

For Review Only

“Just a quiet family drama—with more than a healthy dose of betrayal, vengeance, a minor haunting, and gore to spice everything up.”

– Cyril Wong, author of *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me and Other Stories*

A late-night call leads Uday Aurora to find his beloved daughter barely alive after a gruesome attack. Uday wants justice, while his son demands vengeance. While the comatose Lavinia’s condition deteriorates, Uday learns the identity of the real culprit.

Distraught, Uday must choose carefully to determine his next steps, for the die is cast, and he now needs to come to terms with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that life has thrown at him. What will it take for a supremely decent man to abandon his characteristic morality, to protect his family while avenging brutality against his daughter? Especially when money buys nearly everything. Even absolution.

A dark, crafty and thrilling stew blending social satire, murder and revenge, *It Happened on Scrabble Sunday* is inspired by Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, liberally flavoured with curry.

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MAHITA VAS

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“A narrative of passion, jealousy, family love and, this being Singapore, truly bizarre recipes.”

– Ovidia Yu, author of *The Frangipani Tree Mystery*

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Pre-dawn, A Monday in February

Four hours. That's how long I've been sitting in this room, the intensive care unit at Temasek University Hospital. For four excruciating hours I have been watching my child as she lies hooked up to monitors and a respirator, suspended between life and death.

The nurses whisper, as if in the dead of night spirits might hear them and jinx their patient's chances of recovery. It is generally believed that the hospital is haunted, having been built on the grounds of a massacre site during the Japanese occupation. I haven't been in this room long enough to notice ghosts eavesdropping.

"So young, so beautiful," says the older nurse, a matronly Chinese woman. She shakes her head and sighs as she checks the drip. "Such a waste."

"Maybe she'll make it. We've seen that happen. I'm praying for her," says the younger nurse, a scrawny, dark-skinned woman from Myanmar.

"You pray for all your patients? You Christian or Buddhist?"

"Christian. Ya, I pray for all my patients. Every day, ever since I became a nurse."

"But still some die. Or never wake up. Like that, pray for what?"

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The younger nurse is silent. She takes Lavinia's pulse, murmurs a few words—is it a prayer?—and leaves the room, a look of smugness plastered across her tanned face. She seems sweet-natured and clearly filled with good intentions, but I am curious; the next time she comes in, I'm going to ask her about her god, the one that allowed such evil to befall my child.

I was there. I saw it happen. First, Lavinia called for me, "Mama! Come, Mama! Help me!" but the men were too strong. I could not stop them. Lavinia began to recite the prayer she said at the start and end of every day, ever since she became a Catholic during her first year in university. She repeated the Hail Mary seven times, like a pre-recorded loop. With each repetition, her breathing became more rapid and her voice became more shrill. By the time I managed to push the skinny one away, Lavinia had passed out. Whether there is a god or not, last night I witnessed first-hand the triumph of evil over good.

My beloved Lavinia will wake up soon. She hasn't opened her eyes yet, but whenever I say her name while I hold her hand, I feel a stirring inside. And she still speaks to me. Mischievous child, deliberately confounding the doctors. *Open your eyes, say a few words while they're here*, I tell her. *Then they'll put you on that scale they use to determine your chances of recovery. It will give your father and brothers hope.*

She doesn't always respond, but I know she can hear me.

I stand next to her and stroke her face, swollen on the left, her pale skin mottled with shades of deep red and blue, interspersed with patches of black. Pus is seeping through the bandage on her right cheek. *My beautiful child. You'll wake up soon. You always loved fairy tales. You'll be the princess who wakes up.*

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PART I

1

The Previous Night

Uday sat up, pushing his hands into the cushions and hitting his heels against the base of the sofa. He blinked for a few seconds before realising he had dozed off. He could not remember the last time anyone had used the land line. It was probably a wrong number. The ringtone had to be changed; Lavinia had chosen a classical piece from when she was learning to play the violin. It was a piercing sound and bore no relation to *Pachelbel's Canon*, but Lavinia, eight at the time, had been insistent. Uday recognised the number.

“Lavi, I’ve been so worried!” Uday heard background sounds and breathing. “Lavi? Are you okay? Hello? Hello?” Uday grabbed the remote control and switched off the television as he pressed the cordless phone against his ear.

“What did you say? Who are you? Is this some sick joke?” Trembling, Uday searched for a pen and paper. He repeated the address as he scribbled it on the thin, white paper. He glanced at his watch. Nearly eleven. “I’ll be there right away.”

Ashwin and Sayana sprinted to Uday’s flat as soon as they received Uday’s Whatsapp message. As they walked into their father’s bedroom, they saw him zipping up a sports bag.

Uday threw his keys towards Sayana. “Get the car and meet

me in the driveway.” As Sayana rushed out of the room, Uday reached into his pocket and handed Ashwin a crushed piece of paper. “Tell Sayana to plug this address into the GPS. Go!”

Uday opened the safe to see if there was anything left in there. He slammed the door shut, grabbed the sports bag and left without locking the empty safe.

Ashwin got out of the back seat to open the front door for his father but Uday insisted on Ashwin sitting in front with Sayana. The brothers had bickered all evening. Lifting his bag, he said, “I’d like to go through these things. Just sit with your brother, please.” It seemed like a reasonable excuse and Ashwin obliged. The two boys could transform into imbeciles at the slightest provocation, but he knew that in times of trouble he could trust them to look out for one another.

“What’s in that bag, Dad? What’s going on?” Ashwin held the seat belt away from him, to prevent it from cutting into his neck as he turned to face his father.

“They have Lavi. She’s been hurt and is being held hostage—”

Sayana slowed down. “Hostage? By whom? Why?”

“Keep going Sayana! We don’t have much time.”

“We should call the police.”

“No! We won’t involve the police. The fellow who called promised she’ll be okay and warned against calling the police. His English was terrible, but I understood this much. Someone wanted her dead, but he saved her. Didn’t claim to be a hero or anything. Just said he saved her and she’ll be okay. Any sign of the cops and she may not be ... she definitely won’t ... be okay.”

Uday removed the leather jewellery case from his bag and opened it with a loud click. He removed the diamond bracelet from a deep, narrow, velvet-lined slot.

“Aren’t those Mama’s jewels? The diamonds you said would go to Lavinia when she gets married?”

Uday put the bracelet back into the box and moved it away from him. “Yes. There is something vulgar about using these diamonds to buy our Lavi’s freedom.” Uday glanced at the box in the dark.

“How much did they ask for?”

“Sounded like it was just one man. He asked for a million ringgit—”

Ashwin gasped. “He’s Malaysian! I hope they haven’t taken Lavi to Malaysia.”

Sayana used his know-it-all voice to reassure them. “Not that easy these days. The officers on both sides of the causeway seem to be on perpetually high alert, thank goodness.”

Uday continued, “I told him that this late at night no one can get hold of that kind of money—I think it’s about three hundred and fifty thousand dollars these days. He then said to bring whatever I had, but he wanted nothing less than a hundred thousand dollars. Cash, watches, jewellery. He said all rich people have at least this much at home, and I shot back that this wasn’t Malaysia where rich people hid their dirty money in vaults.”

Ashwin thrust his chin towards the bag. “Do you have that much in there, Dad? It’s ransom. He’s not saving Lavi. He’s selling her life!”

“I don’t think she was just kidnapped for ransom. This fellow, he ... he said ...” Uday sucked in enough air to bloat his face before releasing a loud exhalation filled with fear and anger. “He said he was paid to kill her but will release her alive if I pay him. He needs the money to start a new life in Malaysia.” Uday looked at his watch, a Rolex Daytona with a rose gold bezel and a patented black bracelet. He looked out of the window as he

unclasped the bracelet and slid the watch off his hand.

“Dad, you have at least ten other watches. Why part with your favourite? And it’s just months old!”

“My favourite is also my most expensive, and means nothing in exchange for my darling daughter.”

Uday opened the velvet jewellery box and selected a few pieces—a heavy gold necklace, bought for Julie when they first moved to Singapore; a sapphire and diamond bracelet, a gift for Julie when Lavinia was born; and a pair of earrings, flawless diamond solitaires in D colour, at least two carats each; and placed them next to the watch.

“A lot more than a hundred thousand dollars’ worth here. Assuming he gets screwed selling the watch and these earrings—and damn, why should I care—he should still get fifty grand. Plus, all this.” Uday reached into the bottom of the gym bag and brought out several stacks of notes in an all-too-familiar green. “Fifty thousand US dollars. Five thick stacks of hundred-dollar bills should make the bastard happy.”

“Why are you giving him so much? Wouldn’t fifty grand Singapore dollars in cash and fifty in jewellery, actually worth a hundred to start with, be plenty?”

“This is my Lavi. I will give more than what’s expected just to have her back with us.”

Sayana looked at his Dad in the rear-view mirror. “Fine. But tell us, Dad. Why do you have so much cash lying around the house? Please don’t tell us it’s dirty money!”

Uday’s expression changed. He put his hand to his heart and said in a soft voice, “After everything I have taught you about honesty, decency and integrity, I cannot believe you just said that to me. No, Sayana, this money is clean. Sterile. This was meant for a down payment on a house in Penang. The owner wanted

cash for the first payment. Apparently, Stamford Raffles spent a week there, at the home of an acquaintance. I was going to fly to Penang with Tamara next weekend. But she had to rush back to Shanghai.”

As they took the Paya Lebar exit, Ashwin asked, “What the hell are they doing at an industrial estate? This whole Ubi area is full of factories.”

Uday looked out of the window on both sides. “I don’t know. It sounded like whoever is helping, or appearing to help save Lavi, is in fact double-crossing the real culprit.”

They found the building after a detour that had not been updated on the GPS. Finding the front entrance shuttered, Sayana drove to the empty carpark at the back and knocked on the wide wooden door to the back entrance. Above the door was a sign which read “A1 Best Roasted Meats”. On each side were line illustrations of a duck and a flayed pig.

The three of them stepped back as they heard the door being unlocked. A stocky man with a cherubic face, dressed like a chef, stared at them, and looked at the bag on Uday’s shoulder. He reached for the bag, but Uday pulled it away. “My daughter first.”

The cherubic looking chef waved them in, locking the door behind them. He directed them to walk towards the refrigerators. The room was hot, as if a huge oven had opened towards them. It looked like a food factory. Uday rushed to Lavinia’s side and stared at his daughter as she lay on a long, narrow steel table. He reached for his phone. Hands trembling, he tried to call an ambulance, but stopped to look at Lavinia, her dress torn and dirty.

“My ... my ... baby ...” Uday leant over Lavinia’s body, holding her gently. “My little princess. Please ... please stay

alive. You must get well.” Pulling away and barely able to stand, Uday sobbed as he stroked Lavinia’s face, streaked with blood. In the shadow of the dim blue light shining from the other end of the factory, he saw the bruises and the wounds. Her left eye was swollen shut and her ear was bleeding. Both sides of her face were slashed and she was bleeding from the back of her head, causing her mass of jet black corkscrew curls to clump in places. Her arms and legs were in various shades of black and blue, with blood still oozing from scrapes all over her limbs.

Uday called for an ambulance.

Ashwin took one look at Lavinia and rushed towards the chef. With his hands squeezing the chef’s collar, Ashwin shoved him to the ground. The man crossed his arms over his face, protecting himself from the blows that rained on him. “Not me! I never do anything!”

Sayana grabbed his brother, who was now straddling the man and was about to hit him again. “She’s alive. Dad has called an ambulance.”

Ashwin stood up and looked down towards the man who was lying on his side, his arms shielding his face. “This fuck tried to kill Lavi!”

“No! Please, I tell you true. He say she already die, kill her, burn her. Also burn her clothes, her handbag. He leave kitchen, then I see she not die. I find her phone. I call you. Eh, I save her!”

Uday glanced at his daughter as he bellowed, “Burn Lavi? Who wanted such a violent end for such a gentle soul? Who?”

Sayana pulled the man up and told Ashwin he would speak to him in Mandarin. “You’re not going to understand a word so just go help Dad with Lavi.”

“I’ve called an ambulance, but we should also call the police.

He can't kill her now. We're here." Uday typed the first "9" on his phone.

"Hold it, Dad! Not yet."

"Look at her, Ashwin. The monsters, whoever they were, nearly killed her. Attempted murder. We need to call the police."

Ashwin took the phone from his father. "If Lavi is supposed to be dead, then we can't let the criminals behind this think she's alive. Involving the police at this stage could mean this story being splashed all over the papers. Her attackers would look for her and try to kill her again. That fellow said she was okay, so let's just call Dr Dubash."

"Too late. I've already called an ambulance. She needs to go to a hospital. I think you've been watching too many stupid crime shows. Call the police!"

Ashwin redialled the number and asked for the ambulance to be cancelled. "She's not as bad as we thought. We'll take her home and ask our GP to make a house call." He returned the phone to his father. "We'll need to go soon. You know what, Dad? Let's say the police catch whoever who did this. Do you think their punishment will be enough? No, Dad, it won't."

Uday had never seen such fury in anyone's eyes. "You want vengeance. I want justice. We cannot take the law into our own hands, Ashwin."

Ashwin stared at his sister's limp body, the bruises and wounds still raw. "The law, no matter how objective you think it is, will never grant us adequate justice for such brutality. We should not, but we must handle this ourselves. We will find out who did this, and we will make him pay. Whether you like it or not."

Uday, weary and distressed from the viciousness surrounding him, croaked, "What have you become, son?"

About the Author

After nearly thirty years of working in advertising and the hospitality industry in Singapore, Mahita wrote her first book, *Praying To The Goddess Of Mercy: A Memoir of Mood Swings*, published in 2012. She now spends her time on mental health advocacy and pursuing personal interests including reading and writing. Her first novel, *Rain Tree*, was published in 2016. She is married and has twin daughters in their mid-twenties.

It Happened On Scrabble Sunday is her second novel.