

Bollywood P.I.

California Dreaming

Sample

PRIYA KHAJURIA

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Praise for BOLLYWOOD P.I.

"Khajuria's deftly written *Bollywood P.I.* has absolutely everything: it's funny, it's smart, it's exciting—and it's unlike anything else I've ever read, in the best possible way. With Jita, Khajuria has created a sassy, street smart character who also has a beautiful heart, and some seriously good one-liners. You will not want this book to end. When it does, you'll want to read it again... If you love great books, you'll love this book. If you love to laugh, you'll love this book. There are so many reasons to love this book!"

MARISSA STAPLEY, bestselling author of *The Last Resort*

"*Bollywood P.I.* was one of the most enjoyable mysteries I've read in a long time (and I read a lot of mysteries). The characters are hip, the dialog is fun, there's a lot of action, a good plot, and a sweet resolution. What more can you ask for in a mystery? I enjoyed every page and look forward to more from Priya Khajuria."

MARC ALLEN, bestselling author and publisher of *New World Library*

"This is a wonderful, warm, inspiring story that will inspire you and lift your spirits."

BRIAN TRACY, bestselling author of *Create Your Own Future*

"...A great storyline with plenty of twists and turns, nicely rounded out with some excellent humour."

LORRAINE MACE, bestselling author of the *D.I. Sterling* series.

"...intriguing...an immensely satisfying mystery."

"...a fun, light-hearted read. Part romantic-comedy, part mystery novel, its main character, Jita, is a funny, likable heroine, endowed with the amazing ability to get herself in — and out — of various scrapes. Jita's interactions with her mother, who is determined to see her wed, were hilarious, and the cast of side characters added color and humor to the tale. This is the first book in what promises to be an engaging series in the same vein as Janet Evanovich's *Stephanie Plum* series."

READER'S FAVORITE * * * * *

"...*Bollywood P.I.* has a soul: it lives and breathes and plays your heartstrings like a master on the sitar. You're in for one hell of a treat."

ANDREW MARC ROWE, author of *The Yoga Trilogy*.

*“There is something infinitely powerful that will transform you in the fight between right and wrong, between good and evil. What is this power?
Look inside... you will find the answer.”*

Inspector Dutt

CHAPTER 1

I leapt backwards and fell to the ground, rolling down Vinod’s driveway. The car backed into the road and headed for me again with a screech, the sun flashing ominously off the windshield.

I picked myself up and ran towards the car and past it. They couldn’t turn that fast. A narrow alleyway between two houses opened up in my peripheral vision and I bolted through it into the next street over. I’d bought myself only a minute or two. The sedan careened around the corner towards me with heart-stopping suddenness and I spun around again, running as fast as I could in the opposite direction.

At the end of the street sat a group of guys, smoking weed and playing music. One of the men, wearing pants hung low in Soggy Diaper Style, made kissy sounds as I ran in their direction.

“MOVE!” I shouted. *“Get out of the way!”*

Wheels ripped up behind me and I whirled around. Sure enough, it was the black car. I picked up speed, pounding right through mini-gardens, dodging fences. The car drove up onto the sidewalk, trampling over flower beds.

“What the hell, man!” There was a loud smacking sound behind me and I turned just in time to see a folding chair bounce off the car. The guys whooped and ran alongside the sedan, throwing beer cans and pop bottles.

The car bounced back onto the road, turning around with a screech of tires, then sped away. I slowed down and stopped at the end of a cul-de-sac. The men loped over as I stood bent at the waist, gasping for breath.

“What’s going on?” asked the taller one who’d thrown the chair.

“I . . . I don’t know!” I tried not to hyperventilate.

“Well, we got ‘em. It’s gonna cost to fix them dents. You okay, lovey?”

I nodded dumbly.

“Come and have a nice smoke with us. Loosen you up.”



(Wait. I’d better take you back a little bit.)



My name is Aparajita Patel. Also known as Jita, when I don’t want my name mispronounced every which way.

Unaware that my life was about to change forever, I tied a gold rakhi around Sunny’s wrist for the brother-and-sister festival of Raksha Bandan and beamed. After a

meaningful pause, Sunny laughed and handed me two-hundred and fifty dollars in crisp notes for what he called the dubious honor of being my cousin.

“I assume you’ll be putting this money towards that enormous credit card bill of yours?”

I assumed he wouldn’t mind not knowing I planned to buy two Dolce & Gabbana knock-offs and a ticket to see metal band *Ghost*.

Sunny glanced at his phone as he made his way across the living room. We sat down on Mama’s couch, the leather squeaking, cradling steaming mugs of jasmine tea, the perfume strong and heady.

I slipped the latest *Bollywood P.I.* installment into the DVD player. Inspector Dutt, sixty-something and elegant with only the faintest hint of paunch, sauntered onscreen across the camera, sunglasses flashing roguishly. He had forty-five minutes each weekday to solve a mystery, do three songs and dances with multiple wardrobe changes and look fabulous. This week featured Uncle Bhinder, who reported a robbery from his bank’s safety deposit boxes.

Fifteen girls, dressed in outfits that would have driven Hollywood celebs into a slaverling blub of envy, sprang out in the middle of the bank and minxed their way through a dance number. I made a mental note to Google some of those outfits.

Sunny turned off the TV and put the remote down.

“Hey! I was watching that!”

“What are you up to for the next few evenings?” asked Sunny.

I raised my eyebrows. Sunny worked overtime at least six days a week and when he was seen by the general public, he’d plug into his iPhone like a starving animal at feeding time.

“How about we go for a burger tomorrow at La Mesa?” he said. “And maybe we can just hang out for the rest of the week.”

“Sure,” I said, delighted. “How’s work?”

He rubbed his face and looked up at the ceiling.

I knew that look. “That bad, eh? I’ll give you a minute. I’m going get more grub.”

I stopped outside the room on the way back with more cookies. Sunny was talking but it took a minute before I realized he wasn’t speaking to me.

“I told you already. She moved here about four years ago. I can’t understand why there’s no record of her.”

He paused for a moment while I debated walking into the room.

“That doesn’t make sense! And why has no one locally heard of her?”

I opened the door and walked in, feeling awkward. Sunny ended the call abruptly.

“You’re on a case, aren’t you? Sorry. I might have overheard a bit.”

“Yep. Naina,” he said. It was a sweet name, meaning *beautiful eyes*.

“Who’s that?”

“A missing woman. She got married to an American. Her family told my guy that she flew out of Mumbai. Her father’s from a small village and had a note of the flight and date but he wasn’t at the airport. We tried checking through Air India but there was no record of her on that flight or any others during that month. We haven’t been able to narrow anything down yet through the other airlines.”

“I guess you tried tracing them through passports or visas?”

“Yes, but nothing’s come up.”

I shook my head. “Sunny, how did you get this case if her family lives in India?”

His eyes skittered away from mine. “Interpol.”

“Interpol!” I stared at him. “Then this isn’t a typical missing person case.”

He looked away. “Forget about it. So are we on this week after work? You’re not busy, right?” Sunny drained his tea and set the mug down.

That depends on what one would consider “busy.” On weeknights I surfed the Internet for best leave-in hair conditioner reviews, browsed Amazon for designer knock-offs or left short and useless posts on PlayBook.

“I’ll meet you in front of La Mesa at six.”



Four fun evenings with Sunny passed quickly. On the fifth day, I joined him on a bench at Stearns Wharf. Tourists meandered past, grouping outside the wharf restaurants to peer at the menus. Small groups of gray clouds moved quickly across the sky, brushed gently by the winds, the skies breaking out with sudden warm hits of sunshine.

The palm trees lining Cabrillo Boulevard stood impossibly high, swaying fronds lazily scratching the skyline. Children ran by, shouting and laughing, their little footsteps thumping down the boardwalk. The wharf creaked gently on its stilts, a gentle reminder that we were standing over the ocean, surf crashing yards away. I took a deep breath of the briny air, the strong breeze whipping at my ponytail.

Sunny smiled and closed his book as I sat down.

“What are you reading?”

“The *Laws of Success*.”

“Is that about the Law of Attraction?” My eyes lit up.

“Business motivation, actually,” he said and I grimaced.

I studied him closely, alarmed by his appearance. He had dark circles under his eyes and looked drawn and anxious. “Sunny, what’s going on?”

“Don’t worry,” he said, glancing around. “Everything’s fine, I’m just tired today.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re cutting back on the overtime.”

“You and me both. Let’s go get some ice-cream.”

Selections made, I sauntered out of the ice cream parlor behind Sunny who was striding towards an empty bench.

“Have you thought about what I was saying?” asked Sunny.

I dragged my eyes away from the hypnotic palm trees. “We talked about a lot of things this week. Remind me again?”

“Jita, I’ve been talking about this every night.” Sunny ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “Before you get married—”

“I’m not getting married!”

“Well then, before that unlikely event happens, do something fun for a change. Why don’t you travel? Maybe date a little bit? Where’s that wild-child gone? You’ve become all reserved and uptight. Remember when you wanted to drop out of college to start a Singles Club?”

I searched my memory. “That was for *pets!*”

“It was still a cute idea. You always loved trying new things. And you liked psychology. Have you thought about getting your masters or doctorate and treating patients?”

“I’m not that great about controlling my *own* mind, how am I supposed to help someone with theirs?”

He shook his head. “And then there was your P.I. dream.”

I snorted. “That was a childish fantasy. I’m all grown up now.”



I remembered the first time I’d told Daddy. Sunny had been there.

We’d met for tea at The Wholesome Café downtown. Daddy ordered tea with carrot cake, I guzzled an Aloha Bubble smoothie and Sunny sipped a veggie juice.

“Here!” I said excitedly, handing my father a business card. I was proud of that card. It was on extra-nice card stock and everything.

“Jita,” said Daddy, in that tone he reserved for telemarketers. “I’m a little concerned about this, er, new direction you are suggesting.”

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

“Well,” he took a contemplative chew of cake and squinted at my card. “To start with, what is this *P.I.* title? Why don’t you just put *Bookkeeper*? That is what you are doing now and getting paid for.”

“That’s my mock-up card!” I said, bubbling over a bit desperately. “I really want to do this, Daddy.”

“Last year you tried practicing meditation and hypnosis. You ended up with airy-fairy clients - smokers and people wishing to visit past lives. And some very questionable fellows who seemed like they were interested in more than just meditation and hypnosis. I wasn’t comfortable with you sitting alone in a room with these strange boys.”

“They were fine! They just needed a little empathy and centering. But I *especially* want to be a P.I.”

“I can’t see how you would build a career on that,” said my father. “Probably you would get clients wishing for proof on cheating spouses – that is not a good career for a nice girl. Anyway, you should be concentrating on your long-term goals. And come to think of it now, why be a bookkeeper when you can be an accountant? There’s still time to start in a new direction since it’s clear you are not focused.”

“I could talk to Uncle Suresh – he’s a P.I. He could help get me started.”

“How many clients has Suresh had?”

“Two.”

Daddy choked on his tea and Sunny thumped his back. “Two? *TWO?*”

“I’ve got to start *somewhere*,” I said.

“Somewhere is right! That is more like nowhere,” he said. “Neetu Singh is looking for a mutual funds trainee at the bank. Why don’t you apply? Start with that. If you don’t want an accounting designation, you can study the funds program at night. What do you think?”

What I thought was: “mutual funds” and “gag reflex” go nicely in the same sentence.

“Sunny, don’t you think Jita would make a good accountant or banker?” He shot a piercing look at Sunny over his glasses.

Sunny smiled diplomatically. “I think that Jita would be great at whatever she does.”

“Arrey, what great-great?” Daddy’s voice rose slightly. “We are not talking about being great at *anything*. One can be great at cleaning the bathrooms!” He waved his fork around excitedly. “The point is to choose a proper profession and stick to it!”

“Uncle, what is the issue? If you don’t mind me asking,” said Sunny.

“Of course I don’t mind, dear boy!” thundered Daddy good-naturedly. “You remember University. After all those fees, Jita got bored and almost flunk—”

“Daddy!”

“Almost fail—”

“*Daddy!*”

“She loves everything for five minutes, then gets bored. Forget the P.I. stuff. I don’t know anyone who can help her career with that. But we all know hundreds and *hundreds*” - his voice rose again to fever pitch – “of dak-ters and lawyers and engineers and accoun—”

“I’ll help her,” said Sunny.

Daddy gave him a look. “Arrey, how can *you* help her?”

“I’ll be there for moral support for her bookkeeping.”

I felt some of the light die out of my eyes. “Thanks,” I said.

“Moral support is nice but not much of anything. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing,” said Daddy, shaking his head at me. “I forget who said that but somebody did.”



“Jita?”

I came back to the present and looked at Sunny.

“Jita, you change your mind all the time. At UCSB you took courses in International Reporting, Psychology, what else? Oh yes, Eastern Religion, Philosophy, Cultural Aspects of Food. There was that year in Montreal studying Canadian politics, except you mastered Quebecois swear words instead, Astronomy, a course in Mining Engineering and, of all things, Forest Sciences. Mind you, you failed that one quite spectacularly,” he said fondly.

“I like learning new things.”

“Maybe it’s time to stop learning and start doing. I’d love to see you enjoying life. Why don’t you ditch the bookkeeping and do something you’ve always had a passion for?”

“You weren’t very supportive about me being a P.I.,” I said, reproachfully. “Why in the world are you bringing it up now?”

“I have my reasons,” he said, looking away.

I held my temper in check. “Don’t be so condescending! Besides, Daddy’s right. Being a P.I. is not sustainable. The bookkeeping keeps my income steady and it’s a decent enough job. I’m lucky to even have a job given the hiring climate.”

“How long are you going to make that lame old excuse? Do you love it?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “I *adore* debits and credits! Have you forgotten about my student loans? I have to have a steady job.”

He gave me a look. “All of us offered to help you out with your loans and you refused. That was your choice. And you live at home now – that’s more of a chance to save money than most people get. But you let your dad scare you out of going in a new direction. And yes, I admit I wasn’t that supportive either. But frankly, if you were paying your own fees, why look for permission to be a P.I. from Uncle? Why didn’t you just go ahead and do it anyway?”

“I thought it was right to mention it to him. He is my father after all.”

“You know what I think?” Sunny sat back and gazed at me through eyes that were disconcertingly clear. “I think you gave away your power to him on purpose.”

Why the hell was he bringing up this stuff now? “Sunny, I tried a bunch of stuff and I failed. Not everyone gets to do what they love. Now can we change the subject please?”

His voice softened. “Jita, you could never be a failure.”

I wiped a blob of chocolate ice cream off his book. When I looked up, Sunny was staring across the street with a strange expression in his eyes. I looked towards that direction. A figure dressed in a dark hoodie and jeans disappeared quickly into the crowd and I felt a chill down my spine.

“Hey, guys!” We turned back towards the shoreline. Angie jogged up to us, dressed in a cream and lime tank top with matching biking shorts. She and Sunny eyed each other.

“Sunny. How are things?”

Sunny smiled. “As good as they can be. So who’s in the hot seat this time?”

“A real man,” she said, wiggling herself between the two of us until she got comfy. If Sunny and Angie weren’t each other’s idea of hell on earth, I’d think there was an attraction.

“Was that Jacob from the Gauchos I saw you with at the art show?”

“That was last month,” said Angie, sipping from a mini water bottle. “I have never seen a man so obsessed with white. His clothes are white, his furniture is white, everything in his place is white. When he started picking out white clothes for me, I said, Jacob, I am going to go *Goth* on your ass if you don’t stop this.”

“So you and Jacob...”

Angie turned off her iPhone. “Yeah, we parted ways.”

“Wow, just over white?”

“Nah, he was mad I said *ass*.”

We cackled for a while.

Angie flicked through her screen and showed me her phone, giggling.

“Check this out. It’s FreshGirl’s latest post on *Chew On This*. She gets into the worst scrapes.”

Angie is my colleague and closest friend. She’s a sports therapist at our clinic, *Radiant Health*, and loves to date sports stars.

“FreshGirl is a character all right. But don’t change the subject. Back to you. Sorry to hear about Jacob.”

Angie shrugged.

“Maybe you just haven’t met the right guy yet,” said Sunny.

Angie gave him a look over her sunglasses. “And that would be who? Someone like you, who’s going to have the little lady stationed at home to plan the meals and decorate the baby’s room?”

“I like cooking myself.”

This was true. Sunny had taken plenty of culinary classes in wine country.

“Yeah, Sunny, I can just see you at that - a vision of domestic bliss,” said Angie.

“At least I *know* what I want,” he said suddenly. “Why don’t you take a break from these guys?”

Angie paused, her water bottle halfway to her lips and we turned to stare at him.

But Sunny wasn’t smiling. “Why don’t you take some time out for yourself and find out what you *really* want? What you feel *good* doing. And maybe date a *real* person one of these days? Not these guys who have to read the papers to find out what their own name is!”

A little girl running after a puppy careened into the bench, breaking the moment. I didn’t dare look at either Sunny or Angie. The bench was getting cold now and I wanted to go home.

Angie gave me a what-the-heck-is-wrong-with-*him* look.

“I don’t know!” I hissy-whispered back. “He’s gone all Rambo on me too.”

“I *am* sitting right here, you know,” said Sunny. “Quit gossiping.”

“Lord save us from old-fart bachelors!” I whispered meanly to Angie and then I crossed myself rather hypocritically.

“I heard that,” said Sunny.

“See y’all later. I’ve got a date,” said Angie, plugging in her earphones.

I turned to Sunny after she left. “What was all *that* about?”

His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Never mind, forget what I said. I just care about you guys, that’s all. Everything’s cool.”

“You’re not yourself at all these days. What’s bothering you?”

“I want to talk to you about Uncle,” he said, after a moment.

“Don’t change the subject.” I stared at him. “What about Daddy?”

“Jita, maybe it’s time to let the past go...”

“If you’re talking about the P.I. stuff, don’t worry. It’s all in the past.”

“I mean Timmy.”

I sucked in my breath. “I’ve told you already – I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Jita, he’d never knowingly - ”

“*No.*”

We sat quietly, the air now thick with tension. Brilliant oranges and reds from the sunset flickered brazenly over passers-by. The sun, an enormous glowing orb, lovingly touched the ocean with sentimental licks of fire as it sank into the gleaming Pacific, as though in farewell.

I sighed and turned to my cousin. “Do you want to play pool tomorrow?”

Sunny looked down at his hands. “It’s going to get busy next week. That’s why I wanted to spend some time with you now.”

“How about we go out for a drink instead?”

Sunny thought for a minute. “What’s the date tomorrow? Yeah. It should be fine.”



The next night at the Hot Tequila, I glanced at my phone. I’d already searched both floors and there was no sign of him. He was almost an hour late. What was taking him so long? I shifted on my stool self-consciously.

As if on cue, a guy with a shirt emblazoned with I TANGO NUDE slouched up to me, holding a Corona. “You alone?”

“Pardon?”

He assessed me up and down slowly as though he was picking out a prime steak.

“Wanna drink?”

“Oh. No thanks. I’m waiting for someone.”

“Your husband?”

“Er no. Someone else.” My eyes darted towards the door.

He winked and drifted off.

I checked for messages with a bartender at the counter in case he hadn’t been able to reach me. Nothing. Back at my table, I re-dialed Sunny’s phone but there was no answer. No responses to my texts either. Where *was* he?

“Hel-*lo* again.” Tango man smiled widely, revealing a gold tooth and yellow incisors. Probably looking for his next tango partner.

“You so sexy. Very nice.” He said *nice* in a slow, throaty growl that made me want to run.

“Excuse me.” I dialed Sunny again but it went straight to voice mail again.

“O-*kaay*.” Tango Man sang. “You get too picky, you’ll end up an old maid.” God, he sounded like my mother.

I exhaled sharply. That was it. I’d given Sunny more than enough time. I picked up my bag and stalked towards the exit.

At home, a tiny glimmer of worry nagged me when I saw my answering machine, the o sitting still and red. This wasn’t like Sunny.

I drove to work the next morning in the pouring rain. There wasn’t much traffic but the rain was slowing the drivers to a crawl. A phrase jumped out of the radio playing in the background - “*A car has been found floating off the shores of Channel Drive. Police identify what’s left as an orange BMW...*” My tires spun and moments later I was at Channel Drive.

Just past the cemetery and off Fairway Road, a small knot of police clustered in an area cordoned off with yellow tape. Cars were slowing down to look so I swerved into the far lane and pulled off onto the shoulder. The car door slammed behind me as I ran towards the cops, straight through the muck and tape. A young policeman quickly cut me off.

“Where is he?” I pushed past him.

Another officer, older and heavy-set, moved towards us, blocking me. “You can’t come in here. It’s a secured area.”

I folded my arms. “I want to know where my cousin is! You found his car, didn’t you?”

They glanced at each other.

The older cop leaned towards me. He smelled like bananas. “Ma’am, it’s better if you go up to the station and ask for Detective Dering.”

“*Where’s Sunny?*” I screamed. “You’ve got his car. Where is he?”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

They turned to escort me back. I took a deep breath – and ran around them towards a second group of police next to the water and grassy sand dunes. Behind me I heard shouts and running feet pounding through the mud and sand.

I stopped in my tracks, rain pouring down my face, and stared past them into the water. A red tow truck with rusty doors was dragging out Sunny’s car. It was crumpled like an accordion, the front part of the car completely smashed in. The sight burned into my brain in an instant; a horrifying photo negative that would forever haunt my memories.

Hands caught me as I slumped to the ground. Voices floated around me as I lay immobile, blank. The officers dropped me home, one of them driving my car but the memories were a blur. Only one thing was clear; no one had mentioned the body.

The next day, I walked into the white, adobe building that housed the Santa Barbara Police Department.

“I must see Detective Dering.”

A muscular officer with 3-D veins and a crew cut sitting behind a standard government-issue counter barely glanced up. “He’s not here.”

I didn’t move. “Can I leave a note? Please?”

The officer sighed loudly and slapped a yellow sticky pad and a pencil with a chewed-off eraser onto the counter. Moisture gleamed on the end of the eraser and I averted my eyes.

I waited in vain for Officer Dering to call me. The following week, I went back to the station. The day was glorious, contrasting against my foul mood. A group of schoolgirls practiced their singing across from the station but even the sweetness of their voices jarred.

The officer leaned back in his chair and laced his hands behind his head, glancing at his biceps. "He's out of town."

The wake for Sunny had been bizarre, a funeral without a body. Reena, my cousin and Sunny's sister had greeted everyone wordlessly. After the police had been to see her, she had closed up and refused to talk about Sunny. There was no closure.

I wanted answers and if Reena was too grief stricken to talk about it, I'd talk with the police myself. I left voice mails, calling at odd times and hoping to catch the detective unawares, in case he was avoiding me. But avoid me he did.

Mama helplessly watched me descend into a depression. My father, who was divorced from my mother some years ago, checked up on me every day. Poor Daddy. He tried to stay anonymous but you couldn't miss his voice bellowing over Mama's cell phone.

Of course, *I* didn't think I was depressed. Living off Puffcorn and playing Super Mario eight hours straight seemed like therapy. Once a week for variety, I'd put on *The Sound of Music* and blubber through *Edelweiss*. Apart from that, I didn't care about anything.

Three weeks later, as I surfed the internet disinterestedly, a yellow neon pop-up blinked up at me.

Become a Private Investigator!

Become a P.I. in six easy semesters of distance learning. Look for missing people, investigate extramarital affairs, do undercover investigations and much, much more! Only \$900 in 3 easy payments! This AMAZING discount is only available until tomorrow. Act fast!!!

I pursed my lips. Then I clicked the link.

A week later, the P.I. package arrived at my office. I stared at the books:

Business/Corporate, Domestic/Family and Online/Document Research with chapters like Infidelity Checks, Hidden Videos and Semen Analysis. By the following weekend, I'd worked my way through the first of the six binders and finished the semester assignments in advance.

It's funny how a reason to live so nicely replaces a reason to die.



A week after I got my books, I sucked in my stomach, pulled on a black Spandex outfit and laced up my Doc Martens. I stuffed a balaclava into my pocket along with thin black gloves and left for Montecito.

Montecito, pristine and relatively unscathed by the earthquake of 1925 that destroyed most of the downtown buildings in Santa Barbara, was one of Santa Barbara's

jewels. Beautiful cottage-like adobe galleries and shops sat dotted in between hidden elegant rolling estates and winding hillocks.

Sunny's office was tucked around the corner from the lower village and housed in a two-story block that resembled a square marshmallow. A plaque the size of a small envelope near the front door, engraved with only the building name Casa Beltado, heightened the sense of discretion.

The hallway opened into an inner foyer, which spanned the full two-story height. It was an older building that had undergone extensive renovations and some designer work since I'd last visited. Staircases with oak banisters flanked and curved around an enormous Art Deco chandelier, spilling crystals of light in every direction.

Cavernous pots of crimson begonias flared with color in the corners of the hall and at the base of each staircase. I checked my watch - it was just before 7 pm. There would still be people working late in the legal office, poor sods, but at least reception would be manned by skeleton staff.

I ran up the stairs two at a time and stood, face averted and pretending to root around in my pockets, around the corner from the frosted glass doors of Sunny's firm. Now what? Did I just open the door and walk in? What if someone recognized me? Maybe I was getting in my own way. Maybe I should practice a little first, then come back.

As I turned back to the stairs, a young woman talking into an earpiece and holding a Quiznos bag climbed up the last step and headed for the legal office. I watched her turn the knob. As the door swung behind her, I reached forward and grabbed the edge, peering in at the reception desk. A redheaded woman spoke into her headphone and as

soon as she had turned away, I zipped by and towards Sunny's office. I felt something fall. Shoot. Better keep walking.

Sunny's door was sealed off with police caution tape, shocking in its stark and simple brutality. I reached to get my gloves out of my pocket – only they weren't there, neither was my balaclava. So that's what had dropped.

I used part of my Spandex shirt to turn the knob and looked into his office. It was completely stripped. There was nothing in there, not even furniture. Sunny's office, once a warm cream tone, now looked shabby and bare. I closed the door, my heart beating wildly.

Why did they remove the furniture? Was that normal? After a moment I turned left, away from reception, and headed to the corner office, which belonged to David Hutton, one of Sunny's partners. I heard a noise down the hall and quickly closed the door behind me.

Sunny's colleagues were likely the last ones to see him alive. There was a good possibility David might know something. Shortly after Sunny disappeared, David had left on sabbatical for his condo in Maui. I thought this was suspicious but apparently the cops didn't, as they'd done dick-all about it.

David favored dark woods and glossy leather upholstery. His desk was cleared off, with only a blank sticky pad free of writing indents next to the phone. I slid open the drawer to the right. It was jammed with supplies and a bottle of headache pills. I jiggled the left-hand drawer. Locked.

I smiled and pulled out a hairpin. Slipping it into the lock, I wiggled it around until it gave with a squeak. I rifled through it hurriedly. It was crammed full of file folders and I pulled out the closest one. It was labeled *Mark Beens*.

There was only one sheet of paper nestled in the file with scribbles such as “Has only billed 75 hours a week from February to end of June. Note: I don’t believe he’s ready to be considered for Partnership. Sunjay Patel does not concur, will re-evaluate quality of work next May.” Sheezus. It looked like a bucket of fun to work here.

A large closed-door bookcase flanked the desk, the bottom covered with scuff marks, likely from David nudging it shut with his foot. I opened it and rifled through the shelves, stacked with innumerable books on law and tomes such as *Seven Habits of the Highly Effective* and *Laws of Success*, books I clearly hadn’t read. A higher shelf was loaded with water polo trophies.

My eyes drifted back to the *Laws of Success*. It looked familiar. A flash-memory of Sunny on the wharf. I pulled it out instantly and my skin prickled. The ice cream stain was still on the cover. I flipped through and turned it upside down, giving it a good shake. Not a thing fell out.

As I made to close it, a mark in the inside cover caught my eye. Something had been doodled in the corner, then scratched out. I held it up to the light and turned it a few different angles. It looked like an 88. I placed the book back on the shelf. For all I knew, it could have cost \$0.88 at a used bookstore. I turned back to the desk and flicked through the rest of the files.

“What’re you doing?” said a voice from behind me.

I whipped around. A tall, well-built and ruggedly handsome man with shiny, dark brown hair stood inside the doorway regarding me with amusement. He was dressed completely in black and an almost tangible aura of suppressed power emanated from him. His eyes held mine and just for a second, I felt funny.

“I’ve been called to fix the latch,” I said. “The drawers were stuck.”

He laughed out loud.

“That’s a good one. Remind me to call you when *my* drawers need attention.”

“Excuse me?”

“Are these yours?” He held out my gloves and balaclava. Faces peered around him from the hallway.

I stared at his hands. “I’ve never seen those before in my life.”

He glanced down at my outfit as I tried to aim my spandex backside out of sight.

“Okay, Catwoman, let’s see some ID.”

“And who are you?” I said, hands on hips.

He flashed a badge. “I’m a police officer. The question is, who are *you*?”

I sighed and handed over my wallet. He flicked through my IDs with no comment, then looked up at me with intensely blue eyes laced with tawny-gold close to his pupils.

“So, you’re the one who’s been calling. You’re Sunjay’s cousin.”

My eyes widened.

“I’m Detective Dering.”

My eyes narrowed. “Did you get my messages?”

He didn’t respond.

“Did you get my *voice* mails? My *letters*?”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t reply. *Why*?”

There was a slight pause. “The case is classified.”

“So you’re unavailable after a *real* crime,” I said. “How come you’re here now?”

His expression was guarded. “I live in the area.”

“Why is Sunny’s case classified?”

“I can’t tell you anything more, Ms. Patel. What I *can* say is that you’re trespassing.
It’s time for you to go home.”



The Cloud

Energy...

...may be the final frontier of one of humankind's most exciting mysteries.

It seems that scientists are confirming today what sages of old have always shared – that everything is made of energy.

All matter, our bodies, our thoughts, our feelings, our words – all are energy.

...meaning what you focus on, you get more of?

...wtf? how did this happen???

FreshGirl

p.s. I regret to share that *Chew On This* is no more.



CHAPTER 2

One month after that awkward meeting, ocean air blew into my office, cool, clear and bracing; the sun bright and welcoming. Elderly tourists from the boat tours wandered out in packs, doddering over the wharf. It was a perfect day to crunch through luminescent autumn sand and watch unctuous politicians strolling down State Street with cups of Joe contemplating where to lunch at our expense.

Unfortunately, I was indoors speaking to a supplier who was wearing shoes that should have been cremated a decade ago. I walked him over to Amy to schedule a delivery. A recent immigrant from Hong Kong, Amy was our ball-busting receptionist who practiced as a part-time esthetician after hours. I walked back down the hall to my office and started winding down through the afternoon processes.

Two of my colleagues, Angie and Mira were in with patients. Kate was out for a ‘meeting’ although her calendar displayed *B’tox*.

I’d been at this clinic for about a year, managing the books and the office. Before that I’d tried working from home. Unfortunately, the amount of time I worked from home had a side effect: stuffing my face at all hours.

Getting rid of the extra blubber wasn’t easy. I’d joined a trendy gym only to leave after three weeks because:

- a) I had to wear stretchy pants
- b) I didn’t like getting bendy in the co-ed yoga classes.
- c) No one bothered spraying cleanser on the sweaty equipment after use.

The phone rang.

“It’s your motha,” said Amy.

There was a pause while I thought about calling Mama back later.

“She your motha. You talk your motha!” Amy patched Mama through.

“Listen, darling, there’s been an abduction,” said Mama breathlessly. “A girl has disappeared from her house.”

“From where?”

“The Ralston Farms. How horrible! What time are you coming home?”

I glanced at the wall clock. “I’m leaving in about ten minutes.”

“I want you to walk in a crowd or near some ladies. Do *not* walk near any strange men! Who knows which mad people are about?”

“Don’t worry, Mama, I’ll be careful.”

“Yes, that is what that poor girl must have said to her family,” said Mama morbidly.

“How was she abducted? Did she leave a note or anything? Were there ransom calls? Did she have any enemies? Were there any threats? What about her family?”

“I don’t know!” said Mama, her voice impatient. “She just disappeared.”

“Did her friends say anything? What about her parents?”

“Arrey, will you stop this? You know what happens when you stick your nose into things.”

“I’ll be home soon, Mama.”

“Alright,” Mama said, slightly mollified. “But stop asking these silly questions. Oof, why can’t you try to emulate some of these nice movie stars like Aishwarya or Priyanka. Now they are talented *and* classy. Instead, you have crushes on people like Scott Z! And I can’t understand how you get all googly over that Inspector fellow.”

Mama, while adoring of those she considers a “good catch” (educated, handsome, wealthy, and of Indian extraction), is highly suspicious of overly clever and successful men that are not of Indian extraction, claiming that they’re married to their egos and have no room for a wife except as a personal assistant. None of which applies to herself and Stuart, of course. #sarcasm #irony

“Inspector Dutt solves mysteries, Mama. He’s *smart*.”

“So? All Indian girls are smart too,” she sniffed. “Just be normal is all I ask. By the way, I was speaking to Mrs. Sharma.” An ominous silence. “She says you told Akash that you like him but insanity runs in our family.”

Mama paused. “Stop smirking, Jita, I can hear you over the phone. I don’t understand why you do this with every potential husband. You know Uncle Dipak simply likes to watch wrestling matches, he’s not crazy.”

This would be female mud-wrestling matches. In Bart Simpson Cowabunga underwear photoshopped to read “Cow-a-DONG-a.” And that’s just the text...I won’t describe what they’ve done to the poor cow in the picture. Then of course he wears it when people visit and plays ventriloquist with the religious idols. Let’s not even talk about the scratching.

“Anyway,” said Mama. “He’s a little eccentric, that’s all. Every family has their skeletons. You are twenty-nine now. You’ll be past your prime to get married. And Akash told his mother earlier that he thought you were adorable.” Mama sounded astonished. “I mean yes, you are my daughter, but I don’t know if I would use the word adorable. Beautiful maybe, definitely annoying. But adorable? Why would you want to refuse an eligible, wealthy man who thinks you are ...” another stunned pause “*adorable*? There is not going to be a stampede of such men.

“Come home soon. And, darling, start improving your attitude about meeting a husband,” said Mama in a way that set off alarm bells. “It’s time you settle down.”



About an hour later, I sat on the sofa in the living room with Mama and my stepfather Stuart. The armrests had faded to a buttery shine in the California sun, the left side displaying a wedge-shaped dent caused by my stepfather Stuart’s enthusiastic craze in Thai Boxing DVD’s. A craze which lasted all of three weeks and two days, at which point he pulled a groin muscle, enjoyed a temper tantrum involving very juicy language and had to go to physio for eight weeks.

Mama tended towards a colorful Indo-Mexican theme: Pastel colored bubble-glass vases sitting on carved tables against a background of cozy, adobe walls painted a chalky white, were interspersed with cool, sandalwood carvings of Hindu gods and goddesses adorning the tops of doorways.

When I stood beneath the doors on a windy day with the windows open, I could catch the fleeting fragrance of sandalwood from the carvings as it lingered and dissipated, wafting through the rooms, conjuring up tantalizing flickers of childhood vacations in India.

Mama was dressed in a silky print caftan with heeled sandals – her favorite choice of home wear. Stuart wore chinos and a white polo shirt with \$1.99 Wal-Mart flip-flops.

The dining area was furnished with a long glass table for eight with high-backed red leather chairs that were more ornamental than comfortable. Large Indian folk-design mats lay beneath steaming bowls of rice and an assortment of curries. We settled in at

the table and drank water out of Stuart's favorite glasses, each of which he'd received for free with a full tank of gas at the local station.

A matching sideboard in cherry wood, topped with a glass shelf and Mexican Talavera pottery bowls, held dinnerware behind closed doors. An oil rendition of the Taj Mahal at twilight, framed in light silver, hung directly across from me, facing the hallway.

"I hear this Indian man called Charles Ralston has a whole bunch of 'wives' working his farm," said Stuart. "It's the last wife who disappeared. Her family's raising bloody murder from Calcutta and there's an uncle in New York somewhere."

"Charles Ralston. That doesn't sound very Indian," I said.

"Must be Anglo-Indian or something," said Mama.

I ladled vegetable curry onto basmati rice studded with aromatic cumin. "How do you know all this, Stuart?"

"Arthur told me, that's Amanda's dad. We had lunch together at Le Jewel. Very pricey." Stuart tucked into his dinner with full attention.

"Who's Amanda?"

He tore his eyes away from his plate reluctantly. "Amanda, the interior designer. Eh right, you haven't met her yet. Nice young lass - her father was a great friend of mine. He retired and moved to Arizona, like so many of the old crowd. Expensive there," said Stuart, whose idea of Big Spending involved presenting a tip as though it were a company bonus.

"Anyway, I took him out for lunch. I paid the last time he visited, two years ago. It was *his* turn to pay this time." He shot us a look. "Cheap feller pretended he had to go call his wife when the bill came."

“You’ll meet Amanda at the party on Saturday,” said Mama, tactfully changing the subject.

“Anyways this Ralston chap’s a pretty rich fellow,” said Stuart, who does not like being sidetracked. “No one on his farm is talking.”

“The cops should go undercover. Especially if he’s wealthy and can buy people off. Or bump off witnesses,” I said cheerfully, shoveling in more rice.

“Stuart, don’t encourage her,” said Mama.

Later I sat in my room, thinking about Sunny. He and his older sister Reena had lived with us in Vancouver, Canada after their parents died in a railway accident when he was fourteen. Reena left shortly afterwards for university at UCLA. Sunny had stayed with us until he finished university. He’d always looked out for me.

The case of the missing Ralston girl sounded like the perfect practice case. I could try my hand at a little bit of detective work and if it didn’t work out, no sweat, the cops were on it anyway. But if it did work out . . . I headed over to my desk and pulled out a small notepad and a pen.

To-Do:

- 1. Get in good with the cops.*
- 2. Learn what I need to solve this case.*

If I solve this case (seems straightforward since it’s not freaking *classified*), the cops would owe me.

Either they’d tell me what happened to Sunny or I’d have learned some skills by then to solve it.

Facile, non?

I logged onto *The Santa Barbara News Press* and the *Independent* to look for articles on the Ralston disappearance. One scanty article showed a picture of the missing wife, Padmini; a petite woman in her thirties with long, black hair and lovely features.

Next, I googled the Ralston Farms website. The farm appeared to be located roughly halfway between Santa Barbara and Santa Ynez. I clicked on a link which brought up a picture of Charles - a plump, soft-looking man in his forties with a moustache and confident smile. His business seemed to be booming, with deliveries to supermarkets all over California.

His brother Max was listed as the VP. Max's picture was eye-catching – he had thick, slicked-back dark hair, intense eyes, and a smile that could melt the undies off most warm-blooded women. What if Charles's wife had something going on with Max? What if Charles had found out?

It wouldn't be the first time someone had boinked the in-law.



The Cloud

You're moving back in with your parents, erm I mean moving out of your parents' place and you've loaded up a dolly with boxes. You've never used a dolly before and you're looking forward to whizzing it through the house instead of clumping in and out with one box in your arms at a time shouting "Move it, move it, *move* it!"

You push the dolly handles low and get ready to charge. Only...your handles dip right down from the weight and you lunge forward looking like Quasimodo mowing the lawn.

You discover you can only turn around if you do a Thriller-type shuffle and don't mind your backside whacking against the door frame with each turn.

Then you get feverish and curse the dolly. "What's with this stupid thing? I'll bet this is not even a real dolly, it's a loading thingy. Yeah, to use at loading docks! Oh geez, they gave me the wrong dolly!"

But then...have you ever noticed that if you stand up straight and dip the dolly just the tiniest bit, that you can turn around in any direction and move with the greatest of ease? Why is this?

I think it's because the closer you bend to the ground, the closer the gravitational pull. And the further the handle and the floor from each other, the lower the force of gravity between them. And the less force applied to the handles, the less acceleration in either direction. But there's more control.

Excuse my smore-inducing train of thought here but...

If the less force you use, the more control or power you have, then that must mean:

Force is inversely proportional to power.

And if force pushes *against* you (authoritative), then true power must work *with* you (collaborative).

Does that mean that people who look at things from a distance have more power?

And those of us who are enslaved by our emotions get whacked in the behind by life?

FreshGirl



CHAPTER 3

Saturday evening was the night of Mama's drinks party. After washing and blow-drying my hair into glossy sheets, I applied a layer of golden bronze foundation, then wiggled into a sleeveless black shift dress that stopped mid-thigh, sparkles flashing down the V-neck area.

I powdered lightly, then fluffed soft dabs of coral blush onto my cheekbones and added gray-silver shadow along with highlighter. Light pink, pearly gloss shone on my lips. After running an eyelash comb through two coats of black mascara, I outlined my eyes in black kohl.

Bollywood Jita winked back at me from the mirror. Spraying perfume around the bedroom, I wiggled obscenely through clouds dense enough to take on L.A. smog and headed downstairs, two steps at a time.

Angie was already in the living room sipping a martini, looking gorgeous in a red strapless mini-dress. Angie is five foot nine, an ex-model with a heart-shaped face and hazel brown eyes. She has creamy skin with a smattering of freckles on her nose and wears her chestnut hair cut into a shoulder-skimming blunt style.

A small group of animated men hovered around her. The rest of the guests milled around the house sipping wine and tea, chattering. Many of the guests were Stuart's friends and colleagues from the world of finance who stood in small groups, animatedly discussing mergers and takeovers.

Mama looked lovely whisking around in a flower-patterned sleeveless dress, her long black hair falling in waves with only a few flashes of silver at the temples. Stuart was dressed in brown chinos and a brand new silky pale cream shirt that brought out his warm brown eyes. I was almost positive that Mama had “helped” him pick out his wardrobe for tonight.

While indulgent with Mama, investments, charities and anything to do with the home, Stuart oddly did not like spending money on restaurants or himself. If left to his own devices, he’d be wearing his Pink Floyd tee (with a hole under the arm) and ancient shorts with flip flops.

The living room and backyard were decorated with mini red-and-white-chili-pepper lights strung along the walls and trees. Candles in various shapes and sizes sat on every available surface, wax pooling in colorful puddles in their little glass holders. Mama had gone all out with the refreshments: Enormous china-blue platters laden with crispy samosas were placed next to fragrant mint chutney in stainless steel *katoris*. Towers of wafery garlic poppadoms sat next to bowls of spiced olives, and plates of . . . I leaned closer . . . what was *that*?

“Brussels sprouts simmered in cream cheese,” said Mama, walking past.

“Er, yum.” I recoiled. Looked like green eyeballs in mucus.

In spite of the windows and patio door being wide open, the air inside was tepid and a bit stifling. Frank Sinatra, Stuart’s favorite, played softly from the living room, piping through innocuous conversations laced with the growing scent of brag.

I resisted a powerful urge to rifle through the CDs and break out *Pink*, and dance my way through the living room, joyously hip-bopping into the walls anyone talking about A

employees versus the depravity of *B* and *C* employees, aggressive growth investment portfolios, and the sublime gorgeousness of venture capital.

The front door next to me swung open with a blast of cool air and a couple walked in followed by a swirl of scent. Mama elbowed past me and greeted them with air kisses, gesturing me over. “Come and meet Amanda and her guest, darling.”

Amanda shook my hand with a frosty smile. She was a classic blond with creamy skin, large green eyes and a pert nose. Glossy hair swung just past her shoulders, topping off a petite hourglass figure. Her manner was reserved, her eyes assessing. She wore an expensive flowing dark blue skirt paired with Jordy Choo boots and a crisp white Guess blouse. But my eyes didn’t stay on Amanda. The tall, dark-haired man next to her shook Mama’s and Stuart’s hands, while I stared up in shock at Detective Dering.

“This is Keith. Keith Dering.” Amanda cuddled close to him and flicked me a *bigger-off-he’s-mine* look.

“The Officer? As in *Detective* Keith Dering?” Mama stopped batting her lashes at him.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. McTavish.” Keith was dressed once again in black.

“It’s Ms. Nayyar, actually. I kept my maiden name. But you can call me Madhuri.” Mama turned and introduced us.

Keith smiled and out flashed two large dimples.

“Hello, Jita.” His voice was like a caress.

My face grew hot as he chatted with Stuart. The nerve. I sat down, contemplating this bizarre twist. The cop in charge of Sunny’s case was here in our house, drinking beer! He could have at least returned my calls, classified or not classified, the smug so-and-so!

After taking their coats, Stuart ushered us over to a sofa. At five-foot-four inches and lean, I felt like an Amazon hulking behind the tiny and graceful Amanda. Even at my height, I'm about as tall as many Indian guys I know. Therefore, I'm not exactly pursued in my community, the guys preferring petite, achingly sweet girls who've perfected the art of the Bollywood Flutter.

The Bollywood Flutter goes like this: Innocent Girl looks teasingly (yet modestly) at Hot Stud. Girl holds Stud's glance for three molten seconds (five seconds is Borderline Hussy), then ever so slowly bats the lashes and at the same time looks down shyly in verrrry sloooow motion, with just the hint of a smile as she turns slightly away. Let me tell you, this is incredibly hard to do. They've also mastered the art of letting out an occasional light, trilling laugh while hitting Stud on the arm in a playful and captivating manner, usually ending with a teasing "oh you *naughty!*" It's an art.

I, on the other hand, get comments such as "Hey cheeky, when're you getting married off?" This is after the initial crush on an Amazon has worn off.

Mama pulled me back out into the kitchen to get drinks.

"Arrey, what is *he* doing here?" she said, feverishly whacking the edge of an antipasto jar lid with a knife handle.

"Well *you* invited him!"

"I didn't know the officer on Sunny's case was Amanda's *boyfriend!*" The seal on the lid popped and Mama distractedly dumped antipasto into a *katori*.

"Shall I ask him to leave?" I turned around.

"Of course not, come back here!" said Mama, grabbing my arm. "He's a guest in our home."

I peered through the door. Keith was animatedly greeting one of Stuart's old friends.

"Does he know Fergus?"

"Fergus is a police officer, darling. Surely they must work together."

We returned with the drinks and placed them on the table. I sat down and smiled politely at Amanda who looked at me coolly.

"Keith just won the national POLDO championships." She tucked a lock of golden hair behind her ear. "He had to fly back early for the Ralston case."

"What's POLDO?" I asked.

"It's a form of martial arts for police," said Keith, slightly embarrassed. "I teach it to rookies part-time."

I thought of Keith kickboxing, his muscles flexing as he flipped someone on their arse. Sexy I suppose, if you like that sort of thing. He had that macho cop act nailed pretty well. Probably practiced it in front of a mirror.

"How'd you learn that?" I asked.

"I trained under one of the founders in Toronto. A Grand Master, about six years ago. Now we boost physical defense training for officers." Keith's face became animated as he talked. "POLDO controlling techniques are quite effective and it makes civilians happy too. The officers love it because they don't rely so much on guns and it builds their self-confidence. Obviously, we still have to carry but whatever we can do to reduce unnecessary force is ideal."

"Jita's a bookkeeper," said Stuart. Amanda sipped her drink without a word but Keith gave me a knowing look – I hadn't been doing any bookkeeping in Sunny's office.

After a while Mama and Stuart went off to greet some of Mama's friends and Keith disappeared to get another beer.

“Those curtains are uh...*different*. Where did you get them?” asked Amanda after a few moments, gesturing at the billowing sari-style drapes in the living room.

I thought back. “From the World Market.”

“Where’s that?” Amanda scanned the curtains with her eyes.

“It’s this really cool store downtown on State Street.”

“What a cute colour...baby-poop yellow!” she laughed with raised eyebrows.

I took a large sip of wine. “It’s *gold*.”

After a moment she grimaced. “What’s that *smell*?”

I sniffed discreetly but couldn’t find anything out of place. “Maybe it’s the jasmine incense? Mama lights it for a while before guests come over just to clear the air.”

Amanda muttered to herself under her breath, “Phew, it stinks.”

Heat crept up the base of my neck. Didn’t she think I could *hear* her?

Thankfully she got up to check on her lipstick but Keith returned to his seat looking annoyingly self-satisfied. I turned to him. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He seemed amused. “You invited me.”

“I did not - oh! Mama doesn’t know you’re holding out on info about Sunny.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Nothing’s been held back other than what’s classified.”

Pompous, good-looking so-and-so.

I revised my plan:

Don’t make him the enemy (which, of course, he is)

Play my cards right (be disgustingly polite, suck-up, etc.)

I smiled. “So you’re on the Ralston case - I saw your name in the *Independent*. How’s that going?”

He sipped his beer. “It’s one of those weird cases we’ve seen before. Guy brings home bride after bride and before you know it, one of them disappears. Problem is, we can’t find a body.”

A low hum sounded. Keith turned away and pulled out a pager from his jacket, frowning at the number.

“Looks like I’ll have to leave soon.” He sat back and looked at me over the rim of his beer bottle. “What’s so interesting about the Ralston case?”

I shrugged. “Any leads yet? Are you guys doing surveillance?”

“Well, the investigation’s still underway. But there *are* a few things that aren’t confidential. You’ve probably heard about them in the news,” he said.

Keith and his partner Ron Higgins had interviewed the women who worked for Charles but they were not very forthcoming. Charles denied they were his wives, the women wouldn’t say anything to the police, and they all had legal working papers.

Padmini had disappeared the weekend of September 25 and Charles claimed to have been away at an organic farming convention in New Jersey the weekend of the disappearance. Essentially the cops had next to nothing to go on, other than following up on the convention for an alibi.

“What was that about Charles having several wives? Was he passing them off as wives?” I asked.

“No, but we got a few anonymous leads.”

“Stereotyping, eh?”

“I’ll be right back.” He smiled and headed for the washroom.

I looked over at Keith's leather jacket and saw the bulge of his pager. Mama and Stuart were on the far side of the room, Amanda was at the sideboard bar refreshing her drink.

I held my breath and slid a hand inside his pocket. The pager slipped out easily and I peered at the name on the screen.

Ralston. Why were the Ralstons calling Keith directly? I stuffed it back in hastily.

"Jita, I'm going out for a while." Keith picked up his jacket and put it on, watching me. Blood pounded into my face. Had he seen me with his pager?

END OF SAMPLE

I hope you enjoyed this little sample!

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