

UNWITTING ACCOMPLICE

RV RAMAN

A Short Story

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It was with relief that Dr Govind stepped aside to make way for the small group of tonsured Germans clad in white dhotis and pale saffron kurtas. A couple of them had buttonholed him on the flight and thrown a barrage of questions about India and spirituality; questions he had been hard pressed to answer. After all, he had emigrated before his questioners had even been born.

This visit to Jaipur, he was looking forward to. Except for the conference tomorrow and the day after, the entire two-week visit was for catching up with the extended family – something he had come to value after living in the west for decades. He smiled as he thought of Rajan, his cousin's son, who would be waiting outside the arrival lounge. It was only in India that a distant relative came to receive you at the airport.

'Govind Uncle!' Rajan grinned as he embraced the older man and took charge of his suitcase. 'Wonderful to see you! Welcome!'

'It's very kind of you to come to the airport, Rajan,' Govind said. 'I'm sorry to pull you away from work, but I'm coming here after so long that –'

'You wouldn't know your way around,' Rajan interrupted. 'I have more leave that I can use, Uncle. Several unused days lapse every year and I can't encash them either. This gives me a welcome excuse to take *chutti*.'

Govind realised guiltily that he had forgotten where Rajan worked. He was a junior executive in some public sector company, he seemed to recall. Though he and his wife, Roopa, weren't particularly well off, they were always willing to help physically.

'How is Roopa?' he asked as he climbed into Rajan's aged Hyundai Santro.

'She's fine. Happily busy at this time of the year.'

'Navaratri?'

Rajan nodded. 'She is quite creative, and therefore in great demand among her friends. She's probably helping a friend with her skit right now. You'll meet her at lunch.' Rajan glanced at the car clock and continued, 'I hope that's okay, Uncle? You had said that you wanted to

go to the hotel first. So I told her that we won't get home before 12:30.'

'Oh, that's fine. Absolutely fine. It'll probably be past eleven by the time we reach the hotel. I'll check in and take a quick shower. Also need to pick up some fruits for Devika on the way home. How is the old dame, by the way? It's been ages since I saw her.'

Devika Prasad was Rajan's mami – his mother's brother's wife – whom Rajan lived with and looked after.

'Not too good.' Rajan replied. His face had grown serious. 'She's pushing eighty now and has more ailments than she can handle.'

'She's a tough one. None of my patients have successfully fought off two rounds of cancer and lived to tell the tale.'

'It's taken its toll, Uncle. She is so frail. Her doctor doesn't think she has much time left – six months, he says. That's one of the reasons I'm delighted at your visit. She'll get to see you.' His face suddenly brightened. 'Say! Would you like to talk to her?'

'Sure! Why not?'

'Let's surprise her. She'll be delighted!' Rajan fiddled with his mobile, and the ringing of a phone came through the car's music system. 'Bluetooth,' Rajan explained. 'It helps me make and receive calls without taking my hands off the steering wheel.'

'Hello?' A low tremulous voice said and coughed.

'Hi Mami!' Rajan said. 'How is your cough?'

'It's there, beta, and the throat aches. But I'm drinking warm water every half hour to soothe it. Has Govind's flight landed?'

Rajan grinned at Govind and nodded.

'Good morning Devika!' Govind said. 'I've landed and am in the car. How are you?'

'Govi!' Devika's voice seemed to crack with emotion, and she coughed again. 'Govi, I'm so glad you are here. I'm sorry I couldn't come to the airport to receive you.'

'No, no! Why should *you* come to receive me? I'm fifteen years your junior.'

'You are coming after such a long time. You are coming straight home, aren't you?'

'Well ... not exactly. I need to check into the hotel first and –'

'A hotel? When *I* am here?' Her voice grew hoarse with annoyance.

‘We have two spare rooms. Rajan, I *told* you he should stay here. Didn’t you –’

She broke into a coughing fit.

‘I did, Mami, but –’

‘Don’t blame him, Devika,’ Govind cut in. ‘He insisted but I declined. I’ll stay with you from the day after tomorrow –’

‘Why? Is it an auspicious day?’

Govind let loose a hearty laugh.

‘It is not every day that a sixty five year old doctor is admonished,’ he said. ‘Don’t be offended, Devika. My colleagues are staying at the hotel, and I need to stay with them during the conference. It’s only for two nights, you know. I’ll stay with you after that.’

‘And Mami, he’s having lunch with us today.’

‘I hope Roopa remembered. She’s gone for some Navaratri skit practice.’

‘Yes, she remembered,’ Rajan laughed. ‘She’ll make fresh rotis when she returns. I’ll pick her up on the way home.’

The chime of the doorbell sounded.

‘Someone at the door,’ Devika said. ‘Okay, Govi, I’ll see you at lunch.’

‘Hard as nails, the old dame is,’ Govind chuckled as Rajan hung up. ‘And very much of the old school. I hope she doesn’t haul you over coals for not *making* me stay with you,’

They continued chatting as Rajan drove into the city. Suddenly, Govind swivelled in his seat as the car passed a garishly decorated gate resplendent with ochre banners and gold-trimmed triangular flags. The group of tonsured Germans from the flight were getting off an Innova.

‘Hey!’ he exclaimed. ‘What’s this place?’

‘Ashram of Baba Devang, an up-and-coming godman.’

‘Godman or conman?’

Rajan shrugged. ‘Who is to say? One hears all kinds of stories – from capers to miracles; from how he cures cripples to how he milks the gullible. He has more devotees than detractors.’

‘A modern day Krishna who cures cripples, eh? He must know more about medicine than I do. The Germans on the flight were singing his praises and were not in the least bit impressed that I didn’t know of such

a great man in my own country.'

'Well, foreigners and wealthy oldies are his speciality, they say. He conducts séances for widows and widowers where one can speak to the spirits of their departed spouses. He apparently also helps them attain *mukti* – salvation. He even makes house calls if you can afford it. We know of a jeweller's widow he visits.'

Govind laughed out aloud and continued guffawing as Rajan looked on amusedly.

'Buy your way to salvation?' Govind chuckled, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. 'The wealthier you are the faster you can attain *mukti*. Not unlike the fast track channel in immigration.'

'Don't laugh, Uncle. Many widows and widowers in our colony swear by him.'

'But not Devika, I bet. She won't let grass grow under her feet, bless her.'

Rajan grinned. 'Not for want not trying on the Baba's part, though. His *bhakt*s have been after her. Here we are. That's your hotel.'

He pointed to a large building further down the road.

'Great! I am walking distance from the Baba. Perhaps I should enlighten myself one of these evenings. Say Rajan, come up and relax in my room once I check in. Have a coffee or something while I freshen up.'

An hour and a half later, Govind, Roopa and Rajan stepped out of the lift on the sixth floor of their apartment building. Rajan unlocked the door and took a few steps into the hall as he ushered Govind in. Half way down the hall, he froze and stared openmouthedly through an open bedroom door. Behind him, Roopa let out a stifled scream and staggered.

On a writing desk in the large bedroom lay a slumped figure, sitting on a chair with the torso fallen forward on the table, onto a brownish red stain that had spread across half the desk. The face was turned away but there was no doubt to the identity of the corpse.

Devika.

A large kitchen knife, shiny and stained maroon, lay on the floor. Beyond the desk, a steel almirah stood with its doors wide open. The locker in it also lay open. And empty.

* * *

Inspector Rathore and a small group of people sat in the oversized hall. Devika's body had been removed, and the bedroom had been sealed off by the police. With Rathore was a grizzled, kindly looking man in his fifties, who Rathore had introduced as Mr Athreya. There was nothing remarkable about the spare, erect man other than a head that was a tad large for his shoulders, and an immaculately groomed salt-and-pepper beard. Roopa, Rajan, Govind and an elderly couple made up the rest of the gathering. A teary-eyed Roopa sat close to her husband.

'How long was she dead when you found her?' Rathore began by asking Govind.

'I'm afraid I am not the right person for this sort of a thing, Inspector. I am a cardiologist, but I am seldom called upon to estimate the time of death.'

'I understand, Doctor. What's your best guess?'

'Well, it's apparent that she had been dead for at least two hours. But how much more, I don't know. Three hours? Four? I am not sure, but I'd put the outer limit as four hours.'

'Let's say two to four hours. You found her at 12:45 pm, right?'

'Yes, give or take a few minutes. I didn't look at the time until after I had examined her.'

'That suggests that she was killed between 8:45 and 10:45 in the morning. That's a pretty large window, Doctor.'

'That's the best I can do. The autopsy should give you a better estimate.'

'You said you had spoken to her after you had landed. What time was that?'

'Sometime between ten and eleven. Rajan called her from his mobile —'

'Then the call history should give us the exact time.' Rathore turned to Rajan, who was already pulling out his mobile.

'10:28 am,' Rajan said, looking at his mobile.

'And how long was the call?' Athreya asked mildly, adjusting his rimless glasses and speaking for the first time. His voice was low and soft.

Rajan took a few moments to navigate to the call details and read out from the phone: 'Two minutes and thirteen seconds.'

'A short call for two people speaking after several years, wasn't it?' Athreya asked, stroking his chin and looking thoughtfully out of the French windows at the far end of the hall.

'She called off because the doorbell rang,' Govind explained. 'Someone was at the door.'

Athreya's eyes snapped back to the doctor.

'The doorbell?' he asked softly. 'You heard it over the phone?'

'Quite distinctly.' Govind glanced at Rajan. 'Didn't we?'

Rajan nodded. 'Our doorbell chimes in a peculiar sort of way ... a series of bird tweets.'

'Can you do me a favour, Mr Rajan? Will you ring the doorbell please?'

Rajan rose and went to door. Presently, the hall erupted into a cacophony of tweets.

'Was that the sound you heard?' Athreya asked.

'Yes,' Govind nodded with certainty. 'That's the one.'

'Any idea who it was who rang the bell, Mr Rajan?' Rathore asked.

Rajan shook his head and turned to Roopa inquiringly.

'Nobody was expected, as far as I know,' Roopa said. 'The maid had come and gone, and the clothes ironing man was not due today.'

'Could your aunt have been expecting someone without your knowledge?'

'Certainly. Neighbours drop in from time to time, as does mami's relationship manager from the bank.' Her gaze flickered to the elderly man wearing thick steel-frame glasses. 'Besides, we have relatives in the building who regularly looked her up.'

'Who are the relatives living in this building?'

'Let me answer that, Inspector,' interrupted the elderly man, adjusting his glasses nervously. 'My name is Kailash Prasad, and I am Devika's brother-in-law. Her late husband, Alok, was my brother. I live on the second floor.'

'The land this building stands on was originally three separate plots belonging to different people. The largest of the three plots belonged to my father, which he left to Alok and me – his sons – to share equally.'

‘When this building was constructed, our share was six of the twenty four flats, which Alok and I divided equally between us. Alok took the three flats on this floor, and I took the three on the second floor. My wife and I live in one of them and my son and his family live in another. The third has been let out for rent.’

‘Your son’s name please?’

‘Sunil. His wife’s name is Mona. They have a son – Tarun – aged twenty.’

‘Thank you. Please go on.’

‘Alok and I had a sister – Parvathi – who is no more. Rajan is Parvathi’s son and my nephew.’

‘I see. Thank you.’ Rathore returned his attention to Roopa. ‘When did you leave the flat this morning?’

‘About ten o’clock. A friend of mine – Puja Sharma – is putting up a skit for Navaratri, and a practice session was scheduled in her flat at 10:15. It’s about ten minutes away by autorickshaw, and it took me five minutes to get an auto. So, I must have left here at around ten.’

‘You locked the front door when you left?’

Roopa nodded. ‘The door locks automatically when you shut it. It has a spring-loaded lock.’

‘And you went directly to Puja Sharma’s flat?’

‘Yes, except for stopping briefly at the gate to tell the security guard that I was going out, and to call me if there was any emergency with mami.’

‘Any particular reason you did that?’

‘She always does that when she goes out,’ Kailash interjected.

‘Devika has been a cancer patient for years now and was on her last legs. The guard has Roopa’s mobile number, and is to call her or me in case of an emergency.’

‘How many keys are there to the front door?’

‘Three,’ Roopa said. ‘One is usually at home, another is with my husband, and the third is kept in Sunil and Mona’s flat on the second floor.’

‘You said the front door automatically locks when you shut it, right?’

‘Yes ... unless you turn the small knob on the inside to the vertical position. But we don’t usually do that. We use the rubber door stopper to

prevent the door from closing when we are outside.’

‘That’s why they keep one key in Sunil’s flat,’ Kailash interjected. ‘Just in case someone gets locked out accidentally.’

‘And where does your son keep the key?’

‘Sunil? On the key hanger in their hall.’

‘And the key that is kept in this flat?’ Rathore continued, turning to Roopa. ‘Was it there when you returned today afternoon?’

Roopa nodded and pointed to a tree-shaped key hanger on the wall behind her.

‘And I presume you had your key, Mr Rajan?’

‘Yes. That’s what I used to open the door when we came.’

‘Pardon me,’ Athreya interjected mildly. ‘I may be mistaken, but isn’t this hall unusually large?’

‘That’s because this is actually two halls, and this flat is actually two flats combined,’ Rajan explained. He pointed to the centre of the hall. ‘There was a wall here that was demolished.’

‘Ah! If this is actually two flats, there should be another entrance. Another front door.’

‘There,’ Rajan pointed to a foyer at the other end of the hall.

‘Through that foyer. But we don’t use that door. It’s bolted from the inside.’

Athreya walked to the foyer and studied the large wooden cupboard standing with its back against the door. He stooped and ran his finger along the floor between the cupboard and the wall, and grimaced at the dust on his finger.

Rathore turned to Kailash. ‘What were your movements this morning?’ he asked.

The woman beside Kailash – his wife – glared at Rathore, but Kailash answered without resentment.

‘I took my morning walk on the terrace between 9:15 and 9:45. I had a shower after that and went to my son’s flat, where I was till about 11:00. These times are approximate.’

‘What were you doing in your son’s flat?’

‘Discussing some business matters.’

‘And your wife?’ Rathore, glancing at the glowering woman. ‘Where was she?’

‘Shuttling between our flat and Sunil’s.’

‘She didn’t join you for the walk on the terrace?’

‘No. Nine o’clock is too cold for her. She takes her walk later in the morning when it is warmer.’

‘Now, coming to the burglary,’ Rathore continued, ‘I believe the steel almirah was open?’

‘Yes,’ Rajan said. ‘And the locker inside too.’

‘What was missing?’

‘Cash.’ Rajan’s gaze.

‘How much?’ Athreya asked.

Rajan squirmed uncomfortably. ‘Quite a lot,’ he said after a long pause. ‘Several bundles of five hundred rupee notes.’

‘Lakhs of rupees?’ Athreya’s eyebrows rose. ‘How did that much cash come to be in an elderly lady’s flat?’

Rajan fell silent, looking at Kailash with pleading eyes.

‘Perhaps,’ Kailash rumbled slowly, ‘I should answer that. It’s not fair to bring Rajan into this. You remember that Alok got three flats from my father’s share? Well, Devika sold one of them six months back.’

‘And?’

‘Come on, Mr Athreya! Don’t you understand? Does any real estate transaction in this city take place entirely by cheque payment?’

‘Ah! Of course! How silly of me. So, how many lakhs did she get in cash?’

‘Forty lakhs.’

‘And all of that was in the steel almirah?’

‘No,’ Rajan interjected. ‘Twenty lakhs is still in mami’s bank locker.’

‘How do *you* know?’ the elderly lady seated next to Kailash asked, glaring at Rajan.

‘I’m the one who takes her to the bank, Mami. She brought home ten lakhs last week.’

‘*Ten* lakhs!’ Kailash exclaimed. ‘Whatever for?’

‘I don’t know.’ Rajan shook his head slowly. ‘She didn’t say and I didn’t ask.’

‘Okay, twenty lakhs in the bank and ten at home,’ Kailash continued severely. ‘What about the remaining ten? Had she run through it in six months?’

Rajan squirmed again. 'You remember, Mama, she had jewellery made for Mona, Tarun ... and Roopa?

'Of course!' A pained expression passed over Kailash's face. For a moment, he gazed sadly into his nephew's eyes. 'I'm sorry, Rajan ... I forgot.'

Athreya sat back with a benign half-smile.

'Okay.' Rathore forged ahead. 'Ten lakhs cash is missing. Anything else? Jewellery?'

All eyes turned to Roopa.

'I don't know,' she whispered. She seemed to shrink into the sofa. 'I've never looked into the other locker.'

'Never?' Kailash's wife asked.

Kailash turned a furious gaze to her, but it was too late. The damage was done. Roopa looked as if she had been slapped.

'Never!' Roopa shook her head slowly, fresh tears cascading down her face. She buried her face in Rajan's shoulder and began weeping.

Athreya studied Kailash's wife. Her face was hard, her lips compressed and eyes unforgiving. There was more to this family that needed finding out. Roopa and Rajan, the poorer relatives who looked after a childless Devika, were the object of resentment as well as suspicion.

'I will check the other locker where Devika kept her jewels, Inspector,' Kailash said, ending the uncomfortable break in conversation. 'But there is something else missing – two cheque leaves.'

He picked up a cheque book from the table and opened it.

'I asked your man to leave it behind after he had dusted it for fingerprints,' he explained. 'The last cheque number recorded in the transaction sheet where Devika kept track of issued cheques is 248041. But look at the remaining cheque leaves – the top is 248044. Two cheques – 248042 and 248043 – are missing.'

'Any idea what happened to them?' Rathore asked.

Rajan, who had his arm around his distraught wife, shook his head silently and returned to the task of comforting her. Seeing that Roopa and Rajan were unwilling to speak any more before Kailash's wife, Rathore rose. Athreya followed suit.

'Thank you,' Rathore said as he shut his notebook. 'Let's see what

the security guard has to say.'

Kailash's wife strode out to the lift while Kailash got up slowly and followed Rathore out of the door.

'Can I speak to you for a minute before you go down?' he asked softly. 'We can talk by that window.' He pointed at a large opening at the far end of the lobby.

'Sure.' Rathore followed Kailash with Athreya close behind.

'I would like you to understand the family background, Inspector,' Kailash said softly. 'While Alok and I did well professionally, my sister Parvathi's husband did not. When he died, he left Parvathi with a mountain of debt that she couldn't repay on her own. She and her son didn't have a roof above their heads either. And to make matters worse, my father had willed his property only to his sons.'

'Alok and Devika, being childless, wanted to take Parvathi and Rajan under their wing, but Parvathi was too proud to accept what she saw as charity. To cut a long story short, Devika got Parvathi a job while Alok and I found ways to fund Rajan's education. Even then, their existence was hand-to-mouth.'

'When Alok and Parvathi passed away in quick succession a few years back, Devika consulted me – her lawyer – and decided on a course of action. She merged two of her flats to create space, and asked Rajan and Roopa to move in. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement wherein a childless Devika got someone to look after her in her old age, and Parvathi's son got a roof above his head.'

'I see ...' Athreya chewed his lip thoughtfully. 'Did anyone else in the family resent it?'

Kailash let out a long sigh and threw up his hand.

'How does it matter now, Mr Athreya? Let bygones be bygones.'

'We have a murder on our hands, Mr Prasad,' Rathore cut in.

'Motives are key.'

'What do you want me to do, Inspector?' Kailash snapped. 'Implicate my own kin? But let me say this – it's not only Devika's relatives who resented her money going to Rajan. There are others too who have their eyes on her wealth.'

'How was Parvathi's relationship with Devika?' Athreya asked.

'Excellent. Devika was a very kind woman.'

‘And your wife? Did she get along well with Parvathi?’

Kailash shrugged. ‘They got along,’ he said listlessly.

‘Your wife’s remark ... it upset Roopa badly ...’ Athreya left the sentence hanging.

‘Where there is jewellery, there is envy.’ Kailash turned and began walking towards the lift. ‘You may want to catch the security guard before the shift changes.’

* * *

‘We know who rang the bell at 10:30 in the morning!’ Sub-inspector Patil, Rathore’s assistant, was beside himself with excitement as Rathore and Athreya entered the police Innova parked outside the gate. ‘It was a man from Baba Devang’s ashram. His name is Bhuvan.’

‘Go on,’ Rathore gestured impatiently.

‘The security guard at the gate confirmed that Bhuvan came in at 10:30 and left about ten minutes later. Apparently, he has been visiting Devaki Prasad for the past few weeks.’

‘Is the guard sure of the time?’

‘Positive! Bhuvan exchanged pleasantries with him before entering the lift. Ten minutes or so later, Bhuvan came back down and left.’

‘Did he speak to the guard when he left?’

‘No. The guard thought he seemed preoccupied.’

‘What was Bhuvan carrying?’ Athreya asked. ‘Did the security guard notice?’

‘Yes, sir!’ Patil’s smile broadened. ‘He was carrying a backpack.’ Patil turned to Rathore. ‘I think we should pick up Bhuvan, sir.’

‘Only for questioning, Patil. No arrest, no strong-arm stuff. Understood?’

Patil’s face lost some of its enthusiasm. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Bring him to the station. Remember, no force.’

Patil strode towards a police van outside the gate, gesturing to two constables as he went.

‘What do you think, sir?’ Rathore asked as the Innova began moving. His tone was deferential, but not in an official or formal sort of way. It was as if he was talking to a mentor.

‘Too early to say, Rathore.’ Athreya ran his slender fingers through his fine-haired mane. ‘It will be interesting to hear what this man Bhuvan has to say.’

‘He will deny it for sure.’

‘Yes, but what alternative explanation will he give? Will he deny that he rang the doorbell?’

‘We’ll know shortly.’

An hour later, they had Bhuvan’s preliminary statement: He had no idea that Devika had been killed, and was stunned that the police suspected him. Yes, he had gone to her flat that morning and had rung the bell. Despite ringing it several times, there had been no answer. He had waited for ten minutes and left. He had gone straight back to the ashram. And yes, he had visited Devika a few times on the ashram’s business over the past few weeks. But he was cagey about what that business was.

‘It all fits in, sir,’ Patil said triumphantly as he, Rathore and Athreya sat in Rathore’s office. ‘There was no way he could deny going to the flat – he knew that the security guard had seen him.’

‘What do you think was the “ashram’s business” he was referring to?’ Rathore asked.

‘What else, sir? Milking Devika Prasad as the baba has milked dozens of widows and widowers! We must move quickly sir, before the cash leaves the ashram.’

‘There is no hurry, young man,’ Athreya said, polishing his glasses vigorously. ‘If the cash reached the ashram, it would have left by now too. I suppose the baba is aware of Bhuvan’s arrest.’

‘Yes, sir. He tried to stop us.’

‘Tell me, Patil,’ Athreya said placidly as if he was discussing a movie he had watched the previous night, ‘was the murder premeditated or opportunistic?’

‘It could be either, sir. Does it matter?’

‘Doesn’t it?’ Athreya held up his glasses against the light to evaluate the results of his polishing. ‘If it was premeditated, would Bhuvan have chatted with the security guard and called attention to himself?’

‘No, sir.’

‘If it was opportunistic, would he have gone to the ashram and waited

for you to come and nab him?’

‘I –’

‘And if *he* had killed and stolen ten lakhs, would he give it to the ashram or keep it for himself?’

‘I am not sure, sir.’

Athreya pocketed his handkerchief and wore his glasses.

‘You see, Patil, it doesn’t fit in neatly after all. Bhuvan didn’t behave like a man about to commit a murder. Nor did he behave like one who has just killed someone and stolen her money.’

‘Then –’

‘It will be interesting to know who else knew that Bhuvan was going to meet Devika today.’

‘I’ll find out, sir. I think the baba knew.’

A man given more to action than thought, Patil strode out purposefully.

‘Now, let’s take stock, sir,’ Rathore said briskly. ‘As far as motive is concerned, ten lakhs provides everyone – relative or the ashram guys – with a strong one.’

‘Don’t forget the missing cheques,’ Athreya added.

Rathore looked up at the older man in puzzlement.

‘With Devika dead, the cheques can no longer be cashed,’ he said.

‘And if anyone tries to do so, it will be a dead giveaway. The cheques are not relevant.’

‘You think so?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘No matter. Proceed with your analysis.’

‘Devika was alive at 10:28 am when the doorbell rang and she terminated the call with Rajan and Govind. Both the police doctor and Dr Govind say that she was dead by 10:45 am. Even if we extend that by fifteen minutes, Devika was certainly dead by 11:00 am. So, the murder took place between 10:28 and 11:00 am.

‘Now, let’s look at where everybody was during that period. Govind and Rajan were driving from the airport to the hotel. Roopa was in Puja Sharma’s flat, where she remained till Rajan picked her up.’

‘Couldn’t she made a quick dash to Devika’s flat and returned?’

Rathore shook his head. ‘Out of the question. That would take at least

twenty-five minutes – ten to get there, ten to return and at least five at the flat. Puja Sharma is certain that Roopa was in her flat all the time.’

‘Okay. Go on.’

‘Kailash and Sunil were together in the latter’s flat on the second floor –’

‘– but there is no independent witness who can confirm that.’

‘Right. Kailash’s wife was here and there, and the boy who sweeps the common area thinks that he saw her go up to the terrace for her mid-morning walk.’

‘What time?’

‘He can’t say for sure, but he thinks it may be around eleven o’clock. Mona had gone to the market – the driver and two shopkeepers confirm that. That leaves only Tarun.’

‘Tarun?’ Athreya blinked as he tried to recall the name.

‘Sunil and Mona’s son. Kailash’s grandson.’

‘Ah, yes! The young man. Where was he?’

‘Mona says he had left for Baba Devang’s ashram at 9 o’clock. He hasn’t returned yet. I’ve asked Patil to locate him if he is still at the ashram.’

‘I wonder if Tarun and Bhuvan know each other,’ Athreya said.

‘I think they do. From what he heard from the security guard and the drivers, Patil suspects that Tarun was the one who put Bhuvan onto Devika.’

* * *

Patil was bursting with impatience when Rathore and Athreya walked in the next day, a mere twenty four hours after the murder. Tarun had been found in the ashram, stoned and disoriented, and unable to recall events of the previous day. Rumours of his drug problem had been confirmed by a reluctant Kailash and a devastated Mona. Patil had arrested Tarun and three others for possession of drugs.

Patil had confirmed that Tarun was on friendly terms with Bhuvan, and the two of them had often been seen together. All that was known of Tarun’s movements was that he had left home around 9 o’clock saying that he was going to the ashram. Nobody Patil had spoken to had seen

him after that, and his whereabouts between 10:28 and 11:00 on the morning of the murder were still unknown.

Mona's and Roopa's alibis had been confirmed by independent witnesses, but Kailash, his wife and Sunil had only each other's word for where they were.

With Tarun incarcerated for the time being, Patil wanted a warrant issued for Bhuvan's arrest. Rathore agreed, and the hasty process for Bhuvan's arrest began immediately.

Kailash had sent a scanned copy of Devika's will, which had been drawn up ten months ago. The interconnected flats she was living in went to Rajan. Her jewellery was to be divided between Mona and Roopa. The will was silent on her financial investments.

Kailash's firm belief was that nobody in the extended family other than Devika and he knew of the contents of the will. It had been drafted, signed and witnessed in the office of the law firm where Kailash had practised prior to his retirement. After signing, the will had been deposited in the safe in the office. No copies had been made, and the original had never been outside the law firm.

'Do you have the phone number of Devika's relationship manager at the bank?' Athreya asked.

'Yes,' Rathore nodded, reaching for his desk phone. 'Want to speak to him?'

'Good afternoon,' Athreya said once the relationship manager came on the line. 'I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about Mrs Devika Prasad.'

'Sure, sir,' the relationship manager replied.

'Did you handle all her financial matters?'

'Yes, sir. As far as I know the only account she had was with our bank.'

'What about her investments?'

'That too. We were her broker for all mutual funds and fixed deposits.'

'Were the investments only in her name, or were they joint with someone else?'

'Single holder only. All of them in her name. But all investments had a nominee – usually Mr Tarun or Mr Rajan.'

‘So what happens now?’

‘The money in the investment goes to the nominee.’

‘I see ... what was your impression of Mrs Prasad? What kind of a person was she?’

‘Oh, she was very kind and courteous – one of my best clients, I am proud to say. I am just a little older than her grandson, but she treated me with utmost courtesy and respect. She would only meet by appointment though, which was fine with me.’

‘So, how would a typical visit go?’

‘She would ask me to take a seat in the hall and offer something to drink. Then, she would conduct the business and sign any papers that need signing. As her hand used to tremble, she would sign a few times on a rough sheet, and when she felt comfortable, she would sign on the document or cheque.’

‘Did her signature vary a lot because of the trembling?’

‘Yes, sir. But the bank knows her well and we often have this signature problem with elderly people. So, the bank uses the discretion vested in it.’

‘I see that the cheque details in the transaction sheet of her cheque book is neatly filled out –’

‘I used to write that for her as her hand trembled. I also wrote the cheques. She only signed them.’

Rathore asked a few questions and hung up.

‘So,’ Rathore said, ‘her financial investments go to Rajan and Tarun. That adds to the motive.’

‘But they would have got it anyway, wouldn’t they?’ Athreya mused. ‘They all knew that she had only six months to live. Why kill her for it and run the risk?’

‘Maybe, someone needed money in a hurry?’

‘Hmm ...’ Athreya looked up abruptly. ‘Tell me, are they vegetarians in Devika’s house?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘Oh ... just wondered.’

The next day, a spry and sprightly Athreya set out to conduct his own investigations. First, he went to Devika's flat and examined the front door and the spring-loaded lock in it. He shut it from inside and asked Roopa to ring the doorbell from outside. Then, using the key taken from Rathore, he entered the sealed bedroom and spent ten minutes in it.

He went to the two shops Mona had been to on the morning of the murder, visited Puja Sharma, the lady in whose flat the Navaratri skit practice had taken place, made a quick survey of Baba Devang's ashram, and spoke to Tarun and Bhuvan.

Finally, he went to Govind's hotel just as the conference ended for the day, and spoke to him. At the end of his discussion, he asked Govind to come to Devika's flat the next evening after the conference concluded.

* * *

It was with some trepidation that Govind stepped out of the lift on the sixth floor and approached Devika's front door. The meeting with Athreya last night have been strange. He hadn't known that Athreya, a retired investigator, was the man behind the cracking of some of the most baffling cases in recent times.

His name was well known in police circles, but he had insisted on keeping a low public profile, and had let others deal with the media. He had taken an early retirement last year, but was frequently called to assist in difficult cases. He had happened to be in Jaipur, and Inspector Rathore had called him in.

Athreya had asked Govind some peculiar questions that had left him unsettled. He had asked Govind to narrate everything he had seen and heard in great detail. He had even asked what Govind thought – as a doctor – about Devika's cough.

At the end of it, he had made a dramatic statement that had left Govind deeply disturbed.

'Among all the people in this drama,' he had said, 'both relatives and the ashram people, only one person is above suspicion. You. You were a key character in the first act of the tragedy. You must play your part in the final act too.'

Taking a deep breath, Govind now stepped up and rang the doorbell.

The cacophony of bird tweets that erupted on the other side of the door sent a chill down his spine.

‘Come, Dr Govind,’ Athreya said as he opened the door and waved Govind to a chair.

In the hall were the same people who had been there when Rathore had begun his investigation two days ago. None of them spoke a word as he entered. In the nervous silence, Athreya’s mild voice seemed jarringly loud.

‘What I want to say won’t take long,’ he began as soon as Govind was seated. ‘But first, I want to make a phone call that I’d like you to listen to.’

He picked up his mobile phone from the table and dialled a number. Suddenly, the room was filled with the sound of a phone ringing. Rajan had connected the phone to the speakers of Devika’s music system.

The ringing stopped and a low, tremulous voice answered.

‘Hello?’ it said and coughed.

It was a voice of an elderly lady, apparently hoarse from coughing.

‘Hello?’ Athreya answered. ‘How is your cough?’

‘It’s there, beta, and the throat aches. But I’m having warm water every half hour to soothe it. Has Govind’s flight landed?’ The voice coughed again.

Govind’s eyes went wide and the hair on his arms and neck stood on their ends. He found himself holding his breath. The voice was eerily similar to what he had heard in Rajan’s car. He saw Rajan jerk and sit up, clutching the soft armrest so tightly that his knuckles went white.

‘Good morning!’ Athreya said. ‘I’ve landed and am in the car. How are you?’

‘Govi!’ the voice cracked with emotion, and coughed again. ‘Govi, I’m so glad you are here. I’m sorry I couldn’t come to the airport to receive you. You are coming straight home, aren’t you?’

‘Well no,’ Athreya said. ‘I’m staying at hotel –’

‘A hotel when *I* am here?’ boomed the voice. ‘We have two spare rooms. Rajan, I told you that he should stay here. Didn’t you –’

The voice disintegrated into a minor coughing fit. Just as it ended, a series of bird tweets filled the air. Rajan rose reflexively to answer the summons of the doorbell, and sat back slowly as he realised that the

sound had come from the speakers.

‘Someone at the door,’ the voice said. ‘Okay, Govi, I’ll see you at lunch.’

An unnatural silence filled the room when the call ended. Govind’s heart was thudding away in his chest. He realised that he too was clutching his chair’s armrests tightly. His knuckles too had gone white.

‘Well, Dr Govind.’ Athreya’s soft voice cut through the silence, his hushed tone deepening the eeriness. ‘What do you think?’

‘Devika!’ Govind whispered. ‘But it can’t be! It was just like the phone call.’

‘Did you recognise the voice?’

‘Surely ...’ Govind trailed away.

‘Think!’ Athreya’s voice was like a whiplash. ‘Think and answer. Do you recognise the voice?’

‘I am not sure ... no ... I don’t think I recognise the voice.’

‘Now, look at me, Dr Govind.’

Govind’s eyes sought out Athreya’s. They didn’t seem benign any longer. They were hard ... deep ... knowing. The tone of his voice had also changed. This was not the mild-mannered Athreya of yesterday.

‘When was the last time you heard Devika’s voice? Set aside the phone call from the car.’

‘Maybe fifteen ... sixteen years back.’

‘Do you remember it?’

Govind was unsure – it had been *so* long back.

‘No...’ he mumbled, ‘no, I can’t say I do.’

‘Do you know, *of your own knowledge*, if the voice you heard in the car was Devika’s?’

So that was it! Govind was sure now!

‘No!’ he said vigorously. ‘Not of my own knowledge. I had *assumed* that the voice was Devika’s. If it was not hers, whose was it?’

‘Someone voice acting as Devika even as the old lady lay dead. Just like the voice you heard just now.’

Athreya turned a sorrowful gaze to Roopa.

‘You overdid the coughing, young lady,’ he said. ‘That was your undoing.’

Roopa sat pale and rigid in her sofa. Rajan was mutely holding her

hand.

‘You asked to use the toilet at Puja Sharma’s flat,’ Athreya continued. ‘At first, she didn’t hear the strange voice you were mimicking. But when she heard the nasty cough, she was concerned, and came to the toilet door to ask if you were alright. She also heard the sound of your doorbell that you played on your mobile. You had recorded the chime on your phone – just as I did in mine yesterday. It is a very peculiar chime. Puja remembered it just as well as Dr Govind did.’

Govind was stunned, but something inside him rebelled.

‘But the phone records show that Rajan had called Devika’s mobile,’ he protested.

‘So he did.’ Athreya’s eyes were still on Roopa. ‘Roopa took Devika’s mobile to Puja’s flat after killing her. At 10:28 am, she answered – as planned – Rajan’s call from Puja’s toilet.’

He turned slowly to Govind.

‘You, Dr Govind, were Roopa and Rajan’s unwitting accomplice. A better witness, they won’t get – independent, professional and eminently reliable.’

Govind stared at Roopa and Rajan. Their faces had gone chalk white, their eyes were staring into nowhere.

‘But why?’ Govind’s mind struggled to accept the revelations. ‘They would have got the inheritance in six months anyway.’

‘Not if Baba Devang could help it. With Tarun’s inadvertent help, he and Bhuvan had succeeded in convincing Devika that they would cure Tarun of his drug problem. In return, they wanted a large donation.’

‘Two large investments in which Rajan was the nominee were maturing next week, and Devika had taken Rajan’s help in writing two cheques in favour of the ashram that were to be cashed once the investments matured. Bhuvan had come to pick up those cheques, and was to also take the ten lakhs cash.’

‘Roopa and Rajan took steps to ensure that they weren’t cheated out of their inheritance. With the hold Baba Devang was gaining over Devika through Tarun’s addiction – another unwitting accomplice, though he was not quite innocent as you – they feared that they may be cheated out of their entire inheritance. Remember, they had no idea that Devika was bequeathing the flat to them.’

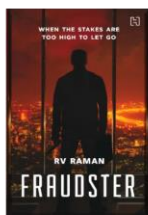
‘So, you were right!’ Rathore mused, staring at Athreya. ‘The cheques *did* provide the crucial motive. They had to be destroyed, not cashed. But what set you on Roopa’s trail?’

‘The knife. It was too large for a vegetarian kitchen, and it was new. If the murderer had come from outside, he wouldn’t have left behind a weapon that could be traced back to him.’

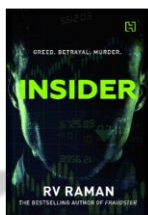
RV Raman writes crime fiction set in contemporary India. For details, visit www.rvraman.com

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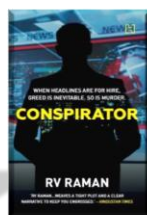
A BANK CHAIRMAN
FALLS TO HIS DEATH



A STOCKBROKER IS
KILLED IN A BAR



ESPIONAGE & MURDER
HIT AN E-TAILER



FAKE, TAILORED NEWS
LEAD TO MURDER

