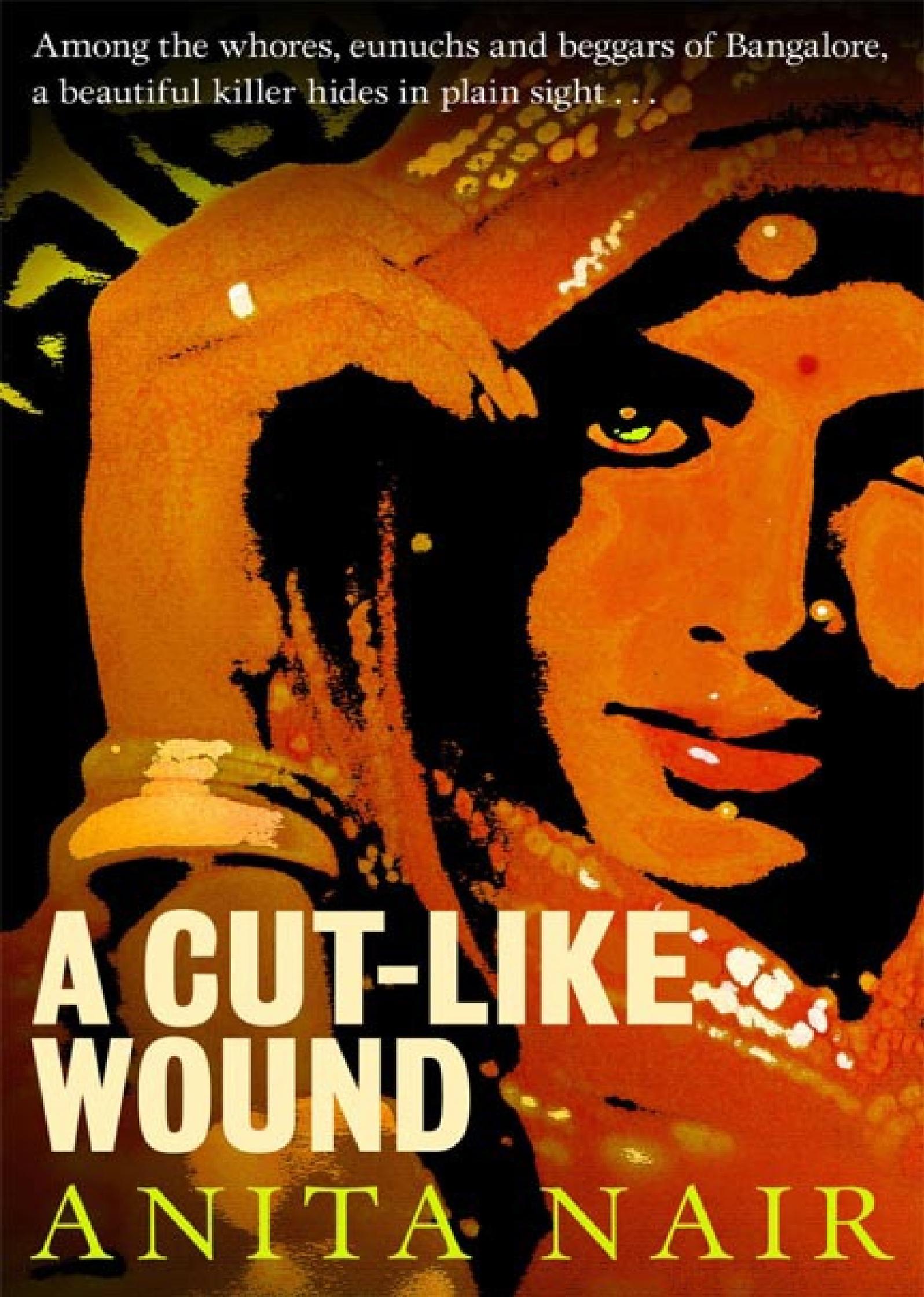


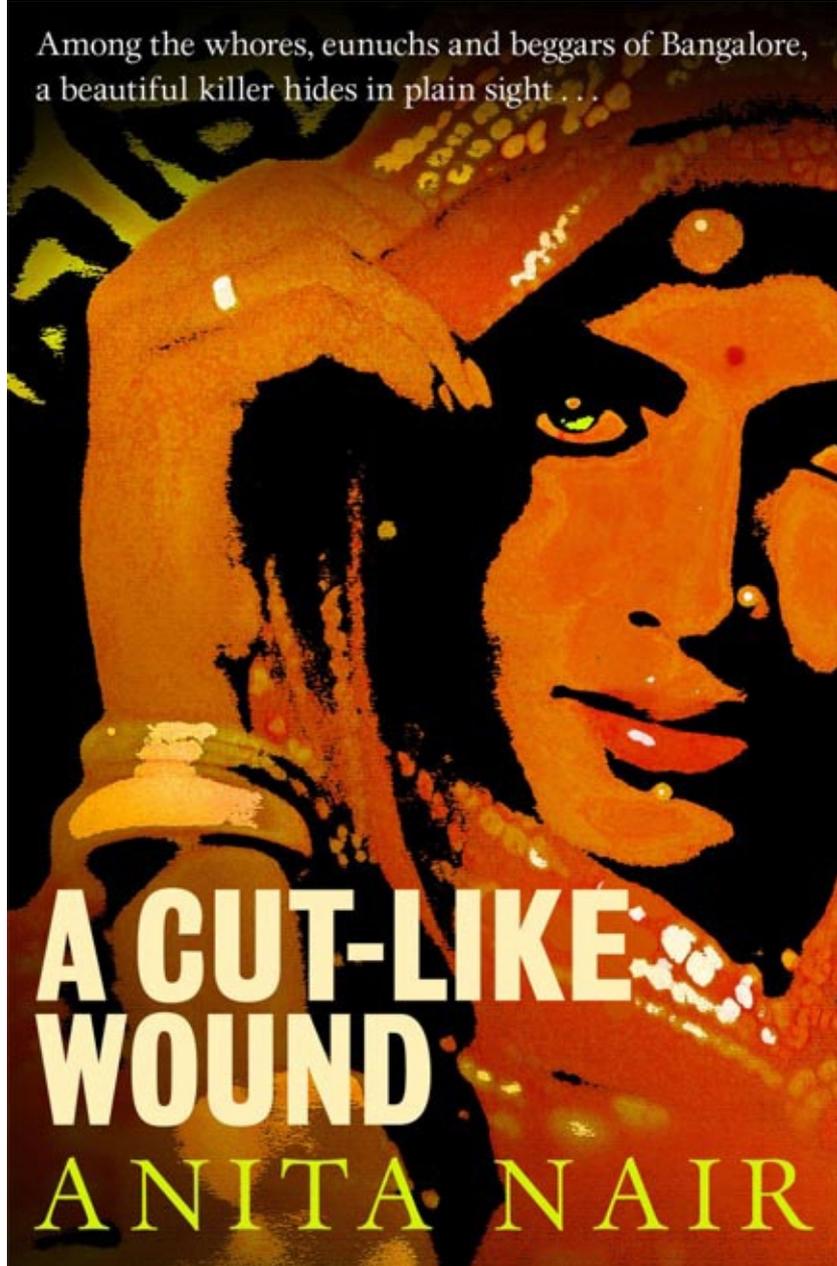
Among the whores, eunuchs and beggars of Bangalore,  
a beautiful killer hides in plain sight . . .



**A CUT-LIKE  
WOUND**

ANITA NAIR

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a beautiful killer hides in plain sight . . .



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WOUND**  
ANITA NAIR

Anita Nair is the bestselling author of the novels *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting*. Her books have been translated into over thirty languages around the world. She is also the founder and editor of the online literary journal *The Heavenly Bliss Salon for Men*.

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# A CUT-LIKE WOUND

Anita Nair

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*For Sunil*  
*big brother, best friend and partner in crime from Day 1*

*'Flora, what makes up a man? That's the question to ask. Well, apparently something within me had asked and I wonder, how sane am I? Yes, yes, I talk sane at times, but without warning, something else emerges like the shadow but more concealed and deadly. What is the trigger? Yes, that's the question...'*

*—The Shoemaker, Flora Rheta Schreiber*

## Contents

Monday, 1 August  
Wednesday, 3 August  
Thursday, 4 August  
Friday, 5 August  
Saturday, 6 August  
Sunday, 7 August  
Monday, 8 August  
Tuesday, 9 August  
Wednesday, 10 August  
Thursday, 11 August  
Friday, 12 August  
Saturday, 13 August  
Sunday, 14 August  
Tuesday, 16 August  
Wednesday, 17 August  
Thursday, 18 August  
Friday, 19 August  
Saturday, 20 August  
Sunday, 21 August  
Monday, 22 August  
Tuesday, 23 August  
Wednesday, 24 August  
Thursday, 25 August  
Friday, 26 August  
Saturday, 27 August  
Sunday, 28 August  
Monday, 29 August  
Tuesday, 30 August  
Thursday, 1 September  
Tuesday, 6 September  
Thursday, 8 September

Bibliography and Reference Material  
Acknowledgements

## MONDAY, 1 AUGUST

### 9.14 p.m.

It wasn't the first time. But it always felt like the first time as he stood in front of the mirror, uncertain, undecided, on the brink of something monumental. On the bare marble counter was a make-up kit. He ran his finger along the marble to check for dust. Only when he was satisfied that it was clean did he touch the quilted cover of the lid. The satin shirred under his fingers. Something leapt in him, a wave of pure delight that was enough to set him off.

A giggle emerged. A snickering sound of pure joy, girlish glee and unfettered excitement.

He switched on the series of light bulbs that circled the mirror. The electrician had stared when he had asked for the light bulbs to be placed so. The electrician's assistant had sniggered and asked his boss, 'Why does he want so many lights? Who does he think he is? Rajinikant? Is he going to put make-up on?'

But he had set his heart on it after seeing it in a film. And so he had frowned and said in his coldest voice, 'If you don't know how to, I can always find someone else.'

That had settled it.

In the mirror, he gazed at himself just once. Fleeting. Then it was time. He opened the kit and started working quickly with a practised hand. The concealer to cover the shadows on his chin and around his mouth. The foundation, the fine creamy talc to smoothen the complexion, eyes enhanced with the kohl pencil, and a twirl of the mascara brush on the eyelashes for the wide-eyed look. He wet the tip of his finger with Vaseline and traced his eyebrows. A pat of blush and then carefully he outlined his lips with a lip pencil and filled it with a deep pink lipstick. He pressed his lips together and applied a coat of gloss. Glistening lips smiled shyly at the reflection in the mirror.

He took a tissue from a box and carefully wiped the counter. Marble was like skin, it showed up how it was used. He crumpled the tissue into a ball and flicked it into the bin. Then he stepped out of the track pants he was wearing and hung it from a hook behind the door. He averted his eyes as he slid off his briefs and, making a moue of his lips, tossed it into the basket that held the T-shirt he had been wearing.

Naked and wearing just his painted face, he walked out of the bathroom. Then he paused and went back again to the dressing table. He opened a drawer in which were six vials of the finest attar.

He opened the stoppers one by one and sniffed at the mouth of the perfume vial. Nag Champa. Raat Shanthi. Roah al Oudh. Shamama. Moulshree. And his favourite,

Jannat ul firdous.

He chose Shamama. Tonight he would be a garden of flowers. A complex scent would herald his arrival and trail his footsteps.

The last door of the walk-in wardrobe was locked. Only he had access to it. He hummed under his breath as he opened the door. Green, green, tonight he felt like wearing green, he told himself as he pulled out a shimmery green chiffon sari.

From one of the drawers, he pulled out a pale-green petticoat and blouse. Then, with a smile, a padded bra and the matching panty. He was still humming as he adjusted the blouse and pinned the sari so it hung low, showing off his waist and his navel piercing. He touched the topaz in his navel. A frisson of excitement unfurled in him.

From the shelf on top, he chose a wig of waist-length hair. He placed it on his head and, as he looked into the mirror, something about the way his eyelids drooped told him who he wanted to be tonight.

With elaborate care he arranged himself so he was the woman from a Ravi Varma painting, fresh from a bath. He brought his hands to his chin and laced his fingers so the tip of the forefinger of the right hand touched the edge of his lower lip.

Hair to her knees, loose and flowing. The sari clasped between fingers, an attempt to cover herself but hinting at the nakedness of her breasts. The fullness of flesh. Shy, yet seeking more. All woman.

He laid out the earrings. He always wore the same pair. Old-fashioned pearl earrings with hooks so he didn't have to fumble with screws. He clipped a necklace around his neck and slid glass bangles on both wrists. The tinkle of green glass as he lifted the hem of the sari and stepped into two-inch-high green-and-beige sandals made him smile again.

No matter how busy he was, he always found the time to go shopping for clothes, accessories, cosmetics and perfumes. The sales assistants presumed it was for the woman in his life and they would exchange glances as he took forever to decide. Once, one of them had said, almost enviously, 'She must be very special, this woman you are shopping for ... most men who come here just pick the first thing they see and leave ... but you...'

He had nodded. 'She is the most important person in my life!'

In the mirror, he saw himself as the woman the goddess wished him to be.

The goddess spoke every Friday. The goddess whispered in his ear what he should do. Ten days ago, the goddess had said it was all very well that he liked to dress up as a woman in the privacy of his home, but it was time for him to step out into the world as Bhuvana. It was time to take control. He had obeyed.

For the first time, though, the goddess had appeared on her own this afternoon. He had dozed off after lunch. He woke up to her whispering his name. She was sitting at the foot of his bed. For a moment, he saw her and then she disappeared. All that was left was a smell of camphor in the room and her incessant whisper in his ear: Tonight you must be Bhuvana. Tonight you will be Bhuvana. As Bhuvana, you will walk the streets. Will you or won't you?

'I will, I will, Amma,' he had whispered, overwhelmed at the vision.

She had left him then, but the fragrance of camphor still hung over the room. A reminder that she was there and was keeping tabs on him.

Now he was the woman he wished to be and he knew again that wave of pure delight. I am she! I am her! I am the most beautiful woman I know.

It was Bhuvana who stuck a hand on her hip and pouted her lips at him.

It was Bhuvana who placed the tip of her finger against her glossy lip and murmured, Tonight, tonight...

And it was Bhuvana who took his hand and led him into that secret place in his head where he was queen of the night, draped in sheer chiffon, with the lustre of those exquisite pearls tantalizing everyone.

Bhuvana, who knew how to make it all possible.

A gentle knock on the door brought him out of his reverie. A voice murmured, 'Are you ready? We have to go now.'

He smiled at the woman in the mirror. Bhuvana smiled back and blew him a kiss. Tonight, all would be well. Tonight, she would have her fill.

'Yes,' he called out. 'I am done.'

Then, turning to the woman in the mirror, he said almost coyly, 'Let's go, Bhuvana!'

Bhuvana giggled.

## 9.51 p.m.

'Go home, Liaquat,' one of the vendors said quietly. 'Go home, son.'

Liaquat shook his head. 'No, I don't want to go home. I don't want to go home alone,' he hissed. 'Leave me, bhai jaan. You don't know how I feel ... All day I stayed in the house by myself. I fasted too, bhai jaan ... Allah knows how I did it ... I summoned every ounce of willpower and didn't touch even a drop of water. But who am I doing it for? What's the point?'

The vendor exhaled loudly. It was the first day of Ramzan and Mohammed and his wife too had kept the fast. Only the little ones had been fed. 'Why do you do it, Abba?' Tasneem, his girl, had asked him.

'Because Allah wants us to,' he had said. The truth was they did it for their children. So Allah's dua would shower down on the little ones.

Soon everyone would come out of their homes after the Iftar meal. Through the night they would wander the streets, picking up a treat here, a bargain there ... Many things were bought for the year ahead. Saeed's daughter was buying her wedding clothes and accessories though the nikah was four months away. He had heard that the rent for a pushcart this year during the Ramzan month had gone up to Rs 15,000. But it would be worth it, Yusuf, one of the men, had told him. They would make a clear profit!

Mohammed had his spot and stand all year round in the same place. And the Ramzan business would spill over to where he was. He smiled. Everyone profited during this month. So would he.

It was late in the night but the Shivaji Nagar bus stand area was simmering with activity. On Saturday nights the streets were more alive than they were during the weekdays. And this was the first night of Ramzan. A certain excitement resonated through the alleys and lanes.

The vendors had their carts edged along the roads, which buzzed with life. The smell of meat cooking on charcoal mingled with the aroma of samosas being fried in giant vats of hissing oil. Chopped onions and coriander leaves, pakodas and jalebis, strings of marigold and jasmine buds, rotting garbage and cow dung. The high notes of attar. The animal scent of sweat and unwashed bodies.

Men of all sizes and shapes trawled the alleys. Some seeking a hot kebab to sink their teeth into; some seeking a laugh, a suleimani in a glass and a smoke. Men returning home from work. Policemen on the beat. Autorickshaw drivers and labourers. Whores. Eunuchs. Urchins. Beggars. Tourists. Regulars.

A composite cloud of a thousand fragrances and desires in that shadowed underbelly of the city.

Mohammed pummelled the dough for the roomali roti. 'Stay by my side and help me with these. We'll go home when I am done. You can stay with us tonight. Shama will be pleased to see you. She's cooked some haleem. You like that, don't you?'

Liaquat swallowed. He hated being alone. He was tempted by the thought of spending the night in Mohammed Bhai's house. Shama-bi would serve him food that tasted of his mother's cooking. Not the rubbish Mohammed and the other vendors dished up to feed these fools who came to Shivaji Nagar looking for what they thought was Muslim cuisine.

He would sleep in the hall with the children. He would sing songs and tell jokes and make them laugh. Everyone thought he was a scream. Most of all, his big-bearded Razak.

He thought of how those fierce eyes softened when they fell upon him. Of how gentle his caresses were as he turned him over and murmured into his ear, 'My Leila. The sweetness of my Leila ... you make me forget it all.'

A deep pang of longing seared through him.

'No one calls me Leila any more,' he said. 'Ever since my Razak mia...'

'He'll be back soon,' Mohammed said quietly. 'Go home,' he urged again, seeing Liaquat's dilated pupils. The boy had been shooting up again. Allah knew what he would get up to in a little while.

'See that...' he said, his eyes following the two police constables ambling lazily down the road, 'the thollas are out in full force tonight. If they catch you...' Then unable to help himself, he demanded, 'Why do you get into this state? Why do you do it, Liaquat? It's not good for you...'

'What state?' Liaquat shrieked. 'Don't lecture me. I am fine. Do you hear me? I am fine. I am horny. I want to get fucked. That's what I want. That's the state I am in,' he said, rising and weaving his way through the stalls.

'I want to fuck ... I want to fuck all night...' He laughed as he slid into the shadows. His white kurta pajama cut a swath through the darkness.

Mohammed turned back to his skewers of chicken cubes. In the distance he could hear Liaquat's falsetto shrill, 'Tonight ... Leila will fuck all night tonight!'

**10.04 p.m.**

They had set out together and she had to wait for almost half an hour for a moment to escape her companions' gaze, which dogged her every gesture and step. She didn't particularly want to be with them but the one she called Akka wouldn't allow it any other way. 'You have to be careful. We have to be careful. If someone saw you...' Akka said.

She hadn't responded to Akka's words of caution. But resentment simmered within her. It was like being four all over again. When her mother would take her to see the sights at the trade fair but she wasn't allowed to touch a thing. 'It has a price attached to it,' her mother would say. 'If it breaks, how do we pay for it?'

Everything has a price attached to it, she knew. But now she could afford it. It was hers if she wanted it. Anything and everything she wanted.

Akka touched her elbow. 'I am not so sure you should take such risks!'

She tossed her head with the hauteur only beautiful women can affect and get away with. The pearl in her earring swung against her cheek. 'Don't I need some fun too?'

Her mouth curled in an almost wolfish way as she turned away. Akka thought she knew all her secrets. But the best secret of all, she kept close to her heart. No one knew. No one knew how powerful it made her feel. She giggled. Akka shot her a look, but said nothing.

The market that had sprung up for Ramzan was on the other side. Akka wouldn't let them go that way. 'They won't like it,' she said. 'Why invite trouble to sit in our laps?' she told one of the others who claimed the bargains were better there.

'Besides, even our best customers will pretend they don't know us. It's their holy month. And they bring their families with them to see the shops ... We'll stay here near the bus stand and go towards Cubbon Road. The others will be there as well,' Akka said, leading them in that direction.

The crowds pressed against her as she and her companions wove their way through. She felt a hand caress her waist and cup her arse. She leaned into the caress but it was over even before it had begun. Leaving her feel used. Dirty. Dirty. Dirty.

A nerve snapped. A pulse throbbed. She saw Akka sneak a look at her. But she didn't let any of what she felt show on her face. And when the moment arrived, as they all stood near a bangle vendor, flirting with him, trying on bangles, scouting for prospects, she slipped away.

She felt him follow her down the dark alleyway. She swung her hips, leading him on. He knew. He knew what she could offer him. She smiled and suddenly paused. She turned her head to smile at him. Her smile froze. There was another man following him. A man who laughed when he caught her eye.

'Go away,' she snarled.

The interloper laughed. A high, shrill laugh. 'He thinks you are a woman.'

Tears welled up in her eyes. Then she pulled herself together and said through clenched teeth, 'Why do you say that? I am a woman, can't you see?'

The interloper giggled. 'In which case, I am the prime minister of India.'

He tapped the puzzled man on his shoulder. 'She's not a woman. She's a chhakka ... Didn't you see a group of them near the bus stand?'

The man's face fell. Disgust replaced lust. He walked towards her and scrutinized her carefully. 'He's right. You are a fucking eunuch.'

The interloper smirked. 'But if that's what you like ... Mia, come to me, I can do better...'

The man hawked and spat on the street. 'Fuck off. I don't want you sucking my cock either. As for you,' he turned to her, 'I am not desperate enough to fuck a man in woman's clothes. Go find some fool who'll be taken in by this...' He gestured at the fullness of her bosom and the curve of her hip. He flicked a pearl drop with a forefinger, watching it swing like a pendulum. 'Nice earrings, but you know something, they don't suit you. You are not pretty enough ... or woman enough to wear them.'

She stared at her feet where the blob of saliva had come to rest. She heard his footsteps as he hurried from the alley. She was nothing. She was filth. She was scum. She had been so happy this evening and then...

She raised her eyes and saw the mocking expression on the other man's face. If only this fucking cocksucker hadn't followed her. If only ... As the rage gathered in her, she forgot all about who she was.

She hurled herself forward and sank her fist into the fool's belly. He bent over double with the impact, the pain, the breath knocked out of him, and as he tried to find his feet, his hands flailed in the air, grabbing for anything they could find to support him. It was her loosely woven plait of hair that he clutched at. The wig came away in his hand.

His eyes widened as he saw who stood before him. The face, even under all the layers of make-up, was one he recognized. Through pain and disbelief, he felt a grin stretch his lips. 'I don't believe this ... you ... it's you...'

She flicked the small switchblade she kept in her bra and held it to his throat. 'Quiet,' she said coldly.

He stared at her, suddenly afraid. 'Let me go.' He fell to his knees. 'I won't tell anyone ... I promise by everything I hold precious. I won't. You must believe me ... please.'

She hummed under her breath as she moved behind him, still holding the knife to his throat. He heard the snap of a bag open and shut. What was she doing?

Then the steel edge of the blade no longer pressed against his throat. He relaxed his clenched muscles. But before he could turn his head to look at her, he felt something descend on the back of his head.

He felt his skull crack. He screamed. Through the blinding pain, he felt something tighten around his throat.

'No, no,' he whispered, trying to snap the string, and felt a million particles of glass pierce his hands. Flashes of light burnt his eyelids and hissing serpents filled his ears. He felt unable to resist any more.

'Are you here?' Akka called out as she entered the mouth of the cul-de-sac. The elderly eunuch was shocked into silence by what she saw. The man on his knees and she standing behind him with her disguise in disarray. As Akka watched, the man crumpled to the floor. He hadn't even felt the string cut the skin of his throat and press down into his jugular vein.

Akka saw her take a tissue from her bag and wipe her fingers clean. She threw it

on his face. The line of blood on his throat grew with every beat of his heart.

Akka ran towards her.

She didn't speak for a while.

'He recognized me. I had no option but this...' she said in an even voice.

Akka felt a chill seep into her. Who was this person who stood before her?

'Anyway, he is just a lowlife. No one's going to miss him. So don't waste your emotion on him,' she said, arranging her hair carefully. 'Give me your mobile.' She opened her palm out to Akka.

Akka handed it over silently and watched as she pressed a few keys.

'It's me,' she said. 'I've left a thing in the alley near Siddiq's garage. Deal with it. No leftovers.'

Akka's eyes darted to the man on the floor. But he was still alive...

'Let's go,' she said, handing the phone back to Akka.

As they turned into the street ahead, she suddenly stopped. She turned and walked briskly back to where he lay on the ground. She bent over and peered at him for a moment. Then she stood up and kicked him on his face with the heel of her sandal. 'Scum,' she muttered as the pointed tip split the skin on his cheek.

## **11.42 p.m.**

Samuel rubbed the cuff of his biking jacket across his eyes. He was tired and sleepy as he rode his bike home. It had begun to drizzle. A fine stinging rain. What kind of a life was this where a man had to ride thirty kilometres across the city in the middle of a wet night after a whole evening of watching models cavort in their underwear and society types toss free alcohol down their throats?

How they wooed him. All of them. The models, the hosts, the sponsors, the party goers, the gatecrashers; Sam here, Sam there, Sam this, Sam that ... Sammy, Sammy ... and then they would want to see the frames he had shot, what they looked like as they held their pert poses with pasted-on smiles ...

It disgusted him, this job he did as a photographer of the society pages for the *Bangalore Messenger*. Some days at least. Most days it was just a job, and one he was good at. He knew how to capture the right poses and intersperse the familiar faces with new ones. And he knew who was who. So he aimed his camera at the butterflies, leaving the moths and caterpillars for the photographers from the rival papers.

'You have the eye,' his editor said. 'You are good. You don't miss a thing. That's why the readers prefer our page three to the others!'

This was still better than working for the news pages as he had once. Prowling outside the house where a child had been mauled and torn to death by a tiger during a visit to Bannerghatta National Park. Crowding at the gates of Golden Palms for a glimpse of a Bollywood actor when he arrived for his nuptials. Sneaking on a politician's tryst with a TV actress. On the day he was asked to get an unusual shot of the grieving family of a former Miss India who had killed herself, he decided to make the move. It had shamed him that he had to prey on people's vulnerabilities and privacy to fill space. He preferred to capture images of people pretending to have a

good time rather than impinge on naked emotion.

Samuel thought of his bed longingly as he turned from the airport road into Sathanur Cross.

Another eighteen kilometres and he would be home. The wind had an edge to it. The fine drizzle had turned into a steady rain, but Samuel felt hot under his collar. He had had too much to drink. He shouldn't have while he was on an assignment. Now Samuel felt his evening's excess curdle in his gut and rise upwards as he rode down the desolate road. He pulled over to the side of the road, retching. From the corner of his eye, he saw a Scorpio with Tamil Nadu number plates drive away. But a fresh rush of vomit hurled itself up his throat, obliterating all thought...

He wiped his mouth with a piece of crumpled tissue he found in his pocket. Then he sat on the kerb, letting the rain wash over him. He hoped a Hoysala wouldn't drive by. It would be a bloody nuisance to explain to the police that he'd had too much to drink and have to flash his press card for instant immunity from the breath analyser.

Then, through the rain, across the road in the eucalyptus grove, he saw a movement. A tongue of flame crawling. A flash of white at ground level. Samuel rubbed his eyes and stood up. Then he ran across the road, instinctively picking up his camera, a Nikon D700.

A man lay in the ditch at the edge of the grove. Or what was left of a man. From the charred mess of flesh and cloth emerged a low moan.

Samuel's hands dropped to his side in horror. What had happened here? What should he do?

Unable to help himself, he raised the camera and clicked.

## **11.51 p.m.**

The night made it seem less unreal. Nights are the same everywhere, he thought. Only up there in the skies, the stars are different.

For fifteen years he had lived in another hemisphere. Different constellations had watched over him, his destiny cast by unfamiliar stars. Michael Hunt, Anglo-Indian by birth, Australian by choice, leaned back in his Meru cab and wondered at the conjoining of two stars from two different hemispheres that had brought him back to Bangalore.

'It's much better by daylight,' the cab driver said. 'Bangalore is a very hi-tech city. Have you heard of Infosys? We have big IT companies – Wipro, Dell, IBM ... and Kingfisher beer!'

Michael smiled. 'I know,' he said.

'Your second visit?' The cab driver saw his skin and assumed he was a foreigner. No touch of the tar brush for Michael, former inhabitant of Whitefield and Lingarajapuram.

'I grew up here,' he said quietly in English and then again in Kannada, '*Nanu illi beldhidhuu.*'

The cab driver gulped and peered at him curiously in the rear-view mirror. He opened his mouth to speak and then changed his mind. Michael knew his words had

had the desired effect. He shut his eyes to still the conversation. It had begun raining. He would have liked to roll down the windows and feel the breeze bring in the rain. Would it feel the same? Or would the rain in Bangalore have changed too?

The cab turned off the airport road. The new airport road. He hadn't been to this new airport ever and thought of the old one longingly. That had been more in tune with the India he had grown up in and remembered. Michael opened his eyes and sought familiar landmarks. He was certain that his friends and he had explored these small roads a long time ago. But he couldn't recognize a thing.

'Where does this lead to?' he asked.

'Kothanur, and then to Hennur, and from there to Outer Ring Road,' the driver said. 'If we go straight ahead, we can go into the city via Lingarajapuram. But we'll take a left and continue towards Whitefield.'

Michael nodded. One day he would go to Lingarajapuram. One day, when he had summoned the strength for it. For now they would go to Whitefield, where his grandaunt's house waited. A house he could sell or keep, or do with as he pleased. Michael felt a great weariness descend over him. At his age, he ought to be making retirement plans and not having to consider new possibilities in life. But Becky, childhood sweetheart, wife of twenty-three years, had slipped out of his life and all that was left were memories, remorse, sorrow, anger, and the looming question: Where do I begin?

He had done this once before, when he migrated to Australia at thirty-three. How could any man be expected to do it all over again? Where was he to find the energy, the drive, the need?

Up ahead in the distance, through the windshield, he saw a man step onto the road and wave his arms. The man's arms moved furiously, seeking attention, calling for help...

'It is dangerous to stop at this time of the night,' the cab driver said.

Michael didn't speak. The cab driver knew best. Suddenly he spotted the bike.

'No, no ... stop the car,' he said. 'Something is wrong.'



## WEDNESDAY, 3 AUGUST

Borei Gowda peered at the general diary. In the time he had been away, the station must have been bustling. Two cases of burglary. A domestic squabble. An accidental drowning of a child. A homicide.

His head hurt. There was a pounding at the back of his head like a 4-stroke Royal Enfield engine. Only, this one had a faulty tappet setting. The dhuk-dhuk note increased by the minute and then suddenly became something else.

Gowda pressed the sides of his forehead with his fingers. Harder, harder, hoping the pressure on his temples would stem the pounding. Why had he drunk all that whisky last night? He should have stuck to his regular drink. Old Monk Rum with Coke and a twist of lime. With rum, no matter how much he drank, he never had a hangover. Whisky offered no such assurances the morning after.

He wished he could go back home and lie in a dark room. He wished his wife would sit by his side and massage Tiger Balm on his forehead with fingertips that were soft but sure. He wished she were the kind of wife whose silkiness of flesh he could turn and nuzzle his head into.

Gowda's wife Mamtha lived in Hassan. He had organized her transfer there when they found a seat for their son in the DGA Medical College in Hassan a year ago. They had to pay five lakh rupees as capitation fee. This, despite the minister's recommendation and a majority of Gowdas on the management committee. To leave Roshan there on his own wasn't advisable, his wife had said. The boy had a predilection for getting into trouble. So Gowda called in yet another favour, and his wife was now the doctor at one of the ESI hospitals. Roshan lived with his mother and until he graduated, Gowda was going to have to be on his own, except when he could get away to visit them. Or, when Mamtha was inclined to take a few days off and come to Bangalore. But she was increasingly reluctant to do so, saying it bored her to stay at home doing nothing while Gowda was away all day. It was better if he came to Hassan, she insisted.

It was always hard coming back to a silent home after being with his family. By reaching much later than he had intended to, he had lost one more day of earned leave and had also failed to fit himself within the rhythm of a working day. If he had gone to the station house, it would have swept him into its coils and made sure that the minutes and seconds of that first day were accounted for. Pending files, briefings, bickering, paperwork, phone calls – it was only when a man had none of these to hinge his day to that he realized the worth of a working day.

Gowda had pottered around in his house from five in the evening, wondering what he ought to do. There was something disquieting about being at home early in the

evening. He switched on the TV and channel-surfed. None of the shows held his interest. Nor did the pile of magazines on the coffee table. What did people do at this hour anyway?

So it had seemed like a good idea when Nagaraj called. ‘Two of my friends are in town and we are going out for dinner. Why don’t you join us?’

Gowda had hesitated. Then he thought of the long evening stretching ahead. In a couple of days he would settle down, but the first night was the worst. That was when loneliness gnawed at him with piranha teeth. If he stayed at home he would drink on his own. Drink himself senseless. This way he would drink less, he had decided.

‘God knows how long this place will be here,’ Nagaraj had laughed as they parked outside the new Nandhini restaurant near Kothanur.

The Outer Ring Road and some of the main thoroughfares in the city outskirts were speckled with places such as this. Supposedly restaurants that families might want to eat at but more often filled with groups of middle-aged men getting drunk to their eyeballs as they discussed politics, mistresses, real estate and religion.

Gowda had looked around him carelessly, taking in the nature of the custom. Nagaraj and his friends belonged here along with the little Japanese bridge that ran over a blue-tiled artificial stream, the cluster of gazebos, the low-wattage lighting, the potted palms, the gingham tablecloths already splotted with turmeric and grease stains, and the overriding smell of curry. What the fuck am I doing in a place like this? he had thought. It had ‘This Way to Alcoholics Anonymous’ written all over it. And yet, what else was there for him to do? For that matter, who was he to sneer at Nagaraj and his friends? Just because he knew better didn’t make him any different or superior.

Gowda reached across and rang the bell. One of the constables rushed in.

‘Bring me some tea,’ Gowda said, and as the man turned to go, he added, ‘and increase the speed of the fan. Is it hanging there as an ornament to look at? Who turned the regulator all the way down?’

‘I was on leave yesterday, sir,’ PC Byrappa mumbled. It was obvious Gowda was in one of his moods.

Gowda waved him away and sank his head into his hands. The constable’s shiftiness had reminded him of someone. Suddenly he knew. Roshan. The moment you asked the boy something, he would produce a disclaimer. I don’t know; I wasn’t there; no one told me...

The faulty 4-stroke engine pounding in Gowda’s head shifted to his temples and accelerated its rhythm.

Gowda didn’t know what to make of his son. The boy had alternated between surliness and an eagerness to please. Gowda hadn’t known how to be with him. Aloof father or buddy daddy. In the end he had been neither and chosen to behave as if he were a guest just visiting. There and not there. *Hello, how are you? How is college? Have you seen any good movies?*

Hard work, this parenting, he told himself as he stared at the stack of files on his table. And for what? The little fucker won’t even give me the time of the day when he’s a hotshot doctor somewhere. But he was a father and fathers can’t absolve themselves of their responsibilities even if they know what lies ahead.

Neither can you absolve yourself of what you need to do now, Inspector Gowda, he told himself as his eyes paused on the mazhar report on the homicide at Horamavu.

Gowda read through the case diary. The homicide had taken place almost two weeks ago; in fact, on the very Friday night he left Bangalore. There seemed to be no obvious intent. There was evidence of sexual activity but somewhere between sex and that final placement of the victim on the back seat of the Tata Sierra, he had been bludgeoned and strangled to death.

The deceased was a middle-aged man who had owned a medium-sized pharmacy. Preliminary investigation had revealed that he had no business enemies or pressing debts, no illicit liaisons or association with any underworld dons. He was just an ordinary man who had probably sought sex outside his marital bed and had to pay for it with his life. In fact, the only extraordinary thing about his life may have been the manner in which he died.

Gowda tried to recreate the crime in his head. The pharmacist in the back seat with the woman. He is so busy getting a blow job that he doesn't realize that another person has sneaked into the car through the hatch. A hammer or something similar is used to strike the pharmacist on his head. He is strangled quickly but just as they get ready to strip him of his possessions, they are interrupted and so the murderer and his accomplice flee the spot without taking anything.

The deceased had on his person Rs 10,000 in cash and an iPhone. He had been wearing a diamond ring, a four-sovereign gold chain and an expensive watch.

Gowda pressed the bell. SI Santosh walked in and saluted.

'What is this manja thread reference to the ligature used?' he asked in greeting, pretending not to notice that the man who stood before him was a perfect stranger.

'Sir?' The sub-inspector's eyes widened.

'You are SI Santosh, aren't you?' Gowda said, peering at the badge pinned on his chest. Thank god, this one was a man. With his predecessor, a woman inspector, Gowda had without thinking stared at her chest to read her name and felt her eyes blaze on him.

'Sir?' she had barked. *You haven't heard of sexual harassment, have you?* the fire in her eyes demanded.

He had looked away, embarrassed. He had been petrified of the repercussions. For the next three months he had managed to avoid her till she was transferred to a station in south Bangalore.

'Sir.'

The young man's strident voice cracked his reverie. Gowda gave himself a mental shake.

'Well, explain this to me.' He jabbed at the file. 'Case number 84/2011. The homicide at Horamavu. The pharmacy shop owner Kothandaraman. I thought the cause of death was strangulation.'

The young man straightened. He began by clearing his throat, but catching Gowda's impatient glare, hurried on to recite almost word perfect the contents of the case diary.

Gowda's eyes narrowed. 'Do you think I can't read? I said, explain. Are you saying a manja thread was used as the ligature? But a manja thread would snap. So it couldn't have been a manja thread!'