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### Cotton Poppo

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The reason why Ritesh Dhawan was called the suited grim-reaper was that his wits and reasoning abilities had made him one of the most trustable detectives in India, and his appearance in a place usually threatened the life out of criminals. It did never matter how perfectly the criminal had hidden himself, he could never escape Dhawan's cunning eyes.

It was the heart of winter at the time. The cool days and cold nights had got transformed into cold days and chilling nights. This drastic change in weather is common in the city of New Delhi during the winters. The smog covers the roads and the range of visibility gets closer to zero.

A white man in his forties was waiting for someone who he assumed to be his last hope. He was in a pink sweat-shirt and a black lower. His hair was jet-black in colour and was combed backwards.

The door-bell rang.

'Ah,' he thought to himself before opening the door, 'here he is, at last.'

He opened the door and smiled gladly when he saw a man in his twenties, neither too dark nor too fair, with jet-black hair, standing with a chubby white-furred cat beside him. The man was in a black blazer followed by a black trouser below it. He fixed his tie and said, "Mr Scott Franklyn? It's Private Detective Ritesh Dhawan."

"Yes, please come in," the man offered a way to the detective.

Detective Ritesh Dhawan entered. "Please don't mind this cat. He's my partner, to be frank."

"A feline partner?" the white man said, closing the door after they both had entered.

“Yes,” Dhawan sat comfortably on a sofa offered by the white man.

The white client of Dhawan seemed nervous as he sat facing towards the detective sitting with Crunchy the cat in his lap. “So, since when have you migrated from Argentina to India?” the detective asked.

Scott Franklyn, the client, widened his eyes and raised his eye-brows in amazement. “How do you know that I’m an Argentine?”

Dhawan smirked. “What else could I reason from your Argentinian Spanish accent and that tattoo of the logo of the Argentinian Football Team on your neck?”

Franklyn smiled and seemed pleased by Dhawan’s sense of reasoning. “Now it seems like I have made a good decision to hire you.”

“So you did,” Dhawan gave a soft smile.

“I came to India a year ago,” Franklyn said.

“Why, may I ask?” Dhawan asked.

“I’m a businessman who started a company which manufactures sweet candies with hard outer shell and soft mouth-watering cotton candy inside it four years ago. I named it Cotton Pops.” The man said.

“Pops,” Dhawan said, paying attention to the pronunciation, “with double-P at the end?”

“Yes,” the client replied.

“Sorry,” Dhawan said, “but I’ve never heard of that.”

“That is because it is not that popular in India,” Franklyn told him. “But in my country, it was a hit! Three years ago, the company sold two hundred forty-seven packets of Cotton-Pops in the entire Argentina.”

Dhawan tried his best to hide his laughter. “Okay, that’s a big number.”

“As my company was a hit in my country,” the client continued, “I decided to make profit from overseas markets as well. Last year I came to India and rented a firm with thirteen employees.

But the sales didn't go well in India with only sixteen packets getting sold in a year. One-by-one, the employees started to leave my company. I started recruiting new employees to fill the vacancies. But the reduction in the number of employees continued. Finally, I decided to pay the pending rent and close the firm. This happened two months ago. Now I had planned to leave the country next week. But yesterday, I was surprisingly summoned by the local Police Department. I am accused for a murder!"

"Okay, so that's the case," Dhawan said, softly slapping his thighs with his palms. "You want me to prove you innocent?"

"Yes, because I am!" the client said.

"So," Dhawan asked, "is the murder anyway related to you. I mean, not in a criminal way. I'm asking as this may be helpful to the case."

"Well, yes," Franklyn said, "the murdered guy was one of my last recruited employees. He did not like my idea of closing the firm as there was no other work he could find to earn for his family. Though we made almost no sales in this country, he argued that he wanted this company to stay in India as this was the only way he could earn something. He did not understand my problem. To pay his salary, I had to earn as well, which I wasn't able to do in India."

"What did you do then?" Dhawan asked.

"I just got fed of him and he was the first to be suspended from the job," the client replied.

"Why do the police think that you're the murderer?" asked Dhawan.

"That is because his corpse was found with a half-chewed candy in his mouth which was manufactured by my company. His body was found lying life-less at the ground-floor of the firm I had rented." Franklyn told him. "The police first summoned the actual owner of the plot of the firm. He told them that he had been living out of the city since months, but he gave my name to them, saying that he had given the plot to me on rent. Investigating further, the police got to know about the dead man's employment in my company."

"And then they came to you," Dhawan said.

“Yes,” the white client said. “Please investigate this case before the police do the same. I know that I’m innocent but I’m afraid that the owner of the plot may produce fake evidences against me.”

Dhawan listened to his client very carefully, nodding at his every point. “Okay. Can I have the address of your firm and that of the owner of the plot?”

“Oh, you may if you wish,” the client took out two cards out of his pocket. One of the cards had ‘Cotton Pops’ written in a stylish, italicised manner. The other card showed the address of Manoj Desai, the owner of the plot rented to Scott Franklyn. “I have kept these cards ready for you, as I thought that you would ask for them.”

“Thank you,” Dhawan said, accepting the cards and standing. Crunchy jumped off his lap. “I’ll contact you within twelve hours.”

“My doors are always open,” the client smiled and shook hands with Dhawan. “How much would it cost?”

“I’ll tell that after the complete investigation,” Dhawan said, “it would depend on the depth of the case.”

Dhawan wished his client a good day and walked out with Crunchy.

It is quite rare to see Dhawan pleased with something. He is never interested in most of the things. But this firm seemed quite soothing to him. Rusting metal walls and messed up colours on them – he liked this gothic feel of the place.

As expected, the place was sealed by ‘do not cross’ tapes of the police. Seeing no-one present around, Dhawan crossed the tapes.

The building had two floors including the ground floor. The plot was not a big one, but was enough to run a small business as stated by his Argentinian client. He went in with his white-furred partner.

Surely, the police had done their work. Dhawan knew this as he could see a humanoid two-dimensional figure drawn on the floor with a chalk. He knew that the police had drawn this in

the position of the murdered man, just as they always do before the investigation. Dhawan closed his eyes for a moment and imagined the dead man with a lolly-pop in his mouth.

‘He could’ve been poisoned,’ he thought.

Crunchy mewed to seek Dhawan’s attention.

Dhawan opened his eyes and turned towards the cat. He was pawing on a pink wrapper designed with purple stripes.

Dhawan picked the wrapper up and waved his hand on Crunchy’s head. “Well done, Crunch.” He read the words written on it in stylish, italicised letters – Cotton Popps’ Trolls: Blueberry flavour.

“Trolls?” Dhawan crossed his eye-brows, “Must be a different kind of candy.”

He took it near his nose and smelled it. He expressed an expression of disgust. He recognised this smell. It was of the liquid found in the refills of a mosquito killer machine commonly used in homes.

‘Poisoned, he was, indeed,’ Dhawan thought and smiled.

After a short relaxing break with two cups of Indian milk tea, the suited detective offered two knocks to a door.

A man with short hair and a big belly opened the door incompletely. “Yes?” He stared at Dhawan and Crunchy, one by one.

“Detective Ritesh Dhawan,” Dhawan said, showing him his ID card. “Mr Manoj Desai?”

“Ah... yes,” the man replied. “You’re a detective from the local PD?”

“No, I’m a private detective,” Dhawan said. “I’m hired by Mr Scott Franklyn to prove him innocent and away from a case of murder.”

“Oh!” Desai seemed overjoyed. “Scott has sent you? Please, come in! Have a seat.”

Dhawan had not expected this fair welcome. He stepped in with Crunchy and found his comfort on a couch.

“Scott is a good guy, I’d say,” Desai said, smiling. “I’m really sad that his business didn’t work in this country. His candies were worth trying.”

Dhawan’s eyes fell on a laptop kept on a nearby table. A sudden change of colour went through Desai’s face.

“Hey, what is it?” Dhawan stood up, seeing the awkwardness of his suspect – Desai.

Desai said in a clearly visible nervous manner, “Can we continue our conversation about Scott?”

“As I am a detective who has come to your house for continuing an investigation, I have the complete right to see what you’re hiding.” Dhawan said. ‘He must be hiding something important related to the case,’ he thought.

“I just have a hobby of seeing these stuffs,” Desai gave a nervous smile. “There’s nothing much important about it.”

“Sorry, but I’ve got to see it,” Dhawan said and pushed his suspect aside, forcefully. Dhawan raised his eye-brows and smiled at the interesting stuff in the laptop.

“Nice hobby,” Dhawan smiled to Desai. There was a series of porn videos displayed on the laptop’s screen.

Desai gave a weak chuckle accompanied by a blush.

The detective examined almost everything around him, but the thing which got his first interest was a mosquito killing machine’s refill pack.

“Buy one, get one free,” Dhawan picked the pack up with a simple smile. “I see that the pack has not been opened yet. You must have used the refill that came free with the pack, right?”

Desai nodded. He had no expression on his face. But his curiosity for knowing what the detective was going to do next was easily displayed by his eyes which were glued to the detective. Was this curiosity or was it fear?

Then, the next thing towards which Dhawan walked was an opened packet of Cotton Poppo's Trolls. Dhawan read the description of the packet, "The greatest offer of the year. Get five flavours of Cotton Poppo's Trolls – Orange, Strawberry, Mango, Blueberry and Guava – by paying half of the earlier price! – Nice discount. I have started loving this company."

It was then when Dhawan fished out nine smaller packets of candies from the pack. He counted the number of candies in each flavour, "Orange – two, Strawberry – two, Mango – two, Guava – two and Blueberry – one. Why? Either you love this flavour enough to start the consumption of the packet with it or you just wanted to use it for something better – for framing Franklyn for a murder. You did it, didn't you?" Then, for a proof, Dhawan fished a small opened packet of Blueberry flavoured Cotton Poppo's Trolls. "And this is where you used the mosquito killer's refill. You thought me to be a fool? Who uses mosquito killers in this season, idiot?"

"See, your words are having no connection. Whatever you're speaking is totally co-incidental! I request you to move out before I get forced to call the police." Bewildered enough, Desai pointed his hand towards the exit-door.

"Go on," Dhawan walked closer to the man, "call the police. They usually don't like when a private investigator reaches them. You'll make the thing easier!"

Worriedness glowed in Desai's eyes and the deep sense of fear in him could easily get sensed by the detective. Finding no way out of this trap of chaos, Desai moved his large fist towards Dhawan's face, but Dhawan blocked the move on time. Then it was Crunchy who played the next move by piercing his canines into Desai's foot and then pulling them out again. Desai fell down, screaming.

Dhawan picked up Crunchy and walked towards the exit but stopped at the door. He turned back, pulled some five-hundred rupee notes out and threw them towards the fallen man. "Charge for your treatment in hospital. I'd suggest being quick with it as you are going to get locked up any soon."

"Trust me," the big man pleaded, "I'm innocent!"

Dhawan ignored his words and made his way through the exit.

The detective walked under the ruthless Sun and had a pleasant smile on his face. This was the smile which he used to have after the completion of each of his cases. It did not take much time for that smile to fade when he saw his client's bungalow sealed with 'DO NOT CROSS' tapes. Was he late?

He had a jog until he reached one of the four policemen in khaki dress-up standing around the house.

"I'm sorry, sir," the policeman motioned to Dhawan to stop, "you cannot enter. The owner of this house has committed suicide. This place is therefore sealed till further orders."

A sudden shock hit Dhawan. 'Scott Franklyn is dead?!'

"I am," Dhawan fished his ID card out and showed it to the policeman, "the hired private detective of Mr Scott Franklyn. I have the right to enter this house."

"Sorry, sir," the policeman apologised, brushing his fingers through his beard, "orders are orders. They have to be obeyed."

Has a human ever been loyal to anything after getting provided with greed of money?

Dhawan fished three five-hundred rupee notes out and handed them to the policeman with a wink.

The policeman gave a soft smile and said. "Okay, sir. You may go. But the cat has to stay outside."

Walking with eyes whirling all around, Dhawan finally reached the room where his client had hung himself to a ceiling-fan. "An inspiring use of a ceiling-fan in winter."

He walked closer to his client's hanging corpse. He examined every feature of his body carefully. It was a willing suicide. He could deduct this as no sign of any struggle could be seen.

Soon, Dhawan noticed the dead index-finger of his client pointing towards something. He crossed his eye-brows and forwarded his hand towards the pocket of Franklyn's trousers towards which his lifeless finger was pointed. Dhawan pushed his fingers into the pocket and

fished a folded piece of paper out. 'A suicide note,' he thought. After unfolding the paper, he read the words scribbled on it silently.

*Dear Ritesh Dhawan, I'm glad that you gave your complete attention to this case. Before writing ahead, I would like you to promise that you would write your adventure to the editor of any infamous newspaper.*

*Now, I shall reveal that it is no-one other than me who is the murderer. After listening to my words, you must have deducted that I'm hungry of fame. And fame is the thing which I'm not able to find in any country. I had planned this all just to get fame. My business was not able to give me what I desired. I'm sure that I'm going to mark an impression on those who are going to read your story in a newspaper. I would be, at last, earning fame.*

*Yes, I was the one who stole a mosquito killer's refill and a troll candy of my company from my friend, Desai. I'm sure that he's still not aware of this. I took the advantage of his habit of getting things ready before time. If he behaved wildly during your interrogation, then I'm sorry for that as this is the only way in which he behaves.*

*I poisoned a cotton popp with the mosquito killer's refill and forced it into the murdered man's mouth. Now, when I got accused of a murder, I told you the entire story in a way which made you suspect Desai, didn't it?*

*To you, this case was totally unexpected, I believe. For this, I beg you to publish this and let me get some fame. In return, please accept the packet of Cotton Popp's Trolls in the cupboard behind me. Don't worry, it's not poisoned. Thank you for your time!*

Dhawan had his eyes widened till their full extent. The unfolded paper fell off his grip and landed softly on the floor. He used to call him a witty, cunning, ruthless, gentleman. But this was the rare time when he could declare himself to be tricked. He had lost the case, for sure. And the way it went was totally unexpected.

The next thing what he could do was to explode in laughter. He laughed hard and reached for the cupboard behind his client's hanging corpse. He pulled it open and picked a packet of Cotton Popp's Trolls out of it. He opened the packet and fished a mango-flavoured candy out of it. He was still laughing while he enjoyed the perfect blending of juicy pulp of mango with milk and sugar.