

# Midnight at Malabar House

Also by Vaseem Khan

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# Midnight at Malabar House

Vaseem Khan

  
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To history's unsung female pioneers who, through obstinacy,  
willpower and an indomitability of spirit, have changed our world.



## Partition of India in 1947



# I

*31 December 1949*

The call came in the deepest part of the night, the telephone's lusty urgency shattering the basement silence. Persis paused, pen poised above the blank white page of the duty log she had been attempting to complete for the past hour.

There was little to report.

She sat alone in the office, the only sounds the gentle swishing of the ceiling fan and the scurrying of a lone mouse under the jumble of desks and battered metal filing cabinets. Occasionally a muffled bang would drift in from the world above. New Year's Eve fireworks. The entire city was out partying, the streets alive with drunken multitudes, celebrating the end of the most turbulent decade in the nation's history. In spite – or perhaps because – of this she had agreed to stand vigil for the night. Frivolity was alien to her nature and she had often been told that her tastes – in matters of dress and deportment – tended to the staid.

Perhaps this was the effect of growing up without a mother.

Sanaz Wadia née Poonawalla had died when Persis was just seven, taking with her the last vestiges of an already waning belief in a benevolent God. Her father had never remarried, raising her as best as he was able in the margins of his grief. Poor Aunt Nussie had tried her best, but Sam Wadia was a stubborn man.

The thought passed through her mind that the call might well



be her father, ringing to assure himself that, an hour into the new year, she was still alive and well.

She plucked up the receiver of the black Stromberg Carlson: 'CID, Malabar House. Inspector Wadia speaking.'

A moment's hesitation, as her caller's incredulity filtered down the line.

It wasn't the first time.

Her appointment, seven months earlier, had occasioned hysteria in publications as far apart as the *Calcutta Gazette* to the *Karnataka Herald*. In Bombay, the *Indian Chronicle* had been particularly scathing: 'The commissioner's experiment in catapulting a woman into the service might well mirror our fledgling republic's forward-thinking ideals, but what he has failed to consider is that in temperament, intelligence and moral fibre, the female of the species is, and always will be, inferior to the male.'

That cutting, framed in glass, now looked up at her from her desk. Each morning it served as a shot across her bows, a trenchant reminder that if it was respect she craved, she faced an uphill task in earning it.

Her caller gathered his composure. 'May I speak with your superior officer?'

She stifled the urge to slam the receiver back into its cradle. 'I'm afraid that tonight *I* am the ranking officer. Sir.'

The shallowest intake of breath. 'In that case, Miss Wadia, might I ask you to make your way to Laburnum House on Marine Drive. The residence of Sir James Herriot.'

'Inspector.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Inspector Wadia. Not Miss.'

Silence. 'My apologies. *Inspector*, if you could make haste, it would be most appreciated.'

'May I ask what this is regarding?'

'You may,' said the voice coolly. 'Sir James has been murdered.'

Laburnum House: a two-storey cubist monstrosity, splashed in virulent shades of imperial maroon and beige, and imprinted from top to bottom with art deco motifs, including two startling elephant heads adorning the sea-facing main gates.

She was met at the front door by a house servant, a hand-wringing native with the look of an overdressed coolie. The man led her swiftly through a shimmering reception hall, an expanse of white marble from the centre of which sprouted a bronze of Prometheus. Some wag had stuck a turban on the Greek Titan's skull, imparting an air of noble sanctimony.

She was ushered into a drawing room where the man who had summoned her rose in greeting from a tan leather chesterfield.

His name was Madan Lal, Sir James Herriot's chief aide, a slender figure, immaculate in herringbone tweed. He wasn't quite tall enough to pull off the high-waisted trousers, but there was a smartness to him that signalled a sense of self-assurance.

He held out a hand. 'Inspector. Thank you for getting here so quickly.'

She noted the manicure, the clean-shaven cheeks, the black hair oiled back in a perfect widow's peak. Round, steel-framed spectacles gave him the look of a bookkeeper or an insurance broker. All in all, an attractive man, if one liked them a little on the well-pressed side.

It struck her that Lal, in his urbanity, was the very image of the modern civil servant. A man for the times: India in late 1949, more

than two years after Partition, a nation struggling to redefine itself against a background of continuing social and political unrest. The dismantling of the old feudal system had seen a significant lurch towards the left, an attempt to even up the social scales. Set against this was the inertia of millennia, the hegemonies of old India, zamindars and noble houses frantically scrapping for their place in the new Eden. Independence had given them a bloody nose, but they weren't about to go down without an almighty scrap. Or so her father said.

She returned to the moment. 'Perhaps you could explain the circumstances of Mr Herriot's murder?' Small talk had never been her forte.

'Sir.'

'I'm sorry?'

'*Sir James.*' He gave a thin-lipped smile. 'We are all wedded to our titles, are we not?'

She coloured, wondering if he was chiding her for her earlier intransigence.

'In theory, you should refer to me as *Major Lal*. I served with the 50th Parachute Brigade in Burma. At any rate, let us dispense with formalities. Please come with me.'

She followed him through the lavishly appointed mansion, up a teak-banistered staircase, and along a series of corridors to the rear of the house.

Lal stopped before a lacquered black door. 'Forgive me, but I take it that you are not of a . . . *delicate* disposition?'

She gave this insulting statement short shrift by brushing past him and into the room.

It was a study, lavishly decorated. Crystal chandeliers hung from a whitewashed ceiling. The furniture – a combination of bone-inlaid Burma teak and hand-carved rosewood – had been curated with impeccable taste. One wall was given over to a mural

in red and black ceramic: Hannibal slogging over the Alps on elephant-back. The remaining walls were taken up by bookshelves, weighed down with identical-looking tomes, many of which had probably never been touched by human hand.

It was a room designed to impress, rather than a venue where midnight oil was routinely burned in lucubration.

Directly before them was a large desk, and behind that desk, slumped in a buttoned-leather captain's chair, was Sir James Herriot.

His head lolled on to his chest, arms slack by his sides.

She moved around the desk to get a better look.

The Englishman was in his late fifties and balding in that particularly aggressive way the British did, the top of his dome marred by a profusion of scarlet patches. He wore a red cape and a red tunic, unbuttoned to the navel, revealing a naked chest, pale and hairless. His stomach bulged above his crotch. He was naked from the waist down, something that had not been apparent from the door.

Instinctively, she averted her eyes, then chided herself. A police officer had a duty to examine every aspect of the crime scene.

Before she could proceed further, the door opened and a white man strode purposefully into the room. Tall, spare-framed, with thick, dark hair, and an uncommonly handsome face, he swung a boxy black leather bag by his side, like a doctor's carry case. A cream linen suit flapped around him, frayed at the elbows. A ratty tie was pushed up in an untidy knot towards a smooth neck. Green eyes flashed from under dark eyebrows. Black-framed spectacles sat on his nose. A sheen of sweat moistened his clean-shaven cheeks.

'Archie. Thank you for coming.' Madan Lal extended a hand to the newcomer who shook it warmly. He turned to her. 'Inspector, may I present Archimedes Blackfinch? He is presently serving as an adviser to the crime branch.'

'Archie, please,' he said, extending his own bony hand in her direction.

'Adviser?' she echoed, staring at the appendage as if he were attempting to palm her a live grenade.

'I'm a criminalist with the Metropolitan Police Service in London,' he clarified, lowering his hand.

Lal took up the baton. 'As you know our government is keen to breathe new life into the various state organs that have been returned to our patronage. If India is to uphold the rule of law we must have a police force worthy of the name. Advisers such as Archie have been retained to provide us with the necessary rigour to underpin our ambitions.'

It sounded like a campaign speech. She frowned. 'I take it you know each other?'

'We have had prior dealings. I assure you, he is most capable.'

'But he has no standing here as an investigative officer?'

Lal's smile became strained. 'Technically speaking. However, it is my hope that you will accommodate him. In fact, I am certain the commissioner would approve.'

She swallowed her objection. Clearly, Lal had the reach to pour discontent into the ears of a higher power.

Turning back to the body, she said, 'Why is he dressed like this?'

'I should have explained,' replied Lal. 'Tonight Sir James hosted his annual New Year's Eve ball. It is always a costumed affair.'

'Who was he supposed to be?'

'Mephistopheles. He is—'

'The demon to whom Faust sold his soul.'

He nodded. 'Quite.'

He seemed surprised. Perhaps women who could actually read and not just look pretty posing beside books and vases were unknown to him.

'Where is the . . . lower half of his outfit?'

'I'm afraid that his trousers have not yet been found. It is most puzzling.'

It was more than that. Why would Herriot's trousers be missing? Had the killer taken them? To what end?

'May I?' said Blackfinch.

She watched as he set down his case, opened it, removed a pair of gloves and pulled them on. She'd been taught the basics of crime scene procedure at the police training college at Mount Abu, two gruelling years as the only woman among a cadre of men who, for the most part, believed she had no right or reason to be there. It was here too that she had learned of the two Indians who had developed the fingerprint classification system that was now used throughout the service and which had been successfully exported to no less a home than Scotland Yard. Naturally, the credit for the technique had fallen to their English supervisor. She doubted that the Henry Classification System would be renamed now that the British had been shown the door.

Blackfinch stepped forward, laid his hands either side of Herriot's skull, and gently lifted his head.

She saw that blood had coagulated around his throat. Streaks of dried blood snaked down towards his pale belly, and over his thighs.

Blackfinch's gloved fingers interrogated the bloody mess until he found what he was looking for. 'The pathologist will have to confirm, but it appears as if a sharp blade was inserted here, at the side of the larynx, driven forcefully inwards, then yanked out to sever the carotid and jugular arteries. Death would have been all but instantaneous.'

Something caught his eye under the desk and he bent down to reach beneath it. When he straightened, it was with a balled-up handkerchief in his hand. He sniffed at it, crinkled his nose, then

removed a waxy paper bag from his case and dropped the cloth into it. Not bothering to explain, he resumed his examination.

Persis turned to Lal. 'What was he doing up here?'

'I have asked myself the same question. I suspect he needed a moment's respite from the festivities. These functions can be quite trying.'

She looked again at Herriot's desk. It was of the pedestal type, fashioned from polished teak and waxed to within an inch of its life. The top was inlaid with a marble slab in bottle green, edged with rose gilt. The eight drawers making up the pedestals had reassuringly solid brass handles. A collection of objects ranged across the desk. An empty whisky glass. An ashtray in which lay a solitary cigar stub. A beige globe of empire, British colonies picked out in red, India still very much in the fold. A reading glass. A brass inkstand with lidded inkwells. A telephone.

There was something about the precise arrangement of the objects that bothered her, a subconscious itch. But she couldn't place it.

She moved to the far side of the desk and reached for the handle of the topmost drawer.

Both men all but cried out, startling her.

'If you're going to touch anything, you must put on gloves,' said Blackfinch.

Flushing, she cursed herself for not having considered this. The idea of appearing incompetent bothered her far more than being murdered or assaulted in the line of duty, a gruesome eventuality that Aunt Nussie predicted on a daily basis.

Lal's objection was more prosaic. 'Those are Sir James's private drawers,' he protested.

'I don't think privacy is of much concern to him any more, do you?'

'You don't understand. Sir James was working on many sensitive matters for the government. Those drawers may contain confidential documents.'

'Then it's a good thing,' she muttered, violently pulling on the gloves Blackfinch handed her, 'that I am known for my discretion.' She opened the topmost drawer – it was unlocked – as Lal's eyes bulged. The man was a bureaucratic heart attack waiting to happen.

The drawer contained a selection of papers, correspondence and handwritten scribbles, but nothing of note or of seeming relevance to Herriot's death.

Inside a battered leather notebook, she discovered a newspaper cutting taken from the *Times of India*. It included a photograph of four individuals: two Indians, a man and a woman, arm in arm, flanked by two tuxedoed white men. The article, dated two months earlier, detailed the gala opening of a club in Bombay.

She studied the individuals in the photograph.

The white men were nondescript – she pegged them as businessmen or civil servants – but the Indian couple were handsome, effortlessly glamorous. The woman, dressed in a sari, had one arm looped around the man's, the other at her throat, where an ostentatious necklace was prominent.

Scanning the article, she discovered that the Indian man in the photograph was the club's owner, Adi Shankar; the woman attached to his arm, 'socialite, Meenakshi Rai'. Aside from the article, the notebook was empty. She wondered briefly why Herriot had kept the cutting, then, on a whim, added the item to the evidence she had been collecting.

Quickly, she riffled through the remaining drawers, finding little of interest – scraps of paper, the odd trinket absentmindedly shoved in and forgotten about, a case of cigars. Lal had worried needlessly.

And then she opened the bottommost drawer.



She lifted out the revolver by the barrel and showed it to the two men.

'May I?' said Blackfinch. He took the pistol from her and sniffed at it. 'It hasn't been fired recently.' He pushed out the chamber. 'Fully loaded.'

'Did you know he had this?' she asked, directing herself to Lal.

'I knew he kept it there, yes. It's a Webley Mark IV. Standard issue for the British towards the end of the war.'

'Sir James fought in the war?'

'Not exactly fought. He was given honorary rank, for political reasons, and this entitled him to a sidearm. He kept it as a souvenir.'

'Was he a good shot?' asked Blackfinch.

'Yes. He prided himself on it.'

'Which means that if anyone had entered this room whom he perceived as a threat, his natural reaction would have been to reach for his gun.' Blackfinch waited, then added, 'Which he did not do.'

In time Persis would discover that the Englishman had a habit of belabouring his point. It was an instinctive and irritating aspect of his personality, made more so by the fact that he had no idea how irritating it was.

'There will have to be an autopsy,' continued Blackfinch.

'Autopsy?' Lal looked horrified, as if he had not considered this.

'We'll also have to search the house,' added Persis. 'How many people were at the party?'

'The guest list was forty-eight,' replied the aide. 'In addition, there were the house servants, the waiting staff hired for the evening, the jazz band and, of course, myself. A further total of nineteen.'

Impressed with his precision, she wondered if, perhaps, he had anticipated the question. 'Are they still here?'

'No one has yet left. Though many of our guests are growing restless.'

'You told them that Herriot had been murdered?'

'Not exactly. I said that he had been taken ill and retired for the night.'

She glanced at the dead Englishman. He was about as ill as it was possible to be. No tincture was going to get him up and jiving on the dance floor any time soon, that was for certain.

'I will need to question them. Can you gather them together?'

'You intend to question the *guests*?' He gave a shake of the head. 'I'm afraid you haven't grasped the nature of the beast, Inspector. Sir James's guest list runs to some of the wealthiest and most influential people in the city, if not the country. They cannot be treated as suspects in a murder investigation.'

'But that is precisely what they are.'

'I cannot believe that,' he countered. 'This is the work of a rogue. An opportunist stealing his way into the mansion, encountering Sir James in his study, and panicking.'

She considered this interpretation of events. 'Did you have guards at the gate?'

'Yes. But it was New Year's Eve. Even the guards take a moment to enjoy the celebration. I doubt it would have been difficult to evade them.'

Blackfinch spoke up. 'The killer was known to Sir James.'

Lal's brow furrowed. 'How can you be so certain?'

'Because the murderer had to get close to kill him. Even if we ignore the fact that he made no move for his revolver, had a stranger attacked him he would have attempted to defend himself. There would have been a struggle. Yet there appear to be no defensive wounds. The killer approached, looped one arm around his head' – he mimicked the action – 'and thrust the knife into his neck with the other hand. A practised manoeuvre, delivered with speed and precision.'

‘What are you implying?’

‘I mean that an untrained individual attacking another with a knife is liable to thrust and parry like a man fencing with a salmon. This isn’t the work of a dilettante.’

Lal paled. ‘You mean his killer was a military man?’

‘Not necessarily. But someone who knew his way around violence, yes.’

‘I will need a list of all those in attendance,’ said Persis.

Lal’s mouth flapped, his composure finally ruffled. He conceded with a short nod.

‘Where is his family?’ Persis asked next.

‘Sir James is a bachelor. He has never married, nor does he have children.’

She paused to consider anything she might have overlooked. ‘Is anything missing from the room or from Sir James’s person?’

‘If you mean anything valuable, then no.’

But there was a hesitation in the way Lal said this that made her look at him curiously. She was prevented from pursuing the thought by Blackfinch.

He had been examining a portrait behind the desk, set into the midst of rows of bookshelves. The painting was of Herriot, boorishly handsome, stuffed into a military uniform like a six-foot-tall sausage. Behind him, serving as a backdrop, was a large white mansion, reminiscent of Shimla or other wintering destinations favoured by the British. It was everything a colonial portrait might hope to express. Grandeur, sophistication, benevolence and disdain.

‘There are scratch marks in the wood here,’ said the Englishman. ‘This painting has been moved around quite a bit. Ergo, I believe there is something behind it.’

Without waiting for Lal’s permission, he reached up and lifted down the painting. It was a large, heavy-framed thing, and the

awkwardness of the action lurched him backwards. Lal cried out, but it was too late. Blackfinch stumbled and fell, the canvas jamming against the corner of the desk. The tearing sound was appallingly loud in the silent room.

Blackfinch sprang to his feet, dusted himself off, mumbled an apology, then went back to the wall as if nothing had happened.

Persis glanced at Lal, who was still looking at the destroyed portrait in horror. The corner of the desk had spiked Herriot's face.

Blackfinch meanwhile had moved on to his discovery – a wall-safe ensconced in a niche behind the portrait. Pewter in colour, the safe sat inside a mahogany cabinet; the logo read: *Morris Ireland Safe Co.*

'It's unlocked,' he announced, turning a handle set into the safe's cast-iron door and pulling it open to peer inside.

Persis moved forward to look over his shoulder.

He reached in and came up with a key ring on which were two identical brass keys. He squinted at the writing etched on the keys. 'They're the keys to the safe.'

'What else is in there?' she asked.

He reached back in, but came out empty-handed. 'It's empty.'

She turned to Lal. 'What was in there?'

'Whatever Sir James kept in there was of a personal nature.'

'I doubt that he installed a safe like this only to have kept it empty.'

'Surely this indicates that the motive for his death was robbery?' ventured Lal.

'Too early to say,' replied Blackfinch. 'But the fact that the safe is open suggests that either he or his killer may have taken something out of it this evening.'

Persis looked around the room. Her eyes alighted on what she had at first thought was an ornamental fireplace. She saw now that a mound of ashes was heaped in the grate.

Walking over, she squatted down and reached out a hand. Still warm. Someone had burned a lot of paper. Recently. She picked up a poker and jabbed at the charred and blackened remains but there was nothing left to indicate their nature.

Another curiosity.

‘Who found the body?’

‘One of the houseboys,’ replied Lal. ‘The McGowans were leaving and wished to thank their host. They couldn’t locate Sir James so asked me to fetch him. I sent Maan Singh. He discovered him here and had the presence of mind to come to me first.’

‘When was the last time he was seen alive?’

‘Impossible to say,’ replied Lal. ‘I myself saw him singing “Auld Lang Syne” with the guests out on the back lawn. That was at midnight.’

‘And the body was found at what time?’

‘Around one-ten.’

Somewhere in that witching hour after midnight Herriot had vanished upstairs to meet his fate.

‘I’d like to speak with the houseboy,’ said Persis.

The boy in question turned out to be six foot six and built like Everest. Maan Singh was one of those formidable Sikhs who’d made their reputation in the two great wars, as solid and implacable as tanks. There were still stories floating around from the Great War of Sikhs who’d shown their contempt for death by refusing to skulk down in the trenches, fairly eccentric behaviour in the middle of continuous bombardment.

‘You found the body?’ she asked, when he arrived.

Singh’s shoulders straightened. He towered over her, eyes drilling straight ahead. Or rather, towards Lal. She sighed inwardly. Singh was from the north-west, a corner of the country not known for its sympathetic attitude towards feminine advancement. In

manner and appearance, he seemed every inch the boorish Punjabi she had been warned to expect by Aunt Nussie, who, for reasons she would not disclose, held a particular grudge against the warrior clans of that region. He wore a scarlet longcoat, sashed at the waist, and a cream turban – the house uniform. The get-up reminded her of doormen at the Blue Nile, the Mandarin, or the Alibaba, popular nightclubs with a penchant for employing statuesque Sikhs to keep out the riff-raff.

‘You may answer,’ said Lal.

‘Yes,’ said Singh, still not looking at her.

‘Yes, *ma’am*,’ she said, unable to stop herself.

Singh’s eyes swivelled down. She met his gaze unflinchingly. He had a handsome head, broad-faced, with shapely cheekbones, fierce eyes and a neatly trimmed beard.

‘What time did you discover the body?’

‘At one-ten. *Ma’am*.’

‘What did you do when you found him?’

‘I checked to see that he was dead—’

‘You touched the body?’ interrupted Blackfinch.

‘I held his wrist and checked his pulse. That is all. He was dead.’ This was said impassively, as if Singh were describing a batsman who had just been bowled during a game of cricket.

‘How long have you worked for Herriot?’

‘I have been in Sir James’s employ for the past month.’

‘What did you think of him?’

His forehead crunched into a frown. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Sir James? What did you make of him?’

‘He was my employer. I did not make anything of him.’

‘Did you like him?’

‘It was not my place to like him. It was my place to do what he asked of me.’

‘What *did* he ask of you? What was your role here?’

'I was a houseboy.'

'Really? You seem ill suited to the position.'

His eyes flashed. 'What do you mean?'

'A man of your size and strength . . .' She couldn't imagine him serving tea or delivering perfumed letters on silver swan trays.

He nodded, understanding. 'I was also Sir James's driver and his personal bodyguard.' Singh grimaced. 'I have failed him. I have failed in my duty. I must live with my shame.'

'There is nothing you could have done, Singh,' said Lal, but the big man was not to be mollified.

'Did you take anything from the room?' she asked.

His face darkened. 'Are you accusing me of stealing?'

'No. But Sir James's trousers are missing. And possibly items from his safe.'

'I know nothing about a safe.' His look could have felled a horse. She knew full well that accusing a Sikh of theft was a mortal insult. Had she suggested that he had put on a dress and danced the cancan, he would have been less offended.

'One last question: was the fire burning when you found the body?'

He frowned, then followed her gaze to the fireplace. 'No. There was no fire.'

'Very well,' she said. 'You may go.'

He marched stiffly towards the door, shutting it forcefully behind him.

'I must apologise,' said Lal. 'He is a singular man.'

She glanced at Blackfinch, who was busying himself collecting fingerprint samples, dusting with Lightning powder. Everything else around him had ceased to exist. She noticed that he had also taken out a camera from his bag and set it on to a tripod, presumably to photograph the scene. She debated the merits of calling out a team from the state forensic unit, but decided that the

Englishman would have a better grasp of the resources he needed and would be able to commandeer them with greater ease.

She turned back to Lal. 'I will interview the staff and guests now.'

Lal nodded. 'Follow me.'

Downstairs, scattered across various drawing rooms and receptions, she found Herriot's guests, well-heeled couples and a smattering of gay bachelors, smoking like chimneys and drinking the place dry. They milled around in a state of costumed uncertainty, subdued, but at the same time infected with a sense of nervous excitement. The cat was out of the bag, she realised. Word of Herriot's passing had reached them, a grisly but memorable ending to their bacchanalia.

She gathered them together in the ballroom and confirmed for them, tersely, that their host was now deceased. It was only when she informed them that she intended to question them individually that the bleating began. Many took this as a form of accusation and responded as one might expect of the rich and powerful. She listened silently to their oaths, threats, curses and protests, her face growing hot, and then repeated her intentions, stressing that she was merely attempting to gather information while memories were still fresh. The next couple of hours were spent in an ante-room carefully interrogating lawyers, bankers, managing agency officers, businessmen, and mid-ranking politicians and their doll-like wives. Each person was also searched, eliciting another round of furious protest.

But Persis was adamant. The murder weapon had to be on the premises somewhere.

Halfway through the interviews, Lal pulled her aside. 'I'm afraid this is taking too long. The remaining guests will mutiny if I don't allow them to leave.'

'They cannot leave,' she said. 'This is a police investigation.'



‘Do you think you can stop them? Many of these people are on first-name terms with the commissioner.’

She bit back her anger. Lal was right. There was no real threat that she could employ to force them to stay. ‘Very well. They may leave under two conditions. First, they must submit to a search. And, second, they must agree to be interviewed in the coming days.’

Lal nodded and went to deliver the news.

Ultimately, Persis was able to interview twenty-two of the forty-eight guests. It quickly became apparent that she would learn little of value.

Herriot was universally hailed as a ‘damned fine chap’. No one had a bad word to say about the man. As for the evening itself, everyone remembered chatting to him – their host had been on fine form – but no one recalled the moment he had vanished upstairs.

Once she had finished with the guests she moved on to the staff and the jazz band.

Again, little of value bobbed to the surface. Aside from the house regulars, the others did not know Herriot and had nothing to add regarding his movements on the night.

One of those who seemed most affected by his death was the housekeeper, a widow by the name of Lalita Gupta, an elegant, reserved woman in a maroon sari. Gupta seemed stunned by her employer’s sudden passing. In her mid-thirties, with streaks of grey beginning to invade her dark hair, Gupta spoke softly, in excellent English. She lived at the mansion, in a room on the ground floor, and had worked for Herriot for the past four years. She revealed that Herriot had spent much of the morning away from home, returning in the late afternoon to check on preparations for his party. She had noticed nothing unusual in his manner that day.

Finally, Persis called in the guards from the front gate.

One admitted that he had indulged in a few beers, but the other was a devout Mahomedan and had remained as sober as a nun. They were willing to swear on all that was holy that no uninvited visitor had slipped by them that night.

While all this was going on Persis had set in motion a second important aspect of the night's action – a search of the premises. To aid in this task she had phoned the nearby Marine Drive police station and argued with the imbecile in charge. A squad of *haval-dars* had been duly despatched. Marshalling these Keystone cops – most of whom could not conceive of the idea of a female officer, let alone swallow orders from one – took up an inordinate degree of energy. It did not help that they glanced at Blackfinch for confirmation each time she issued an instruction.

In Herriot's bedroom, searching through his wardrobe, she discovered a ticket stub caught in the pocket of a gabardine driving jacket. The stub was stamped with the serial number 77183, and the series code 12, together with the message: PASSENGER TO RETAIN THIS PORTION OF THE TICKET. She recognised it as an intercity train ticket, but, frustratingly, the top half was missing, taken by the ticket inspector, no doubt. It was on that half that the date and start and end points of the journey were usually found. In a second pocket, she found a scrap of paper. It was torn at the top, clearly ripped from a pad. Just below the tear were the printed words: *By a pool of nectar, at the shrine of the sixty-eight.*

On the paper, in a scribbled hand, was a name – BAKSHI – and beneath that a jumble of letters and numbers: PLT41/85ACRG11.

She stared at the page, but could make nothing of it.

When the search was completed – with little else to show for the effort – neither the murder weapon nor Herriot's missing trousers had been found – she took Lal aside.

She asked him about the note, but Lal had no idea who Bakshi might be. The annotation meant nothing to him.

'I need a list of Sir James's appointments over the past weeks. I wish to establish his movements prior to his death.'

'I will provide you with a list.'

'There's something else: why do *you* think he was killed?'

'What do you mean?'

'Motive,' she said. 'What possible motive could someone have had to murder Sir James?'

Lal sighed. 'I have been asking myself the same thing. Sir James was a gregarious man, well liked and widely respected. He could be blunt when the need arose; yet he was a diplomat too and understood how to navigate the often treacherous waters of both British and Indian politics. I remember, a few years ago, we met Gandhi together. This was well before his death, of course, a year before the British finally caved in. Sir James took him aside and told him that he had won, that the British government had lost its stomach for the fight. There's just too damned many of you, he said. And every blasted one of you as troublesome as a wasp at a picnic. He actually made Gandhi laugh.' Lal smiled, reliving the memory.

'You don't seem overly upset by his death.'

Lal stiffened. Tact had never been her strongest suit. Aunt Nussie was constantly at pains to admonish her for her forthright manner. A lady, she had impressed upon her, must be demure, charming, gracious, and light of foot. Persis had rarely found herself praised for any of these qualities.

'He was not just my employer, Inspector. Sir James was also my friend. We first met years ago, at University College London. My parents had sent me abroad for the furtherance of my studies. Herriot was a trustee of the college. He gave that year's Disraeli Lecture, a vivid dissection of the state of affairs in India – he'd already spent the best part of a decade here. He was one of the few Englishmen at the time who believed in Indian Home Rule and

was courageous enough to say so publicly. It is one of the reasons we asked him to stay on after Partition.' He sighed. 'I saw death in abundance during the war, Inspector. I cannot say that it has inured me to it, but I have a certain stomach for these things. I grieve for James in my own way.'

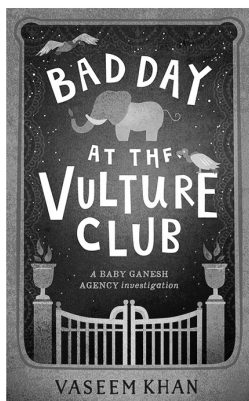
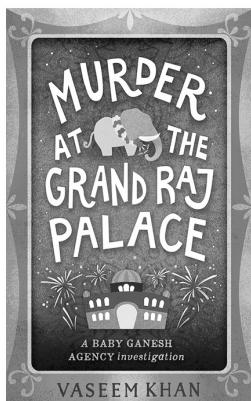
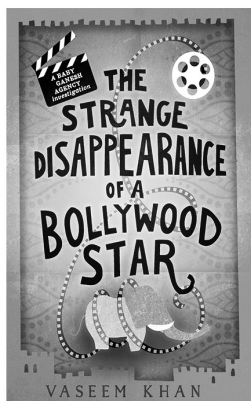
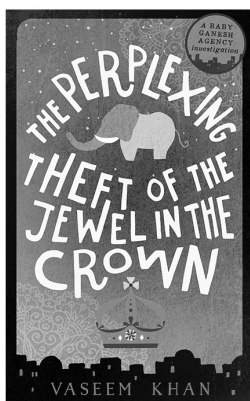
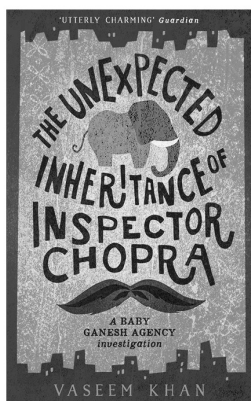
Her last act of the night was to arrange for the body to be taken to the morgue.


She waited for the ambulance to arrive and looked on as they lifted Herriot's pallid corpse on to a stretcher, threw a white sheet over it, then carried him downstairs and out into the night like pygmies bearing an expired chieftain to the mountain.

As she drove home, just an hour before dawn, a single thought reverberated in her mind. *Why, out of all the police departments in the city, had Lal chosen to call Malabar House?* After all, even if those in power would never openly acknowledge it, *they* knew that they were outsiders, brought together precisely because they had been deemed unfit for any assignment of worth.

The thought followed her into a fitful sleep.

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