

THE  
TEMPLE  
DANCERS'  
CURSE

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To all those ageless immortals whose souls have been  
ravaged by time and destiny.







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## - PROLOGUE -

A pre-dawn glow of dark amber shrouded the ancient town of Basavakalyan in a sleepy stupor only deepened by the vagaries of the monsoon. The old Basavakalyan fort rose like a sinister shadow into the skies against the backdrop of dense foliage and muddy cliffs that surrounded the historic town in northern Karnataka. The crumbling, dilapidated building shook off its shyness as the fading darkness exposed its peeling exterior and cracked walls that were damp with incessant rains.

The dark corridors along the ramparts of the fort around the central open-air courtyard stared mutely at the single tank of water in the center of the courtyard. The deathly silence within the fort was broken only occasionally by the call of the wild outside. A lone woman stirred in the only inhabitable space inside the fort's battlements - a small, forgotten museum that had

seen better days. The woman twitched. *Something was wrong!* She had never had trouble falling asleep before. Yet, it had been a night of troubled slumber and devilish dreams that night.

Outside, the deserted streets exacerbated the loneliness fanned by the windless night. A resting stray dog abruptly perked up. Something was coming. A low growl escaped its rabid fangs as it struggled to make out what its senses dictated it should be seeing. Just as suddenly, growl turned to whine as the terrified animal slunk away into a dark alley. The wind picked up as a stench of burnt flesh wafted through the moist air. A scraping sound raked the night.

An apparition slowly made its way along the deserted street, passing the alley into which the petrified canine had disappeared. The still air broke into agitated gusts of fog around the apparition as it approached the fort's entry ramp. The few bushes near the gangway at the entrance of the fort wilted. A thick latch splintered and the heavy wooden doors of the fort's main entrance labored open as the apparition floated into the courtyard.

Sub-Inspector of Police Sharanabasappa lay sprawled on his chair, his feet propped up on his rickety desk. It had been another eventless night. Swatting away a pesky mosquito, he shifted his potbelly awkwardly and stretched. Projecting an aura of dutifulness and toil was an eccentricity that had stuck ever since he had been

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promoted to SI courtesy a hefty bribe that had evaded prying eyes but could have made jaws drop. The police station he headed was the only one for kilometers around, housed in a ramshackle low-rise building and housing two constables apart from himself. It was time to remind his sidekicks about his eccentricity.

“Kanthappa! KANTHAPPA!” It was also time for his early morning coffee.

The two seconds of silence was all that Sharanabasappa needed.

“Kanthappa! *Elli idiyo? Muthbala!* Which rat hole have you burrowed into?”

“*Saar*, I'm here only. *En beku?* What do you want? The brat will be here with your coffee anytime now.” The deliberate panic in Kanthappa's voice did nothing to assuage his master's manufactured umbrage.

“*Avanu bidu.* That boy's employer - the coffee shop owner - has been complaining about the encroachments in that vacant lot next to his joint. If those encroachments go, maybe that vile concoction he brews in the name of coffee will improve. My taste buds have been to hell and back, drinking that foul coffee day in and day out. Done anything about his complaint?”

“*Saar*, we need municipality permission for that. You only asked us to wait.”

“I did? Oh, anyway. We need to step up patrolling at night. That...”

“But, *saar*, there's hardly anything happening in town.”

Sharanabasappa's brow furrowed into an ugly knot. "You listen when I speak. Just listen! *Moogu thoorbeda*. I'm hearing things. Our Basavakalyan temple is a high-risk spot. It's prone to dacoity. Put up a schedule!" The snort from his nostrils were as much to clear them as it was to disguise the discomfort he was feeling with the blatant lying he was resorting to just to put his minion in his place.

"*Aytu saar*. Will do." Kanthappa's eyes glazed over. It was going to be another long-winded harangue from his higher-up.

"Also, restart the weekend beat near that brothel."

"But, that..."

The glare from the SI silenced the impudent minion. "And, tell that clown Mudhol to visit the fort every now and then."

"The fort? That place has been abandoned for centuries, *saar*. No one lives there."

"Don't I know that, you jackass? I want to keep it that way. Out, now!"

The minion slithered away, mumbling under his breath. Sharanabasappa smiled to himself. It gave immense joy for a lowly police officer like him to do unto his underlings as his higher-ups did unto him. The joys of being in the police force were measured by not only the grease one could palm but also the extent of terror one evoked in one's underlings. The smug SI reached under his armpit to scratch a non-existent itch before settling back. If there were no action in this

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decaying town, he would make sure there was some. He had reports to send, after all.

The door to the museum shuddered lightly - as if it were being tested. Inside, the sleeping woman had thrown off the moldy blanket that had been her only companion for years. For decades, perhaps. All that covered her now were her tattered blouse, a see-through sarong and a ragged petticoat, exposing her midriff and ankles to the monsoon chill. Her curvaceous waist now twitched, partly due to the chill and partly due to a sinister foreboding.

Abruptly, the sleeping woman stiffened. *There was a scraping noise!* Just outside the door. She slowly turned in her makeshift bed on the damp floor of the museum. Just as her gaze fell on the rotting door that separated the museum from the courtyard outside, a powerful stench of something burning overpowered her aged nostrils.

Curling her ankles underneath her, the recluse sat up erect. Or, at least as erect as her stoop would allow her. The ponderous weight of having entertained her masters of the past was upon her. The burden of centuries was hers and hers alone to bear. Time had taken its toll. And, was now, at a standstill. Eager to witness an occurrence that took place only once in bygone centuries.

As the woman's wrinkled eyes tried to adjust to the hazy darkness of an elusive dawn, she let out an

involuntary gasp. *It was happening!* Just as *they* had foreboded. The door was transforming itself into an amorphous mass of human flesh. Or, so it seemed. The aging woman squinted, even as she felt the bottom of her stomach plunge. A ghastly apparition was materializing in front of her. Grey and smoke-like, it exuded unadulterated evil. Oddly, it gave a sense of burning the very air around it as it moved.

Her mouth contorted in a noiseless scream, the woman's eyes widened in horror as the apparition slowly approached her, the scraping noise increasing in crescendo. Unable to move or scream, the hag sat transfixed, as if in paralyzed trance. Suddenly, she felt the skin near her ribcage crinkle inwards and let out a putrid odor. As her eyes shifted down, she recoiled in revulsion. There was a strange sign burnt onto her midriff. And, it was expanding, the wound simultaneously cauterizing and breaking into red splotches. The sign expanded into other signs. Strangely, they looked familiar, yet vague. They were the last thing she saw.

Sharanabasappa drained the last of the bitter coffee, cursing his stars. He was going to clear those encroachments if that was the last thing he had to do. The first signs of life had begun to sprout on the streets as the monsoon sun lazily emerged on the hilly horizon. Basavakalyan, the town he had grown up in, was at best a transitory hub - a town traders flocked to on weekends

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and tourists thronged occasionally. Though a town of high literacy, it was hardly commercial in its dealings or attitude. It was not a place secretly ambitious officers like Sharanabasappa cared to spend the rest of their careers in. No, something had to be done about that. And, it was left to the likes of Sharanabasappa to instill the sense of urgency and activity in a town that had been long relegated to mere footnotes in archives of museums and libraries.

Taking a long swig of the fresh breeze wafting from the hills nearby, Sharanabasappa swung his Royal Enfield off its heavy stand and hopped on. He had grease to collect, reports to fill, superiors to please. The first stop would be the brothel at the edge of town. It was easy money. In Basavakalyan, he was the law. And, if he had decided that the decrepit two-storeyed house near the town temple was a brothel, so it was. Gunning the engine, the SI engaged the clutch. That was as far as he got before his orderly came sprinting across the wet concrete in front of the station.

“*Buddhi*, it’s a call for you. Hurry, please! Looks like there has been some incident.”

The SI’s eyes lit up before an imposed air of diligence descended on his face. “Where? Who was the caller?”

“*Gothbilla saar*. No idea who called. But, it was from near the fort.” Kanthappa averted his eyes. He knew what was coming next.

His superior smiled inwardly. “What does he say?”

“‘She’, *saar!*”

“What?”

“It’s a ‘she’. A woman called. She was hysterical. She heard some frightening screams from inside the fort area early in the morning. She sounded very crazy.”

“When was this?” Sharanabasappa’s authority over his minion seemed to escalate with each question he spat at him.

“About half an hour earlier, *saar.*”

“Hop on. Next time, I tell you something that your shrunken brain cannot fathom, don’t question it. Just remember this incident.”

His mouth and nostrils still covered by a handkerchief, Sub-Inspector Sharanabasappa stood up, his gaze still fixated on the lifeless form on the floor in front of him. The head was twisted at an odd angle, yet the eyes were staring vertically upwards - at whoever was gazing at the body. There was nothing else to indicate an assault on the woman. Except the signs.

Sharanabasappa looked once more at the inscription on the woman’s midriff, this time trying to read the script used. It was nothing like what the jaded officer had ever seen before. The words had a rhythmic structure and had been inscribed in a derelict Indian script, one that the ambitious SI of Basavakalyan had no clue on. He only knew that it was not man-made. No human could have inscribed such intricate lettering on human flesh with such flawless perfection and



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symmetry.

Although spooked by the nature of the killing, Sharanabasappa was secretly elated. He would now be on the radar of his superiors in Badami. For reasons right or wrong. All that mattered was action. Action that could be reported and taken advantage of to propel himself upward. Promotion to an Inspector was not far off now. If only this incident became important enough.

Sharanabasappa turned to his stupefied underling. “*Yen nodutta idiyo thamma?* Take out your incident report diary. Jot down!” barked the SI.

As Kanthappa fumbled for his diary, his presumptuous superior intoned, “Victim old-aged, about 65. Medium height. Light-complexioned. Wearing old and torn clothes. Blue blouse. Cream petticoat. Three beaded necklaces. Numerous glass and metal bangles and anklets. Found dead in Basavakalyan fort museum at around 5:45 AM. Neck twisted. No external injuries visible, except for burn marks on waist and midriff extending up to rib cage on either side. Burn marks some kind of writing in an Indian script. Door to museum open at the time of incident report. Char marks on the floor all around the victim, similar to ash marks of light incendiary blast. No visible footmarks or signs of forced entry. One witness. End on-site evaluation.”

The frail teenaged boy sat wide-eyed on a stone bench outside his brick-and-mud hutment. His stare was transfixed on the heavy wooden doors of the fort

directly across the street. Sharanabasappa and Kanthappa sat on either side, the latter ready this time with a fresh page open on his diary.

The SI cleared his throat. "Let's begin again. What did..."

"Please! He's seen enough. He's had enough for today! Can't you question him some other time?" Kanthappa flinched. The woman's voice from inside the hutment sounded even more hysterical than it had on the call.

Sharanabasappa turned ever-so lightly in her direction. "For the hundred-and-eighth time, we understand he's in shock. But, we need to question him now. When the incident is still fresh in his memory." The woman sobered down.

Sharanabasappa faced the boy once more. "What happened at the fort? Tell me everything you saw. Everything you think you saw."

The boy's gaze didn't break. But, his lips moved. "*Deva... deva...*"

"A spirit?"

"Grey smoke... it entered her... entered through mouth... bent her body... head twisted... eyes turned orange... rings of smoke from mouth..."

The police officers looked at each other. This didn't sound like a routine homicide case any more.

"...horrible scratching sound... odd burnt smell..." the boy continued to chant, "evil being... letters on stomach... appearing one by one as if someone was

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writing them ...”

“Did you spot anyone? In the museum or anywhere in the fort complex?”

The boy resumed his blank stare at the fort's doors.

“Why did you enter the fort in the first place? Your mother says she heard wild screams and wails, but also said you didn't hear anything since you were fast asleep. Yet, she found you missing from your home after the screams.”

The boy sat unmoved.

“She also says you're not the adventurous type. So, you couldn't have gone exploring the fort by yourself, could you? Something drew you there.”

The boy stirred. His glazed eyes met Sharanabasappa's for the first time. “I don't know. Something probably did.”

“What do you know about the signs on that body?”

The boy's eyes turned stone-cold once again as he averted his gaze back to the fort's doors.

Assistant Commissioner of Police Chandrakant Kademani sat reclined at the breakfast table, one hand fiddling with the coffee cup on the table and the other fingering a half-burnt Four Square, his head thrown back as he gazed absently at the ceiling. The top cop of Badami, a historic town in North Karnataka, found strange refuge in the total absence of information in ceilings while pondering over anything intriguing. He had not moved for the better part of the hour.

“I’m telling you, it’s nothing, Chandra.”

The voice of his live-in partner brought Chandrakant back. He brought the coffee cup to his lips for one last sip before settling back. A hurriedly folded newspaper dangled precariously on the edge of the table, resting on his thighs. The news item of his interest - a crime report of an incident that had occurred three days earlier - stared back at him from the bottom of the

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crime section. Chandrakant peered closely once again at the macabre photograph tucked away in one corner of the report.

“I can’t get these signs off my mind, you know?”

“What signs, Chandra? You’ve been going on and on about them since morning. Here, let me have a look!” Angela Stein came sashaying from the living room and promptly plonked herself on her partner’s lap, picking up the newspaper.

Chandrakant immediately broke into a shy smile. “You’re not getting any lighter, you know. You need to step up that treadmill routine of yours,” he laughed, eliciting a poke in the ribs.

Angela shot a look at the report and the accompanying photograph. “Oh, my god! Who’s the poor lady? It’s a woman, right?”

“Yeah. Someone killed in Basavakalyan three days back. It’s a strange case. There’s...”

“As are all your cases!”

“I know. But, this one beats everything. There’s no sign of breaking in. There are hardly any physical evidences of how the killing took place. And, the best part is, no biometrics.”

Smiling coyly, Angela shifted slightly so that she was now exerting pressure on a sensitive spot. “That means, no fingerprints, or any of that forensic shit, huh?”

Chandrakant had turned red. “Yeah. All killers leave some form of biometrics or physical evidence of having been at the site of the crime. The only physical tell-tale

sign here is those signs on the body.” He slipped his free hand around her waist and pulled her closer, jabbing at the photograph. “Look!”

The photograph was accompanied by a close-up that zoomed in on just the words inscribed on the midriff of the victim:

**nayana sarasa vatavata  
vāranāgagabhīrā sā sārābhīgaganāravā**

Angela cocked her head. “Those are Hindi words. Devanagari script.”

Chandrakant nodded. “Right and wrong.”

“How do you mean, Chandra? Those are Hindi words, right?”

“That is indeed the Devanagari script, yes. But, the words are not making any sense in Hindi. At least, as far as I know. They’re not in Hindi.”

“Which language is it in then? And, what’s eating you about this case? This must be one among a gazillion others like it, Chandra.”

“I’m not sure. You know me. I don’t sniff around a case unless a bell rings in me. And, this one has all my alarm bells ringing. Though, I can’t put my finger on why.”

The sun was now lashing out at all that lay below it, ignoring the sparse cloud formations that dotted the Badami skyline. Chandrakant alighted from his official

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jeep and lit up a Four Square. Pausing to take a deep drag, he turned smartly and marched into the Badami City Police Station. It was as much his den as his thinking space. Thinking men needed vacuum. Doing men needed space. Chandrakant was a bit of both. Unsurprisingly, he found himself quite often at the vortex of conflict between the need to be everywhere at once and the constraint to be in solitude.

As he whisked by, Remya Nair, Deputy Commissioner of Police and Chandrakant's second-in-command at the City Crime Branch (CCB) of Badami, looked up. She couldn't help breaking into a wide grin. The department had labeled her boss 'Don Juan' - a deliberate take on his non-womanizing ways.

"Not the Don Juan jibe now, Remya! Not the Don Juan jibe. I'm floating today. I needed to be here. And, I need to think."

"Whatever you say, CK. You're the boss. But, you look the part. Those sunglasses, that nasty cigarette butt in those clenched teeth of yours, those rippling biceps..."

"Yeah, and my fledgling paunch! Didn't know Don Juan wore sunglasses, by the way. Shall we get to work?"

"What's bugging you?" The toss of burgundy hair made sure that it wasn't a question.

"God, you sound just like Angela! I just seem to be stuck with older, wiser women."

"Older and attractive. Out with it, CK. You want to dive into something today, don't you?"

“If I ever get Angela off my back, I must make a mental note to leave you out when I draw up my prospective list of ladies whose gene pool I want to invade. You women are psychic.” Chandrakant tapped the half-burnt butt on the window sill. “There’s this three-day old report on today’s page three. The Basavakalyan fort murder. Have you read it?”

“Believe so. What about it?”

“Anything strike you as strange? Out of place?”

“Other than that there were Sanskrit verses inscribed on the grossly contorted body of a woman who was killed by someone without leaving any traces of evidence? Absolutely not!”

Chandrakant jumped. “Sanskrit?”

“Huh?”

“Did you say Sanskrit verses?”

“Sure. That’s Sanskrit, alright.” Remya poked at a newspaper report on her desk to make her point.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve studied the damn thing in school. Of course, I’m sure. Why?”

Remya sighed. Chandrakant had disappeared into his cabin. There was a loud clatter followed by a string of curses in Kannada, before the DCP heard her boss talking animatedly into the landline telephone - one of the few functioning pieces of equipment left in the Badami City Police Station.

An hour later, the half-doors to Chandrakant’s cabin



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flew open as the ACP barged out and deposited himself on Remya's desk. He was carrying a thick file with computer printouts, newspaper cuttings, incident reports and case histories, along with a writing pad on which he had obviously been scribbling away. He spat what was left of his fourth cigarette for the day into the nearby spittoon and turned to Remya.

"I think I'm onto something."

"You always are. Is this the Basavakalyan case?"

"Yeah. Listen. I want you to dig up some leads from our police records."

"Sure. Leads based on?"

"Go through these names." Chandrakant slid the writing pad he had been carrying across the desk. "Get into our regular state-wide crime incidents database."

"The KSCID?"

"Yeah. Cross-reference the names on the first list on that pad. If you get a hit, ID the names you get from the state database with the names on the second list on that pad."

"Okay. But, what are..."

Chandrakant lit up another Four Square and took a quick drag. "Then, once you have a 100% match, get into the SIUCD and..."

"But, that's the special incidents database. That requires clearance from the Commissioner himself."

"I already have it."

"You already have it? When did..."

The ACP of Badami City exhaled leisurely. "Ms.

Nair, there's a time, place and motive to interrogate your superiors. For now, shut your Lord-given sweet mouth and listen. This next bit is important."

Ignoring his second-in-command's pout, Chandrakant scribbled on a PostIt and stuck it at the top of her screen. "Use these security credentials. The SIUCD should give you the details for the matches you have found from the state database."

"Question. The KSCID may have records for names that aren't on your lists, but may match the description of the incident you're trying to dig into. What if the name you're looking for actually is in one of those?"

"Outstanding."

Remya made a face. She had never been able to make out what her boss' 'outstanding' conveyed - barb or praise.

Chandrakant let out an easy laugh. "No, I'm serious this time. That was a good point. Now, here's how we'll tackle that scenario."

For the next half hour, commander and lieutenant sketched out a battle-plan to unearth elusive information. Information that had the power to disguise ghastly events as innocuous incidents. Information that could lead to prevention of future crime. Information that, if left to its own devices, had a habit of perpetrating a false sense of security in places that were anything but secure.

Sanya Rawat-Chaddha deftly got out of an *autorickshaw* and scurried across to her office on the thoroughfare of Infantry Road. Much had changed on the iconic road that bordered the Bangalore's Central Business District on the north. The newly setup City Crime Branch (CCB) of the Bangalore Police Department was one such change, necessitated by the demand of the times and the ever-increasing complexity of human minds that committed crimes fit only to be deplored and dissected.

The CCB unabashedly occupied the entire third floor of the only high-rise on Infantry Road. Although quite close to the Police Commissioner's office, what went on inside the CCB was a far cry from the regular police department's mop-up jobs. Taking the steps two at a time, Sanya cursed under her breath. She was late for a meeting that she so wanted to happen. Fully expecting to be met by the usual whirr of computers,

buzzing phones and soft murmurs of colleagues, Sanya glided into the CCB lobby and immediately stopped. Her office sounded strangely silent.

The lone guard on duty looked up, surprised.

“We’re closed today, ma’am,” grunted the guard, condescension marking his staccato statement.

“Closed?” It was Sanya’s turn to be incredulous.

“Of course!”

Unwilling to be outdone, Sanya blurted, “Yes, of course. Anyway, I have some analytical runs to process.”

“You’ll have to log the entry.” The guard pushed a worn register forward and took out his body scanner. Allowing herself to be scanned, Sanya swiped her ID card, pausing to allow the iris-scan and fingerprinting to process. Once in, she paused again, stumped. Sure enough, the entire office was empty. Dumping her handbag and case files onto her desk, she rushed to the only fully glass-walled cabin on the floor and peeked in, just to be sure. Just as assuredly, her boss was not in too. Which was a relief. The Chief Psychologist of the CCB could be quite unpredictable, as had been proven on numerous past occasions, much to Sanya’s chagrin.

Returning to her desk, Sanya whipped out her phone and quickly dialed. A voice crackled alive on the fifth ring. “Yes, Sanya?”

“Morning, Mr. Hiremath. It’s me, Sanya.” Sanya hoped she didn’t sound too nervous.

“Yes, I got that. And oh, call me Pravin... I’ve told

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you before too.”

Sanya let out a nervous laugh. “Sorry, I hope I didn’t catch you at the wrong time.”

“Actually, you did. What’s the matter?”

“Sorry, sir. But, aren’t we working today?”

“Oh Lord, no. Why? Are you at the office?”

“Yes. But, I...”

“Didn’t you get the message we sent out? It’s a holiday. It was announced in the papers too.”

“Holiday?” Sanya sat down, reminding herself not to have late night movie sit-ins on weekdays.

“Well, yes. The state government has declared it. Didn’t you read about it?”

“Oh! Due to that impending *bundh*?”

“Yes. Everything’s locked down today due to that traders’ stir. Services are down. Local transport’s down. How the blazes did you get to office, anyway?”

“Sir, I somehow managed. Actually, I was up late last night with something, so, didn’t read about this stir in my rush to get to office in the morning. Sorry to bother you with the call. I’ve anyway reached here - I’ll work on that profiling model and try to refine it.”

“You do that. And, leave by lunch time. Things could get bad on the road towards evening.”

“Will do, sir. Bye.”

There was a click at the other end. Sanya could almost picture her superior shaking his head with a wry patronizing grin playing on his lips. A sudden feeling of euphoria grabbed her insides as she realized she had the

whole office to herself. It gave her a kick to be working in a professional atmosphere with no one around. The mind awoke to different possibilities. It accepted different outcomes. Outcomes that could be more real than one cared to acknowledge. An empty office gave the mind the illusory feeling of expanse - a commodity sorely required for deciphering crime - while retaining the boundaries required for goal-bound and time-bound analysis.

It was not easy living up to the label of the hottest new psychoanalysis whizkid on the block. It was even harder to measure up to the expectations of the CCB's Chief Psychologist who had hired her over a dozen other bright young wannabes. Sanya intended to extract maximum juice from the situation - it wasn't often she got the entire office to herself - and turn in extra work for some extra brownies. An added attraction on such occasions was the unhindered access to the bank of state-of-art teraflop computing systems they had nicknamed 'The Hulk'.

Sanya plopped down in front of 'The Hulk' and keyed in her login credentials. Before long, she had a batch process running while she went over the adjustments she had proposed for standard psyche profiling models used to decode criminal minds. Sanya leaned back. It was going to be a short but fulfilling day.

Setting down the grilled sandwich she was munching on, Sanya looked down at her buzzing phone and groaned.

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It was the same unknown number she had ignored twice already. On a hunch, she picked up the call. "Yes?"

"Is this Sanya Rawat?" The voice on the line sounded deep and authoritative.

"Who is this?"

"Chandrakant. Assistant Commissioner of Police Chandrakant Kademani. Badami division."

"Badami?"

"Yes. Bagalkot district, North Karnataka. Am I speaking with Sanya Rawat?"

Sanya frowned. "Yes, this is Sanya. I'm sorry, but how do I know you are who you say you are?"

Chandrakant chuckled. "Alright. Do you have access to the state database?"

"Yes."

"My officer serial number is CC1098Y199763. Key that in and see if the details match what I just gave you. It will also have my cell number. That's the number I'm calling from - the number displayed on your Calling Line Identification. Check both out. I'll be on the line."

A few minutes later, an apologetic Sanya was back on the line. "I'm so sorry about that, sir. It's just that..."

"I understand. I don't expect young girls to be blindly trusting of phone calls from unknown callers either."

"It's not that... anyway... please tell me."

"Were you involved in a homicide incident about four years back?"

Sanya froze, stunned. "Yes. But... but... that was a

long time ago. That..."

"And, was this the case where you killed a crazed old Englishwoman who was allegedly out to kill you? And, you were helped by a South American national in averting the bid on your life?"

"Ye... yes. But, like I said, that was a long time ago. It... it was in self-defense. And, that's how the court ruled too. That case is closed and I've received the B1 clearance form from the local police station too. In fact, I'm currently employed by the Bangalore CCB as Assistant Psychologist. And, they wouldn't employ anyone with..."

"Relax. I'm not re-opening that case. This is not an investigation."

"Oh! You really got me sweating here for a moment."

"And, fancy that. You're a 'psycho' in our own CCB, albeit a few hundred kilometers apart. Who'd have guessed?"

"I'm guessing you didn't call me to tell me that? That you couldn't guess?" Sanya was already liking this man with a baritone and easy approach.

"No. I called to tell you that there's been a... a... specific development. And, you could be involved."

Sanya's frown returned. She was looking forward to another uninterrupted session with The Hulk. This sounded like bad news. Surprises had never spelt good news for her. She had taken it upon herself from very



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early on to eliminate situations from her life that had the potential to throw up the unexpected. Yet, the dance of destiny was only to be negotiated, not interfered, with. There had been those few instances in her life that had inevitably turned things upside down. This sounded like one of them. Especially since the caller had linked the reason for his call to a horrific incident in her life that she knew was a page from the devil's own cookbook for concocting evil.

Caution underlined her tone as Sanya managed to find her voice. "What development?"

"Before I get into that, can you fill me in on the details of the attempt on your life by that Englishwoman? It's important."

"Okay. So, this is years back. More than four years back. This is going to sound crazy, but it's what it is. I was stalked by a delirious Englishwoman who I have reason to believe was the reincarnation of the killer who murdered me. Rather, murdered my past self."

"So, a case of reincarnation? A case involving supernatural occurrences?"

"Yes."

"That explains it. It's a 'special incident'. No wonder it was listed in the SIUCD. Go on."

Sanya sighed. Somehow, the ACP's words and tone didn't talk the same language. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I'm parking my judgment for now. There must be a reason why someone chose to file this case in the

SIUCD. There was also a diagnostic report by the official shrink at the time that neither the victim - which is you - nor the witnesses were under any kind of psychological duress while filing the SIUCD report. That's good enough for me. And, I've seen crazier things in my fifteen years on the force. Go on."

"So, this Englishwoman's past incarnation was a Spanish conquistador - a mercenary hired to quell native rebellion in South America in the 1800s. There was one region where the natives - Aymaran tribes - put up a hell of a fight against the marauding mercenaries. That was where today's Peru and Bolivia stand. The leader of those natives was an Aymaran woman called Bartolina Sisa."

"Let me guess. That's you?"

Sanya paused. "Yes. That's me. In my past life. Or, so I think. I had to assume at the time that it was true, otherwise I'd have lost my marbles. The situation was beyond scary. It was the stuff of hellish nightmares. I still continue to believe that I am her. Or, that she was me. It's the simplest way to bring finality to the incident."

"That finality may be under threat. But, continue..."

Sanya's frown deepened. "The conquistador was a sadistic mother fucker." Immediately, she bit her lip. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. I..."

"No explanation needed," cut in Chandrakant.

"So, he wanted to teach Bartolina... me... a lesson. More than two hundred years ago, he coerced the

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natives to send her to her deathtrap at a tavern in Quillacollo, a small village near Cochabamba in Bolivia. The natives tricked her into going there. It was there that she... I..." Sanya bit back the stinging moistness in her eyes.

"Are you okay? I broadly know what happened, so you don't have to go into any specifics that are uncomfortable."

Sanya's eyes suddenly flashed. "No. It's alright. I can handle it. I... she... was molested and raped by that monster of a man in that tavern on that fateful night. In full view of his leering and salivating henchmen. All savages. It was a five-hour ordeal..." Sanya's voice faltered as ancient and not-so-ancient images flitted across her mind. "She was finally killed in cold blood from close range after the animals had had their fill."

There was a studied silence from the other end as Sanya finished relating the story of her past identity.

"And, then he returned in the form of that Englishwoman to hunt you down again in this century?" Chandrakant's voice had perceptibly softened.

"Yes. The son of a bitch came all the way here from somewhere in South England. All along, there were creepy incidents involving me which mirrored exactly what had transpired with Bartolina on that fateful night at the tavern. Things that happened to her over those five hours on that day happened to me in exactly the same sequence but over five days."

“What kind of things? What kind of incidents?”

“Her ordeal started when she entered the tavern at Quillacollo. Mine started when I visited a lounge club in Bangalore I frequent with my friends. I fell down semi-conscious in the restroom and saw images of that tavern. Don’t ask me how or why. Everything was queer that day. My whole head felt woozy. And, there was no apparent reason. It wasn’t food. I wasn’t tired or stressed. I hadn’t touched a drink that night. No, it was totally abrupt and without any perceivable causal factor.”

“I understand. Go on, please.”

“There were five things - mishaps - that befell her in that tavern that night before she was raped and killed. First, she is violently pushed around. Then, she falls heavily which cuts open a gash on her leg. Her top is ripped open and the conquistador slashes her back with a knife. He slaps her repeatedly, until she become senseless. Then, he gropes and molests her. Finally, he heaps the worst indignity any woman can suffer by violating her, before snuffing out her life.”

“The case file says you experienced five mishaps yourself.”

“...that were bizarrely similar. And, in the same sequence.”

“Intense.”

“Day one - this was after the wooziness in the bar - I get pushed around by alighting passengers at a Metro station and my skirt gets caught in the closing doors. I

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almost got dragged. Day two, due to a run-in with an annoying classmate who had a crush on me, I slap him in college and turn to walk away in the ensuing commotion, but trip over someone's leg and cut my thigh on a bench. Day three, I have a weird nightmare - or hallucination - about a bull attacking me. I still don't know if it was real or imaginary. I wake up to see my parents trying to calm me down. I was apparently hysterical in my sleep. In the melee, my top gets torn."

Sanya paused to take a quick drink from her sipper. "Next day, due to a gargantuan confusion, my mother sees my semi-nude pictures plastered all over the Internet by this annoying classmate who wanted to get back at me for rejecting him. Mom freaks out thinking I've become exhibitionist and she ends up slapping me thick and hard. A first for me. Ever. Then, incredibly, the next day I get molested in the lift of the lounge bar I frequent. This too, is unprecedented, since that bar is one of the safest I've been to. And, all through these five days, I'm getting weird images of some South American tavern and all kinds of things connected to those mercenaries flashing in my mind. Hellish hallucinations... devilish nightmares... it was pure agony."

Chandrakant extinguished the spent butt he had been toying with and cleared his throat. "There are certain other details in your case file that are even gorier but corroborate what you're saying."

"Yes. I'm glad it's all in the past. You were

mentioning some development or something. What's that?"

There was a manufactured pause before the Badami ACP spoke again. "There's been a killing in Basavakalyan."

Sanya slowly straightened up. A knot started to form somewhere deep in her gut. Dreading what she was about to hear next, she found her voice. "And, how am I involved?"

"The victim's body has your name inscribed on it."