldn't be the second thing. That would have to be the first thing. The moment she surrendered, she would lose her police powers. She would not, then, be able to charge Sara. So swap those things around then!

She was sure that Sara was the one who had killed Nadeem. But so far, her team had not been able to unearth any evidence connecting Sara to Nadeem's death. The potential sighting of Sara at the concert hall, the art cafe in Nadeem's building, and the bar where he was last seen would help. But, to prove beyond any doubt that Sara murdered Nadeem would still not be possible. That is, unless Sara confessed. And that is what Alia intended to do at that moment - get Sara to voluntarily confess.

In her team, she was the best officer when it came to interrogations. There was something so reassuring in her manner that it created a conducive environment for getting people to confess to their crimes. Maybe her sense of righteousness shone through when people spoke with her. They could trust her to always do the right thing. They felt that they would get a fair shake with Alia. The thing was, except in the context of training, Alia had never had to catch a murderer. This would be her first time. She would be doing this alone and under extraordinary circumstances.

It had been chilly in the compartment as the train sped from Cypress to Juniper. Sara was sitting next to the stack opposite to Alia. She had her hands clasped around both knees tightly as she rocked back and forth. Her eyes were blank. Alia was sitting cross-legged with her hands were in her pant pockets to keep them warm. She quietly switched on the recorder on her phone inside her pocket. She had decided to do something quite different than what she had been trained to do. But then, how many times does such an occasion come up in life when one murderer is attempting to get another murderer to confess. Alia felt confident that her strategy was the best one in this situation.

She looked away from Sara and began, "yes - I killed Qasim. I used a shovel to smash his head in. It was one blow and I knew even before the shovel touched his head that he was going to die."

"I don't know why I had blanked it all out until a few minutes ago. Something for the psychologists to figure out, I guess," she added, ruefully.

"I knew Qasim from my life in Iran. He used to be called Basheer in those days. He had killed my father and two elder brothers. Just shot them in the middle of the street outside our shop. In broad daylight. Dozens of our neighbors had watched it happen. After shooting them, he had screamed with joy. I saw it all. I was just a teenager back then."

Alia stopped talking. She had still not looked at Sara. She was trusting that Sara was now concentrating on every word that Alia said next.

"Why did you kill Nadeem?"

"I know what you are trying to do," murmured Sara after a long pause. Alia was surprised but she didn't show it. She could tell that Sara wanted to confess, anyway.

"You know that I killed Nadeem. Somehow you figured it out. That is why you followed me tonight.

Nadeem led one of the Janjaweed gangs in Darfur. His people raped my mother and sister; and then killed them. They also killed my father that night.

Nadeem was playing the flute as those brutes were decimating my family.

I thought that I had left all that behind when I came to Sequoia. And then a few days ago, I heard that flute again. It felt like fate was playing a cruel joke on me.

I was delivering some equipment to the concert hall, when I heard that same tune on the flute. Then I saw him. The monster was still alive. He had followed me over all these years and thousands of miles. I was terrified.

The screams of my family came back to haunt me. They were blasting away as if they wanted my eardrums to split and bleed."

Alia finally turned her head and looked directly at Sara. Her eyes were full of kindness. This poor woman had suffered, too. There was so much pain in this world. Pain that just

wouldn't go away, it seemed. Pain that would eat away at the soul until there was nothing left but the empty shell of the body. A body that would seem to be alive in every way, yet dead when it came to feeling anything beyond what the physical senses would convey. Sometimes even those senses would be deadened. After all, the emotions that we feel tend to affect us physically in myriad ways that we still don't understand. Alia had read about how otherwise healthy people died because of heartbreak. There were so sad that their hearts simply stopped beating.

As much as she wanted to reach out and pull Sara into a comforting embrace, she reminded herself that she was still a cop. She desperately wanted to hold Sara who was shaking with silent sobs as she re-lived the worst moments of her life. But that would have to wait. First, she needed to understand the sequence of events in as much detail as possible. That way her team could have a chance to collect sufficient evidence to convict Sara even if she recanted her confession later.

Alia was finding her own behavior utterly distasteful for the first time in her career. There was something deeply disgusting in what she was doing. It was not the surreptitiousness of how she was obtaining Sara's confession. That was par for the course. She had no compunction in using whatever tricks she could think of to put criminals behind bars. And Sara was indeed a criminal. But this felt different. It felt almost cruel to manipulate this vulnerable woman who had already lost so much and was now about to lose whatever little was left.

Alia had decided that she would turn herself in after she had booked Sara. But, that was something that Alia had decided on her own volition. Sara, clearly, didn't want to get caught. Sara had tried to run away. Sara was even willing to hurt Alia in her bid to avoid getting arrested. That is how far Sara was ready to go. Still, Alia couldn't bring herself to look at Sara as a straightforward criminal. There was some strange connection between the two. It was not as simple as Alia, the cop, arresting Sara, the criminal. Why did this feel so difficult and complicated and messy?

Alia had not noticed that Sara had fallen silent. Sara had stopped sobbing. She was leaning against the stack with her eyes closed. There was a serene air around her. Finally, being able to talk with someone about her past and what she had done, had brought her immense relief. She had been petrified of getting caught and being sent away from Sequoia. And now she had, indeed, been caught. By a cop, no less. Yet, this had felt different. Unburdening herself to Alia - who was in the same situation as her - had felt good. The tension that had built up in her muscles since the day she had discovered Nadeem had melted away. Maybe she could sleep well from that moment. All would be well. She smiled to herself and gently opened her eyes to look at Alia.

Alia was looking down at something in her hands. The tension was back, in a flash. That looked suspiciously like a phone. Alia looked up, grimly, at Sara.

“What is that? What were you doing?” hissed Sara.

“I have uploaded a recording of our joint confessions to my personal server. When the train reaches Sequoia, we shall go to the police HQ and surrender ourselves,” Alia said, unequivocally.

“Why?” Sara had to make an effort to get that word out. She was feeling weak. It was good that she was already sitting down on the floor and leaning against the stack, or else, she would have fallen down.

“Because you and I are criminals, of course! We have murdered. And that act cannot go unpunished!”

“Noooooooo.... no.... no...” whimpered Sara.

“I thought that you understood it. That was not a crime that we committed. We didn't do anything for personal gain,” Sara had found a little bit of strength to string together those few words.

“The why doesn't matter, Sara. All that matters is that we did something illegal.”

“But of course it does matter!! How can you not see that? It was self-defense! Nadeem had followed me here and would have killed me after torturing me. That was in his nature. I was simply protecting myself. And self-defense is no crime!!” Sara was steadily gaining strength as she marshaled her thoughts. This was all going haywire. Why was Alia being so strange? Did she not get it?

“You did the same thing. Your family was killed by Qasim or whatever his real name was. He had also followed you to Sequoia - undoubtedly to hurt you. You had to do something to protect yourself from him. You had no choice!”

Alia was momentarily taken aback by this torrent of words pouring forth from Sara. So far, Alia had not tried to understand, let alone remember WHY she had killed Qasim. All she had ascertained in her mind was that she had indeed murdered him. According to her memory, which was crystal clear, she had picked up the shovel and hit Qasim. But what had been the thoughts going through her mind at that moment? Why had she picked up the shovel in the first place? Why had she smashed Qasim's skull with it? Was Sara right about her motivation, too? Did she kill Qasim in self-defense? Well that would change everything then.

The memory playing out in her head - though - seemed to show Qasim on his knees in front of her, begging for mercy. She remembered the fear in his eyes. There had been



no sign of Qasim threatening her. Rather, Qasim didn't seem to even know her. While she had seen Basheer, he had never seen her. Definitely, not on the day he had shot her father and brothers. She had been completely hidden inside the store that day. She had stayed behind the sack for what felt like hours after the death of her family. In fact, it was her mother who had found her behind the sack.

Could Basheer have seen her before or after that horrible day? Could he have known that it was her family that he had destroyed? And that she was avenging their death in Sequoia all these years later? No - that sounded ridiculously far-fetched! She didn't remember saying anything about her family's death to Qasim before she had killed him.

She thought hard about that evening at Qasim's camp. Until the moment she had seen that old photograph of Basheer and then realizing that Qasim and Basheer were the same person, there had been nothing even remotely disconcerting about her interaction with Qasim. Whatever her motivation behind killing Qasim was, it was not self-defense.

For that matter, it was not the motivation that Sara was claiming to have had for killing Nadeem. She had poured over the interview notes of all the people that Nadeem had been in contact with. There was not an iota of evidence suggesting that he had been violent toward anyone in Sequoia. If - as Sara was asserting - that Nadeem had followed her from Sudan to Sequoia then why would he wait for five whole years to threaten her. Did Nadeem even know Sara? After all Basheer/Qasim had not known Alia as per her own recollections.

"Did Nadeem know you from Sudan?" Alia asked, suddenly. She had to know the answer to that question!

Sara hesitated and that was sufficient for Alia to prod her further.

"He didn't know you at all - right? You mentioned that his men had entered your home and killed your family. And you also mentioned that after that horrible night, the first time you had seen Nadeem was directly in Sequoia and that too only a few days before you killed him. How could he have even known of your existence then? Why would he have followed you? Why would he even threaten you with violence?" the ruthless interrogator in Alia was back in the saddle. No more doubts about what was to be done.

Sara hesitated because she knew that Alia was right. What puzzled Sara was that in all her hand-wringing after she had killed Nadeem, this thought had never once crossed her mind. Nadeem didn't even know her. But she had been so sure of her fear. She had

acted out of fear. Hadn't she?

This was pure survival instinct in action. Flight or fight. Both she and Alia had chosen to fight back instead of running away. In all likelihood, if they had met their respective tormentors outside of Sequoia, they would have chosen to flee. The dynamic in that context was the men having all the power and control while the women being the oppressed ones. That dynamic had been decisively eliminated in Sequoia. Alia's and her behavior were proof of that.

They had grown into strong and independent persons. They were fearless. They had stood their ground courageously instead of backing off. They had delivered justice instead of wilting in the torment. That was the magic of Sequoia. Women were truly equal to men. She didn't want to leave Sequoia for any reason whatsoever, the law be damned. She had to somehow persuade Alia to drop this matter entirely.

"Did you kill Nadeem in order to avenge the torture and death of your family?" Alia continued doggedly.

"I... I... you are right. Nadeem didn't know me. And he had not threatened me. But don't you see Alia - he didn't have to do that. His very existence was sufficient to portend violence. He was an evil man. He had, somehow, escaped punishment for his crimes. He should have been sentenced to death long ago. That would have been the outcome of any fair legal system in a decent society. You have to agree then, that all I did was do the legal system's work. It was overdue," Sara tried another tack.

"Justice can only be delivered by the legal system, Sara. You are not part of it. You could have brought Nadeem to the attention of the legal system in Sequoia and through that, of the legal system in Sudan. You cannot take law in your hands, Sara. You just can't! Nor can I!"

"How is ending evil NOT a good thing? I don't get it! Qasim was an evil man! He should have been punished a long time ago, too. And the fair punishment for him was death. But he was never punished. He changed his name and got away with his crimes. Of course - he and for that matter anyone who gets away unpunished always, always, assume that they are safe to continue with their bad deeds. You stopped that. You saved other people from death. That is all that matters.

You and I did the right thing. We should - in fact - be rewarded for our good deeds. And here you are talking about confessions and surrendering.

What if they don't understand us and instead punish us? THAT would be the wrong thing to happen."

“Qasim and Nadeem were bad people. They should have been punished a long time ago. Yes - I completely agree with you on that Sara. BUT, they should have been punished by society collectively acting through the law enforcement mechanism. We cannot just ignore that mechanism even when the ultimate outcome is the correct one. If everyone did that, then the social compact that we have established among ourselves, would be void. Don't you understand that? It is a slippery slope. You get that... right?”

That was the second argument that Alia had decisively struck down. Sara was getting increasingly desperate.

“I... I am a decent person. I am training to be a nurse. Please believe me.”

“I am a decent person, too. But we still killed a human being. And for that we need to face the consequences. I don't see any way out of this.

Even if we decide to not confess and somehow we manage to escape detection, do you think we shall be able to live happily for the rest of our lives? Our conscience would always remind us. We would never find peace.”

“I made a mistake. I don't know what got into me that I did it. I have never hurt anyone. I haven't even hurt an animal or insect or plant,” said Sara wringing her hands in frustration.

There were no do-overs here. No rewind button to go back in time and undo the past. Death was like that. It was final. If she could, then in a heart-beat she would go back and spare Nadeem. The painful past was not as important as the future that she was building for herself in Sequoia. In fact, the more she thought of this, the past - good and bad - was entirely irrelevant. She should have forgotten it. All of it. Completely erased it from her mind and brain. She should have filled her mind and brain with all the wonderful things she had dreamed of ever since she had arrived in Sequoia.

As if she was talking to herself, Sara continued, “it was like a nightmare. I don't know how to explain it, really. It was as if I was watching this person called Sara kill Nadeem. As if it was someone else who was following Nadeem. Plotting his death. And then carrying it out. It's just that that person looked like me. But it was not me. I don't understand how I could have done all those things.”

With a start, Alia realized that Sara had put in words exactly what Alia had been mulling over at the back of her mind. It was unfathomable for Alia that she would break the law. That was so not her. Then why had it happened? How? Why hadn't she been able to stop herself? Maria and for that matter everyone at work routinely teased her about how

she was so inhibited. She never let go of her iron self-control. What had caused this deadly deviation?

The train was slowing down again as it neared the city of Juniper. Again, wordlessly and without any gestures, both of them hid themselves in the shadows during the unloading of stacks from their compartment. Both were lost in deep thought, trying to solve the puzzle of their abnormal behavior. Non-violent and loving individuals was how they saw themselves. Now they were faced with the reality that they were violent. So violent that they had each killed a human being. Yet, both - in their own ways - had sworn to protect life.

The train took off again and as it gathered speed, both knew that their time was running out. Their freedom was about to end. Their future was going to abruptly change course, again. Sequoia would be gone. The lives they had built for themselves would be no more. They would be banished back to their former homes and the law there would decide what would happen to them. They both knew what that meant. They would be hung. And that would be that.

They had been doing something good in Sequoia. The success of Sequoia was supposed to pave the way for a better life for tens of millions of people. They were meaningful contributors to that promising future. What a waste!

"If one is not fully in control of their actions then are they even responsible for those actions? Should they be punished?" Alia thought aloud without realizing it. This got Sara's full attention.

"How does one prove whether one is in control or not?" asked Sara, hopefully. Alia may or may not have heard that. She continued, as if she was still thinking to herself.

"I don't remember consciously deciding to kill Qasim. It just happened. But I cannot - for the life of me - recall the thought process that led me to that action. I am quite sure that I did not deliberate on it. No weighing of pros and cons. No premeditation - in other words. I did pick up the shovel. I did swing it. I did aim for his head. I did - in fact - kill him. But I can't find the motivation behind that action anywhere in my memory. It can be a crime only if I willed it so and then acted on it. Where was my will in all that?"

Sara was listening keenly to Alia's monologue. She was finally seeing a glimmer of hope. Alia seemed unsure at worst. At best, Alia appeared almost ready to retract her original opinion of being guilty. What Sara had subconsciously concluded and then tried to articulate to Alia in a half-assed manner was now getting articulated clearly.

"If I am not responsible for my actions then neither is Sara responsible for hers.

Unfortunately, both of us are in the same position, we cannot prove conclusively to anyone else that we were not responsible for our actions. We are both sane - there is lots of evidence of that. Temporary insanity could be a defense but it would be well-nigh impossible to make that case. Why would anyone believe us?

Since they won't believe us, they will convict us. And banish us from Sequoia forever. It is not the prospect of the death sentence that we would receive back home that bothers me much. My life was worthless before Sequoia and it would be worthless without it. But it would not be fair to me as I was not responsible for my actions. No - it would not be fair at all!"

Alia looked at Sara, still unaware that she had been voicing her innermost thoughts so vividly.

"You and I are both innocent, Sara. I am more or less sure of it. But we cannot prove our innocence to anyone. I am barely able to make the case to myself. Hence, confessing to these crimes and inevitably getting punished for them would not be fair to us. I am not going to confess and neither am I going to charge you. You are free to go. I shall delete our confessions from my records."

Wordlessly, with tears streaming down her cheeks, Sara hugged Alia tightly. A bit stiffly, Alia returned the hug and patted Sara's back kindly. The train had been hurtling toward Sequoia at top speed. As they stepped apart, the now familiar lurch of the train reminded them that the train was slowing down. The moment the train stopped, they stepped off it and without another glance at each other, walked away in different directions.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

It had been a couple of days since the riot. That night was etched starkly in Sonia's mind. The gruesome image of Shahid's charred body was something that she would never forget. That ugly stench of burning flesh and hair mixed with the intoxicating smell of turpentine was still in her nostrils. She had tried showering multiple times every day to get rid of the smell. Maybe it was all in her head. But then, how does one un-see and un-smell something like that?

It is not as if Sonia had never before been on duty during a riot. In Dhaka, as a rookie, she was on crowd control duty numerous times. So much so that at times she felt as if the main job of cops was to keep the crowds in check. Riots were common in Bangladesh. The rising unemployment and chronic food shortages had steadily destabilized the country that just a few years ago had been showing signs of economic success.

The gluttony of the wealthy from all over the world, especially, since the turn of the century had created a huge demand for goods that required a lot of cheap and relatively unskilled labor to produce. Clothes, for example. Bangladesh had seized this opportunity with both hands while others such as India and Pakistan had missed it. The carefully nurtured growth of the textile industry had created a vast number of jobs for both men and women. In a very short period of time the industry grew and grew some more. It raised the incomes across the country and the future seemed bright.

That is when the pandemic hit and then the war in Europe started. On top of that the economic mismanagement in the west created the recession which was like a kick in the gut of the Bangladeshi garment sector. Inflation made everything expensive from fuel to food. Manufacturers started laying workers off in droves. Unfortunately, at the same time, people in rural areas were forced to abandon their fields as the sea intruded more and more every year. Agriculture was getting decimated. Several cyclones caused unimaginable damage stretching the government's resources beyond the breaking point. With nowhere else to go, the rural laborers made their way to the cities and towns hoping for something. Anything.

Of course, the protests had started. Initially, they had been peaceful. But that didn't last long. The anger and frustration had to find a more suitable outlet. Violence had fit the bill perfectly. In the beginning, it had been aimed at the government and Sonia had spent weeks trying to protect government property. The government - predictably - had decided to deflect it with deadly effects. The religious fundamentalism in the neighboring countries - Myanmar and India, and Pakistan - had provided an easy way to create the conditions where the majority Muslim population of Bangladesh could be turned against the minority Hindus. It had been like magic. Practically, overnight, the

government had gone from being the main villain to the champion of the downtrodden. The fever of nationalism had started rising. And then the riots had followed. Rabid mobs of young men had rampaged across the cities.

It had been quite confusing for a young woman like Sonia. She was a Muslim by birth. But that was all that was religious about her or her family and friends. None of them were practicing Muslims. All they did was celebrate the festivals which for Sonia meant an excuse for eating fantastic food. Suddenly, she had been thrown into the cauldron of religious riots where the Muslims had not only been backed, but actively encouraged by the government, to attack the Hindus and Christians. The Muslims were the majority and the dominant population and ideally, her job should have been to protect the weaker and smaller population. And she had done that as much as she could without getting on the radar of the senior cops who had been most happy toeing the government's line. But it had really messed her up.

When she came to Sequoia, she had thought that she had left all that craziness behind. For starters, there was no concept of politics in Sequoia. There were no elections - as in elections that are like popularity contests in the so-called democracies. In Sequoia, being part of the city's leadership - the city council - happened through a lottery system. Every year, one-third of the council was picked through a random draw. Each person served a three year term and then was permanently excluded from the lottery. Oversight of the city's operations was the primary function of the council.

Of course, voting did happen. But, it was only for policies. Any resident could collect support from ten percent of the population to register a proposition with the legislative department. Each proposition would consist of four alternative designs and it was mandatory for all residents to vote through a ranked choice mechanism on each registered proposition. But before voting, it was mandatory to study and debate it with others. In fact, a week was allocated for study and debate every year right before voting. An independent court established by the UN and consisting of non-residents served to enforce the laws as enacted by the city. People had just gotten on with this system and so far there hadn't been any power games.

But then, it was not some policy that had led to that riot in Sequoia. It had been an old-fashioned religious riot. The riot had happened in the midst of the places of worship. Shahid and his group had explicitly attacked the Hindu temple and the Christian church. The slogans that were shouted had all been religious in nature. While the crowd had dispersed immediately after Shahid's horrific death, that didn't mean that the rancor had vanished. Sonia had absolutely no doubt that the grievances were very much festering away out of sight.

She had her team round up a bunch of the people that had been seen as the natural leaders at the riot. Instead of bringing charges against them, the city council had decided to have a chat with them, both collectively and individually. The conversations

had left Sonia quite ambivalent about the future. Correction - she felt more pessimistic than optimistic. Without exception, the bunch had felt remorse about their individual actions and more importantly, the effect of their actions on the crowd. Everyone agreed that violence and rioting was to be avoided. But where they became strangely stubborn was when it came to them taking a public stance on it.

The tribal instincts that had been dormant for the first five years in Sequoia had been fully awakened. Each individual was vehemently pointing fingers at the others. The frustrating whataboutery had also reared its ugly head. No one wanted to be the one to unilaterally step back. They wanted others to do so first.

In any case, Sonia's main takeaway from last week was that she really needed to get those murders solved. It was crystal clear to her that the root cause of this growing instability were the two murders. It had all started there. They had to find the killers and bring them to justice as soon as possible. Then there was a chance that they could bring in calm. At least for the moment. Not that the evil specter of tribal identities would go away because of that, but at least the near-term rioting and outright violence could be quelled. And the future of Sequoia could be secured. Her future in Sequoia would be safe.

#####

The next day, Sonia found herself again at Kaija's home. They were waiting for Rachel and Camille to show up for the video call. Kaija had not been anywhere near the major riot. However, she had seen and heard enough about it to have a reasonably good idea of what had gone down. Neither she nor Sonia were surprised to see Rachel's request for another call.

On the dot, the video crackled as Camille dialed in and a few moments later so did Rachel. Camille had a grim expression. Without waiting for a cursory greeting, Rachel exclaimed in agony, "what the fuck just happened Sonia? I mean... we just talked about it a few days ago. Kaija gave that speech at UN which - I have to say - was as well received as I had hoped for. It had certainly dampened the talk of chaos at Sequoia. The plutes had gone silent since the speech. Until now... that is."

Sonia was absolutely dismayed and Kaija looked worried.

Rachel was not yet done with her venting, "I got another call from our friendly investor. The gloves are going to come off soon. The plutes have started chattering again. But before we get to that... what the hell happened? Am I getting this right? Another murder? And a full-blown riot? A public self-immolation? How bad are things? I really need to know the details if I am going to have a chance to tamp down on whatever is



brewing at the UN.”

Sonia was shaking her head vigorously as Rachel was speaking.

“Okay... let me clarify what happened. The fourth death was a genuine accident. One of my staff, in fact, witnessed it. An unfortunate individual was crushed under a stack of crates that fell down because they had not been tied properly. It just so happened that the guy who died was a Muslim and the guy who was driving the truck with the crates was Jewish. It became far worse than what it was purely because the guy who died happened to be talking with Shahid, who accidentally immolated himself later that evening during the riot.”

Sonia was speaking fast and she had to pause to catch her breath.

“The riot - well - we don’t yet know the how of it. Somehow it got going within a couple of hours as the news of the accident spread through the city. We are not yet sure who organized it or if it was entirely spontaneous.

Shahid’s death at the riot was just plain unfortunate. He was one of the groups who had brought the paint thinner to the riot in order to set fire to the church and the temple. He got carried away and tripped while he was about to hurl those burning buckets on the crowd and ended up killing himself. I was there and so were thousands who saw what happened.

Bottom-line, both were unfortunate deaths. Nobody else was even seriously injured. The damage to the church and the temple was trivial. Nothing that a paint-job wouldn’t fix.

The rioting, though, worries me. It came together quite rapidly. We hardly had any time to mobilize. If not for my brave colleague - Alia - the riot could have turned far worse than it was. She managed to really impose some order on the rioters before Shahid and his buddies showed up with those Molotov cocktails. Fuckers!”

Sonia stopped talking. Camille spoke up instantly, “ohh... this is not the end by a long shot. The rioters are gonna come back again and they will escalate. I guarantee that! That is just how the mobs behave. You’ve got to find the murderers. If I am not wrong, four Muslim guys have died so far and a cop. Plus there has been damage, however superficial, to a church and a temple. This is bound to escalate.”

They all stared at each other. They didn’t know what to say or do.

Rachel queried, “any updates on the murder investigations?”

Sonia shook her head.

“Well - if Camille’s prediction turns out to be accurate - then we are in trouble. The plutes are going to take full advantage if the situation escalates. In fact, I won’t be surprised if they try to add fuel to it. They are itching to invoke the poison pill clause in the contract. You can bet that they are already making the calls to their flunkies and lackeys spread around the various governments. Sonia - you have to get those murders solved. Soon! And while you are doing that, you need to also try and see if you can head off any riots. I don’t know how you are going to do that. But you are going to have to figure it out ASAP.”

“Else... “ she trailed off. There was no need to spell out the danger to Sequoia all over again.

#####

Couple of days later, Sonia saw Alia walk into the office and called out. She wanted to get an update on the investigation.

“Got a minute?”

“Sure, boss,” Alia stopped mid-stride and answered cautiously.

Sonia noticed the hesitation. She also sensed the wariness in Alia’s overall manner. Come to think of it, there was something off about Alia ever since the riot. Sonia couldn’t really put a finger on what was different, but there was something going on. Well, now was the time to find out.

“How are you doing?”

“Umm... okay. Why?”

“You seem a bit... what’s the word I am looking for... subdued?”

“I am fine, boss. I am. Really!”

“O-k-a-y. So where are things at?” Sonia decided to drop the interrogation for the moment.

“No new evidence so far. But I have a new theory about Nadeem’s murder.”

“Really!” Sonia’s eyebrows shot up.

“I mean - it is a possibility that I had not considered before. Now I am thinking about it.”

“Go on. Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“Well... what if Shahid was involved in Nadeem’s murder?”

“What do you mean involved? Do you think that he killed Nadeem?”

“It is possible, isn’t it?”

“I thought... that Shahid was Nadeem’s friend. Okay - maybe friend is stretching it a bit. Anyway - what is the motive?”

“Maybe it is the religious angle after all. Shahid may have killed Nadeem because of that.”

“You are not making any sense!”

Alia’s face had taken on a reddish hue now. She seemed uncomfortable.

“Maybe Nadeem was not a good Muslim and Shahid punished him because of that.”

“Where is this coming from, Alia?” Sonia was trying to keep her puzzlement in check.

Alia tried again, even more tentatively than before, if that was possible.

“Tozi has been working with the Interpol experts on this. They used some image recognition algorithms to collate pictures from the various social media platforms. Apparently, it takes a while to troll through the gazillion images that exist on the internet. There weren’t many matches, for starters. And even those that got short-listed by their computer didn’t seem to be useful. But they did get a few robust matches. They tried all the tricks and are reasonably confident that the person in those short-listed matches is Nadeem.”

“Can you cut to the chase, please?”

“Yes... I am getting to it.”

This was very unusual, thought Sonia. Alia was always succinct. In fact, it was annoying that she would get to the point without explaining how she got to it, leaving the listener quite at sea. And here, she was spending an inordinate amount of time - by Alia's standards, that is - in giving background? Something's wrong with her. Definitely!

“A couple of pictures show Nadeem in close contact with another young man.”

“Am I being thick, Alia? What the hell are you getting at?”

What's going on with you! No really! This is so unlike you,” Sonia's exasperation finally burst out in the open.

“Tozi thinks that Nadeem might have been gay!”

Alia continued hurriedly, before Sonia built up steam.

“Shahid seemed to have been a very conservative sort of Muslim. It is possible that Nadeem was gay and that he, maybe, made a pass at Shahid and Shahid just lost it and killed him.

There is some corroboration on that front. Remember one of Nadeem's colleague - Vidya? The one who works at the concert hall? She had a crush on Nadeem and had tried multiple times to get Nadeem to go out with her. But it seemed that he had not reciprocated. Vidya was confused, wondering whether she was doing something wrong or Nadeem was just not interested in her. I think - it was because Nadeem was gay. And because he was such a loner, no one knew about it.”

Sonia simmered down a bit as she took in this new information.

“Fair enough. Do we have any actual evidence about this?”

“Unfortunately, this theory is all about the motive. We have nothing on the means and opportunity. And now that Shahid is dead, we can't get a confession.”

“How confident are you about this theory? Like... on a scale of one to ten?”

“Maybe a four...”

“Hmm... that may not be sufficient enough to convince everyone.”

“What about Qasim? Did Tozi’s magical powers find anything else on him?”

“Not much. Qasim was from Lebanon. But we haven’t found any pictures of him from there.”

“Santosh? Any luck in figuring out who killed him?”

“The speech recognition and the image recognition algorithms give a high probability of it being Shahid. I think, Tozi said that the software was about 77% confident. The distortion in the sound was too high. The killer wore loose clothing, so picking out the body shape was hard. And the killer was mostly stationary - so not much for the software to work with in terms of the motion. That probability was after triangulating all three of those key elements together. Again - Shahid is dead. So we are stuck.

I guess - if we had found something to link Shahid to Qasim and a motive for him to kill Qasim, then we could lay this all at Shahid’s feet and be done with the whole situation. That would certainly take the wind out of this whole righteousness that so many men seemed to have suddenly been infected with.”

Sonia sighed loudly.

“Okay - this is probably as good as it gets. Go ahead and write this up while I think about it some more. Good work - Alia!”

“Uhh... yes boss!”

“And we still need to talk about what is bothering you. I know, you have been working hard along with everyone else. And it has been a long haul. What is it now - two months straight - since Qasim’s death? We all need a break.”

“I am okay, boss. Of course, a break would be nice. But I don’t need it. Maybe I am just a bit under the weather. We are getting close to winter and I probably need time to adjust to the chill.”

Sonia nodded her head, indicating that Alia was free to go.

That last bit bothered Sonia. That was not like Alia. That girl was all about professionalism. She had always made damn sure that she didn’t bring any of her personal stuff to work. Including anything bothering her physically. If she was sick, she

would have just told her and taken a day off. She wouldn't be showing up to work this way.

Nope - something was not right with Alia. Sonia decided to keep an eye on her. Not overtly. And she also decided to cross-check Alia's work with the rest of the team and the evidence collected so far. Again - not overtly. She didn't want to leave any impression on the team that would undermine Alia's position. Something just didn't sit well with her. She almost felt as if Alia was hiding something from her. Being sneaky? That word didn't usually fit Alia. But it sprang up in Sonia's mind unbidden.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Tozi was putting the finishing touches on her memo describing the findings about Santosh's video. This had been a very difficult assignment for her and not because of technical challenges. Santosh had not just been her colleague but also a close friend. The two of them had trained together and then been selected for the detective division around the same time. They had a special bond.

She had to watch that video umpteen times as she had analyzed it for clues. Even though her customized algorithm had indicated a probability of only 77.34% in matching the killer to Shahid, she was sure that it was indeed him who had murdered her friend in cold blood. Her hate for Shahid had in no way diminished even after witnessing Shahid's own death. Not for a moment had she felt sympathy for Shahid in his agonizing final moments on earth.

As usual, there was no one else in the office that late in the evening. It was not that Tozi kept unusual hours or worked late. It just so happened that the line between work and non-work had blurred for her over time. On many evenings, she would be fiddling around on some computational hobby that had nothing to do with work. And on other evenings, she would be sketching some designs that she just had to put down on a piece of paper - or rather, draw them on her tablet.

The last two months, though, it had been all work. She had been patiently trying to put together as much information about Nadeem's and Qasim's pasts as she could. This meant lots of trawling. But it also meant learning about new software from the Interpol experts, and at times writing her own code to layer on top of the outputs produced by those softwares.

So she was quite surprised when she heard Sonia calling out to her. She looked up from her screen and made a sign saying that she needed a couple of minutes to finish what she was doing. Sonia nodded and went back to her office.

"What's up boss?" Tozi walked into the office with her funky bright green satchel slung across her shoulders.

"Ohh... nothing in particular. I happened to be still at work and noticed that you were also hanging back. Thought I would catch up with you. That is... if you have some time."

"Of course! I got nothing much to do. I was going to head out, grab something to eat

and then crash for the day.”

“Good! Come, sit down. Care to join me for a beer?”

“Of course!”

As Sonia was reaching into the mini-refrigerator under her desk to pull out the beer, Tozi started wondering, why her boss suddenly wanted to chill out with her.

“Here you go. It is made of rice. I think. I am not sure I like it much. But that’s all I have left.”

They both took a long pull on their beers. Sonia let a few moments roll by.

Then she asked, “how are you doing?”

“I am okay, boss. I mean... all things considered. I am alive. Santosh is not. Which is a huge bummer. And all that rioting is not good, of course. But, I was stuck indoors at my computer when all those things happened. Never in harm’s way - that’s me,” a whole bunch of contradictions peppered Tozi’s soliloquy.

“Hmm... physical violence is not the only thing that gets us. Sometimes, I think, it is the emotional violence that causes the real harm. Long-lasting harm. Deep-rooted harm. It changes us in such fundamental ways that physical violence simply cannot,” Sonia commented.

Then she asked, “how’s the investigation coming along? Alia told me that you have done some really stellar analytical work in finding traces of Nadeem’s past.”

Tozi shrugged. It was no big deal, really. Most people were unnecessarily impressed by anything to do with computers. All she had done was run some software and write some code and the grunt-work was all done by the computers.

“Also - getting that match between Santosh’s killer and Shahid... that was phenomenal. I don’t know what we would have done without your skills. We just didn’t have any hard evidence linking Shahid to that. Not that it matters much... But still - we can get some closure from knowing who killed him and that his killer was punished. By his own hands! Some cosmic justice - that.”

“Yes - served him right. I am glad he suffered before he died,” there was a hard edge to Tozi’s voice which caught Sonia by surprise. But she got it. She nodded



sympathetically and chose not to comment on that statement. Instead, she decided to move on.

“No such luck with Qasim, though.”

“Umm... say, what?”

“I mean - we didn't find anything on Qasim's past. Right?”

“I wouldn't say nothing, boss. We may have something. It is kinda weak. But my hunch is that it may add up to something. I am continuing to dig further.”

Sonia drew her brows together and looked curiously at Tozi.

“What do you mean?”

“Well... we did get some matches for Qasim, too. Just like Nadeem. The problem is that those matches were from pictures taken in Iran and they seem to be of a person named Basheer. Now - it could very well be a mistake that the algorithm is making. That these are two different people, but for some reason the software thinks that they could be the same person. Qasim's official record indicates that he came from Lebanon. We talked with his colleagues and they confirmed that. At no point in their conversations, Iran came up.”

“Go on...”

“Maybe, I am a bit biased. I tend to have a lot more faith in the software than most people do - including the Interpol experts. I have been staring at those pictures and I am kinda sure that the software is right. The pictures of Basheer show him as a young man, completely unshaven. Quite unlike our Qasim. But that is only the superficial comparison for the untrained eye. This is where the algorithm really shines. It can alter the face with respect to age and other features such as hair quite accurately. It can even guess the effects on the face if the person puts on weight or loses it. For example, I could use the software to figure out how you may have looked when you were fifteen years old and had a pixie cut.”

Tozi smiled impishly.

“I think, you would have looked cute!”

Sonia laughed out loudly.

“Yeah... yeah... cute is not the word that would come to mind if you knew me then.

So - you think that there is a possibility that Qasim may have changed his name and background some time before coming to Sequoia?”

“Yes - I think so.”

“It wouldn’t be that surprising. I am sure there are lots of folks who may have wanted to do such a thing. Maybe to hide from danger. Or maybe even hide from justice. Did you ask Interpol to follow up on Basheer?”

“Alia was going to do that. She said that she will have to run it by you because of some budget issues.”

“Right... right... “

Sonia was being intentionally vague. But not successfully. Tozi realized that something was amiss. It seemed as if this was the first time Sonia was hearing about this. She wondered why Alia had not yet briefed Sonia on this. It would be quite unlike Alia to delay something like this. But then, she had noticed that Alia seemed quite distracted in the last few days. She had put it down to the strain that Alia was so obviously under. Could it be something else?

When Tozi had pulled up Basheer’s photos for Alia to review for the first time, she had felt Alia go quiet. She wouldn’t be able to swear on it, but she thought that Alia’s face had paled when she saw the photos side-by-side. Or maybe not. She was thinking too much. Alia was probably under the weather. She decided to not say any of this to Sonia right now.

Abruptly, Sonia changed the topic as if she didn’t want to talk about Alia either.

“I know you have been trying to keep up with the chatter on social media. What do you think is going on?”

Tozi was happy to change the topic, too. She liked Alia a lot. She didn’t want to inadvertently say something bad about her. And, most definitely not to Alia’s boss. Correction - Tozi was happy to change the topic, but not happy about the topic that Sonia had brought up. She had been planning to discuss it with Alia the next morning,

anyway.

“Something is brewing. I don’t know what. But something big is going to happen. Probably soon. The chatter had quietened down for a day or two after Shahid’s death. Everyone was probably in shock. But then, it started picking up. Slowly at first and then it exploded in the last day or two. It is a lot of innuendo that I cannot really make sense of. I suspect that most of the real communication is happening via private encrypted channels. I guess, some of the folks simply can’t help themselves and blurt out things in the public.”

Sonia sat up straight. She had a decent buzz going on after having downed a couple of bottles of beer. Now that buzz was gone. Suddenly, the room felt cold.

“Something big? Soon? C’mon - tell me more!”

“I can’t. I have several algorithms trawling through the chatter round-the-clock with several keywords to look for. I am not getting anything definitive. I am sorry, I wish I had something more. I am going to take a crack at it again tomorrow, now that I am done with the analysis on Nadeem and Santosh.”

“Yes - you do that! Make this your top priority! Forget about everything else! Just focus on this! Find out... whatever it takes... I don’t care if you end up bending some rules... but come back and tell me something specific! Something actionable! The last thing we want is another riot!”

“You got it!” the fear had rubbed off on Tozi. She resolved to go get something to eat and then come straight back to work. Her sleep could wait. There was something in Sonia’s manner - her wild expression - that made it clear that the boss was terrified.

#####

Three groups of men - yes, all men - were meeting secretly and simultaneously in different parts of Sequoia. The suspicions that Tozi had articulated to Sonia a couple of days ago, were indeed based on reality. Something big was going to happen. Soon!

The first group was mourning Shahid’s death. That would be avenged. This time around there would be no failure. Four Muslims had been killed in Sequoia. Countless had been massacred in different parts of the world. There was that ruthless execution of innocent Muslims within the compound of a mosque - right after the Friday prayer, no less! - in Washington DC. Then there was that wanton assault on innocent Muslims in India where women had been gang-raped and men had been beheaded by the sword- and trident-wielding mob of fanatical Hindus. There were lynchings in Myanmar, and

missile attacks in the middle east. No one had been apprehended for the Sequoia murders. The various infidel governments were either too scared that the bloodlust will turn against them if they dared to do something about it or they were themselves openly exhorting the crowds to let loose.

All this was unequivocally true.

It was also very much true that a couple of Muslims had started this latest saga of mass murder when they decided to shoot up the rotunda outside St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. They had killed dozens of innocent tourists who had been waiting their turn to admire the art in a church. Many of those tourists had been Hindus. They were all dead because two kids thought that the two murders in Sequoia were akin to a pogrom against all Muslims all over the world. They had launched their jihad and martyred themselves.

Of course, the Christian and Hindu men had witnessed the attack on their places of worship in Sequoia. No one had been hurt except Shahid - the main instigator of that attack. Yet, the viciousness with which the attack had begun was hard to forget. Hard to unsee. So, forgiveness was not on the table any more.

The failure to destroy the church and temple, first time around, had wounded the egos of both Yusuf and Farhan. They had planned it, even though, Shahid had become the de facto mascot. They were not going to let go of their goal that easily. Shahid had played his role as well as they had hoped for. He had carried out the dramatic execution of Santosh. After that, he had reveled in being the centre of attraction at the two mini-riots that had just happened to take place around him. His own death had instantly brought glorious martyrdom back into the spotlight. With all this attention, it hadn't been difficult for Yusuf and Farhan to recruit several thousand angry young men to fight for their cause.

Yusuf and Farhan were planning to bomb the church during the Sunday morning service. The murders and the subsequent violence had triggered a resurgence in religious activities. Suddenly, the weekly prayers and rituals brought in crowds that had not been seen in almost 3-4 years. Hence, the target, yet again, was a place of worship. The plan was to destroy the church on Sunday and a couple of days later destroy the temple during one of the key Hindu festivals that was supposed to bring in the crowds. Unbeknownst to them, and to each other for that matter, both the Christian and Hindu mobs were planning to destroy the mosque on the Friday right before the targeted Sunday. On the holy day for Muslims.

Three groups, each comprising of thousands of angry men, were planning to attack each other around the same time. The leaders of each group had tried to keep the main plans secret by using encrypted forms of communications. Yet, the information

that something was being planned, something violent, something transformational, something huge, was leaking all over the place as the vast majority of the foot-soldiers of these groups were unable to contain their excitement.

It was a strange phenomenon. This bloodlust. Men, throughout history, had been immersed in this particular emotion again and again. This attraction to committing violence of any and every kind at the flimsiest of reasons was like a moth being attracted to a flame. It was as if they couldn't help themselves. Evolution had programmed in the fight-or-flight instincts. But this bloodlust had nothing really to do about that. This was a social construct that had been continually reinforced through generations and across different societies and civilizations.

The even stranger aspect of this was that it was a mob phenomenon. A single individual doing something violent was sufficiently scary. When a mob of men feeding off of each other escalated the violence, it became a terrifying spectacle. Violence has always begotten violence. This continued, despite, wise individuals who pointed out the stupidity of it all. The wise ones advocated for peace. They appealed to sanity. They invoked all kinds of philosophical, moral, and ethical notions to bring about peace. Seldom were they successful in achieving it. It had certainly never persisted for long periods of time.

The curious thing about the experience of the first five years in Sequoia was that violence had practically vanished. Men had been well-behaved! There still was some minor violence every now and then. But it was brought to a swift and decisive end with both parties amicably making up. Rarely had it persisted. It was uncanny that this had happened. No one had really noticed it - "the dog that didn't bark" is noticed only by the most observant. It had happened, though. Peace had persisted. Nothing had simmered under the surface. Men had gone about their lives without attacking anyone.

That is why Qasim's murder was so difficult to understand. Finally, the spell had been broken. The good times had ended with that one vicious blow. Pre-meditated or not. Justified or not. It didn't matter. A life had been ended. Violence - of the deadliest kind - had managed to find its way in Sequoia, after all. Not that anyone - inside and outside of Sequoia - had ever in their wildest imagination harbored the notion that somehow Sequoia would never have violence. Rather, the expectation was the opposite. The fact that all of the residents came from extremely traumatic lives, even the most optimistic sociologists and psychologists had assumed that there would be huge amounts of violence in the three cities. The creation of the police force - literally, the first institution to be created - was because of this expectation. Miraculously, the police had been reduced to being mediators at best. Crime was miniscule. Violent crime, non-existent. That is, until Qasim's death. Which was quickly followed with Nadeem's. And then, as if the dam had been breached for good, the violence had steadily escalated over the days and weeks.

#####

Tozi had nailed down this chatter with some heavy-duty triangulation algorithms. Soon, it became clear to her that multiple groups were planning attacks on each other. There seemed to be, at least, two groups who planned to attack the mosque on the coming Friday. It was not clear who exactly was planning these attacks. She went to Sonia, the moment she saw her walk into the office the next morning.

“Did you stay up all night?” Sonia’s left eyebrow was raised impossibly higher than her right one.

“Uhh... yes. I was trying to pin down some details. Lost track of time,” Tozi shrugged. Such questions confused Tozi - they seemed so pointless.

“And?” Sonia’s eyebrows were now back again at the same level but her forehead was full of wrinkles. She could tell from Tozi’s tired eyes and slumped shoulders that the news wasn’t good.

“Multiple groups are planning multiple attacks.”

“What the hell!?” both eyebrows shot back up instantly.

“The first one is likely to be on this Friday. The mosque is the target. As far as I can tell, two groups seem to be planning the same. They don’t seem to be aware of each others’ plans, though.”

Sonia nodded and patted Tozi on her back.

“Good work, Tozi! Good work. Now listen to me. I want you to go home and get some sleep. I want you back here after lunch to take another look at your analysis when you are fresh. And - I said, after lunch. Not before. AFTER. Go!”

Tozi smiled tiredly and left.

Sonia was dialing up Kaija even before she entered her office. She waved at Alia to come join her in the office.

“We, finally, have some intel. My staff managed to connect some of the dots. Looks like plans are being made by multiple outfits. The first attack appears to be planned for this Friday. They are going to hit the mosque. Clearly, this is to avenge Shahid’s stupid

assault on the temple and the church! Are you in?"

Kaija must have replied in the affirmative.

"Alright - I am coming over! We need to wake up Rachel and Camille, right away."

Then she hung up.

"Updates? Make it quick!" Sonia looked briefly at Alia before turning back to her phone screen as she scrolled through her messages.

"Nothing new, boss. We are going over our list of suspects with a fine tooth-comb, again. I will call you, if something pops up."

Sonia absently nodded at her without looking up.

"Okay. Do that!"

"What's happening boss? I overheard your call just now. Also, on her way out, Tozi told me that she was up all night urgently working on something for you."

Sonia didn't say anything for a moment. Alia wondered if she had even heard her. But decided to wait. She was on precarious ground since the last conversation with Sonia. Her boss's expressive face had given it away, loud and clear. Sonia was having doubts about Alia.

"Umm... what did you say? Aah... Tozi... yes. I am pulling her off your team. She is going to be directly working with me from now on. Shit is about to hit the fan in a big way. And I need her intelligence gathering skills. You are going to have to find someone else to pick up her tasks."

With that Sonia, finally, looked up straight at Alia.

"Will that be okay?"

"Uhh... sure. I think, Carlos and Nadia can split up her workload between them.

But... why? What's going on, boss?"

"You heard me - didn't you?" Sonia looked keenly at Alia. She noticed that Alia's face had become a lot paler in the last few moments.

"According to Tozi's analysis, looks like the situation in Sequoia has gone from bad to worse. There seem to be revenge attacks being planned. Probably soon."

"Like... like the last one?" stuttered Alia.

Sonia was now getting curious. This was another unexpected reaction from Alia. Her protege was sounding distinctly shaky. As if she was afraid. Sonia had marveled at the way Alia had stepped up to the enormity of the challenge during the last riot. Before, Shahid and his crew had shown up with their crude versions of Molotov cocktails, Alia's calm presence and her authoritative demeanor had made an impression on the crowd. In fact, Sonia was quite sure that it was sufficient for dispersing the crowd if Shahid had not showed up. That's how good Alia had been. Totally in control and radiating an aura that few possessed. And now there was this version of Alia standing in front of her. Quavering? Why were her nerves so shot?

"You don't look good, Alia. Are you ill?"

There was concern in Sonia's voice but her body language betrayed a sense of irritation at Alia's behavior.

"I am fine!" Alia said in a flat voice. The color was back in her cheeks. A bit too much color. Almost as if she had been caught doing something bad.

Sonia didn't have time for dealing with Alia at the moment.

"Go see a doctor, if you are not feeling well," she said brusquely.

"We are going to need all hands on deck later this week to get on top of this situation."

"I am okay. I am here to do whatever you tell me to do."

"Fine! We shall talk later. For now - I want you to focus on the investigation. That is one of the things that may help save us from catastrophe."

"Catastrophe?" Alia looked alarmed. Where the hell was the phlegmatic Alia?

"If the situation gets out of control, then the UN will step in. They will send their people



and probably take over the management of Sequoia. And that - I guess - would be the end of what we have been building here. They would run Sequoia like one of the special opportunity zones they have in the US - like a damn labor camp.”

With that Sonia turned around and walked away. Which is why she didn't see Alia's absolutely stricken face.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Sonia walked into Kaija's office and closed the door behind her. Kaija was already on the video call with Rachel and Camille. Sonia wearily sat down next to her and waved at the sleepy image of Rachel and the blurred image of Camille on the screen. All three waited for Sonia to speak. It was obvious that things were bad. Exactly how bad, was something they were about to find out.

"I had one of my staffers do some extensive trawling through social media. The good news is - we know when it is going to happen. It is this Friday. The bad news is that there are at least three groups, each with thousands of followers, who are planning attacks on each other. It seems that the first attack is on the mosque and two groups are apparently planning it."

Sonia paused to catch her breath. She had blurted this out as if she was hopped up on too much coffee.

"Slow down... slow down..." Rachel was not yet fully awake.

"Wait - before you try that again, let me get myself some coffee and skim through the messages that have been pinging all night. Just give me five minutes... just... hold on for a bit."

Kaija and Sonia nodded their heads and then glumly looked at each other. Camille was on mute and had momentarily switched off her camera anyway.

"That bad, huh!"

There was not much to say.

"Do we have the ability to stop this?"

Kaija brought up the big question that Sonia had been mulling over on her walk from the Police HQ to Kaija's office.

"If we bring in everyone, we probably have about three thousand cops who have received at least some sort of training. And that is really scraping the bottom of the barrel. I am even including the folks who do mostly administrative work and have zero experience in the field."

This was simply not large enough to take on a mob numbering in tens of thousands. The cops in Sequoia didn't have any weapons and that was by design. The host countries had made this a non-negotiable conditions. The fact that there were millions of new residents on their territories was scary enough for them. The last thing they wanted was this huge new population to have access to weapons of any kind.

This last thought crossed both Sonia's and Kaija's minds at the same instant. They both looked up at each other in dismay. Sure, the cops had batons and shields and protective riot gear of all sorts. But nothing to really calm down the crowds with. If the crowds decided to get truly violent, the cops stood no chance whatsoever. They would be forced to retreat to safety. Whatever safety meant, at that point. Just as they were imagining these scenarios, there was an audible gasp from the video monitor. All the color had drained from Rachel's face.

"What... c'mon... what has happened, Rachel?"

Rachel tried to shake her head as if trying to wake herself up from a nightmare.

"They know..."

"What are you talking about!" whispered Sonia. The feeling of dread that she had kept at bay since her conversation with Tozi yesterday evening was now grabbing at her.

"The UN knows about the planned attacks. Armed forces are being dispatched to Sequoia to quell the violence," Rachel croaked and then words stopped coming out of her mouth as she looked at them.

"How could they know? I just found out about it. And I can guarantee that Tozi has not informed anyone besides me. I trust her absolutely!"

"I am not sure how they know this. But they seem to have been tracking the developments all along. That is the only way they could have had the time to pull together this armed force. They must have ignored Kaija's speech at the general assembly. Including the request for additional time to deal with the murders. The last riot seemed to have only accelerated their preparation."

"Armed force? Like what? UN Peacekeeping Forces? Who is on the way?" Kaija, finally, found her voice. Her worst fears were coming true. They must have been planning this - sending these soldiers - even before her plea at the UN. There was no way, the logistics could have been worked out this quickly. All week she had been talking with various folks at the UN and in Oslo. But they had not said a single word to her about

sending troops. They had been lying to her! Assholes!

“What I can gather from the email trail is that it is neither the Norwegian military nor the UN Peace-keeping Force. It appears to be some private group that has been brought in under a contract with the UN. Apparently, they were best positioned to move quickly. There have been far too many ongoing crises to handle in Africa, Asia, and South America. The UN cannot pull any of these forces out at such short notice.”

“Why would Norway allow this?”

“Norway - in fact - seems to have decided to stay out of this completely. They refused to send in their forces fearing that it would create a conflict on their soil. They are treating Sequoia as a UN territory. They want UN to deal with this.”

“So... then where did this force magically come from?”

“No idea,” said Rachel cautiously. Her mind was racing fast. She was frantically trying to remember the various conversations that her boss had been part of. She tended to tune those out because he was a vapid idiot. She was usually included in them as a mere note-taker. But now that she thought about it - there had been some mentions of some group in a few of those conversations. There had been a fair bit of winking and nudging happening. No wonder she couldn't recall why that group was being mentioned. What was their name? Dammit!

She pulled up her tablet and logged in to her boss's account. She was hoping that there were some communications that could help make sense of all this. Long ago, she had managed to finagle her boss's login credentials. She didn't check it often. She just kept it in her back pocket in case she needed to access some of the high-level communications that her boss conveniently forgot to mention to her. It made her job easier. Anyway, her boss couldn't care less about it.

Right away, she noticed several threads of messages on which her boss was copied. He had not logged in for a while as all the messages for the past couple of weeks were still unread. Johnson Group! That was the name. She looked them up on the database and was horrified to see that they were a sophisticated and fully private militia packed with former members of special forces from many countries. They had worked in many parts of the world on clandestine operations that their clients, including national governments, preferred to not know anything about. They called it “plausible deniability”. Not that anybody felt any particular shame for those activities these days. But still - they did try to keep up the charade.

The US had recommended the Johnson Group to the UN. The email had come straight

from the White House. The UN staff had been forced into a corner because of the pressure from four of the five permanent members of the Security Council. China hadn't bothered to give any opinion on this. The UN was notorious for its red tape. Yet - somehow - this contract had been processed within a week. That must have taken some serious arm twisting!

Kaija and Sonia had been patient as they could see Rachel frantically scan through numerous documents. But now they couldn't help themselves. Kaija cleared her throat.

"Is there any thing more that you can tell us, Rachel?"

Rachel looked up grimly after a few moments.

"I won't be surprised if the mercenaries are already in the vicinity of Sequoia. It is a global corporation called the Johnson Group. They have been providing these services ever since the early 2000s. They got established during the Global War on Terror. Anyway - the history doesn't matter right now. For some reason, they happened to have a small force stationed in Murmansk. A second one was based in the Shetlands. Both teams were mobilized a few days ago."

"How big is this force?" Sonia asked cautiously. Although she felt like she didn't want to know the answer.

Rachel scanned through some more email threads and then with a snort of frustration, she started digging deep into the bowels of the UN's contracting folders.

"It looks like two ships sailed from those two bases. The total size of the force seems to be about 500."

Sonia laughed out loudly.

"Paah! What are 500 soldiers going to do if riots break out in Sequoia. Tozi thinks that tens of thousands are likely to be out on the streets this Friday - that is, in three days time. We don't have to worry about them!"

Rachel tried to ascertain whether Sonia was kidding.

"You are kidding - right?"

The mirth on Sonia's face dissolved.

"This is bad - Sonia. Really... really... really bad!!!"

"Huh?"

"These two naval vessels must be packed to their gills with state-of-the-art weapons. These days, men don't go into a battlefield. At all, I mean. They sit behind computers and control their deadly weapons from far away. They are close enough - physically, that is - only to deal with those weapons in case there is some malfunction."

Rachel paused. She hated to be the messenger of extremely bad news for her friends. More than that - she hated that the assholes in the US had gotten their wish of taking over Sequoia and turning it into yet another slave colony. She had fiercely fought to make sure that did not happen. But she and all other like-minded people, her friends, her colleagues were very close to failure. Just like that, through brute force, the otherworldly dream of Sequoia was about to be smashed.

"They have awesome firepower at their finger-tips. They can utterly destroy Sequoia from far away. It would take them a few hours, at best. Not even a whole day. They could take out every single electronic circuit in the entire city with the press of one button. You won't even realize it when it happens. One instant you are looking at my ugly mug on your monitor and the next moment, nothing. None of your devices would work. This is, of course, the non-violent form of attack. They have the usual explosives to physically destroy everyone and everything.

But they won't destroy Sequoia. That is not their objective. They will simply use the threat of annihilation to have all of you follow their orders. Once they physically take control of the key infrastructure - energy, water, sanitation, etc. - they wouldn't even need weapons to force you to do their bidding. Winter is a few weeks away - you know. You can very well imagine what would happen if there is no heat."

Sonia couldn't believe what she was hearing. Five hundred guys could do that? How in the hell does that happen?! She started shaking her head, increasingly violently.

"No... no... NO!"

She turned to Kaija and grabbed her arm, "right - Kaija? You made this city happen. They cannot just end it... this life that we have been creating for ourselves. We have been creating hope for billions who have no chance in hell. We are the expeditionary force that is setting up this new world. Proving that this new world is viable. They cannot just take it away with guns."

She looked desperately at Kaija first and then Rachel, back-and-forth, hoping that they

would agree with her. That they would reassure her. But she was met with a deathly silence.

“I am so sorry Sonia! I am afraid, they can very much do whatever they want. They have the weapons after all and we don’t have anything to defend with except our wits and our bodies. And our minds. We had allowed ourselves to dream about a better future for us and billions of other folks. Unfortunately, the old adage continues to be true - might makes right. THE PLUTES ARE GONNA FUCKIN’ PLUTE!!”

Rachel’s voice faded and the last few words were barely audible.

The three of them just sat there quietly for several minutes. Their fate had been sealed. All because of a couple of unfortunate deaths. In a normal world, the police would have solved the two cases, apprehended the guilty parties, the courts would have judged them, and the perpetrators would have served their sentences. That would have been the end of it. Instead, in their world, the inability to so far find two pathetic murderers had become the veritable “nail” from the infamous fable that began with “for want of a nail” and ended with “the battle was lost”.

Sonia suddenly stood up and announced, “I have to go. I am going to try and solve these murders and I am going to try and stop these riots. If we catch those goddamned killers, there is no riot. I am sure those murders had nothing to do with religion! Even if I don’t catch the killers, I am still going to my damndest to stop the riot. I am going to persuade all the people who are planning it. I don’t care if I have to go and convince a thousand of them in the next three days!”

With that, she walked out with her shoulders squared and head held high.

Kaija and Rachel watched her go and then looked at each other.

“Is there nothing we can do to avert this?” Kaija quietly asked Rachel. She was hoping that there was some way they could buy some time at the UN.

Slowly but decisively, Rachel shook her head. “No - I know what you are asking Kaija. There is nothing that can be done at the UN. It seems that the powers-to-be have decided to use this excuse to get what they have always wanted after all.”

After a moment, she exclaimed, “Unless!”

Kaija looked up expectantly.

“Unless we can change public opinion outside of Sequoia to such a degree that the plutes decided to back off for the moment.”

“Why would that matter?”

“You may not remember this well Kaija - I think, you were deep in your grief at that time. But when you made your famous announcement, the rejection from the various governments and all the so-called “wise” people was so unanimous, that Sequoia would never have come into existence if not for Camille and the millions of young people who took to the streets. The “wise” people had written you off as a deeply troubled young woman whose statements were not to be taken seriously. But Camille felt otherwise. People like me, thought otherwise. With that announcement, you had given us all some hope after that heat wave. We had mobilized and we had prevailed. Not at the scale of the challenge that is still in front of us. Yet - we managed to get the ball rolling. I think, we need to do the same now. We need to mobilize the same people who fought to bring your vision into reality to now defend your vision from annihilation.”

Rachel’s face was aglow with fierce determination. Her fists were curled up. She too was ready to go to war. Kaija nodded her head.

“Yes - I agree. You get going on the public opinion. And I shall start with the governments of the nations from where Sequoia’s residents came from. I will try to rally them to our cause. Have them take the fight to the powers-to-be at the UN and elsewhere. We are not giving up!!”

Just when they were about to hang up, the Camille’s camera sputtered into life. Her face looked extremely blurry but her voice came through quite clearly. Since Camille had not said a word during the call until then, and also because her video had been switched off, they had forgotten that she was still part of the conversation.

After their first conversation when Camille was in New York with Rachel, Camille had gone underground. She had been livid to know about the plutes and the draconian condition they had put in at the time of Sequoia’s creation. She had left New York immediately after that conversation. She had decided to mobilize in the Nordic countries all over again. For the past few years, she hadn’t been paying much attention to Sequoia or the other two new refugee cities. She had been focused on blowing up fossil fuel infrastructure all over the world. She was part of a global network of saboteurs who had decided that direct action was the only way to drive up the risks and financial losses of the fossil fuel companies. No more policy changes. No legal challenges. No more trying to change public opinion.

Her initial thought was to take down the plutes through a direct confrontation. Just blow up their properties wherever they were located. But that seemed practically impossible



as the plutes had been fortifying their personal and professional properties for a long period of time. For the past few days, Camille and her buddies were trying to see what else could be done to the plutes. They didn't have any new ideas, yet.

Rachel's description of a mercenary force landing in the vicinity of Sequoia and the plan that Rachel suggested - mass mobilization seemed to be promising given the short time frame. But Camille felt that the mercenaries needed to be confronted directly instead of only taking out marches in far away cities.

"Fucking cowards!" unloaded Camille. Her eyes were blazing with fury. But she was deadly calm.

"I will make those bastards shake in their boots if they dare to touch even a single blade of grass in Sequoia!" she said slowly and deliberately.

"I am going to get as many people as I can get to go and encircle Sequoia. Form a human barrier between the fucking mercenaries and Sequoia. We shall not use violence. But we shall broadcast all of it round-the-clock across the world. We shall die before we let them breach our barricade. Let's see if the plutes have the balls to kill white kids from the Nordic countries on live TV."

"Can you get this thing done... in the next three days, I mean?" Rachel asked hesitantly.

Camille looked at her and said, "You bet, I will!"

"Okay then. Good luck, Camille!"

#####

Probably, for the first time in her life, Alia was, literally, biting her nails off. She was so distracted that she hadn't noticed that she bit off some dead skin from the side of her left thumb-nail. With the next bite, a few flecks of blood had appeared. No matter.

Sonia swept into the incident room. Such was the force of her entry, that every single person in the room involuntarily looked up. Her eyes were gleaming with fierce emotion. Some of them stood up. The sudden cessation of all chatter registered on Alia's ears and she fearfully looked around.

Sonia was silent for a moment as she looked at each person turn-by-turn. When her eyes, finally, came to rest on Alia, her nostrils flared up and her eyes shone. She

beckoned Alia to come join her at the front of the room. Alia reluctantly got up and walked over. The feeling of dread that she was laboring under for several days, had exponentially grown from the moment Sonia looked at her. She was terrified and desperately trying not to show it on her face.

“Listen up, everyone!”

They had never really seen this fiery version of their boss. Sonia seemed like she was radiating some sort of strange energy. Some were exchanging expectant looks with each other.

“This is it! We have three days to solve these murders. If we don’t, then all hell will break loose and Sequoia will be over.”

The alarmed but also puzzled looks reminded her that none of them had a clue as to what she was talking about.

“Okay - that probably didn’t make much sense to you. Let me explain.”

She gestured at Tozi and said, “I have had Tozi start a separate investigation for me, yesterday. What she found is extremely disconcerting. The riot that happened a few days ago where Shahid ended up killing himself... well... that doesn’t seem to have dampened the anger. Rather, it seems to have added fuel to the fire that has been burning away since that scuffle in the warehouse district last month. It appears that a far more massive and destructive riot is likely to happen on this Friday.”

“Shit... shit... shit... ,” Alia thought. Her blood turned cold.

“The UN knows about this impending riot. And some people have managed to force the UN to send in armed forces to take over Sequoia if the riot does break out. These people are not doing this from the goodness of their heart. They want to take over Sequoia. The worse thing is that they can do it. Long story and I don’t have the time to tell it in detail. Here is the short version... these people are extremely wealthy and ridiculously powerful. They provided the funding to the UN for getting Sequoia built. No - before you ask - this was not charity. This was an investment. The UN - that is us - are contractually obligated to pay them back that loan with a handsome profit stuck on top of it. You know that part, anyway.”

Sonia had to pause to take a breath before continuing her tirade, “but those wealthy fuckers also added a clause when they provided that loan to the UN. The clause allows them to take control of Sequoia and we are not talking of just the city, as in buildings. But it includes us - the people. If those fuckers are able to establish that Sequoia is

unlikely to pay back the money they are owed, then they can enforce that clause.

They are claiming now that the escalating riots imply that the city is falling into chaos and will not be able to honor the contract. Hence, the militia to enforce the clause. And when they do take charge of the city, they plan to convert it into a labor camp - yes, you and me will become the laborers - who do what we are told so that they can make money on our backs. We don't have a say in all this. We become slaves, overnight. Got it?

Unless - we stop the riot from happening! And, I think, the best chance of preventing that riot, is catching the murderers before Friday.

I know, very well, how hard all of you have been working since Qasim's murder. I know that! I am proud of all of you! I couldn't have asked for better colleagues... better friends... than all of you... no exceptions! But we have not been successful so far and now there will be severe consequences of that failure."

With that Sonia turned to Alia and immediately noticed that her star investigator was showing all the attributes of a deer caught in the head-lights of an oncoming truck - completely frozen and destined to be run over. She gently touched Alia's shoulder. A wave of compassion came over Sonia. Something was really really wrong with Alia. She whispered, "you okay?"

"Huh!" Alia blinked her eyes a couple of times.

"Yes. I am fine," the customary poise that Alia had always maintained when standing in front of her team had fought through the fog of fear and self-doubt and reclaimed its place in her psyche. She rolled her shoulders just like a boxer as the bout begins. She was ready to throw some punches. And take 'em. And, eventually, prevail.

"As Sonia mentioned earlier, we won't have Tozi to help us out, going forward. Carlos, I am appointing you as my second. Don't you dare raise your hand now! You are being promoted - in the field, as they say. You are ready to lead and we shall greatly appreciate if you stepped up.

We have gone through all the evidence at least a couple of times in the last few days. We have re-done many of the interviews. What I want all of you to do is now find yourself a partner with whom you will exchange your raw notes. You will each go through your partner's raw notes with a fresh set of eyes and see if there is something there that has not yet made its way into our official reports.

We all have thoughts going on in our heads and some of us doodle or jot down

whatever passing idea that comes to our mind. A different explanation or an alternative way to look at some evidence or even ideas about new kinds of evidence. These raw notes are the only ones that we have not gone back to, so far. Let's see if they bring up new insights!

Do that for the rest of the day and we shall have a de-brief at 5 pm. We are going to be at it for the next 72 hours. But we shall do that in staggered shifts so that we can all get some rest. We need to be at our creative best to nail both these cases down!

I believe in us... in our collective ability to get this job done. All of you are thorough professionals and I am proud of you. As Sonia said, I couldn't have asked for a better team. But, now we have far greater motivation to get this job done. Our lives... our futures... the very fate of all our families and friends and billions of people hangs in the balance. Let's get this done!"

"This was good," thought Sonia. She had seen the obvious effort that Alia had made to snap out of whatever was bothering her and take on the leadership role again. Of course, she needed a lot more from Alia. She needed her help in stopping the riot, too. Sonia nudged her toward her office to have a quick word as everyone got going on their allotted tasks.

"I saw how you handled the crowd at the last riot. I am going to need you to continue doing that in an effort to head off this riot, if possible. It would be nice to solve the murders and that way take out the wind from the sails of these would-be rioters. But I would like to have a Plan B in place. If we can convince them to back off - even if it is for a bit - I think, it will give us some breathing room to come up with a proper strategy to deal with such situations over the long term."

"Anything that you want, boss," Alia promptly answered.

"Let's wait for Tozi to get back in the office. We shall have her draw up a list of possible leaders behind the planned riots. Then you and I can split up the list and go talk with them. We are going to have to play it by the ear. I don't know what kind of response we are going to get. We certainly cannot arrest anyone. There is no evidence that anyone has done anything illegal. Yet."

"Sounds good! I am going to check on the team and see if there are any leads that I can run down. You will ping me when Tozi is back?"

Sonia nodded.

“Good luck!! To us all! I am hoping that we catch a break right away.”

## Chapter Forty

Another forty-eight hours to go before the planned riot. Alia had spent all of the previous day agonizing over her options. She had handed over her raw notes to Carlos to go over and he had not found anything new that they could follow up on. Of course, she had pretended to do the same with Carlos' notes. The entire team had engaged in this exercise whole-heartedly and yet, there was nothing new to show for. If she wanted, it could all be resolved instantly. But she was not sure what she wanted.

They had a long brainstorming session in the evening. The team had drawn up ever more bizarre scenarios that could potentially help them solve the murders. Even solving one of the murders should be sufficient, they all thought, in pre-empting the riot. Simply thinking that way was a sign of desperation. Some leads had been provided by the Interpol but following up on them would mean going back to the Interpol and that was just going to take too much time. There was nothing they could do to expedite that.

The most promising leads that the team settled on exploring further were going back and talking with every single person who was at the bar where Nadeem was last seen. The mysterious large black woman had still not been identified. It was not even clear if she was a real person or simply something folks had made up.

Tozi had come back after her nap and a quick brunch. She had set up her work-station in one of the conference rooms. She could use all the white-boards and the multiple projectors to lay out the full gamut of the connections among the various loudmouths who had been boasting about the planned riots on their social media feeds. She had projected the various photos on the white-boards and then with a dry eraser she had drawn the connections between them. Once she had highlighted some of the names who seemed to be at the core, she had brought in Sonia and Alia. Identifying these core planners was relatively easy - they had said the least in public. In fact, they were more or less completely silent. The tell was that they were connected to the most number of the loudest talkers. These would serve as a reasonable starting point for Sonia and Alia.

Both had started calling these people up one by one. The moment Sonia and Alia had disclosed who they were and why they were calling, almost all of them had clammed up. They disavowed violence of all kind. They even went out of their way to prove how non-religious they were. If they had time, Sonia would have preferred an indirect approach to these people. And an in-person one at that. But because they didn't have the luxury of time at all, they had decided to use a phone and cut to the chase immediately. Alia was not surprised that not a single one of them wanted to be caught doing anything bad. No one wanted to be deported from Sequoia. They were being as

careful as possible. About the external threat to Sequoia, they had been completely dismissive.

After a futile few hours, Sonia and Alia had decided to call it a day and headed to their homes to catch some sleep. Tozi was going to continue working on identifying more folks and she had also decided that she was going to look for some leverage that Sonia and Alia could use to pressure the would-be rioters to desist from their plans. Alia informed Carlos that he was on for the night shift while she grabbed some dinner and a few hours of sleep. She promised that she would be back by 3 am to relieve him. The rest of the team had also been assigned to different shifts.

Alia had tried to eat some dinner but she was too wound up for that. She didn't sleep a wink. She just sat in her flat and thought long and hard. She really had only two options. First, own up to her crime and get deported back to Iran, for good. Second, keep it a secret and hope that they could prevent the riot somehow and even if they couldn't prevent it, Sequoia still survived. Sonia had told her about Rachel's, Kaija's, and Camille's plans. There was a possibility that global public pressure would ensure that the armed force outside of Sequoia ended up only breaking up the riot and then leaving the city back in the hands of the local police.

She needed to see Sara and talk this out with her. Both their lives were going to be affected one way or the other. She was not going to decide for both of them. No way! That was just not who Alia was. She accorded the same respect to every other person that she expected back from them. She believed in trusting people. She believed in cooperation. She believed in persuasion. She believed in - above all - being a reasonable person irrespective of the situation she might be in.

As time went by, she felt herself leaning toward the first option. Greater common good - as a general principle - had always seemed reasonable to her. Her and Sara's lives would be utterly destroyed while Sequoia would get a chance at surviving. Maybe even fulfilling its destiny as dreamed by the founders of the three cities. But she also felt physical pain at being permanently separated from Maria. How could she live with that? That is if she was allowed to live.

Finally, at 10 pm, Alia decided to go look for Sara and talk with her. Since her sole conversation with Sara, Alia had quietly figured out all the details about Sara. She had resisted connecting with her again. She had been true to her word and had stayed quiet. Now she felt that she had no choice but to go to Sara's flat.

The late-night tram ran every twenty minutes instead of the usual five minutes during the peak hours. Sara's flat was right in the heart of Sequoia unlike Alia's which was closer to one of the corners of the city. Sequoia had been laid out in the form of a square grid. Alia had to switch trams a couple of times to go down the diagonal as

quickly as possible.

There were few people on the trams at that hour - mostly, revelers returning home. Well - Alia thought - they didn't look like they had had fun. There was a somber air around them. More likely, they were trying to enjoy the last few days of freedom before the riots took place and the armed force barged in to take over Sequoia and their lives.

The news had spread throughout the city in a flash. After the initial moment of shock, most people had resigned themselves to their fate. Of course, this whole experiment of Sequoia had been like a dream. It had always been too good to be true. It was now time to wake up and face the reality. Their destiny had been written long ago. They never had any hope. The last five years had been a pleasant detour around the unfortunate lives they had been living since their birth. No one could change destiny. Alia read all this in their eyes and their faces as they quietly talked among themselves. Those who were alone, stared blankly into space. Even the music playing in the background was melancholy today. How could Alia condemn them all to this horrific fate?

She mentally shrugged her shoulders and got off at the stop closest to Sara's flat. It was a short walk. The building was festooned with murals that provocatively merged two disparate scenes - a hot desert and cold mountains. The artist had done some marvelous brushwork in the way the transition between the two scenes was portrayed. Alia briefly admired the mural and then resolutely started climbing the stairs to Sara's flat. Because it was a chilly night and the mood was serious, there were only a few bunches of people sitting in the central common area, quietly talking.

Alia knocked on the door. Within a few moments, she heard the latch being unlocked and as the door was about to be opened, the latch was locked up again and Sara's voice came from inside, "who is it? What do you want this late at night?"

Well - that was strange. Sure - when people had been new in Sequoia, they had locked their doors and been suspicious of everyone. But as they built their connections and relationships with their fellow citizens, most of those fears had faded away. Most people didn't bother locking their doors now. Maybe at night when they went to sleep and wanted to guarantee privacy, they would lock them. But the rest of the time, it was considered absolutely safe. And no one ever asked for identification before opening the door.

"It's me," Alia replied.

"We need to talk!"



Again, the latch was unlocked and the door partially opened. Sara's face peeked around it. When she saw Alia, her hand reached toward her mouth in alarm. She opened the door fully and waved Alia into her flat.

The flat's layout was similar to Alia's. But it was decorated, unlike Alia's. Maria had tried to get Alia to put up some beautiful artwork on the walls, but Alia had not shown much inclination to do so. She preferred her flat to be spartan in nature. It might seem to be impersonal to someone who didn't know Alia well. But it accurately reflected Alia's personality. Alia lived in her own head, most of the time. In her head, she imagined a rich, vibrant, and colorful world made from her thoughts. Existence of vibrancy in the external world was somewhat less relevant for her. She was not averse to it. She simply didn't want to spend too much time in creating it or nurturing it. She was happy living in her own head.

In sharp contrast, Sara's flat indicated that she found the external world crucial for her survival. There was a lot of African art sprinkled around the flat. But the most striking things were the numerous collages of portraits that Sara had stuck to the walls. They were of people from all parts of the world and of all ages. The common thing among them all was that they were pictures of smiling people. Even though the lights were dim, the place felt lit up brightly because of the joy in the eyes and expressions of all those photos. Sara had surrounded herself with happiness.

Maybe that's why the sadness in Sara's face stood out so poignantly. The last time she had seen Sara was on the freight train. It seemed that since their last meeting, Sara had shrunk into herself like a star collapses when it dies. She had lost weight and was clearly not sleeping well.

"We have a problem, Sara. A really big problem. An existential problem, to be accurate."

Sara's brow furrowed.

"Our intelligence has indicated that there is going to be a major riot in Sequoia in a couple of days. Tens of thousands of people are expected to get out on the streets. We are expecting violence. People appear to be fashioning all kinds of weapons in preparation for it."

Sara nodded absently. She was no longer looking at Alia. Almost as if she were avoiding Alia's gaze.

"I am assuming that you have nothing to do with all that. You are not going anywhere near that... are you?"

Sara shook her head.

“Good. At least, I don’t have to waste my time trying to convince you not to cause any more violence. I spent all day trying to talk with some of the people who seem to be planning all this. Those cowards... no one was even brave enough to admit that they were a part of it.”

Alia’s voice had taken on a bitter edge. Sara turned toward her. Sara could tell that Alia was struggling with the burden of her guilt, too.

“Our intelligence also indicates that this riot is part of the escalation that began after Nadeem’s death. The two murders - both Muslim men - have become the unintended spark that has ignited this tribal fire which is now threatening to consume the entire city.”

Sara knew this, of course. Heck, she had knowingly fanned the flames. But she had never thought that this was where it would lead. She had only wanted to divert the attention of the police and everyone else from the murders so that she didn’t get caught. She had seen such tactics work like a charm at the refugee camp where she had lived before she came to Sequoia. That’s what the politicians and leaders did every single time they failed to address some important problem that the people in the camp were facing. They would cook up some excuse to rile up people. Then that rabble-rousing would lead to factions and then those factions would fight and the original problem would be forgotten. Eventually, things would calm down. And the politicians would continue their reign without any accountability. It always worked. It was not as if she had invented this strategy. She had merely adapted it for her own purposes. In any case, Nadeem had to die. She had done the right thing. Why should she be punished for it? That was ridiculous.

Finally, she spoke up, “well... so what. They will fight and some people will get hurt. Some will even die. And that’s on them. They are all adults. They are making their own decisions. It is not my problem. After a few days, things will calm down and people would have forgotten all about the riots and murders. They will go back to their daily lives. They always do.”

“What if there was no going back?”

It was a simple question. But, Alia had asked it so sincerely that Sara suddenly felt scared.

“Meaning?”

“What if there was no going back?”

“Don’t just repeat the same thing and expect me to make sense of it. Why won’t we go back to our lives?” snapped Sara.

Alia sighed. She was tired. She just wanted all this to end. Whatever that meant.

“Have you not heard about the armed forces that the UN has sent to quell the riot in our city?”

Sara had not heard about that. She had not left her flat for the past 2-3 days at all. She had cut herself off from all forms of communication. She had missed classes and had also taken sick leave from her job. Ever since her confrontation with Alia, she had been feeling miserable. It was not how it was supposed to be. She was supposed to feel better after the way they had parted. Alia was not going to report her. She was home free. Yet, it hadn’t sat well with her.

“When the riot breaks out, those armed forces will intervene and take over Sequoia. For good! The investors behind Sequoia - under the guise of protecting their investment - plan to convert our city into a labor camp. We would become - for all practical purposes - the slaves of those investors,” Alia patiently elaborated.

Sara’s heart sank.

“Nooooooooooo... noooo...” she whimpered.

Tears started streaming down her hollowed cheeks. All the fight was gone out of her. She had seen labor camps in Africa. She had read about them. She had watched videos of them. She knew all about the horrors that took place in those camps. Her fate would be no different from what had befallen her mother and sister. Actually, it would be far worse. They had, at least, been fortunate enough to die immediately after the assault. In labor camps, women were assaulted again and again. There was no reprieve. They may die at some point or they may be condemned to live in that hell for a really long time.

“If that riot happens, then there will be no going back, Sara. That would be that.”

Neither of them had much to say for a long time. Alia - out of sheer habit - kept scanning the pictures on the walls of Sara’s flat. She didn’t recognize a single face. She had just turned her attention - again, on auto-pilot - to the personal belongings, when she became aware of Sara’s muttering. By now Alia’s eyes had gotten used to the low lighting and she could clearly see Sara’s face even though Sara was sitting in a dark

corner of the living room. The tears had stopped. Sara had also wiped her eyes and face. Instead of helplessness, there was anger in her eyes now as she talked to herself.

“Why... why... did he have to come to Sequoia. Why couldn't he just leave me alone. And for god's sake, why did I have to see him. There are three million people in Sequoia and in five years... five whole years... I had not seen him. Why now?”

Of course, the “he” was Nadeem. Alia had felt this exact emotion at least a dozen times ever since she had remembered her actions. “Why?” indeed. It didn't really matter. In fact, this particular emotion was the most useless of all the emotions she had felt. This wishing of the past being different. There was nothing to be done about it. Nothing could be changed. What had happened, had happened. Every time she had felt that emotion, she had talked herself out of it with all these well-known proverbs. It had helped... somewhat. The real question was, “what to do now?” Alia waited patiently for Sara to run through the trajectory of the emotion. Inevitably, Sara reached the same conclusion as Alia - what was done was done. At that point, Sara looked up at Alia who was waiting for this moment.

“What should we do, Sara?”

“What can we do?” Sara defiantly responded.

“If we confess, then there is a very good chance that the riot can be stopped from happening. After all, we both are Muslim women. There is no religious angle here. In fact, there is no other angle here except that these men had destroyed our families.

We could save Sequoia with our sacrifice. Because, we shall surely be held accountable and deported.”

“Is that so!” This was more of a comment than a question. Sara didn't seem convinced. Alia just shrugged.

“Or we can take our chances with slavery. Maybe that life is better than going back to where we came from. Although, keep in mind that they can send us wherever they want to, including back. I hear that the slaves in the US are rotated out every few years to ensure that there are no chances of people developing any strange ideas that they can permanently live there - even if it was as a slave.”

From Sara's expression, it was clear that she had no idea about what was happening in the US. She simply couldn't bear the thought of going back to Sudan under any circumstances. Why should she?! She had done nothing wrong. Nadeem was guilty.

He had to be punished by someone. It just so happened that she was the one who had ended up doing so. And she was not even really in control of herself when she killed him. Why should she suffer for that?! Hadn't she suffered enough already?!

Sara hadn't said all these things out loud but Alia could read them on her face as if she was reading a book. She had felt the same several times. Did she still feel the same after the new information that had come to light?

"Look - when you and I decided to keep this quiet, we had not anticipated the consequences that we are facing right now. We thought it would simply be an extra-legal form of justice that we had committed. Now things are very different, Sara."

"No they are not!" Sara was adamantly sticking to her conviction.

"Sara - why did we come to Sequoia in the first place?" Alia gently asked. This was not going anywhere. She had wanted to talk to Sara to reach a decision that made sense.

"It was my first chance to escape the living hell where I was born. I was living a cursed life. Finally, I felt that I was being rescued."

"Me too, Sara. Me too!" Alia concurred in a soothing tone.

"I am training to be a nurse, you know. All that courier work I do is only until I can finish my coursework. I want to help other people who are in pain. I want to see people smile... be happy, you know," and she waved her hands vaguely around her flat.

"And I want to ensure that life is fair. Which is why I became a cop. I believe that we can all be happy if we are able to resolve our differences in a fair manner, instead of relying on crude and violent ways. I do this because I feel we have a duty to each other - of being trust-worthy. Being just. Being reasonable. Not causing harm to each other. I want what you want, too!"

Sara was nodding vigorously. Even thinking about her dreams had brought a smile to her face. She was beaming with joy at what Alia was describing. Alia couldn't help herself and she smiled back at her. But then her expression soured.

"We made one mistake and... and here we are..."

As if a switch had been flipped, the broad smile on Sara's face was wiped out.

"We didn't even realize we were making that mistake when we made it. I had managed

to suppress it so completely that the only hint I had about it were my recurring nightmares that didn't make much sense."

"Is there no chance of stopping this riot?"

"There is always a chance. But this is a mob now. How many times, in the entire history, have masses of angry men been able to stop themselves from committing violence?"

Sonia and I will continue to try our level best to persuade them to not do this. But I am not hopeful. The baggage from our pasts that we are all destined to carry with us, shapes their decisions just as much as it has shaped our actions."

It seems that however much we try to escape our pasts, we are not really capable of actually doing so. It seems we can never really break free. All of us. Doesn't matter where we go and what we do."

Alia looked away. She walked about the flat aimlessly for a few moments. She was in the kitchen when she heard, "maybe it is true for you and me. But it doesn't have to be true for the other folks in Sequoia." This was something new from Sara. Alia swung around and walked back to the living room.

"If we confess and that confession is sufficient to stop the riot from happening, then we could help the others to not make mistakes like we did. At least they could, finally, break away from their past. For good!"

Sara sounded thoroughly unsure about this.

"I dunno, Alia. I just dunno... what to do. I am so tired. I can't think."

Alia sat down beside her and put her arm around her shoulder. Sara rested her head on Alia's shoulder. Two decent women with nowhere left to go.

# Chapter Forty-One

Another day had gone by. A little more than twenty-four hours remained before the imminent riot. Tozi had worked through the night and pulled together yet another list of names for Sonia and Alia. It was decided that Sonia would continue to persuade some of the riot-planners over phone so that she could be accessible at the police HQ at all times. While Alia would try to meet up with others in person and see if she could have better luck than Sonia.

Tozi was walking to back to her desk after handing over the list to Alia and Sonia, when she suddenly remembered that the uniformed police who had been on duty during the last riot had been wearing body-cams. That footage could be invaluable in figuring out who the leaders were at the last riot - those holding the megaphones or standing up in the front of the crowds or directing the others.

She practically, ran back to her desk and started pulling together the video files from that day. There were at least a hundred files to go through. And each was about 2-3 hours long. Luckily, she realized that many of the cops were not stationed at the heart of the riot. They were either holding the lines to keep the crowds at bay or they were with other cops, held back by Sonia as a reserve. Their videos were of less use. The videos had precise GPS coordinates stamped on them. She pulled up all those GPS coordinates into a mapping software that allowed her to identify the most promising videos. There were about a couple of dozen videos at most that she had to go through instead of a hundred.

She started playing them one by one. Whenever, she felt like an individual seemed to be showing some initiative, she would tag that face for subsequent use as a reference in the facial recognition software that she was planning to use to process all the videos. After scanning through a couple of videos, manually, and at normal speed, she had tagged about forty individuals. The video quality was excellent and the facial recognition software was quickly able to tag all the places in the remaining video files where those people had appeared. She pulled up those instances in each file in order to verify that the behavior of those individuals was indeed that of organizers or leaders of some sort. Only four of the tagged faces seemed to fit the bill. None of the four names were on the list she had put together based on social media trawling. She found their names and passed them on to Sonia for follow up. She felt that her crude algorithm - part automated and part manual - was reasonably sound to identify some more targets for Sonia and Alia to engage with.

She started scrolling through the remaining short-listed videos at double speed. Time was of the essence. After watching four more videos, she felt like her eyes had gotten far more attuned to looking for patterns even with the higher speed. For starters, the

scenes playing out were similar. The main difference among the videos were the different vantage points because of which new faces popped up. She got so familiar with the scenes and the faces that she had already seen several times that she was able to triple the speed without really losing out on any interesting new prospects. Of course - every time she found someone, she would slow down to normal speed and carefully observe their behavior. This was a tedious process and yet, she managed to get through at least a dozen videos over the course of the afternoon. She flagged another ten names for Sonia and Alia.

After grabbing a quick bite for dinner, Tozi settled in again to scan the last few videos. She had saved these ones because they had captured the latter part of the riot better. The part during which the spectacular flame-out of Shahid had happened. Tozi had not been present at the riot. But she had seen some of the videos posted on social media. She had thrown up when she had seen the video of Shahid's death the first time around. She had no desire to watch any of that again. But now she had no choice. She was hoping that the high-speed scanning would make it somewhat easier to get through the remainder of this ugly task.

She had heard some of her colleagues talk admiringly about how Alia had walked right into the middle of the riot and attempted to calm down the crowd. Now she got a chance to watch it. Tozi had always found Alia to be a quintessential introvert. Quiet and peaceful. Even though her presence was always felt by everyone. She didn't know much about Alia simply because Alia didn't talk much about herself with anyone. Yet, it was clear to her that Alia was a naturally gifted investigator. She was not the plodding kind. But someone who had an imagination that allowed her to come up with hypotheses that no one else would even dream of. Those hypotheses would allow Alia to examine all the available evidence and information from different perspectives. Invariably, that methodology would yield the correct answers. She admired this unique quality of Alia's. She had assumed that Alia would lead them all in cracking the two murder cases in no time. Yet - that had not happened. Both cases seemed to have stumped Alia. And increasingly, she had felt that Alia was unable to deal with this lack of success. She was a bit worried about her boss's health, in fact.

She slowed down one of the video's that had the best view of Alia's intervention at the riot and also had the best sound quality. Her respect for Alia went up by several notches. The crowd had been baying for blood. To be able to walk right into the middle of it all must have taken a ton of courage. Several tons, she thought. She doubted if she had that kind of courage herself. No one - not a single cop including Sonia had left the relatively secure bubble of the police cordon to engage with the crowd the way Alia had. Wow!

Soon after, Shahid and his crew showed up. She promptly tagged all of Shahid's co-conspirators and sent that data to the facial recognition software for processing. If these guys had bothered to join Shahid in his craziness, surely they must be part of the



core group of planners. And that is when the section containing Shahid's ill-advised final actions began. She sped it up and tried to look away. But the spectacle had a hypnotic effect on her and she found her eyes inexorably drawn toward Shahid's body burning like a torch. The sped up video made it seem as if he was dancing around like a dervish. Then had come his collapse and the seemingly unending moments until he had died.

The crowd that had been in thrall of the tragedy unfolding in front of its eyes had snapped out of it at some point and had started dissipating rapidly. She, somehow, managed to wrench her attention from the burning body and started tagging the faces of the people who had been trying to keep the crowd from leaving. These were, most definitely, in her view the most likely planners of tomorrow's riot. They looked hardened even in the video. They would be the ones who would have led the re-grouping soon after.

It was then that she noticed something amiss. She had seen Alia trying to - ineffectually - put out the fire and help Shahid. Eventually, Alia had given up and stood helplessly by the body as if in a trance. Tozi understood that... even she had been mesmerized by it. Then she saw Alia look up and away from where the body-cam was situated. She seemed to have realized that the riot was over. But Tozi felt that Alia was looking at something specific.

It was someone, not something. Roughly in the direction where Alia was looking, she saw a tall black woman who seemed to be staring right back at Alia. With a shock, she realized that this just might be the mysterious black woman they had all been trying to track down for Nadeem's murder. Tozi had no reason to back this realization of hers. But still, Tozi felt confident. There was something furtive about the woman's manner - the way she was looking at Alia from afar. Tozi, promptly, tagged her face and set the facial recognition software loose on all of the images and videos that she had been scanning for days. This was top priority!

The second thing that Tozi realized a few moments later was that Alia must have recognized the woman from somewhere. Or else, why would she have noticed her in particular and why would she be staring at her. Incredibly, as Tozi watched the two women engage in a sort of staring contest with each other, the black woman turned around and started running. Then Alia promptly followed her. Tozi was very well aware of Alia's athletic prowess. She had no doubt that Alia would catch the suspect unless the suspect managed to somehow hide herself in the pandemonium.

So... Alia had found the black woman, after all? Tozi was puzzled. At no point since that day, Alia had mentioned anything about this incident at all. No reference to a black woman. No description of an attempted chase. What had happened? Tozi stopped the video as both Alia and the suspect were no longer visible in it anyway. She pulled up the official reports filed by Alia after the riot. She quickly scanned through them and

indeed there was no mention of it at all. Why had Alia hidden this vital piece of information? If she had brought it to everyone's attention, Tozi had absolutely no doubt that she would have pulled these same body-cam videos up earlier and nailed this woman by now. What the hell was going on!!

While Tozi was thinking about all this, the facial recognition software had started spitting out all kinds of matches for the black woman from the database. Her name was Sara and she was from Sudan. Immediately, Tozi remembered that Nadeem was from Sudan, too. That must be the connection. They must have known each other in the past. Tozi was - again, based on no actual evidence - confident that that was relevant to the murder. Tozi started scanning the other matches. Sara was on social media and she was connected to Shahid. In fact, Sara was the woman who had been with Shahid when the first mini-riot had broken out in the warehouse district. Again, the body-cam footage from one of the cops who had shown up there, had captured a glimpse of Sara. It seemed that Sara had slunk away. Tozi knew that Alia had also gone to stop that mini-riot. Tozi was sure that Alia had seen Sara there, too.

Tozi's mind was now frantically trying to make sense of this new information. There was not much concrete information to go on except for the fact that Alia had actually chased Sara and for some unknown reason AND had chosen to keep that a secret from everyone. She had to go talk with someone about this. Probably, Sonia. But before she did that, she wanted to check on something else. She remembered that Alia herself had asked the team to review each other's raw notes a couple of days ago. Carlos had mentioned that he had reviewed Alia's notes and found nothing new. Tozi wanted to make sure that that was indeed the case. She hurried over to the incident room where she knew Carlos was working away into his night shift. As she walked over to him, she saw that he was sitting back with his shoulders slumped. He looked like he was in daze. She grabbed his shoulder and shook him.

"Hey man. You okay? You are looking like you saw a ghost or something!"

"Huh... whaaat?" Carlos jerked his head around to look at Tozi. It took him a moment to realize that it was Tozi. He just stared at her. Then he slowly started shaking his head and said, "I must be going mad. Yes - that must be it."

Tozi pulled up a chair and sat down next to him.

"Tell me."

"I dunno Tozi - this is weird. Why didn't she tell us about this earlier? I don't get it!"

"She? Who are you talking about?"

“Boss. I mean Alia. She never mentioned this. Either I am losing my mind or... I dunno.”

“What did she not tell us about?”

“This... this video. From the drone. She was there.”

“Carlos - you are not making any sense. Tell me everything from the beginning.”

He nodded, “maybe you can make sense of this. A couple of days ago, Alia ordered all of us to review each others’ notebooks to see if there were some things that never made their way into the formal reports and memos. Just go over the musings and doodles and notes that people make when they are thinking and jot them down.”

“Yeah... go on. I, actually, came to you just now to ask about that. But later...”

“Well we did go through the lot and came up with more or less nothing new. Then today morning, I realized that none of us had looked at Santosh’s notebooks because they had been packed up in a box after his...,” Carlos faltered a bit, “you know...”

Tozi had a grim expression on her face. She nodded for him to continue.

“I finally got a chance to go through them. I didn’t find anything new except one somewhat cryptic note. Here... look.”

With that Carlos pulled a notebook from the top of a stack on his desk and flipped open to the bookmarked page. It read, “check the drone footage!”

Tozi looked puzzled.

“Yeah... me too. I didn’t know what he was talking about. But based on the subsequent notes, this must have been before Nadeem’s death and during the investigation into Qasim’s murder.”

“I don’t remember us doing any drone surveillance as part of Qasim’s investigation. Did I miss something?” Tozi, usually, preferred to not go out in the field. She was most happy with her computers.

“No - you are right. I mean, we didn’t need any drone surveillance. Why would we, anyway? I checked it out. There were no drone footage files from after Qasim’s murder in our database.”

“Okay... are you going to get to your point quickly? The suspense is killing me!” snapped Tozi. She was not a big fan of Carlos’ plodding style.

“Yes... so... right. I was puzzled, too. Just for the heck of it, I looked at the files from before Qasim’s death. That is when I found this video,” he gestured at his screen.

“What am I looking at?”

“She was there. They were all there.”

“Who was where? C’mon Carlos!” Tozi couldn’t keep the irritation out of her voice.

“Just watch this!” and Carlos hit play on the keyboard.

The drone footage came on, crystal clear images as the drone lifted off the ground and climbed to about 100 meters. In a typical grid-search pattern, whoever was operating the drone started scanning the land around the spot from where the drone had been launched. Slowly but surely, Tozi started getting a feel for the terrain as the drone continued its scanning. An ominous storm showed up on the horizon whenever the drone’s camera faced in that direction.

“What are we looking for, Carlos?”

“Just... just keep watching... you will see it.”

The drone, methodically, quartered over a small hill and suddenly Qasim’s campsite came into view in one corner of the shot. Then the drone seemed to make a beeline to a grove of trees not too far from the campsite. The camera focused on the trees for a few moments capturing footage from all angles and from multiple heights. And then the operator must have recalled the drone because it headed straight back to its base. As it landed, almost like a snapshot, Alia’s face flashed on the screen and the video ended.

Tozi was too stunned to say anything. She looked at Carlos with the same dazed expression that she had seen on his face earlier. She mutely, gestured at the screen, “she was there?”

“That’s what I have been trying to tell you.”

“Please explain and don’t ignore any details!” ordered Tozi.

“Three days before Qasim’s body was found - Alia, Santosh, and Nadia had taken Max, one of our regulars, to find his loot. The spot that he remembered appears to have been close to Qasim’s camp. I looked up their reports. All three of them match. Nothing to see there. But when I looked at Santosh’s notes - he mentioned that he and Nadia had returned to the HQ with Max while Alia had stayed back at the site. Here, read this...,” Carlos pulled another notebook from the stack and flipped open to the bookmarked page.

“I will read it later. Just tell me!”

“Yeah... so, it seems that Alia wanted to explore the terrain with a drone. A storm seemed to be approaching and she didn’t want all of them to get stuck in it... that too with Max in tow. In any case, Nadia had plans that evening and Alia had asked Santosh to type up the report of their wasted afternoon before he clocked out for the day.”

Before Carlos could continue with his narrative, Tozi said, “so Alia saw Qasim’s campsite three days before his death and she never mentioned it to anyone.”

“Exactly! That doesn’t make any sense, unless...” and Carlos’ voice trailed off uncertainly as he stared at Tozi.

“Unless she killed Qasim!”

Carlos waved his hands around as he stood up.

“I don’t believe it, Tozi. I just don’t. There has got to be some other explanation for this! There is no way Alia would do something like this. That is not who she is. She is the most honorable person I have ever known. She follows ALL the rules and makes us do the same. All the freakin’ time.”

Tozi was quietly thinking.

“Well... we don’t really know people, do we?” she said it out loud, almost as if she was speaking to herself and not to Carlos.

“The timing could fit, too. The autopsy had been unable to pin an accurate time of death because of the stormy weather before Qasim’s body was found.”

Reluctantly, Tozi stood up and said to Carlos, “we have to go talk with Sonia about

this.”

He nodded unenthusiastically. This whole thing was well above his pay-grade. As Tozi started to walk toward the door, he grabbed her arm.

“You wanted to look at Alia’s notebooks, didn’t you?”

“Ohh... right. Do you know which one is from the day after the riot?”

“Here it is...”

Tozi quickly flipped through the notebook. Nope. There was no mention of Sara anywhere in the notebook. No mention of the chase. Nothing. In fact, Alia had no notes from the evening of the riot at all. With a grim look, Tozi started walking toward the door.

Tozi and Carlos approached Sonia’s office. They didn’t have to wonder if she was in there. Sonia was letting someone have it with both barrels. Her voice was echoing through the entire floor. She was pacing in her office like a truly pissed off lioness. Her hands were slashing through the air and her fingers were pointing - or maybe poking hard - at some imaginary person’s chest. She saw them outside the partially open door and beckoned them. She was silent for a few beats as she heard out the person at the other end of the line. It was surprising to see her be patient. But that was Sonia - she took it just as well as she gave it. With a final round of yelling, she hung up and threw away her headset in disgust.

“They would rather burn this place down than look bad. Fucking egomaniacs!”

Then as if by magic, all the anger and frustration in her entire body vanished as she gave a tired smile to her young colleagues.

“How are you two doing? Do you have some good news for me? I really need that.”

Sonia was excellent at observing people and reading their minds. She had seen the expressions on Tozi’s and Carlos’ faces. They looked tense and also, maybe, confused. She wanted to make it as easy on them as possible. The fire and light show she had put on a moment ago for that idiot on the phone was going to scare these two into an awkward silence. And she had no time for dancing around at that moment. Shit was - indeed - about to hit the fan. Well... in a few hours, that is.

With that sudden change in mood, Carlos had the expression of a deer caught in a

headlight. His large black eyes stared blankly. He couldn't even stutter out anything.

"Why don't you start, Tozi?" Sonia waved at them to sit down as she made her way back to her chair. She was tired. Really tired. She didn't mind talking with people at all. But the stress from the situation was really taking a toll on her. For once, she was finding that her extraordinary skills of persuasion were not making any impact on her targets. She was going to have to come up with some new tricks if she was going to stop the riot.

Tozi relaxed at the change in Sonia's mood.

"Boss, how do I say this. We may have good news and bad news for you."

Sonia, astutely, didn't say anything. She merely raised her right eyebrow slightly and let Tozi continue. Tozi decided to take a more deliberate approach instead of just blurting out the facts.

"We may know the perpetrators. At least we have strong suspects, I think."

At that, she stole a sideways glance at Carlos who adroitly nodded. He was getting back his ability to converse.

Sonia was still quiet. She was carefully watching Tozi.

"Let me start with Nadeem's murder. Remember all those reports and witness statements had mentioned a large black woman? We figured out who she is. Also, she probably knew Nadeem from before Sequoia - in Sudan."

Sonia merely gesticulated with her eyes for Tozi to go on.

"Her name is Sara. She is training to be a nurse and right now she is doing part-time work as a courier. I have her contact information and everything."

Finally, Sonia spoke, "how did you find her?"

Tozi hesitated a bit. She bit her lower lip and then made her decision.

"Let me show you this video."

With that Tozi pulled out her tablet and summoned the video she had been reviewing

earlier. She had book-marked the exact spot from where to roll the video. Carlos pulled up his chair and Sonia leaned across the desk to look at it. The scene showed Alia standing close to Shahid's burning body but looking somewhere in the distance, away from the body-cam. And then the video started playing. As it did, Tozi isolated the section of the screen toward which Alia was looking and magnified it. Sara's face popped up from the gloom. Tozi zoomed out again and let the video roll forward through the subsequent moments where Alia and Sara stared at each other, then Sara turned and ran away, and finally, Alia took off after her in hot pursuit. Tozi paused the video there and looked at both of them.

"I checked the formal reports from that night and also Alia's notebook. She doesn't mention this encounter anywhere. To the best of my knowledge, she never brought it up at any of the team meetings. Even if her chase had been futile, if only she had told me about this, I would have pulled out this video and identified Sara days ago."

Tozi paused. Sonia's face was inscrutable. Sure - everyone joked that they would love to play poker with Sonia given how transparent her face was. But few knew that when needed, Sonia could exert full control on what emotion to show and what to hide. All she asked was, "anything else?"

"Uhh... yes. There is something else that Carlos found out. Actually, we found out different things independently but simultaneously."

Carlos decided to follow Tozi's lead and lay out the video evidence before discussing it. The drone footage started playing out on his tablet as Sonia and Tozi watched. He fast-forwarded through it until the drone footage showed Qasim's campsite. Sonia recognized it immediately and again, her right eyebrow went up. Carlos fast-forwarded the video again until it was almost at the end. Then he slowed it down so that they wouldn't miss the last frame. The frame in which Alia's face popped up. At that point he paused the video.

"This is a video from three days before Qasim's body was discovered. I was going through Santosh's notebooks when I found a note he had made about checking some drone footage. It was not clear what he was referring to. As I was scrolling through the list of videos, I noticed one from a drone that Santosh had requisitioned three days before we found out about the murder."

Again - Sonia's face continued to be inscrutable. She had not shown any emotion at all. She ordered both of them, "state your conclusions. As clearly as possible. You go first, Carlos."

"I think that Alia may have killed Qasim. She hid the fact that she had observed Qasim's campsite before his murder. Why would she hide that? Unless, she went there



and for whatever reason murdered him. And then acted as if she knew nothing about it. I think, Santosh must have remembered being in the vicinity of Qasim's campsite with Alia, Nadia, and Max. He had noted that Alia had sent them back to the HQ after a futile search for Max's loot. He clearly mentioned in his notebook that Alia had asked him to leave the drone with her as she wanted to spend some time exploring the area before she headed back."

Sonia nodded and then turned to Tozi.

"Sara must have killed Nadeem - we don't know why. Alia figured it out somehow but chose to hide it from all of us. The only reason that I can think of why Alia covered for Sara is that she was herself guilty of killing Qasim and Sara probably guessed it when they met.

I also found that Sara was present at the mini-riot that happened in warehouse district, the one where we had arrested a bunch of people but then let them go. Remember, that is when Shahid came across our radar for the second time. I think, Alia must have seen Sara there. That is why she recognized her again at the riot where Shahid died."

"Just to be clear, what I am hearing from both of you is that Alia chose to hide a couple of important things from the investigation team. And because of that, you are guessing that she may have herself murdered Qasim and covered up for Sara who may have murdered Nadeem. Apart from this circumstantial evidence, there is no actual evidence against both of them. Right?"

Both Tozi and Carlos nodded their heads. The way Sonia had summarized their theories made it sound as if they were both crazy. They forgot to breathe as they waited for Sonia's wrath to descend on them. There was nowhere to hide.

"Good work. Both of you! I am proud of you."

What? Sonia was buying all this?

"I mean it - you two. It is a solid piece of police work. And you showed the courage to bring it to me even though this looks bad for your immediate supervisor. You also showed discretion in your behavior. You came straight to me, instead of bringing it up at the team meeting. Excellent instincts!

But... there is always a 'but', isn't there?" Sonia smiled kindly at them.

"It is late and we have a riot on our hands in a few hours. I need all my team to be rested and ready to do whatever it is that we are going to have to do to save Sequoia. I

want you to go home and sleep. There is not much we can do right now about Alia and Sara. It is not going to be of any use in stopping the riot. I am going to go get some sleep, too.”

She nodded at them and wished them a good night. Tozi and Carlos got up wearily and trudged off.

Sonia debated whether to call Alia and confront her right away. She even picked up the phone and dialed her number. It promptly indicated that the phone had been switched off. She tried Sara’s number, too. Same result. Then she launched the phone tracker app on her computer. She - as the police chief - was the only one who didn’t have to seek authorization to use this app. She summoned up the movements of Alia’s and Sara’s phones over the last couple of hours. Sara’s had been at her home for a while. Alia’s phone had made her way to Sara’s place an hour ago. Then both the phones had started moving. And somewhere in the last half hour, they had both been simultaneously switched off. Sonia stared at the last known location.

“What the hell is Alia up to?” she wondered. She thought of something and on a whim sent a text message. Within a few moments, there was a one-word response - “Yes!” Sonia smiled sadly. She still didn’t know what was going on in Alia’s mind. But this development was not so bad. She switched off her computer and got up. She needed to get some rest. Tomorrow was likely to be the most important day in her life. She had to have all her wits with her. Persuading people was her super-power. She needed to draw upon all of it tomorrow if the riot was to be nipped in the bud. In between the calls she was making to the leaders of the riot all day, she had been bouncing off some ideas with a few critical folks. She had a hunch that some of those ideas had now been put in play. She was praying that they would help her do her job well.

## Chapter Forty-Two

Hundreds of Christian and Hindu men - yes, all of them men - started pouring out in the streets of Sequoia soon after noon. All morning they had congregated in smaller groups in the common areas of the various buildings they lived in. Clear instructions had been given that large groups were not to be formed in parks and other public spaces until it was time to march on the mosque. The Christians were wearing white and the Hindus were wearing saffron, specifically, to broadcast that this was a holy war.

Both the Christian and Hindu men were claiming that they had no choice but to go to war. That they were the victims who were now bravely defending their faith from the barbarian Muslims. That they were sick and tired of the violence being committed on them over centuries. No longer would they take it quietly. They were going to fight back and end the source of the problem. After today, no Muslim was going to be able to raise his head, ever again. Anywhere in the world. They were the vanguard of the final confrontation that was about to play out all over the world. They would become the heroes who would be hailed for eternity.

Over the last few weeks, the attendance for the Friday namaz at the main mosque - also the largest in Sequoia - had grown exponentially. Several hundred men and a few women were about to pray in the mosque on that fateful Friday. The namaz would start soon after the sun had reached the zenith. It usually took about 10-12 minutes to finish the prayer.

After the Namaz ended, the gathered Muslim men were going to finalize the plans for their attacks on the Christians and Hindus. The vivid emotions in their hearts and minds were remarkably similar to those of the Christians and Hindus that were about to descend upon them. There had been a few rumors about the Muslims getting preempted. But those rumors had been laughed off. Those weaklings didn't have the guts, the Muslim men had crowed. And so the stage was set for bloodshed.

The rumors had been flying thick over the last couple of days about something big that was about to happen soon. The city council had been exhorting all the citizens to keep calm and to not resort to any violence. The arrival of the armed forces on the borders of Sequoia had been hinted at. The city council had decided to not confirm that news in the hope that panic could be avoided in the city.

The most common reaction was to hunker down behind closed doors of their flats and to hope for the best. The second most common reaction was to barricade the buildings and then commiserate in the common areas of each building. Some prepared to defend with whatever weapons that could be improvised from mundane things such as

kitchen knives, scissors, gardening tools, and mechanical equipment.

The roads were empty. So were the parks. No one left their buildings, unless they had to. All the people who worked at the city had been asked to - maybe begged would be more accurate - come to work. Keeping the infrastructure humming along was supposed to help in conveying a sense of order and peace. At least that was the theory.

Both the Christian and Hindu mobs were mostly unaware of each other. Each mob was coalescing into an ever larger procession in totally different parts of Sequoia. They just happened to be moving toward the same destination - the largest mosque in the city where they would find the largest group of Muslims in one place on that day at that hour.

The bloodlust pulsed through the mobs as someone would start shouting some wild slogan and others would pick it up. It was like two angry pythons were alternately coiling up and then uncoiling as they made their way through the city. The lack of anyone else on the streets and in the parks had been unnerving to some of the would-be rioters. It made them pause and think about what they had embarked upon. But such was the energy of a violent group of men that these doubts got squashed almost as soon as they emerged. The shouting became sporadic as the two mobs neared the mosque from two different directions. And as if on cue, the walls of the buildings lining up the streets on which the men were hurtling along lit up with videos and loudspeakers crackled to life in the air. The drones had come alive.

#####

Sonia sat next to Maria grimly watching her broadcast the video messages via the drone-based projectors on the sides of the buildings along the routes the two mobs were advancing on. The police force that Sonia had at her command was too meager to take on crowds of the size that she was seeing on the screens. There was no way in hell she was going to put that small force in harm's way without a well thought out plan for success. One element of her plan included this mass appeal to the rioters that was conveyed by Maria's crew and the equipment they used for their immersive concerts.

Sonia had allowed Maria to tap into and use the emergency address system that had been installed all across Sequoia. The video came from the drones and the synchronized sound came from the emergency address system. For those who were hunkered down in their flats and buildings, the video feed was available through their connected devices. The effect was quite startling. The audio was like an omnipotent voice that reverberated throughout the city even though the video could only be viewed on the sides of select buildings or on small screens. Sonia hoped that this effect could help in knocking some sense into many of the people who had showed up for needless

violence.

Maria was expertly running the scrolled messages along with the audio that urged the mob to not resort to any violence. The messages begged them to work with the negotiators in getting their concerns addressed. These were straightforward requests that made some of the would-be rioters pause and think about what they were doing. But their leaders had also brought their own megaphones and they now dialed up the volume of their own slogans to get the blood of their followers boiling all over again. The text messages and clipped audio announcements were no match to the animal force of the marching mobs.

So Maria went to the next level of appeals. Over the last couple of days, she had worked closely with both Kaija and Rachel in rounding up important people from around the world and especially, from the countries that had been the homes of many of Sequoia's citizens, to record video statements about maintaining peace. They echoed those text messages in their own words and languages. The selected group ranged from scientists to community organizers and they all had one thing in common - they were empathetic to the concerns of the angry crowd. But they also exhorted them to calm down and resolve those concerns through nonviolent means.

Again, the appearance of those faces on the videos forced the mob to stop and listen to what was being said. The words they were hearing were in their own languages and were being said by someone they probably knew well and even trusted. A few people stayed behind as the mob's speed slowed down. Sonia was nodding her head and patting Maria's back with hope. Maybe this could work, after all. As they watched the footage captured by the drones spread out across the two mobs, they saw several people attempting to stop the march and engage in heated discussions with others. The leaders knew that this form of dissent could not be allowed to grow. They quickly sent some of the core members to isolate the dissenters and separate them from the main mob. Their megaphones continued to crackle with vicious slogans. They started vilifying the people in the videos. That was sufficient to keep most of the mob intact and resume the procession. The mosque was now very close and the leaders knew that once they could get the attack going, then there would be no stopping. They started shouting the slogans at a constant beat that forced the marching people to fall in step. Then they raised the tempo and the mob surged forward again.

Time to go for the jugular, so-to-speak, Maria thought. Her team had been lining up the live-streaming videos of mothers and fathers of some of the people in the mobs. She started projecting them one-by-one and then later stitching them into collages. This helped in stopping several dozen more men in their tracks as they recognized their families. As hoped, the message did break through and they started moving away from the main mob. Unfortunately, this was a bit too late as the two mobs had now reached the mosque and were now staring at each other in surprise. Initially, they thought the other one was the Muslim mob. But that mistaken idea dissipated quickly as they

realized from the slogans that they were both there to attack the Muslims. There was no attempt to merge together as neither mob wanted to share their moment of glory with anyone else. The leaders of both mobs realized that they needed to be wary of the other mob as the last thing they wanted was a three-way riot. A few quiet messages were exchanged between the leaders of the two mobs and a temporary truce was affirmed.

Maria looked at Sonia despairingly. She had hoped that these appeals would have a major impact on the size of the mobs. Unfortunately, it was too little too late. Now she helplessly watched the mobs starting to chant things like “death to the Muslims!” as everyone waited for the signal from the leaders to commence the attack.

The doors of the mosque opened and a small group of Muslim men came out shouting loudly. By then, they had realized that their plans had been upended by this preemptive attack. Whether the Christians and the Hindus had coordinated or not, was now irrelevant. They were now faced with a crowd numbering in several thousands and it was baying for their blood. There was going to be no idiocy of using crude bombs to throw at the mosque or light things up in fire. Everyone had learnt their lesson from Shahid’s idiotic but tragic self-immolation. This was going to be an old-fashioned hand-to-hand combat with whatever weapons the people had. One could see lots of wooden and metallic clubs festooned with nails. Many were brandishing knives as viciously as they could. The group promptly ran back in to the mosque.

#####

Yusuf and Farhan panicked when they got a glimpse of the sea of white crosses and saffron flags from the mosque’s windows. How could this happen? They were the ones who were supposed to vanquish these infidels. They had patiently prepared their followers for the martyrdom. In fact, today was the day when they were going to spell out the details of how the two attacks were supposed to be executed. Instead, they were now trying to first calm themselves down and then come up with a plan to defend themselves. The size of the mob that was now screaming for their blood was far greater than the devotees that had assembled inside the mosque.

The first thing to do was to summon up more people from their side. Pulling aside a small group of their followers they issued the order to flood the social media with a call for arms against the infidels. It was not going to be any new material. The craziness had been playing out for weeks on social media around the world. All this group had to do was to copy and paste it in messages to their fellow Muslims in Sequoia. Of course, some of them who were not in the mosque had already been rallying the devout followers when they heard about the Christian and Hindu mobs gathering for an assault.

By design, the number of men in Sequoia was half that of women. Barely a quarter of those men had claimed to be Muslims when they had arrived in Sequoia five years ago. Over that time, maybe less than five percent of that number had continued to show any signs of being devout Muslims. How many of them would actually show up to defend their religion was an open question. Farhan and Yusuf had never really paid attention to the total number of their followers, anyway. They had always known that a small number of dedicated fanatics was going to be sufficient to cause whatever impact that they had in mind. It had always been the case and there was no reason for it to be any different now. The problem, now, was that the other side had managed to organize itself, albeit in two distinct tribes. Together, those tribes easily outnumbered the small band of militant Islamists that Yusuf and Farhan had assembled. When it comes to hand-to-hand combat, unfortunately, numbers were all that mattered. All the weapons were just too crude and ineffective to make up for the imbalance in the forces that were about to clash.

The number of Muslim women in Sequoia, though, was enormous. Again, this was by design. Whether it was from Africa or the Middle East or South Asia, Muslim women were among the most oppressed people on the entire planet. They had been made the top priority for rescue. If only the Muslim women would join in the holy war, the tide could be turned against the infidels, thought Yusuf. Of course, there was the small problem of all those women being extremely poorly treated by the men for centuries. Sure, every now and then, the Islamist militants had callously brainwashed a few women to join their holy wars. But they were always a tiny minority. The vast majority of the women were thoroughly oppressed and ruthlessly exploited throughout the history of Islam. Not that this was particularly different in Christianity and Hinduism or for that matter most other religions anywhere in the world at any point in time. But at that moment, this was going to make a big difference for the survival of Yusuf and all his followers who were cowering in the mosque with fear.

#####

First came the rocks. Then came other hard projectiles. The two mobs had brought too many of those kinds of weapons to be left unused for long. Since, not a single Muslim devotee had shown the courage to step out and fight, the crowd had decided to goad them by throwing things at the mosque and defiling it. Farhan debated whether to call Sonia and seek help from the police. Then decided that that was not really up for debate any more. He had behaved extremely harshly with Sonia when she had called him to urge him to stop the violence. He had told her - a Muslim woman from Bangladesh - in no uncertain terms that she was a traitor because she was protecting the infidels who had been killing fellow Muslims around the world. She was highly unlikely to lift her pinky finger to help him.

The windows and doors of the mosque had been locked up and the building was quite air-tight. Yet, the ominous din had seeped in. That is when fear turned into reckless

anger. How dare the infidels defile their holy mosque in such a revolting manner. They must be punished at all costs. What would the world say about them if they didn't retaliate. Their god was with them and would ensure their victory. Armed with next to nothing except pieces of furniture that they had cobbled together, every single one of the devotees in the mosque screamed the war cry and burst through the main door to launch their counter-attack on the vast enemy. An enemy that had merely been baiting them to come out in the open.

Projectiles flew from all sides. Screams emanated from every part of the crowd as the blood lust grew and grew. The inferno of hatred was blazing fiercely. Yet, something kept the people from engaging with each other. Maybe it was the fear that once that threshold was crossed, there would be no turning back from the wanton massacre that would inevitably take place. No one - it seemed - wanted to be the first one to cross that threshold.

#####

The US President was in the Oval Office watching the live broadcast of the riot that was about to begin at the mosque in Sequoia. The video was being made available by the courtesy of the Johnson Group's drones that had been surreptitiously monitoring the situation on the ground for the past couple of days. They had meticulously tracked the two mobs, watched them assemble, and then proceed through the empty streets.

The plutocrats had chosen to not show up at the White House even though they were in constant touch with the President's senior staff. The plutocrats were, of course, also in direct contact with the Johnson Group's on-field commander even though the Johnson Group was formally contracted by the UN and was officially referred to as the UN Peace-keeping Force.

All the plutocrats were now waiting for was the mayhem in Sequoia to start. The instructions to the Johnson Group had been crystal clear - they had to put on a show as if they were reluctantly entering Sequoia and that this was the last resort for stopping the ongoing violence from escalating to horrific proportions. So it was imperative that the violence had to start before they intervened in any way. The pretense of being patient had to be maintained as much as possible. The footage was being captured to ensure that no one would later question their on-field decisions. None of this footage was going to be publicly aired unless it was necessary to do so at a later date to justify their actions.

The Johnson Group's on-field commander was a former Russian colonel named Yuri. No last name. He preferred it that way. Even that was a fake name as he really didn't want his actual name to show up anywhere. He was excellent at his job and his employers at the Johnson Group had been very happy with his exploits so far. He had



absolutely no doubt in his mind about the success of his mission. By the end of the day, he would be fully in charge of Sequoia. He got a call from the plutocrats telling him to go on red alert as the Muslim devotees started streaming out the mosque. He was told to wait for at least a few people to die before he initiated the first phase of the operation.

Yuri waited with his crew in the control room that had been set up not too far from the Sequoia border. All his equipment and troops had been dropped off by the giant helicopters from the two ships that were now anchored just off the coast of Norway, carefully staying in the international waters.

#####

Sonia was visibly sickened by the growing intensity of the skirmishes launched by each side. She, along with Maria, had tried their best to try and dissuade the mobs from committing violence. It had not worked at all. The three mobs were now restlessly heaving in front of the mosque. Many vile things had been flung at each other. Several people had been bloodied because of them. Rocks and knives and broken glass bottles now littered the whole area. The reluctance of the mobs in getting down to business was ebbing. The leaders were steadily egging on the people standing right at the front of each mob to take matters in the hands. Filthy language was filtering through the drone cameras that Maria had now trained at the heart of the conflict.

In the blink of an eye, the status quo shifted from throwing things at each other to showering blows on each other. A small group from the Muslim contingent broke away and decided that it was time to do or die. It was like a tiny green spear lancing into the sea of saffron. That initial foray of the green flags was so forceful that the saffron flags gave way. But then the people at the back stood their ground and the frontline enveloped that tiny green smudge and smashed it into the ground. The Muslim group had been pummeled by the Hindus with both fists and clubs. Knives were stuck in torsos and blood started flowing easily and abundantly in that moment. The appearance of so much blood snapped many out of the haze of hatred as they were mesmerized by the screams - both hateful and arising out of pain - mingled together. And just like that, the skirmish stopped. The bodies of the Muslims - battered and bruised and bloodied - were pushed back toward their people and the mobs resumed their shouting.

Maria couldn't bear to see this anymore. She turned to Sonia with pleading eyes. She knew that there wasn't much left to be done. Their future was getting butchered right in front of their eyes. As has been the case throughout the history of humanity, a small number of vile men had decided to yet again destroy the peaceful and beautiful lives of women in order to satiate their egos.

#####

Yuri's headset crackled as he got the word from the plutocrats to launch phase one. They had seen the blood being spilled. They had made sure that the high resolution videos of the killing of that Muslim band were recorded. They had their excuse to launch their bid to take control of Sequoia.

Yuri didn't even bother to look around at this team. They were all professionals and knew what they were expected to do. He merely raised the index finger of his left hand as the signal, "Go! Go! Go!"

Yuri's team's fingers flew on their keyboards, their hands gripped the joysticks, and instantly, several drones carrying the necessary ammunition swept up into the air and headed rapidly toward that mosque in Sequoia. They reached the target without any incident and stayed up at the designated altitude waiting for the next set of instructions. The actual targeting of the smoke bombs and the shock-and-awe ammunition was going to be done manually.

Yuri's second-in-command, Vincent, had already lined up several spots as targets on his pad. He sent a bunch of them to different members of the team controlling each group of drones. They copied them and looked up at Vincent for the signal to initiate the launch sequence. Their faces - all expression-less - were those of hardened killers. They knew that later in the day, they were going to drive into Sequoia and take physical control of the city. This was merely laying the groundwork to suppress the population of the city.

Vincent snapped his fingers and the drones dropped the first round of smoke bombs. None of these were supposed to actually hit the ground or anyone. They were all programmed to explode a few hundred feet above the ground and create a pall of smoke that settled down as the people below watched it come down.

Another snap of fingers and the lightning bombs were dropped. Again, they exploded well above the heads of the crowd with thunderous sound and flashes to maximize the effect of mayhem. The idea was to scare the crowd but ensure that they didn't feel physically threatened enough to disperse. Rather the goal was to get them even more riled up. Then the so-called voice of calm would announce that the crowd better shut up or the armed forces will intervene with actual weapons. It was all nicely choreographed. Yuri was confident that it would play out exactly as he had planned it.

He nodded at Vincent to start prepping for the next phase.

## Chapter Forty-Three

Sonia grabbed Maria's arm in anger when she saw the smoke bombs go off. It took her a moment to realize that the bombs had not been launched by the crowd. She knew that there was no capability within the crowd or for that matter with anyone in Sequoia to create that sort of ammunition. They must have been launched by the mercenaries hired by the UN. Of course, they must have been watching all along and waiting for an excuse to step in. Grudgingly, she acknowledged their finesse in waiting for the right emotional moment and then using those theatrical props for maximum effect.

"Start broadcasting this to everyone! Everyone in the whole fucking world needs to see this. Now, Maria! Now!" she yelled.

Maria's fingers flew across her tablet as she lined up the livestreams from all the main camera drones and started streaming their footage. She chose different vantage points in order to maximize the sense of both the scale of the external assault and its impact on individuals on the ground. Sonia had informed her about the expected armed intervention earlier that day.

It had been Camille's idea to ensure that live footage of the Johnson Group's assault on Sequoia be broadcast far and wide. She wanted to make sure that the heinous actions of the UN and the plutocrats acting in the background got fully exposed to the world.

Mainstream media from all over the world picked up this livestream almost instantly. Maria had given them advance notice. More importantly, the various social media platforms magnified the broadcast multi-fold. Maria's millions of fans were appalled at these developments in Sequoia and started campaigning for an immediate cessation of the assault.

On the ground, Sonia watched, the crowd initially getting scared and confused by this sudden aerial assault. They were not sure what the smoke, lightning, and thunder really meant. After a few moments they realized that no one was harmed and it all seemed benign. This pissed them off even more than before as they assumed that it was some failed attempt by their enemy to attack them in a different way.

The mobs surged toward each other with deadly intent. Sonia was sure that this was the moment when the violence would become decisive. She shuddered at the thought of all the maimed bodies that were going to be littered all over the place after the rioters had sated their thirst for blood.

As she was scanning through the various perspectives from the drones, her eyes were

drawn to the footage from one particular vantage point. The camera lens was pointed at a small platform just outside and on one side of the mosque's entrance. It was about 30-40 feet high and seemed to have been installed there for some renovation work on the outside of the mosque.

Three women were climbing the ladder that led to the top of the platform. The one leading them had reached the top and was switching on the gigantic megaphone that she had slung on her back while climbing the ladder. The other two joined her and then all three stared fearfully at the mayhem about to erupt around them. The smoke from the bombs had mostly settled down to ground level and it looked as if the platform was floating above everyone else.

Sonia was transfixed by this scene and she subconsciously realized that many people in the crowd had paused as they had also noticed the three people quietly standing up on the platform. They were pointing at them and the ripple of that knowledge spread through the three mobs. A surprising hush fell over the entire crowd. Maybe they were all looking for an excuse to stop the violence, anyway. Even they didn't know why they were doing what they were doing at that point in time.

Sonia yanked Maria by her wrist and pointed her to that scene. Maria turned around and her jaw dropped as she saw Kaija, Alia, and a large black woman standing on a platform bang in the middle of the riot. She looked at Sonia questioningly but Sonia was gesticulating at her, "stream THAT. And only THAT to everyone!!!" Maria brought multiple drones in to focus on the platform and also snapped the broadcast audio feed to clean and relay whatever sound was expected from the megaphone that Kaija was now bringing up to address the crowd.

"Quiet please!"

The famous statement that the chair umpire at a Wimbledon tennis match deployed to get the audience to settle down, seemed almost incongruous in the context that Kaija was uttering it.

"Do you know who I am?"

Raise your hands if you know me!"

A sea of hands came up almost immediately. No one had any trouble hearing her. Not only was her voice coming through the megaphone but it was also being echoed through Sequoia's emergency address system. For a moment even Kaija was puzzled at why her voice sounded so loud before she realized what was happening.

“Good... I am glad that you still remember me. I am grateful to you for showing me the respect by giving me this opportunity to speak to you.”

She paused and looked around as the crowd settled down. The murmurs simmered down. Then she continued.

“But I am not the one you need to hear from right now. The two women standing with me are the ones you need to listen to.”

“Alia,” she said as she touched Alia on her shoulder, “and Sara” as she pointed at her.

With that, she gave the megaphone to Alia and took a step back.

#####

Unbeknownst to anyone, Camille and her friends had commandeered a small flight and flown to a rural air-field that was close to Sequoia. Hundreds of their comrades had joined them in their RVs and ATVs as the convoy had made its way to the location of the Johnson Group’s base. Rachel had managed to find the coordinates of the base and sent them to Camille.

The convoy was not unarmed. Most of them were in their teens and their twenties. Their bodies were their real weapons. They had decided to confront the Johnson Group in the long and illustrious tradition of non-violent protests that had successfully fought against armed oppressors. Unlike that tradition, though, they had armed themselves with the modern tools for broadcasting their confrontation to the entire world. They had cameras of all kinds and drones to carry them. They wanted to make it abundantly clear to the world that the Johnson Group was an immoral - unfortunately, not illegal - force that was attempting to surreptitiously destroy the peaceful city of Sequoia. If need be, the activists had decided to provoke the Johnson Group in shooting at them and were ready to die for their cause.

This was that faction of the climate movement that was mostly made up of folks who were tired of the glacial pace of change that the movement was achieving through the usual policy process. They were fed up with the delays and the constant subversion of the democratic governance system by the fossil fuel companies. They wanted to escalate the activities and had started blowing up fossil fuel infrastructure. They were no longer interested in reasonable negotiations. They understood that their enemies understood nothing except the naked use of power. If that is what they wanted, then that is what they were going to get.

This group had been launching a series of guerrilla attacks all across the world with

several other like-minded folks. They didn't care if innocent lives were lost in those attempts. This was war. It was the war for the ultimate survival of humanity and all life forms. There was going to be collateral damage. They had accepted it as long as the fossil fuel companies took heavy losses everywhere. They were no longer afraid of losing the sympathy of the masses. The masses were going to suffer far more if these activists did not shut down all of the fossil fuel companies.

The ongoing crisis at Sequoia had given Camille an opportunity to re-direct the fury of this group in a different direction albeit for achieving the short-term and narrow objective of saving Sequoia. The group had been livid when they had heard about the Johnson Group's armed campaign to occupy Sequoia. Camille decided to go with this group to not only pull the spotlight on Sequoia but also to defend it at all costs.

As their ATVs raced across the uneven terrain toward the Johnson Group's base, Camille's phone rang. Rachel had called her to switch on her display and look at the live footage from Sequoia. Camille - who was riding pillion - did that and immediately realized that something momentous was occurring in Sequoia. She saw Kaija standing on a platform with two other women amidst a sea of angry-looking men. One of those two women was pacing on the platform with the megaphone in her hand and saying something. The key thing was that the rioters all seemed to be listening to her. Camille called for a halt and asked everyone in the convoy to listen to Alia before resuming their journey. They were a few miles away from the Johnson base. And was she glad that she stopped to listen to Alia.

#####

Alia took the megaphone from Kaija's hands. She glanced at Sara and gave her a sad smile. Sara was petrified to stand in the midst of this sea of violent men. So many Nadeems, she thought! But something in Alia's innate confidence and the unruffled calm of Kaija gave her some strength. She managed to stiffly nod at Alia who then turned squarely toward the crowd. A deep breath and another. "Here goes," thought Alia.

"I killed Qasim!"

A hush fell on the crowd. Everyone just stared at her. This was the last thing anyone expected her to say. They were all expecting her to tell them to stop fighting or something on those lines. Some of them knew that she was a cop and were expecting her to threaten them with punishment. Many had seen her at the earlier riot when she had offered to discuss the details of the investigation with them.

"And Sara killed Nadeem!"

There was pin-drop silence. If not for the visual evidence, anyone would have thought that the plaza in front of the mosque was absolutely empty.

“We are both Muslim women.”

Alia was taking deliberate pauses between her simple, short, and direct statements. No long sentences. No paragraphs. No caveats. She had decided to keep it as unambiguous as possible.

“I repeat, we are both Muslim. I lived in Iran before Sequoia and Sara in Sudan.”

Alia now looked down as she paced to one end of the platform with her back to the crowd. She let a few moments go by and then turned back to look at the crowd.

“I killed Qasim because he had killed my father many years ago. At that time, his name used to be Basheer. He was part of the local militia. My poor father was a grocer. Qasim - or rather Basheer - didn't even know my father. One day, he came to the market where my father had his store. Without any reason, Basheer shot my father and my two elder brothers along with several other innocent people in the market.

Sara killed Nadeem for the same reason. He had led a gang of blood-thirsty thugs to her village. His men tortured and killed her family. She barely escaped that carnage herself.”

With her head down, Alia paced swiftly across the platform from one end to the other and back. She knew that all the eyes were on her. Everyone was hanging on to each and every word that she was uttering. She looked up at the crowd again.

“These two deaths had N-O-T-H-I-N-G to do with their religion! Nothing at all!

Qasim and Nadeem had committed horrendous crimes against our families. Most probably, they were also responsible for many more crimes against other people.

One day their paths crossed with ours in Sequoia. And we ended up killing them. They should not have been in Sequoia in the first place. They should have been caught and punished long ago. But somehow they had escaped. Somehow, they had found their way to Sequoia.”

Another pause. But Alia was no longer pacing. She was staring, unblinkingly, at the crowd now.

“Sara and I must be punished for the crimes we have committed.”

She said each word slowly, deliberately, and as loudly as she could.

“Both of us will accept our punishment. And that should be that. Nothing more and nothing less!”

Tears had formed in Sara’s eyes as Alia had said the last two statements. All night, they had agonized over what to do when they had sought refuge at Kaija’s place. In the end, they had concluded that this was the right thing to do. But it still pained her. She did not want to go back to Sudan. Now what was she going to do? She had nothing left to live for.

Maria was utterly bewildered. Her Alia, a killer? That didn’t make any sense. What did she mean by that whole revenge business? Did this mean that Alia would be now gone from her life for good? Wasn’t that the punishment for such serious crimes - deportation?

The thought about the punishment had crossed the minds of everyone in the crowd, too. Many of them knew very well the high cost of serious criminal activity. Murder was as serious as it got. Justified or not. These two women were truly formidable. They had confessed their crimes in public knowing full well that their life in Sequoia would soon be over. In all likelihood, their life was over, period. It was highly unlikely that the Iranian and Sudanese governments would not execute them. They just stared at Alia and Sara, dumbstruck.

“We both wish that we had not acted in such a manner. That we had, instead, gone through the proper channels through which Qasim and Nadeem would have been lawfully punished. But, we didn’t do that.

We took the law in our hands. And THAT is not right. We broke the social compact that has enabled all of us to have lived safely and happily in Sequoia for the past five years.

This is a voluntary confession. Nobody is coercing us. We shall take the punishment that the court assigns us.

The question for all of you who came here today with the intention of committing unlawful acts is - will YOU take responsibility for these criminal acts that you have committed today?

Will YOU take the punishment?



Will YOU let the social compact in Sequoia continue to exist?

Will YOU let Sequoia to survive?

WHAT WILL YOU DO?"

#####

As soon as Sonia saw Kaija introduce Alia and Sara to the mob, she took off from Maria's control room. She had a reasonably good idea of what was about to happen and she needed to be on the location to take full advantage of it. All her plans to quell the riot had failed. But this wrinkle had brought forth a glimmer of opportunity. And if anything, Sonia was a master at recognizing when the door was being cracked open and how to then kick it off its hinges to barge right in. This was it!

Her Plan A had been the attempt over the past three days to persuade the leaders of the three mobs to not commit any violence in the first place. She had told them that it was okay to have peaceful protests. But that plan had gone down the drain without a whimper.

Plan B was to use Maria's audio-video wizardry to try and persuade the mob itself to desist from violence. That had fallen flat as most of the rioters had shrugged off the heart-wrenching pleas of respected people and even their own families and friends. The two mobs had rolled right through all that and gone and attacked the mosque.

The Plan C that she had put in motion quietly and unknown to all the people that she worked with was appealing to all those citizens of Sequoia who disapproved of the violence to organize a counter-riot. The vast majority of Sequoians had been passively watching the events that had been unfolding around them. Most had been afraid and hiding from those events. Just as the muscle memory of violence had kicked in for the rioters, these reactions of fear and cynicism had kicked in for these folks. Sonia's plan was to try and get this vast silent majority to show up at the site of the riot in overwhelming numbers to force that mob of violent men to dissipate. If need be, she had authorized them to physically restrain the rioters. Sonia had quietly reached out to numerous women who were relatively well-known and reasonably well-respected in Sequoia to organize such a crowd of counter-rioters. Unfortunately, this plan had also failed. On the day of the riot, only a small number of women had found the courage to assemble together and march to the site of the riot.

As she was heading to the site of the riot, Sonia was frantically messaging all those women leaders to re-double their efforts to increase their turn-out. She was praying that Kaija's appearance on the scene would surely inspire some more women to cast off

their fears and do what needed to be done.

She watched Alia's confession from one side of the platform. She was incredibly sad at the fate of these two women. Their actions could not be forgiven. That was clear to her. Yet, she knew that Alia was not a bad person at all. As Alia was wrapping up her confession, Sonia noticed that the numbers of the counter-rioters - mostly women - had swelled massively.

Their size was distinctly larger than the three mobs of men who were concentrated in front of the mosque. And it was growing rapidly as more and more women were pouring out of their flats and buildings. Alia's and Sara's courageous act of confessing their crimes had served as a major catalyst for them in shaking off their apathy. At least Plan C was showing signs of life! But Sonia had to make sure that it would decisively end the riot which would then allow her to tell the mercenaries in no uncertain terms to back the fuck off.

Sonia quickly climbed up to the platform and yanked the megaphone out of Alia's hands. Alia was surprised to see her boss. But she meekly handed it over and stepped back.

"Okay then! Y'all heard what she said."

Then turning to Alia and Sara, she announced into the megaphone, "I am arresting you for the murders of Qasim and Nadeem. Please don't try to resist!"

The second sentence was unnecessary for Alia and Sara. Resisting arrest was the last thing on their minds. But it was important for Sonia to say it out loud to establish her authority at that moment in front of this mob. She turned back to the mob.

"Now I want all of you to quietly and peacefully leave this place and go back to your homes or wherever the hell you need to go to. Just get the FUCK out of this place!"

Her face had that dangerous look of daring the crowd to disobey her order. It worked - to an extent - as some of the rioters started looking around uncertainly.

Then someone shouted, "this is not about just those two murders. We don't care about that anymore. These bastards have killed our people for centuries. Everywhere they go, these barbarians murder us. We are not going to let them off the hook this time around. This ends now! We shall get our revenge."

It was not clear who "we" and "they" were. That was the dumb thing, Sonia thought. These idiots were so programmed to hate and fight, that it didn't really matter to them

which particular tribe they belonged to. They would always find someone to hate and then kill. She had lost her patience with this nonsense and there was no way in hell that she was going to engage in a dialogue with them.

She stared back at the guy who seemed to have shouted. A few sounds of approval popped up in support of that guy. Then she sneered at him. She sneered at them all. She knew that her face was being projected on the sides of the buildings. So she let them have the full effect of an utterly contemptuous Sonia.

“Look around you!” she waved at the women who had gathered on all sides of the three mobs but were watchfully maintaining their distance. Maria duly switched the projection from Sonia’s face to pan the vast crowd of women surrounding the rioters. She even zoomed in on a few faces that she deemed to be the fiercest among all.

“If you don’t drop your weapons and quietly leave, all those women standing there will make you do it. And they outnumber you by a factor of... I am going to guess here... I think, it is at least ten!”

She let that hang in the air for a bit.

Then she sweetly and sarcastically, asked, “would you like to get your butts kicked today?”

Switching her tone dramatically, she let them have the full blast of her anger.

“I am so fucking tired of this. All you stupid men have been running around hating someone... killing someone... just creating a fucking mess... from the beginning of time!

What the hell is wrong with all of you?!

You have oppressed us women for millennia. Abused us. Exploited us. Tortured us. Raped us. Killed us. Mindlessly!

Now that we thought that we had finally found a refuge here in Sequoia, from all that violence and ugliness, you want to start that same nonsense here, too?

Do you actually like this shit?!

Because of your thoughtless and inane behavior, those assholes out there,” and she waved warningly at one of the drone cameras because she knew the mercenaries were

watching all this,"are just waiting to swoop in and turn us into slaves again.

I mean... WHAT THE FUCK!

You want to go be a slave. Please fuck right off from Sequoia.

Seriously! Get the hell out of here. Like... NOW!

But don't you dare drag the rest of us into that same muck as yourself."

All the anger, all the frustration, all the irritation, all the annoyance, everything that she had to suffer through all her life just because she was a woman, came out. That dam had burst and the flood exploded out on the mob. They didn't know what hit them.

"I have to ask again... are you fucking deranged or something?

Do you not like your life here in Sequoia?

Is ALL this stupid violence worth it?

Really? I mean... what is going on in that thick head of yours?

I am done with your nonsense. All of us women are fucking done with it.

We ain't going along with your stupidity anymore!

If you don't go back to your fucking homes quietly right now...

I promise you that we shall make you go VERY painfully.

THAT I promise you!"

The full Sonia experience of flashing and glaring black eyes; the long and curly black hair swishing around as she paced; and the slashing gestures was on. Those who knew her well, were used to this. But those who didn't know her felt like they were the puny demons quavering in front of the goddess Durga. The one who was so incandescent with rage that she was about to smite them from the face of the earth.

The ones who had been standing close to the platform had merely seen the life-sized

version of this show. The rest had seen all this projected in larger than life form on the walls of the buildings. Her voice had thundered through the public address system. Maria had even added some nifty echo effects to her voice. The whole effect was simply overwhelming.

The one-two punch of the sombre yet bold confession made by Alia followed by this display of raw power by Sonia and the vast sea of women surrounding them completely snuffed out the fight from the mob. Their shoulders slumped. They knew they were beaten. They started shuffling about trying to find a way to get away from this place as soon as possible.

Sonia smiled broadly and added, "Yes - thats right. Get going! Don't make me come after you!"

Then she turned her gaze back at the drone cameras. She raised her middle finger at them and enunciated, "P-L-E-A-S-E F-U-C-K O-F-F!"

After sending that direct message to the mercenaries and the plutocrats, she turned to Alia and Sara, "you two - let's go!"

## Chapter Forty-Four

The megaphone crackled and the sound of someone clearing their throat cut through the murmurs of the dissipating crowd. Everyone turned around to see who was talking. Kaija's face came into focus on the sides of the buildings.

Most of them knew who Kaija was. After all, it was her beneficence that had brought them the opportunity of building a new life in Sequoia. When she decided to move to Sequoia herself, they had appointed her as the mayor of the city. A lifetime appointment even though it was symbolic in nature.

Not many had seen her in the public as she was a private person. Few had heard her speak as she preferred to listen. She did participate in the city council meetings. Those who had been part of the city council had gotten to know her through those interactions. And now there she was, standing in front of them all for the first time.

She knew that she had everyone's respect and she had never abused that privilege. In fact, she had chosen to largely stay out of any limelight despite her stature. She would reluctantly agree to serve as the special guest for a few city-wide events. But there too, she preferred to be brief in her remarks if she made any in the first place. For her to speak publicly, especially, on this particular day was something totally unexpected.

Earlier that day, as the riot was about to spin totally out of control, her simple and quiet manner of addressing them from that platform was sufficient to pause the mayhem. The pause had been long and peaceful enough for Alia and Sara to confess. Kaija had hardly said anything beyond introducing them. Now they all stared at her as she started speaking in that solemn way of hers.

"May I have your attention, please?"

She waited for the last few whispers to die down and the entire crowd became silent.

"Thank you. I appreciate your patience in allowing me to speak to you. Again."

She looked around at the crowd. Then as if she was satisfied with whatever it was she was hoping to see, she nodded her head absently and began to talk.

"I think, most of you know who I am. But in case you don't, let me introduce myself and tell you a little bit about myself."

“My name is Kaija. I was the one that invited all of you to come live here in Sequoia.”

Clearly, there were at least some who didn't know about her at all. There were quite a few expressions of surprise at that statement. Those who knew about Kaija but had never seen her in person let alone listened to her speak, were also surprised. The volume of murmurs went up. Kaija raised her left hand and asked them to be quiet.

“Same as you, I permanently moved here when our city was born five years ago. Although, I am sure, no one would stop me from leaving Sequoia and going back to my former home in Oslo, I have no intention of ever doing so. I love it here! I want to spend the rest of my life with all of you in this new world that we are building.”

For the first time, she smiled at them. It was a tentative smile. Shy, like a young moon trying to peek from behind clouds. Not yet ready to step out fully. As if not sure how it would be received. Or maybe like a child hiding behind the parent. Darting out briefly to check out the strangers before retreating behind their parent, safe and sound. Kaija was just not sure what to expect from this particular gathering.

As she saw many faces light up, her smile turned even more radiant as her cheeks took on a reddish hue. Her grey eyes shone with joy. Then suddenly, as if a cloud covers up the sun, her smile faded away as she grew sad.

“But the developments of the last few weeks and especially, what happened here today makes me wonder if we are ready to embrace our new life.”

She sighed. Then finding some resolve within her, she continued.

“A few blocks from here, there is a small park. Right in front of the city council's office. There is a rough-hewn grave in that park, next to the pond. A beautiful old Rowan tree provides shade for the grave.

It is the grave of my best friend, Jaska. He died during that tragic heat wave. Many of you may have also lost someone in that heat wave.

In a moment of clarity, as I grieved for Jaska, I decided that I shall do my utmost so that no one has to suffer again in a similar way. I knew that the places from where many of you came from have become uninhabitable.

I knew that the rich countries were never going to send the money and resources that would enable you to adapt to the changing climate. A change to which you didn't contribute. In fact, it was the rich countries who have been the biggest contributors to

climate change. They were directly and solely responsible for your plight.

So I decided to invite all of you to the land of my ancestors on the same day when the nations that had occupied my ancestors' land were finally returning it to the stewardship of my people. Instead of looking back, in that moment of clarity, I decided to look ahead to the future.

I did the right thing!"

Again she looked all around her. Some knew what she was talking about. They had read about her. But for most of them, this was new. A wave of gratitude moved gently through the crowd. She was heartily thanked in many languages. She raised her hand in acknowledgment and then continued.

"I wish it was not just one moment of clarity, though. I wish that my perspective about life had changed permanently in that moment. I wish that I had continued to focus on the future of humanity instead of being pre-occupied with my past. I continued thinking about the friend that I had lost.

I would like to think that I could have done more to ensure that far more people were rescued instead of only ten million. As of now, more than a couple of billion people are in harm's way with nowhere to go. And in another couple of decades, that already large figure could easily double."

A hard look came in her eyes now.

"But all of you know that. You also know the compromise that allowed the creation of Sequoia. And, of course, you know very well the terms and conditions that you agreed to before being allowed to settle down in Sequoia."

People were indeed being patient. Sonia had begun to wonder where Kaija was going with all this. She was not yet worried, but was starting to get a bit concerned about her friend's state of mind. Instinctively, she moved closer to Kaija on the platform as Kaija continued with her soliloquy.

"Most of you may not know this. Even I didn't know about this until I talked to the people involved in the negotiations around the compromise.

Almost no one believed that we would survive.

Psychologists said that lack of families would doom us to chronic loneliness and



depression. Sociologists said that lack of anything cohesive - for example, culture or religion - to bind everyone together would lead to distrust and eventually, anarchy. Economists said that we were so ill-prepared and unskilled that we would never be able to become productive enough to pay off the loans let alone generate a surplus. It was all doom and gloom except for a few pinpricks of positivity.”

Kaija had been looking into the distance as she was describing all these things. Now she looked at the crowd standing close to her. She even made a conscious effort to look at the camera-holding drones so that the audience that was further away wouldn't feel left out.

“And they were right, those doomers. For a while, at least. Things looked quite bleak during that first winter in Sequoia. Most of us were indeed lonely. We were missing our family and friends and those familiar surroundings that we had grown up with. We were miserable in this cold and dark place where we knew no one. We were depressed.

It is not that the places we had left behind were nice places. Those families and friends may not have been nice either. In fact, those places were downright horrible for many of us. And many times, the so-called families were the primary abusers.

But we knew all that. There is a certain kind of comfort in the known. The unknown scares us. We gravitate toward the known even if it is harmful. We tend to resist the unknown even if it could be incredibly beneficial for us. It seems that is our nature.

I admit that I too was quite sad and simply going through the motions of being part of the city council. I think, if I had not been assigned that work then I may have spiraled off into oblivion. That task anchored me to reality exactly when I needed something like that in my life. Do you remember those days?”

She saw many people nodding. Their expressions were clouded as those memories rushed back. Then in a quiet voice, Kaija said, “but soon, a miracle happened. We snapped out of that funk. Individually and collectively. I think, for the first time, we actually saw each other. Not just as another re-settled stranger who happened to be living in the same building as us or trying to work with us. We saw each other as potential relationships with wonderful possibilities. Remember that?”

A few smiles perked up. Of course, they remembered the friendships they had formed then. Remembered how they had fallen in love with someone for the first time in Sequoia.

“We started caring for each other. And that made us want to do things that would bring joy to each other. We started looking out for each other. This... this sense of

community... this sense of camaraderie and fellowship is ALSO in our nature.

We didn't even realize it, but the fact that we didn't have to endlessly worry about the basic necessities of life had liberated us to focus on the things that make life beautiful. Worth living, in fact.

No more fear of being molested or getting killed. No more scrounging for food and water. No more suffering from unbearable heat. No more living through the agony of untreated diseases. Suddenly, daily life had become mundanely safe for all of us.

Of course, all of you knew that subconsciously even before you moved here. In fact, that was the reason that you had chosen to come here. You had dreamed of these things. And those dreams had indeed come true. You could finally sleep peacefully through the night."

Kaija was grinning from ear to ear. She hadn't realized it herself. Such is the infectious aspect of joy. There were many broad smiles in the crowd now.

"Another thing that used to create a lot of stress in our lives, had vanished when we moved here."

"Correction - at least receded in the background!"

She looked questioningly at them. Silently urging them to guess what she was referring to. No one said anything. Many looked confused.

"The social structure that we grew up in, no longer surrounded us."

The confusion continued. But revelation seemed to be dawning slowly on the faces of a few.

"You see - our place in society was defined right from the moment of our birth. Because of our gender. Our religion. Our race... caste... color of our skin. The unique family in which we are born. The money that the family had. Everything was already defined for us.

No one asked us how we should be treated. We were supposed to simply do what we were told to do. May it be by another person... starting from our immediate family all the way to so-called leaders from far away. Or it may have been written down in a book... say, a religious text. Or the laws of that place. We were told again and again that we were not supposed to think for ourselves. We were supposed to simply

conform to whatever the so-called tradition was.

If anyone refused to do so, then the cost they paid for that rebellion was extremely high. Either they were punished or outright killed for their transgression. At the least, they were cast out into a life of loneliness. So... most of us put aside our brains... our hearts... our minds... and did what we were told to do.

The problem is - the idea of not thinking for ourselves, is NOT in our nature. Living our lives by the rules written by others, sometimes centuries ago, even millennia, is NOT in our nature. In fact, it is completely unnatural!"

Without missing a beat, Kaija triumphantly said, "in Sequoia, that entire oppressive social structure was absent."

Her eyes were alive with a fierce energy.

"For the first time, in our lives, no one was telling us who we were supposed be! Especially, us women.

No man was controlling all aspects of our lives!

No traditions imprisoned us!

Even for the men, no authority figure was telling them what to do and how to think."

She beamed at them and then shouted out as loudly as she could, "for the first time, in all our lives, we were truly free!

Free to think for ourselves!

Free to do as we saw fit!

It was not just that the physical quality of our lives had improved drastically, but more importantly, our emotional lives had been transformed so much that they were unrecognizable!

All those years of being told that freedom meant anarchy... remember that?!

That was all lies!!!

With our new-found freedom in Sequoia, instead of hurting each other, we did the exact opposite. We saw each other. We collaborated with each other. We commiserated with each other. We loved each other. We found joy together. We managed to chase away our worries and sadness by drawing on each other's strength. We protected each other from harm.

We did this all entirely naturally. No one told us to do this. It was not described in the constitution of Sequoia. We just... did it. On our own... entirely voluntarily... without any coercion whatsoever... we were nice to each other. This IS our true nature!

It is because of this that I am not surprised that crime is very low in Sequoia. And there have been no murders at all for the first five years. Not a single murder in city of three million souls. Do you see what we have managed to achieve?"

There was an urgency in her voice now. Even some anguish as she repeated that question.

"That is until the last few days when many of us seemed to have lost our heads and reverted back to the absolutely vile behavior that we had left behind in the places we had grown up in.

Two of our fellow citizens had succumbed to the age-old impulse of avenging the wrongful deaths of their families by themselves committing a crime. You see, if their respective societies had not failed them first, then Alia and Sara wouldn't have any reason to do what they did. The places where they grew up - Iran and Sudan - allowed villains like Qasim and Nadeem to exist in the first place. Worse, those societies did nothing to protect themselves from those villains. And to top it off, they allowed those villains to get away with horrendous crimes.

I am not justifying the actions of Alia and Sara. Taking the law in their hands was unequivocally wrong. I am glad that they voluntarily confessed to their crimes. I believe that their contrition is genuine. But they will be punished for their actions. Because that is how a society thrives. It looks out for everyone. It holds everyone accountable. I am simply pointing out that the societies we left behind were very different from the one that we have created here in Sequoia. Until that is, some of us decided to take a hammer to it.

And all for what? For those long forgotten religious identities, you chose to commit violence against each other?!

Instead of seeing each other fully as complex and unique individuals who have free will, in just one moment, so many of us decided to reduce each other to a mere

religious identity that was assigned to us at birth. An identity that had forced us into servitude for life. We voluntarily decided to return to the prisons that had caged us since our birth. The prisons that we had broken free from when we chose to come to Sequoia.”

Her frustration and anger was spilling out now.

“Imagine if life had been stagnant instead of ever evolving. The world would still be full of single-cell organisms. We wouldn’t even exist!!

Imagine if we had not migrated in harmony with nature. Our species would have long ago become extinct. Luckily, our ancestors were not hung up on stupid ideas of owning land. Or drawing artificial boundaries on them that decided who can go where.

Imagine if scientists had not continued to experiment with new ideas. We would have never developed the technologies that make our lives comfortable.

Imagine if artists had decided that they would simply regurgitate the art that already existed. Where would all the wonderful new creations have come from?

It IS in our nature to change... to evolve... to create... to innovate.

It is NOT in our nature to stagnate.

To hell with traditions. Of all kinds. Whether they be religious or national or familial.

Do we really want to imprison ourselves all over again?

Or do we want to be free?!

Do we want to hurt each other?

Or do we want to thrive with each other?

It is time to decide what we want from our future!

What do YOU want?!” she, literally, yelled.

It was muted at first, but slowly and surely the wave built up from all parts of Sequoia.

“Down with all the traditions!”

“Freedom!”

The declaration reverberated throughout the city.

Kaija raised her right hand again. She had more things to say.

“That moment of clarity I had years ago was the first one. I had a second similar moment last night as I listened to Alia and Sara wrestle with their feelings.”

The faces in the crowd were flushed with passion.

“I realized yesterday that when we came here, we signed a formal contract with the UN about the dos and don’ts. Then we discovered this wonderful way of life that brought us so much joy over the last five years. But, in confronting the first crisis, we promptly fell back into our old ways of thinking. Alia and Sara let their old emotions and familial obligations overrule their affinity with the new way of life in Sequoia. Many of us who decided to take up arms acted similarly - they allowed their religious identity to wipe away their individuality. That same individuality which had enabled them to care for their fellow citizens.

In order to prevent or at least try to make such a de facto retrogression from happening again, I think, we need to formally affirm - both individually and collectively - that we shall always prioritize this new way of life that we have established in Sequoia. That instead of allowing the past to dictate our present and future, we shall do all the thinking ourselves.

Are we ready to embrace this way of life?”

“YES! YES! We do!” the first tidal wave of affirmation crashed all over Sequoia.

“That instead of reducing our identities to some family name or religion or gender or race or caste or color or place or anything like that, we shall respect each other as we are! Shall we do that?”

“YES!” and a second tidal wave swept across Sequoia.

“That instead of looking out for our individual selves, we shall always ensure that we don’t cause anyone else any harm. Rather, our actions would benefit others all over the

world! All of humanity. All the creatures on earth. The Earth itself!”

“WE DO! YES! YES!” a third wave raced across Sequoia.

“IT IS DECIDED THEN!”

“YES!”

The echoes continued long after the crowd dispersed that day!

In that moment, the people of Sequoia had formally and for the first time in their lives, embraced a new faith. A faith that was based on the core of human nature. They wouldn't be afraid to change... to evolve. They would care for each other. They would care for all of humanity. They would care for the whole earth!



**THE END**