

The Case of the Missing Birthday Cake



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Happy birthday! Life with you rarely goes exactly as planned, which is why it is always worth remembering. Here's to more tea, cake, wrong turns, and laughter together.

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Four Cups and a Crooked Crown

By ten past nine, Nadia's birthday weekend was precisely on schedule. Sunlight warmed the café window, the tea had steeped for the agreed four minutes, and all four mismatched cups were occupied. The only disorder was Leo, who had arrived early carrying a label maker nobody had requested.

"One pastry," Marco said, dividing the air above the plate with the solemnity of a surveyor. "Shared evenly."

"Four pastries," Maya said. "Because last time 'evenly' produced litigation."

Leo lifted the label maker. "I can designate portions."

"No," said three voices.

Nadia reached for her glasses to inspect the handwritten schedule beside her cup. Her fingers found nothing. She checked her cardigan pockets, then the table beneath the napkin holder.

“Before anyone moves,” she said, “my glasses appear to have—”

Maya pointed upward.

Nadia touched the frames resting on top of her dark waves. Marco’s laughter began low and spread until his shoulders shook. Leo raised the label maker as if preparing an official record.

“We have a system,” Nadia said, settling the glasses onto her nose. “Its finer points are confidential.”

“Excellent,” Leo said. “Then, as senior deputy birthday coordinator, I hereby present—”

From beneath the table he produced a paper crown. It had been folded with enthusiasm rather than accuracy, one point listing sideways. Nadia regarded it. Leo regarded her hopefully. She put it on.



Priya, standing behind the counter, smiled at the resulting applause. She had been glancing over more often than usual, Nadia noticed—not at the crown, but at their cups, the schedule, and the clock.

“Four pastries,” Priya declared, setting down a plate before the debate could resume. “Birthday ruling.”

Then she untied her apron and reached for a canvas bag already waiting by the door.

“Market errand,” she said. “I won’t be long.”

The covered market was in the opposite direction from Priya’s usual Saturday errands. Before Nadia could ask, Priya gave the crooked crown one last measuring look and slipped out into the bright spring morning.

After the brief stop at Nadia’s apartment, they returned to the café precisely seven minutes behind schedule, which Nadia considered recoverable. Marco carried the serving plates, Maya the sensible list, and Leo the label maker, although no fresh labeling emergency had arisen.

Sol waved them through to the back room. “Cake’s on the birthday shelf. Decorations underneath.”

The birthday shelf was easy to identify. A card reading NADIA—SATURDAY had been affixed to its edge in three different fonts, the last contributed by Leo five minutes earlier.

It was also completely empty.

Nadia checked the shelf above, then below. No cake box. No carton of streamers, candles, and table decorations. Only a pale square in the flour dust showed where something large had recently rested.

“Perhaps Priya moved them somewhere cooler,” Maya said.

“Or,” Leo said, drawing himself upright, “we face an audacious confectionery heist.”



Marco gave him a level look. “Let’s try cupboards before criminal masterminds.”

Sol opened two cupboards, peered behind a stack of trays, then crouched. “There’s something here.”

He drew out a folded café order slip tied with blue twine. A crooked crown had been stamped across the front.

Nadia untied it carefully. Inside, in extravagant block letters, someone had written:

THE CROWNED ONE'S FEAST HAS BEEN CLAIMED.
SEEK IT AT LAST YEAR'S FIRST WRONG TURN.

For one beat, nobody spoke. Then all three of them looked at Leo.

"What?" He glanced from the note to Nadia's listing paper crown. "Theatrical phrasing is not evidence."

"It is rather in your register," Marco said.

Nadia read the message again. Last year. First wrong turn. Warm sunlight lay innocently across the back-room tiles while her afternoon schedule rearranged itself in her mind.

"Riverside Park," Maya said. "The wrong bench."

Nadia folded the note along its existing crease and tucked it safely into her schedule. Irritation should have come first. Instead, a bright little spark caught beneath it.

"All right," she said. "Nobody touches anything else. We're going to investigate."



Evidence Before Lunch

“First,” Nadia said, clearing one end of the preparation counter, “we need an evidence corner.”

Leo reached for his label maker.

“No.”

“It could say EVIDENCE.”

“It could also remain unused.” She laid down a clean tray and placed the note upon it. Beside it went the twine, her schedule, and a pencil. The crooked paper crown slipped toward one eyebrow as she worked, lending less authority to the arrangement than she intended.

Maya bent over the order slip without touching it. “It’s definitely

ours. Same ruled paper Sol uses at the tables.”

Sol fetched a fresh pad and held up the top sheet. The spacing and faint blue lines matched. “And that twine comes from the pastry parcels. There’s a spool by the packing shelf.”

“So,” Leo declared, “the criminal possessed intimate knowledge of the café.”

“Or eyes,” Nadia said.

Marco opened a paper bag he had brought from the apartment. One by one, he arranged biscuits along the counter, from the smallest round one to an oat biscuit of considerable authority.

Nadia stared at him. “What are you doing?”

“Preventing reckless biscuit selection.” He nudged two nearly equal specimens into alignment. “Also, nobody makes accusations while hungry.”

Sol accepted the smallest. Maya chose the next. Nadia recognized a policy disguised as nonsense and took the third.

Maya angled the note toward the window. “The crown isn’t drawn. See the even edge? It was stamped.”

Nadia leaned closer. The black ink had pooled at one point of the crown and faded identically along each crooked spike. Deliberate, repeatable—not Leo flourishing a marker in a fit of inspiration.



“And this?” Leo pointed to a pale smear near the fold.

“Flour,” Sol said.

Marco studied it. “Not fingerprints. It’s a broad rub.”

Maya nodded toward the empty shelf. “Transferred from a box when someone handled the note against it, perhaps. The writer’s hands needn’t have been floury at all.”

Nadia wrote four items on her schedule: order paper, pastry twine, crown stamp, flour transfer.

The evidence had come from the café, but its theatrical voice no longer belonged quite so neatly to Leo.

Not quite so neatly did not mean not at all.

Nadia set down her pen. The paper crown tilted over one eyebrow, lending the interrogation less gravity than she intended. “Leo. Is your crooked crown connected to this note?”

Leo looked at Marco, then Maya, as though a procedural escape might be hidden behind either of them. “Connected is a dangerously elastic word.”

“Leo.”

“Yes, I arranged a small and entirely harmless surprise involving crowns.” His fingers closed around the label maker in his pocket. “No, I did not take the cake or the supplies. And I did not write that note.”

“What surprise?”

“If I told you, it would become an ordinary event wearing a surprise’s coat.”



The answer left a small, unwelcome gap where Nadia's easy belief in him should have been. He saw it; his theatrical expression dropped.

"I'm not protecting whoever did this," he said more quietly. "I'm only trying not to ruin something nice."

Maya turned her sensible list around. "He couldn't have placed the note after the boxes disappeared. From breakfast until we went to Nadia's apartment, all four of us were together. Leo came back

with us, and the note wasn't here when Sol first checked the shelf."

"So he is," Marco said, "at worst, inconveniently mysterious."

"That is my finest category," Leo said, but without his usual flourish.

Nadia folded the clue along its existing crease. Leo's secret still bothered her, precisely because she wanted it not to. But Maya's timeline held.

"Last year's first wrong turn," she said. "Not the café. Riverside Park."

"The bench," Maya agreed.

"The bench I selected under severe navigational pressure," Leo said.

"You confidently led us to the wrong side of the lake," Marco replied.

"History will vindicate me."

Nadia tucked the note safely into her bag. "History can meet us there."

They left for Riverside Park together, with the missing cake ahead of them and Leo's unspoiled surprise walking uneasily in their midst.



The First Wrong Turn

Warm wind stirred the new leaves at Riverside Park's entrance, carrying the green smell of cut grass and the distant shriek of children near the lake. Nadia checked the time. Their comfortable margin before the afternoon gathering had become an accusation.

"We split up," she said. "Leo and I take the lake path. Marco and Maya circle from the café side. First person to find the bench calls the others."

"No," Marco said.

Nadia turned. "An admirably efficient contribution. Would you care to enlarge upon it?"

"If we separate, Leo will identify three benches as the one he definitely chose. You'll identify another. By the time we compare

accounts, the evidence will have developed a social life.”

“I resent the accuracy of this attack,” Leo said.

Marco’s camera rested against his dark shirt, untouched. “We have one note, one disputed memory, and a cake somewhere in warm spring weather. Staying together is slower only until somebody makes a mistake.”

Nadia opened her mouth, then noticed Maya already bracing a small notebook against her tote.

“Case rules,” Maya said. She wrote as she spoke. “One: follow physical clues, not attractive theories. Two: accuse no one without proof.”

Leo leaned over the page. “Could that be underlined?”

“It is now.” Maya drew the line. “Three: if we find the cake, we get it out of the warmth before doing anything dramatic.”

Leo looked wounded. “Could we do something moderately dramatic while carrying it?”

“No.”



Nadia looked from Maya's neat list to Marco's patient expression. Four people moving together would be untidy. Four versions of every observation, four walking speeds, four opinions about shortcuts.

Also four witnesses.

"All right," she said. "The rules stand. Nobody wanders off, nobody accuses Priya—or Leo, or anyone else—without evidence, and nobody sacrifices the icing for a speech."

Leo sighed. “Justice is harsh.”

Nadia adjusted her crooked crown and pointed down the lakeside path. “Wrong bench first. Together.”

The bench stood beneath a budding tree, exactly where Leo had confidently delivered them last year and nowhere near where they had intended to be. Nadia crouched to inspect beneath the seat. Marco checked behind it. Maya examined the ground.

Nothing.

“This was not the first wrong turn,” Marco said.

“It was absolutely the first wrong turn. Leo marched past the lakeside path and announced he knew a scenic alternative.”

“I said it had narrative potential,” Leo corrected. “Then we crossed the wilderness for several days.”

“It was seven minutes,” Maya said.

Marco pointed toward the path. “The first wrong turn was at the entrance. This was the consequence.”

“And then you discovered you’d forgotten the candles,” Nadia said.



“After you sat on the birthday banner.”

“I sat on a folded blanket.”

“The banner was inside it.”

Maya ran one finger along the bench’s backrest. “Marco forgot the candles. Nadia sat on the banner. I bought pastries from the café. You ate cake with wooden coffee stirrers because nobody had packed forks.”

Leo spread his hands. “Against impossible odds, civilization endured.”

“And Nadia said—” Marco began.

“Exactly as planned,” all four said.

Maya’s fingertip stopped beside a faint white mark. Chalk dust smudged the wood. Wedged in the narrow gap below it was a coffee stirrer and a folded scrap of paper.

Nadia reached first. She glimpsed the black points of a crooked crown as a warm gust whipped the scrap from her fingers.

It sailed over the path. Leo lunged; Marco nearly caught it against a branch. The paper spun upward, cleared the rail, and vanished among the bright ripples of the lake.

They stared after it.

Maya held up the stirrer. Nadia rubbed chalk dust between her fingertips.

Their clue had become two useless objects and four unreliable memories.



A Whisper Across the Park

Leo cleared his throat. “Marco,” he whispered, at approximately the volume of a station announcement, “I may need to disclose the crown situation.”

A cyclist passing on the path glanced over. Nadia folded her arms. “Please do. The ducks are eager to hear it too.”

Leo winced, then unfastened his bag and pulled out a flattened bundle. Paper points sprang loose in several directions. Six crowns emerged, all cheerfully colored, badly crumpled, and listing to one side.

“I asked Priya to keep these behind the café counter,” he said. “The one you wore this morning was the prototype. Its crookedness was not a criminal signature. It was a structural disagreement with glue.”

Nadia looked from the crowns to Leo. His usual delight in an audience had deserted him. He held the ridiculous bundle out without flourish, sacrificing the surprise rather than leaving that narrow doubt between them.

“I should’ve told you sooner,” he added. “But I didn’t take the cake or the carton, and I didn’t write that note.”

Marco examined the crown bag. “What’s this?”

Caught in its folded bottom was a receipt from the covered market. Maya smoothed it against the bench and checked the printed time against her list. Nadia leaned close. The purchase had been made while the cake and supplies were being moved from the café—and the market was too far away for Leo to have managed both.

“Cleared by festive stationery,” Marco said.

Leo drew himself upright. “As I always expected justice would proceed.”

Nadia tucked one crumpled crown back into his bag. “You could have saved us ten minutes.”



“And ruined six crowns’ entrance?”

Her smile came before she could prevent it. Leo was innocent. But Priya had stored his crowns, known about the crooked prototype, and gone to the same market printed on the receipt.

The joke had cleared one suspect and sharpened another.

“We’re still at the wrong bench,” Nadia said, studying the chalk dust beneath it. “Unless the first wrong turn meant the path by the

fountain.”

“It meant this bench,” Marco said. “We ate here.”

“No, we ate farther along, under the tree.”

“That was where you sat on the banner.”

“I sat on the banner here.”

Maya had been looking past them toward the curve of the lake. “Neither,” she said. “Leo brought us here first. Then we moved because Marco put his coffee on the ground and complained the bench sloped.”

“I observed that it sloped,” Marco said.



“With feeling.” Maya pointed farther down the path. “At the bench we actually used, Nadia’s tea was on the left end. Marco’s coffee was beside the pastry box. Leo’s drink was balanced on the backrest until he nearly knocked it over, and mine was under the bench in the shade.”

Nadia remembered the arrangement only after Maya supplied it: four cups among paper bags, the banner compressed beneath her, wooden stirrers passed around as emergency cutlery. She had been certain about the tree. Maya had remembered where

everyone's order stood.

"Lead on," Nadia said.

The second bench looked no more promising than the first, but Maya crouched without hesitation. Tucked behind one iron support was a neat parcel wrapped in café pastry paper.

Leo made a restrained noise of triumph that was not restrained at all.

Nadia drew the parcel free. Blue twine crossed it in Priya's familiar parcel knot. Inside lay a small metal token stamped with the covered market's emblem. On the wrapper, the crooked crown appeared in fresh ink above five words:

WHERE RIBBONS WAIT UNDER ONE ROOF.

"The decoration stalls," Marco said.

Nadia handed the token to Maya. "You found it. You keep the evidence."

Maya slipped it into her bag. Together they turned toward the park gates and the covered market beyond.



Under the Market Roof

Warm air carried spice, bread, flowers, and the bright paper smell of the covered market. Beneath the roof, shoppers threaded between produce crates and fabric stalls while strings of colored pennants shifted overhead.

Maya presented the token at the first decoration stall. The shopkeeper glanced from it to Nadia's crooked paper crown, coughed into one hand, and pointed down the aisle. Two neighboring vendors abruptly became fascinated by their own displays.

"They know something," Leo announced.

"They know you announce things," Marco said.

Celia's stall appeared behind curtains of curling ribbon. Paper

lanterns crowded its ceiling, and rosettes bloomed across the counter in impossible colors. Celia took the token, looked at Nadia's crown, and failed to suppress a smile.

"We're following evidence," Nadia said. "Not participating in whatever expression everyone here has rehearsed."

"Of course." Celia's face became solemn everywhere except at the corners. "Perhaps the evidence is behind the blue ribbons."

Leo swept the ribbon curtain aside with unnecessary ceremony.

There stood the missing party carton.

Nadia's relief arrived first; suspicion followed close behind. The box had not been abandoned or hidden in haste. It sat squarely on a low platform, its label turned toward them like an exhibit. Maya checked the seal while Marco peered behind the platform.

"Decorations," Maya said. "Candles, probably. No cake."

A second label had been fixed beneath Nadia's name: KEEP COOL — P.

Nadia looked at Celia. "Did Priya bring this?"

Celia busied herself straightening a ribbon that was already straight. "I can tell you she borrowed my crooked-crown stamp this morning."



Around them, another ripple of badly hidden smiles passed between the stalls.

The supplies were safe. The cake was somewhere else, in spring warmth, with Priya now at the center of every clue.

The market tea counter gave them one pot, four mismatched cups, and exactly ninety seconds before Leo pointed at the pastry case.

“One,” Nadia said.

“Four,” Leo said.

“We already have biscuits,” Maya reminded them, opening her notebook.

Marco emptied those biscuits onto a napkin and arranged them from smallest to largest. “These are investigative provisions. Pastry is a separate question.”

Nadia took the chipped blue cup. The familiar argument eased something in her shoulders. Around them, kettles hissed, shoppers bargained, and several market traders continued not looking in their direction with impressive determination.

Maya ruled a line down the page. “Priya knew about Leo’s crowns before today. She had access to the café order slips, pastry paper, and blue twine. Celia says she borrowed the stamp this morning.”

“She could have prepared the park clues before breakfast,” Marco said, selecting the smallest biscuit with grave care.

“And moved the cake and carton after we left,” Nadia said.

Leo lowered his voice, achieving ordinary volume. “I would like the record to show that this is much better villainy than I was accused of.”

“You brought a label maker to breakfast,” Nadia said.

“Innocently.”



Maya added times beside each event. The sequence settled into place: clues planted early; four friends kept visibly together; boxes moved while their backs were turned. Priya had the access, the timing, and a market full of people apparently committed to smiling at ribbons.

Nadia reached for the evidence bundle beside Maya's notebook. The blue twine was tied in a compact loop, its short end tucked twice beneath the crossing strand.

She stopped.

"Priya's parcel knot." She turned it so they could see. "Every pastry box from the café. She tucks the end under twice so it won't snag."

Maya drew a neat box around Priya's name.

Marco pushed the largest biscuit toward Nadia. "Evidence before accusation."

"And now?" Leo asked.

Nadia accepted the biscuit. "Now we have evidence."

They returned to Celia's stall with the evidence bundled neatly and the biscuit less neatly consumed. Nadia crouched beside the recovered carton, studying its taped seams for another crown, arrow, or verse.

"Nothing outside," she said. "We check beneath the contents."

Marco took one handle. Leo took the other. They lifted.

The bottom gave way with a soft, treacherous rip.

Candles dropped first, followed by coils of streamers, folded decorations, and a bright avalanche of paper shapes. One escaped star skated toward a shopper's basket. Nadia caught a ribbon against her shoe, but three packets of tiny candle holders were already bouncing toward the aisle.

Maya moved before anyone else did. Her hand went into her bag and emerged with a thick fan of napkins. She spread them beneath the spill, scooping the smallest pieces into the folded paper before they could scatter under neighboring stalls.



“Napkins?” Leo said, kneeling to capture the runaway star.

“Emergency napkins,” Maya corrected.

“Of course.”

Marco held the wounded carton steady while Nadia folded back the sagging flap. Something stiff crackled beneath the cardboard lining.

“Wait.”

She eased out a narrow claim slip dusted with scraps of blue paper. The heading named the market cold room. Beneath it, in block capitals, someone had written CROWNED ONE. A time had been stamped beside DEPOSITED.

Lower down was a second time, later that morning.

COLLECTED BY: P.

For a moment the market’s noise seemed to sharpen around Nadia: wheels rattling, ribbons whispering, traders calling across the aisle.

“The cake was kept cold,” Maya said.

“Was,” Marco emphasized.

Leo’s dramatic voice softened. “And then P collected it.”

Nadia looked from the claim slip to Priya’s parcel knot in the evidence bundle. Relief arrived first—the cake had been protected from the spring warmth. Then the unanswered question pressed in behind it.

Priya had taken it somewhere else.



The Green Handcart

“Tomas will know,” Celia said, too quickly.

Nadia tucked the claim slip into Maya’s sensible custody rather than announcing that they had solved everything. An initial, even one attached to Priya’s stamp, twine, timing, and access, was still an initial.

Celia led them through the market to a delivery bay where handcarts stood between stacked crates. Tomas listened without interrupting as Maya gave the times from the slip. Nadia noticed Marco approving of this restraint, which was irritating only because he was right.

“Yes,” Tomas said at last. “Priya collected that box.”

The confirmation landed differently from suspicion: cleanly,

without any need to force it.

“An insulated cake box?” Maya asked.

“Large, square, and handled as if it contained state secrets.” Tomas pointed toward a gap among the carts. “She loaded it onto the green café handcart.”

Leo drew breath.

Nadia raised one finger. “Not an announcement.”

He released it in a whisper that carried to the next stall. “The identity of P is confirmed.”

Marco’s laugh rolled out, but his attention stayed on Tomas. “Did she say where she was taking it?”

“No. She did leave an envelope for the ‘four-cup detectives.’” Tomas glanced toward Celia. “I put it with the café papers going back. Thought it was an order note until I saw the crown stamped on it afterward.”

“So the envelope is at the café,” Maya said.

“And the cake?” Nadia asked.



“Safe under the insulated cover when I saw it. But Priya said she had to move the cart again before the courtyard clock struck three.”

Nadia checked the market clock. Its minute hand had advanced with outrageous efficiency.

Leo lifted the battered carton. Marco supported its loosened bottom. Maya gathered the napkin-wrapped candle holders.

“Back to the café,” Nadia said. This time it was not a theory dressed as certainty. They had a witness, a misplaced message, and a deadline.

The green handcart could vanish again before three.

They reached the café warm from hurrying, the crooked crown slipping over Nadia’s left eyebrow. Sol was already searching through a stack of order papers beside the till.

“Please tell me you have an envelope,” Nadia said.

Sol drew out a cream rectangle. A crooked crown had been stamped across the flap, and three words occupied the front in Priya’s precise lettering:

FOR NADIA ALONE.

Leo leaned closer. “That seems unnecessarily ominous.”

“From you, that is expert testimony.” Nadia accepted the envelope.

The others waited. Marco still supported the wounded carton as carefully as if its streamers required medical supervision. Maya glanced at the clock, then at Nadia. No one asked her to open the message aloud.

That made the choice feel more private than the envelope did.

Nadia broke the seal. Inside was an order slip bearing four lines:



Where four becomes one,
and cups refuse to match,
where no one agrees how much pastry is enough,
the Crowned One ends the catch.

Beneath the verse, written smaller, was the instruction: Leave your fellow detectives behind. Come alone.

The first lines belonged unmistakably to their Saturday table: one pot poured four ways, mismatched cups, and the weekly pastry dispute Priya had refereed often enough to know nobody ever surrendered. Even “Crowned One” now sounded less like a thief’s boast than Priya trying not to laugh while writing it.

This was not malice. It was a performance built from things Priya had heard while carrying tea and collecting crumbs. A birthday performance, almost certainly. Nadia imagined following the instruction neatly, finding Priya and the intact cake, then returning with the whole puzzle tied off before anyone else could be disappointed.

It would restore the schedule. It would protect Leo from another false suspicion, Marco from hauling the collapsing carton across half the neighborhood, Maya from rescuing one more preventable disaster.

“Well?” Leo asked softly—for Leo.

Nadia folded the slip along its existing crease. “It’s addressed to me.”

She did not yet put it away, and she did not show them.

Marco rested one hand on the recovered carton. Maya watched Nadia without pressing. Leo’s attempt at patience lasted perhaps

three seconds.

“Does it say where the cake is?”

Nadia looked at the three of them, then unfolded the slip and placed it on the table. “It says I’m to leave my fellow detectives behind.”

Leo read the instruction. His expression collapsed into guilt so quickly that Nadia’s suspicion changed shape.

“Oh,” he said. “That may be partly my fault.”

“Explain ‘partly,’” Marco said.



“I told Priya Nadia didn’t need more birthday fuss. I said she needed a mystery.” Leo lifted both hands. “It was a joke. I did not request an actual cake crime with documentary evidence.”

Nadia tried to remain stern. The crooked crown slipped toward one eyebrow and ruined the effect.

Marco raised his camera. “Wait.” He began clicking backward through the morning’s photographs. There were cups, crumbs, Leo gesturing beside his unnecessary label maker, Nadia laughing

at something outside the frame. None of them had been posing.

Then Marco stopped.

He enlarged one image and turned the screen toward them. Beyond their table, half obscured by the window frame, Priya stood beside the green handcart. Blue twine ran between her hands and the cart's insulated cover. Propped against its handle was a route card with a tiny printed map.

Maya leaned closer. "Market courtyard."

"And the cover?" Nadia asked.

"Insulated," Maya said. "The claim slip proves the cake was cold when collected. If it stayed under that cover, it's safe. We don't need to panic about icing. We need to follow the cart."

The café clock ticked toward three.

Nadia folded Priya's instruction again, but this time she passed it to Maya for the evidence pile. "Apparently the Crowned One declines to come alone."

Leo drew breath for an announcement.

"While walking," Marco said.

They swept up the carton and hurried into the warm spring street together, heading for the market courtyard.



The Crowned One's Feast

The first painted arrow appeared beneath the market clock, scarlet and unmistakable. It pointed into a narrow arcade festooned with ribbons. A second arrow waited on the paving stones, then a third, leading toward a side passage screened by bright paper flowers.

Across the entrance hung a sign stamped with the crooked crown:

GUEST OF HONOR ONLY.

Leo stopped so abruptly that a roll of rescued streamers shifted inside the carton. “A direct challenge to the investigative establishment.”

“Or an instruction,” Nadia said. The passage curved out of sight. Priya had designed this last moment for her alone: the solution,

the surprise, perhaps even the satisfaction of arriving first.

Marco looked at the sign, then at Nadia. He did not argue. That made the choice entirely hers.

Maya crouched beside the nearest arrow. “Paint’s dry. But these aren’t part of the route card.” She pointed beyond it, where two faint parallel tracks crossed the dusty paving and continued past the passage.

“The handcart,” Marco said.

Leo peered along the tracks. “Bearing the kidnapped confection.”

“And turning left,” Nadia said, noticing a blue thread caught on the corner of a produce crate.

She adjusted the paper crown before it could slide over her glasses. “We have a system.”

The others waited.

“It includes all four detectives.” Nadia stepped over the painted arrow and followed the wheel marks.



The tracks faded near the courtyard, but Marco found a shallow green scrape on a stone bollard. Maya spotted crumbs of dried mud beside a temporary screen draped with decorations. Leo, unexpectedly restrained, pointed to a cart wheel showing beneath its hem.

They approached without splitting up. Nadia took the middle, with her friends close enough that the carton brushed her sleeve.

Behind the screen stood the insulated green handcart. Priya was

beside it, one hand gripping a length of blue twine and the other reaching toward the screen as though she had been about to pull it aside.

She froze.

Nadia folded her arms. Her crown tilted magnificently.

“Caught,” Leo announced, abandoning restraint, “at the scene of the frosting.”

Priya lowered the twine. Beyond the screen, Celia, Sol, and Tomas became intensely interested in separate lengths of bunting.

“I confess,” Priya said. “I moved the cake and the party carton. With assistance from several people who are apparently useless at looking innocent.”

Celia gave up and laughed.

“You needed occupying,” Priya continued, “while we decorated the courtyard. Leo said you would prefer a mystery to fuss. Last year’s picnic supplied the route, and your Saturday ritual supplied the language.”

Nadia tapped the evidence off on her fingers. “Your café order slip. Your blue twine and pastry knot. Celia’s crown stamp. The market token under the correct park bench. Cold storage under ‘Crowned One.’ Then the insulated box onto your green handcart.”

At each item, Priya nodded. By the final one, Nadia's stern expression was becoming difficult to maintain.



“And the flour?” Maya asked.

“From the carton,” Priya said. “I handled it after the note.”

“Fair,” Maya pronounced.

Priya turned to Leo. “I am sorry the theatrical wording made you look guilty.”

Leo considered this with ceremonial gravity. “I accept, on behalf of dramatic people everywhere.”

Marco’s laugh burst out, taking the last strain with it. Nadia felt her own follow. Around them, the shopkeepers stopped pretending not to listen.

Priya unfastened the insulated cover and lifted the lid. Cool air escaped, carrying vanilla and citrus. Inside sat the cake, smooth and entirely unharmed, crowned with an icing circlet tilted at precisely the same impossible angle as Nadia’s paper one.

“Oh,” Nadia said, before wit could rescue her.

“Evidence confirms it survived,” Maya said softly.

“And,” Marco added, opening a small paper packet, “this year, I remembered these.”

Candles gleamed inside.

Priya pulled the courtyard screen aside. Color waited beyond it, and so did the celebration.



Exactly as Planned

The recovered streamers crossed the courtyard in bright, improbable diagonals. Celia and Sol fastened the last paper rosettes while Tomas rolled the green handcart out of the way, its criminal career apparently over. Nadia took one step toward a sagging ribbon to straighten it.

Priya caught her hand. “Guest of honor.”

Nadia surrendered the ribbon. It was astonishing how difficult—and pleasant—it was to stand still while other people handled everything.

Leo climbed onto an empty crate. “Citizens of the market! The Crowned One’s feast, recently missing under highly suspicious yet excellent refrigeration, is hereby restored!”

Applause broke out beneath the covered roof. Marco lit the candles. Maya divided plates. Priya cut the first slice. Nobody asked Nadia where anything belonged.

Leo distributed his crumpled paper crowns, placing one on Marco at a dignified tilt. Marco returned the favor by setting Leo's nearly over one ear. Maya adjusted Priya's; Priya tucked one onto Maya. Nadia's original crown remained the crookedest, listing above her glasses like a verdict nobody intended to appeal.

When Nadia cut into the cake, a generous ridge of citrus icing slid from the knife toward the table. Maya's hand was already there, napkins unfolded beneath it.

"Preparedness," Maya said.

"Interference with evidence," Leo countered.

Marco laughed with his whole body, nearly losing his crown. Nadia laughed too, still holding the knife, while Priya rescued the slice and Leo attempted to protect three plates at once. Somewhere in the middle of it, Marco lifted his camera. There was no warning, no instruction to look up, only the quiet click as all four of them failed together to compose themselves.

Nadia looked around at the tilted streamers, scattered crowns, safe cake, remembered candles, and friends doing every practical thing before she could volunteer. The courtyard shone with other people's attention.

She raised her crooked crown with one finger and surveyed the beautiful disorder.



“Exactly as planned.”

The following Saturday, Nadia stopped beside their usual table and looked up.

Marco’s photograph hung on the wall: Leo defending three plates,

Maya lunging with napkins, Marco caught at the edge of the frame by the reflection in a serving tray, and Nadia laughing with the cake knife still in her hand. Above the frame, the original paper crown sat at a heroic slant.

“You said you took that picture,” Nadia told Marco.

“I did.” His compact camera rested beside his cup. “I didn’t say I was entirely absent from it.”

Maya studied the reflected figure. “Confirmed.”

Leo drew breath, plainly preparing to accuse Marco of tampering with evidence, but Priya arrived first. She set down one pot of tea, then four mismatched cups. Last came four separate pastries, arranged in an uncompromising row.

Nadia stared. “We haven’t debated yet.”

“You were going to propose one,” Marco said.

“For ceremonial purposes.”

“And Leo was going to demand four,” Maya said.



“Five,” Leo corrected. “One for investigative contingencies.”

Priya folded her arms over her café apron. “These pastries constitute evidence. Evidence must not be divided, concealed, relocated, or tampered with.”

“Does eating count as tampering?” Nadia asked.

“Only if you fail to make tea first.”

So Maya poured, Marco aligned the plates with grave precision, and Leo inspected the pastries as though one might contain a coded market token. Outside, warm spring light moved across the pavement. Inside, cups knocked gently against saucers, and the crooked crown watched over them.

Nadia lifted her mismatched cup. Four others—Priya’s included—rose toward it.

“To evidence,” she said, “and four pastries. Exactly as planned.”

Leo stood halfway from his chair and projected to the entire café, “Let the record show: the Case of the Crowned One’s Feast is officially closed!”

Priya slid his pastry just beyond reach.

“Pending good behavior,” she said.

Their laughter filled the usual corner, beneath the photograph that had already become proof of how the story happened, no matter how many versions they told.