

***Rightfully Wrong Wrongfully Right***

***Varsha Dixit***

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*Dedicated to friends, and readers of romance...*

## Chapter 1: The Crazy Mad Scientist

‘Hmm! A move to Luxemborg in my fifties should work. Assisted suicide is legal there!’ The tragic thought was voiced in the most casual manner by the thirty-year-old man with a scholarly face, squared jawline, long and narrow nose and arched eyebrows. His black hair fell below the collar of his T-shirt in a rakish style, making his dark eyes behind the narrow rectangular glasses appear even darker and mysterious. His face was a combination of high cheekbones and sharp eyes. No one would dare call him a ‘chocolate boy’ with a face like that.

He sipped hot tea from a cup in his hand. It was strong with a sweet aftertaste. Someone on the street below lit a match. A flash of light and then darkness! Balance restored.

‘A life that plans for death is more intelligent than a life that denies the inevitable end!’ the man said to his audience. He was Dr. Viraj Dheer, a scientist and inventor, laureate of several national and international awards. And his audience was a trio of shifty sparrows on the balcony rail framed by the sun rising on the Mumbai horizon behind them. Viraj leaned over the rail and threw some of the lightly toasted bread on the ground. ‘Here you go patsies!’ His audience responded with quick hops and soft chirps.

Sitting back Viraj studied the ocean from the balcony of his 1 BHK, sea-facing apartment at Juhu.

Even at five thirty in the morning, traffic noises were loud and the smog hung heavy over the sea, making the city look like a large tent made of over-washed sheets. Human chatter surrounded Viraj—the milkman’s sharp call to the watchman of his building, the clinking sound of tin as a woman carrying a bunch of tiffins hurried past on the street, strains of radio music and bhajans that escaped through open windows and

doors of nearby houses, the low and laborious sound of a ship horn coming from a cruise boat anchored at some distance in the sea.

The sparrows chirped and hopped around him. ‘You should be out looking for worms! Don’t get used to this multigrain bread. I won’t be around for long.’ He tossed some more bread. ‘Netherlands could work too. The flying time to get to any of those places is probably the same.’ Viraj shook his sneaker-clad foot. The fatter of the sparrows pecked at the crumbs that had fallen around his feet.

Viraj wasn’t depressed, nor was he terminally ill. He was a brilliant but practical man who had made a deathly decision a long time ago. *When I feel there is no more to achieve, no more to know, no more to give, I would rather switch the lights off. It might be interesting to find out if there is something beyond death.*

Viraj shifted to a more comfortable position in the cane chair; his eyes behind the narrow glasses were gleaming and alert. *The Crazy Mad Scientist!*—a moniker that was actually a curse used by his late abusive father when describing Viraj, his younger son. People built hills out of moles; Viraj had built a life around a moniker. Finishing his tea, he got to his feet. The sparrows flew away, except for the fat one. The fat one raised its beady eyes at Viraj and then looked down at the crumbs. Giving Viraj a final you’d-better-not look, the sparrow resumed eating.

The morning breeze chilled Viraj’s body. He felt alive. Viraj yanked off his loose T-shirt. His torso was buffed and he had washboard abs. With muscular arms and a taut stomach, Viraj’s body looked more like a marine’s than a scientist’s. *Weak and frail bodies came with their own tagline, ‘You shall be kicked, trampled and beaten.’*

Tossing his T-shirt on the floor, Viraj got down to do his push-ups. Twenty minutes later he rested breathless, with sweat dripping down his chest. He saw a few faces in the windows of apartments across from his balcony. A middle-aged woman smiled at him flirtatiously even as she watered her plants in a pink nightgown with a white chunni around her neck like a hangman’s noose.

Viraj swung his gaze few feet away from the flirty aunty, to the balcony where a

girl in her early twenties did her stretches. She was none other than the flirty aunty's flirty daughter! Her tight black capris and hot pink tank top clung tightly around her curves. Stretching her arms up, she bent forward and touched the tips of her shoes revealing much of her cleavage. While in that position she looked up and gave Viraj an eerily familiar and flirty smile. The apple did not fall far from the tree!

Viraj got to his feet, grabbed his T-shirt and went inside his apartment. Being watched was his most hated thing, second only to talking! The only talk that interested Viraj was discussions on colonization of mars or quantum phase transitions. Unfortunately there weren't many people talking about it.

In his teenage years, Viraj had a few 'normal' adolescent traits—gawking at girls, especially the older ones, listening to nineties pop songs, flying kites and playing 'kanche', oiling the hair and combing it in different styles. The quintessential 'normal'—sometimes he'd look up at the sky and holler, 'One day I will own you!' Unfortunately the 'abnormal' in his life always overshadowed the 'normal' for his father was a violent, and unemployed alcoholic. Poverty was their reality. His father was the type of man who felt that he deserved the best but never lifted a finger to achieve it. The only time he lifted his hand was to strike his wife and his younger son.

Viraj's elder brother who sucked at studies but excelled in mohalla cricket could do no wrong in their father's eyes. His father's favourite dialogue was, '*Bada sala Sachin Tendulkar banega aur yeh chota ration card katega!*' Ironically, now Bhai (as Viraj calls him) sells life insurance while Viraj made a million by the time he was twenty-one by selling his design of a toy that dispenses medicines to kids.

Viraj's father didn't live to see his success though. He had died of massive brain hemorrhage, quite contrary to the end that was expected—liver damage or getting hit by a truck as he roamed around drunk on the streets. Viraj had learnt of his father's death and cause of it much after it had happened. He had been surprised. He never thought his father had any brains.

'Omelet is ready and your dinner is in the fridge,' called out Viraj's mom from

the kitchen. Kripa Dheer in her early fifties was small in frame. A thick bun of white hair hung over her nape and she always wore the plainest of cotton saris. Placing a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, she beckoned him. Her smile showed more of her lower gum than usual. One day, in a drunken stupor, Viraj's father had hit her repeatedly in the face with a rolling pin and broken her jaw. Since they were poor back then, their visit to the local quack didn't help much. After all, he was no cosmetologist. So even though he mended her jaw, her lower lip continued to hang loose on one side.

Viraj had offered to have a cosmetologist, a rich man's cosmetologist, fix it now. But his mother preferred her loose lip as it was—a reminder of what she had been through.

'Maa, you don't have to come here to fix me breakfast every morning,' said Viraj as he chugged the juice.

'I live close enough to do this.' She held out the plate to him. 'Stop overfeeding the poor sparrows. Their feet and wings won't be able to support abnormally big bodies.'

'How is Keshav sir?'

'The usual, can't control his sweet tooth. Binged on gulab jamuns at dinner, had an uneasy night. He will probably wake up around ten,' she grumbled while wiping the counter clean.

'Who made the gulab jamuns?' Viraj asked, cutting into his omelette.

'I did—'

'Stop overfeeding your sparrow!'

'Sit on the table and eat,' his mother ordered. 'How is your work coming along?' She followed him to the table.

'It's boring!' Viraj grunted, brushing his hair back.

Kripa patted her son's head and grabbed her purse from a nearby cane chair.

‘I could walk away from my work.’

‘They’ll sue you!’ She replied.

‘What do I have to lose?’ Viraj shrugged chewing.

‘All the money they have given you!’ she reminded him, walking to the front door.

‘Like I said, what do I have to lose?’ Viraj gazed at her with his usual solemn expression.

His mother sighed. ‘One day you will find your drive back. Something or someone will help you finish what you started!’ She opened the front door, giving him a final warning, ‘Don’t binge on gulab jamuns.’

‘Hope your boyfriend feels better!’ Viraj called out.

‘You just love saying that, don’t you?’ Her smile reflected the contentment within.

Viraj put his plate in the sink. ‘What? Not every woman is cool enough to find a boyfriend at fifty- five.’

‘See you tomorrow!’ his mother said, closing the door behind her as she left.

Viraj headed for a shower. He had to get to his lab. She’s right. It’s my drive that’s lacking. His genius mind had begun to bore him. As the cold water poured down his skin, he closed his eyes and whispered, ‘Luxemborg, you might be seeing me sooner than I had thought. Much sooner!’



## Chapter 2: Desperado

‘Soon of course! Are you not bothered? Talk to him ASAP, Nik! You’ve got to save me!’ The words might sound like a plea but they were delivered like an order of the empire. And it was ordered by the young woman clad in a light pink designer suit with a ruffled silk cream blouse, teamed with silver Ferragamo high heels. Her perfectly French manicured right hand fisted tightly in front of her chest. Her other hand adorned with intricate diamond-encrusted ring and bangles rested in her lap. Gayatri Dutta!

The order was being issued to an equally insurmountable force, Nikhil Chandel. He was the thirty-three-year-old M.D. of Diamond Design Inc. His persona was very much like the immovable carbon atom structure of the diamonds he imported and exported. However, there were a few chinks in his molecular structure and Gayatri was one of them. And unfortunately for him, she knew it.

Nikhil picked up his cell and glanced at the time. ‘Can’t do it now, Guy, I have to head home for Advey’s swimming class.’ Nikhil was talking about his three and half-year-old stepson who was now as much his own child as one could ever be.

Advey’s mother, Sneha Gupta, and Nikhil had married a few months ago Nikhil’s show-no-emotion-feel-nothing days were now a distant memory. The cover was more or less the same, but the book had been rewritten.

‘Your son is adorable! But aren’t you the one teaching him swimming?’ Gayatri crossed her feet and swung her chair. Though Nikhil shied from showing obvious signs of pride, Gayatri did notice how his lips eased on the side and his eyes shone at the compliment she had just given Advey. Old Singham was now the new Prem. Gayatri had an inherent love for Bollywood movies.

Most NRI’s had their children watch Bollywood movies with the same vengeance the Zealots indoctrinated the children in their community. The NRI parents were

promoting their culture and the Zealots, their cults. The children were screwed up one way or the other but at least the NRI kids knew how to dance.

‘Your nephew is adorable!’ Nikhil began gathering his things from his glass desk.

Gayatri pouted, shifting in her chair. ‘But you have to help me, Nik. You have to talk to Dad!’

‘What is he telling you to do now?’

‘Same thing, get married ASAP! I don’t even get to choose the guy!’

Nikhil rolled his eyes. ‘It can’t be that bad!’

It’s worse! Much, much worse! Gayatri stayed quiet.

‘Fine, I will talk to him. Come home. We’ll have dinner together. Let’s discuss this a bit more.’

‘Your Hitler—’ Gayatri was about to continue, but seeing Nikhil’s wary expression, she said instead, ‘I mean your wife, doesn’t like me much. You should ask her before you invite me.’

‘Can you blame her? In the last five months since Sneha and I have been married, how many times have you come over to our place? In fact, the one time that you visited, you completely ignored her.’ Nikhil reminded as he wore his jacket.

Gayatri grimaced, stretching her neck as if she were straightening a crick. Conceding weakness did not come easy to her. ‘I just feel very awkward around her. I messed up a few things. I know it happened a long time ago but—’

Nikhil logged o his computer. ‘The past is in the past, Guy. Don’t carry it around; it’s nothing but excess baggage.’ He picked up his cell. ‘If you promise to try and get along with Sneha and Vey, I will help you.’ He gave her one of his rare smiles.

Gayatri got to her feet and smoothed out her skirt. ‘Only if I had an actual

biological brother.’ She clucked her tongue.

Nikhil raised an eyebrow. ‘Emotional blackmail. Some things never get old.’

‘Whatever!’ Gayatri walked to the door. ‘I guess I’ll see you when I do... Probably in Amsterdam, married to some guy with a belly bigger than a halwai who sits outside his shop making jalebis.’

Nikhil called out. ‘Fine! I will talk to him. However, in the meantime let us have the pleasure of having Your Majesty for dinner.’ Unseen by him Gayatri smiled. *Definitely the new Prem. Old Singham was unyielding!* Nikhil walked over and stopped in front of her. Playfully, he pressed her nose to the side.

Gayatri grabbed his finger. ‘Oww! Stop!’ She met his eyes grudgingly.

‘You can’t avoid my wife forever, you know. You might end up avoiding me, Guy.’

Gayatri’s kohl-lined eyes widened and her lips, outlined perfectly with a fuschia Urban Decay gloss, parted. ‘You and Sneha are now a package deal?’ Though not part of the family, Nikhil meant more so than those with whom she shared her last name. ‘Your wife has you wrapped around her little pinky!’ She grumbled, hiding the fact that a big part of her felt envious of Nikhil for having found rock solid love and friendship with a woman who would always have his back. They were the perfect family. Gayatri pressed her lips. *I could gag!*

‘Come home with me and I’ll surely talk to Sir Dutta tonight. Promise!’ Nikhil’s father had died when he was very young and Gayatri’s father who had been an old family friend had taken Nikhil under his tutelage. My dad found the son he never had and Nikhil found himself a father of sorts, Gayatri had thought then.

Gayatri glared. ‘And you called me the emotional blackmailer!’ Nikhil shrugged. ‘Fine, I’ll come for dinner and even be nice!’ Gayatri crossed her arms, staring down at the carpet.

Nikhil smiled at her affectionately. ‘Deal. Let’s go. I’ll text Sneha.’ Retrieving his phone from his suit pocket, he walked towards the door. Gayatri followed him to the elevator. They waited side by side.

‘Just hope it’s not contagious!’ Gayatri mocked.

‘What?’ Nikhil asked.

‘Whatever you and Sneha have caught. Just hope it is not contagious!’ Gayatri rolled her tongue against her cheek.

Nikhil reached out and tugged Gayatri’s sleek ponytail. ‘Owww!’ Gayatri smacked his hand.

‘Yes, it’s contagious.’ Nikhil let go of her hair. ‘We got it from Nandini and Aditya—’ He stopped short. ‘Sorry! I didn’t—’

Gayatri did not let any awkwardness show on her face. She would have made a good poker player. ‘I’m cool!’ she retorted staring at the metal doors. Once upon a time, Gayatri was nearly engaged to the country’s most eligible bachelor, Aditya Sarin. Aditya had dumped Gayatri for his homely and pretty neighbour, Nandini Sharma. Coincidentally or maybe because life had a sense of humor like AIB, Nandini was die-hard friends with Sneha Gupta, now Nikhil’s wife.

A few months ago, wanting to avenge herself for being humiliated, Gayatri had plotted against Aditya and Nandini and tried to break their marriage. That is when Sneha and Nikhil (Gayatri’s brother for all intent and purposes) had stepped in to curb Gayatri and her devious methods. Sparks had immediately sizzled between a recently-divorced Sneha and Nikhil. Sneha and Nikhil had been quick to marry and her son, Advay, from her previous marriage made it a perfect trio.

Nikhil had forced Gayatri to see the ugliness of her obsession in trying to humiliate Aditya. As both the couples— Nikhil and Sneha, Nandini and Aditya—moved on, Gayatri had stayed back in India but kept her distance from them. Nikhil had tried to reach out to her several times as had Sneha, but Gayatri had never returned the calls until

today.

*Because today, I'm desperate!* Gayatri realized Nikhil was watching her. With forced flippancy she exclaimed, 'Aditya and Nandini should be quarantined on an island!' She added a wink for effect.

'True!' Nikhil shook his head.

In less than an hour they were at Nikhil's apartment. He used his keys and led Gayatri in.

'Dad!' exclaimed Advey and jumped down from the sofa. The open book on his lap slipped off and landed on the floor. He ran to Nikhil who was quick to put aside his laptop bag so he could swoop him up and throw him in the air. Advey chortled and Nikhil's eyes crinkled in response. Nikhil caught Advey and tickled his sides. 'Got you, kiddo!'

Advey's chuckles reverberated straight through his tiny ribcage.

Nikhil pressed a kiss to the toddler's plump cheek and then instantly turned Advey upside down. Advey shrieked in delight as Nikhil laughed.

Gayatri felt a warmth rise inside her as she saw her usually cold-as-a-cod brother morph into a doting father.

Nikhil straightened and lowered Advey to the ground. 'More, Dad, more!' Advey grabbed Nikhil's leg and pleaded.

Nikhil ruffled Advey's hair. 'Later! Let's get you changed. 'It's time for a swimming lesson!'

'Wimming lessons, Bua!' Advey suddenly woke up to the fact that there was someone else in the room apart from his dad. Wobbling on his chubby legs, he launched himself on Gayatri.

'Whoa!' Gayatri caught Advey without losing her balance and pecked his cheek.

He wriggled to be put down. Gayatri obliged him, but only after kissing him on his other cheek.

‘Wimming lessons! Bud!’ Nikhil reminded. Advey gave them a beatific smile and stripped his pants right down.

‘Vey!’ Nikhil chuckled.

‘You’re a hoot, Vey!’ Gayatri clapped her hand over a mouth. Going up to him, she pulled his pants up. ‘Aren’t you the cutest?’

‘No pants! Wimming lessons Bua!’ Advey immediately pulled them down again and this time he tried to wiggle his feet out of the pant legs.

Amla, his nanny, came to their rescue. She picked Advey up with his pants and underpants hanging around his ankles. ‘Shame, shame, Adi baba! Bad, very bad!’

Amla marched away holding Advey in her arms, his pants trailing across the room

Nikhil loosened his tie. ‘Have a seat, Guy!’

‘Sure, if I can find my way to the sofa without falling!’ Gayatri muttered stepping gingerly over tiny cars and dinosaurs toys littered all over the carpet.

‘I’ll be right back. I’ll have the cook bring something out for you!’

‘Just some coffee would be nice!’

‘Sure!’ Nikhil went up the stairs and disappeared into a room at the end of the hallway.

Another door opened and Advey came running out in a pair of red-and-blue swimming shorts. A pair of blue swimming goggles flapped in his hands. He stopped and looked at Gayatri. ‘Bua, Daddy?’

‘In there!’ Gayatri pointed in the direction of the kitchen.

Advey took o again, his bums all puffed up and funny because of the swimming diapers. *Father and son! My dad's favourite combo except he never got a son, he got Didi and me!* A familiar ache arose in Gayatri.

A manservant brought a tray with a blue and white Khurja pot and matching cups from the kitchen. He placed the coffee in front of her.

‘Thanks!’ said Gayatri, taking a cup.

The doorbell chimed. Gayatri stiffened. *Must be Sneha!* Squaring her shoulders she pasted a forced smile on her face. Sneha was one of the rare people who could cut Gayatri to her size with her piercing looks and mind-reading techniques.

Someone came into the living room.

*What the fuck?*

### **CHAPTER 3: MOSCOW MULES**

‘Uh...hi!’ Nandini raised a hand slower than a railway track phatak. She took the seat that was furthest from Gayatri. The smile on the faces of both the women were similar; the difference was in their eyes—Nandini’s were nervous and Gayatri’s frigid.

‘How are you? Long time!’ Nandini was never one to hold a grudge or silence.

‘Good! And you and...’ Gayatri trailed off awkwardly. She hated the guilt that broke out in her upon mentioning Aditya to Nandini. *A damp vamp I am!* That was one limerick Dr. Seuss would never use.

‘We are good!’ Nandini smiled even as she played with the strap of her handbag and then shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

Gayatri tapped her feet incessantly. *Savdhaan India please frame me for murder, if that is what it takes to get away from this half-assed barrel of goodness, Ms Nandini.*

Nikhil emerged out of his room carrying Advey like a sack over his shoulder. Advey hung upside down. Nikhil stopped short when he saw the two occupants in his living room—Gayatri and Nandini. His expression was that of petrified victims in horror films seconds before they were slayed.

*Eggjactly Nik!* Gayatri smiled acknowledging his horror with a smile that seemed sweeter than a packet of Splenda.

‘Where’s Sneha?’ Nandini blurted.

‘Good question!’ Nikhil eyed the front door as though he were calculating how much time it would take to get out should he make a run for it.



*Don't you dare!* Gayatri narrowed her eyes at Nikhil. Advey looked up and loudly squealed, 'Maathi!'

Just then the doorbell rang. Nikhil went to answer it.

'Literally saved by the bell!' Gayatri muttered.

'Aha! Full House! Everyone's here!' Sneha said, stepping into the living room. She had a laptop bag slung over one shoulder and a wide purse in her hand.

'Let's leave these two here, go for dinner and make our own movie!' Nikhil whispered into Sneha's ear.

"Tempting, but I'll pass!" Sneha giggled and shot a warning glance at her husband.

Gayatri noticed the ardor that lit Nikhil's green eyes. They twinkled with affection for the five-foot-something girl whose spine and spunk probably outdid an army.

'Lou birds!' Nandini called out.

'Shudd up, Kul-Nandini!' Sneha went up to her son who was engrossed on 'Mathi's' phone. 'Hey, Vey! Where's the hug for Mom?'

A distracted Advey gave Sneha a half-hearted hug. Suddenly the phone was taken from his hands. Surprised, Advey looked up as Nikhil held the phone in his hand now. Advey screamed 'Mom!' as he flung himself at Sneha who lifted and embraced him in a heartfelt hug. He then planted a big kiss on her cheek and gazed at Nikhil with his lower lip jutting out. The pleading puppy look combined with his innocent light brown eyes worked like magic.

Nikhil handed the phone back to Advey. 'Like mother like son! Always pushing my buttons.'

'Then stop throwing the buttons in our face!' Sneha retorted, unloading her bags on the sofa. She smiled warmly at Gayatri. 'You are here! Finally!'

'In flesh and blood!' Gayatri's smiled gingerly.

Sneha turned to her best friend, sister and first love all rolled into one.  
'So Adi is back tomorrow?'

'Yup! Tomorrow afternoon. How did the meeting with the Bhatias go?' Nandini asked. Sneha and she had opened an advertising firm a few months ago. They now boasted of one big client and a few small ones. Being a boutique company Sneha and Nandini were choosy about the companies they pitched their work to.

'It went well. Preeti impressed them. Have set up another meeting for next week. You should be there for that one. They will be sharing their ad budget in that meeting,' Sneha informed.

'Sure! Send me a meeting invite, I'll add it to my calendar,' Nandini agreed.

Gayatri felt out of place during all this work-talk. 'I just got a text. I have to go.' She held up her phone to show them the message.

'Nonsense! Ignore it! You are staying for dinner. Nikhil hardly gets to see you. *We* hardly get to see you.' Sneha flashed a big smile. She gave Nikhil the 'back-me-up-here' look.

Nikhil quickly came around and gently placed his hands on Gayatri's shoulders. 'You are staying, Guy.'

'But...I had...' complained Gayatri even as she watched Nikhil take her phone from her hand.

'We boys will leave you girls alone while we go and brave the wild waters of the west! C'mon, Vey, it's pool time!' Nikhil said.

Advey dropped Nandini's phone at once and wiggled his bum off the sofa. 'Later gators!' He trotted away behind his dad with some swagger.

Gayatri clamped her lips in what she hoped resembled a smile. *Now what? Will they force me to draw blood and be part of some shitty sisterhood?*

'Drinks anyone?' Sneha asked gazing at Gayatri.

Gayatri gave a polite smile, still not used to this disarming Sneha. The Sneha she remembered was a fire-breathing dragon.

'Moscow mules! The one Nikhil taught you!' Nandini chimed in.

'Make that two!' Gayatri nodded.

'Make that three! I'll make one for myself too.' Sneha gave a thumbs-up sign and headed for the bar in the dining area.

'Make yours light, you crazy cow!' Nandini called out to Sneha while winking at Gayatri. 'Sneha's a one-drink-wonder. The last time she got drunk we all discovered Nikhil's flair for poetry,' Nandini giggled.

Gayatri straightened her ponytail.

'So how have you been?' Nandini was an effortless conversationalist. She was genuinely interested in everyone's business!

'Just been busy with work,' Gayatri fibbed.

'Where do you work?'

Gayatri bit her lip, caught in her own lie. 'A few projects here and there!' She brought back her I'm-better-than-you look. 'Have been traveling a lot, between Amsterdam and Mumbai.'

'Of course, you have family there, don't you?' Nandini asked. Gayatri nodded.

Sneha entered the room right then. 'Nik was telling me about the situation with your dad! Marriage mart ready?'

Gayatri drew in a sharp breath. *Nikhil, you idiot!*

'Gayatri's dad wants her to move back to Amsterdam. He feels that she is doing nothing constructive here.'

*Sneha, you are a bigger idiot!* Gayatri's hands fisted as she positively bristled at having her Achilles' heel exposed to the two women she would never want to appear weak in front of. In her head a GIF kept playing on loop—a GIF of her dropping a piano on Nikhil's head.

'Gayatri could come work with us,' Nandini blurted.

Sneha and Gayatri simultaneously erupted in a resounding 'No!'

Like Tihar jail was never free of criminals, Nandini never lacked ideas. 'She could work with Nikhil.'

'Pass!' Gayatri took a long swig of her drink. Then glancing in Sneha's direction, she said, 'No offense meant!'

'None taken!' Sneha shrugged.

'Hmm, maybe you could start something new?' Nandini quipped.

Gayatri gave a brittle smile. Another long swig of the drink! 'Not an option. Dad won't allow it.'

'Why?' Sneha asked.

'Because he won't...' Gayatri felt a knot in her chest and took a deep breath. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* 'Dad doesn't trust me. I haven't been successful in a few ventures he started for me.' She sat back, gently stroking her bracelet, a distant look in her perfect almond-shaped eyes.

'So what? Everyone has more downs than ups. All it takes is one big successful "up" and all the "downs" are ancient history.' Nandini spoke passionately in her defense.

*Now I'm a sad vamp!* Gayatri raised her glass. 'This is nice! But when do we have dinner? I'm starving!'

'Sorry! Let me grab some snacks.' Sneha jumped to her feet and went towards the kitchen.

'I'll be right back!' Nandini excused herself and followed Sneha.

Finally by herself, Gayatri slumped her shoulders and leaned back in her chair. The drink was strong enough to loosen her tongue. 'Maybe I should just fucking marry whoever Dad wants me to marry. So what if I don't get to choose my spouse?' She twirled the glass in her hand. 'So what if the man turns out to be a jerk? Why fight the inevitable? I'm used to jerks. At least I'll

have money, because Dad would never pick a 'nobody' for his rich bitch!' Gayatri sat up straight and finished the rest of her drink in one gulp. The minty drink did nothing to erase the bitter taste in her mouth. She rose to her feet and walked to the windows of the high-rise apartments that overlooked the Pali Hill neighborhood.

Unknown to Gayatri, Sneha had witnessed her tortured confession.

## **CHAPTER 4: JAI SHRI KRISHNA**

Sneha retreated and then came back again into the living room, this time announcing her entry. 'Appetizers are ready! I'll set the table in the dining room!'

'Why the dining room? We can just eat here.' Nandini returned from the restroom.

'Because I paid fortune for that damn thing!' Sneha retorted.

Nandini chuckled. "I have to make a call!"

Gayatri, why don't we move to the dining room?' Sneha suggested.

*Sure mom!* Gayatri followed Sneha into the formal dining room.

'You have a seat. I'll set the table,' Sneha offered.

'Don't you have servants for this?' Gayatri asked pulling out a chair.

Sneha smiled as she opened the drawers on the side armoire. 'Nikhil and I like our privacy. Thus we manage the household chores ourselves. Less traffic in the house you see!'

'Hmm... this is a nice table!' Gayatri trailed her fingers over the carving on the chestnut colored, mahogany dining table; it was crafted with rosewood and walnut veneers with brass accents all over for an imperial look. 'It's big and formal for sure!'

Sneha's gave her a wry look. 'I did go overboard. It dwarfs the room! Wish I had thought of that before I bought this beautiful monstrosity.'

Gayatri swiveled her head a few times studying the room. 'Decrease the length of the chandelier hanging over it, place a few long mirrors on the facing walls and get a smaller armoire. The room will look bigger and the table smaller,' Gayatri suggested tucking her hair behind her ear.

Sneha thought about the changes Gayatri suggested and then peered around as if visualizing those changes. 'You are right. That could work!' she exclaimed. "I'm impressed!"

'Ouch!' Gayatri gracefully linked her arms in front of her 'I'm a jack of few things but master of none!' *Wow I'm over-sharing!*

Sneha paused for a moment, her eyes gleaming. Slowly she took a seat opposite Gayatri. 'Have you ever run a facility, managed operations... a biggish office?'

'I did manage a few of my dad's offices. What do you have in mind?' Gayatri asked, arranging the napkins in origami style.

'That's neat!' Sneha pointed at the napkin.

'One of those innumerable lame classes I had to take when I was young,' Gayatri replied dryly.

'No woman should ever *have* to do anything.' Sneha said quietly.

'Slip of tongue! Classes I took and thoroughly enjoyed!' Gayatri made a quick recovery. 'You were asking earlier about some operations?'

'Hold on! I think I heard Vey and Nik come in!' Sneha abruptly exited.

By the time Nikhil, Nandini and Sneha came back in the room, the table had been laid out.

'Very beautiful, Gayatri!' Sneha remarked noticing how Gayatri had used some potpourri from a nearby vase to decorate the napkins and the table.

'I was bored,' Gayatri smiled.

'Did know that a shark can smile Guy!' Nikhil teased her.

Gayatri rolled her eyes. 'Yes, they can. Haven't you seen Shark Tale or yourself smiling?'

Nandini chuckled loudly. 'Oh I saw Shark Tale and I loved it! She continued in her animated voice, 'It was hilarious! De Niro as Don Lino and Jack Black as Lenny! OMG! They cracked me—'

'I was forced to see it and hear most of it because a kid next to me on a flight was dumb enough to forget his headphones!' Gayatri interrupted, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

'Oh!' Nandini decided to shut up and instead fiddled with a napkin on her lap. Just then the servant wheeled in a trolley loaded with food.

Nikhil cut a piece of idli and put it into his mouth.

'You eat idli with a knife and fork?' Nandini noticed.

'He evens eats paranthas like that!' Sneha remarked.

Smiling, Nikhil continued to eat.

*Dad eats like that!* Gayatri thought as her hands hovered over the knife and fork by her side.

Sneha leaned over and pushed Gayatri's napkin closer to her. 'Go for it!' She gestured at Gayatri's hand.

'Thanks!' Grinning, Gayatri picked up a piece of chicken 65 with her hands and ate it.

Nandini and Nikhil both watched the exchange, the former with a raised eyebrow.

'Nik, I was thinking, why doesn't Gayatri manage the lab?' Sneha voiced.

Nikhil continued to look down at his plate, hiding his frown. Gayatri turned her gaze towards Nikhil and Sneha.

'The lab?' Nandini asked. Sneha nodded.

Nikhil continued to frown at his plate.

'Frowning at your food won't make the question go away Dad!' Sneha affectionately addressed him like Advey did.



‘Please tell me what lab are you all going on about?’ Gayatri asked.

‘The lab where Viraj is overseeing the making of Adi and Nikhil’s dream project. Adi’s dad’s started it. He discovered Viraj and his idea.’ Nandini replied.

‘So then basically this Viraj started it!’ said Gayatri, wiping some crumbs from the side of her mouth.

Nandini became quiet and went back to breaking some of her idli and dropping it in her bowl of sambhar. Few drops of sambhar splattered on the white tablecloth near her plate.

‘It’s okay! Leave it!’ Sneha said, trying to pacify a visibly horrified Nandini. Gayatri simply rolled her eyes.

‘You are talking about the lab where Viraj and his team are working on a new kind of top secret battery and in which Aditya, I and eleven other investors have nearly invested all of our money in. Including Gayatri’s father. The project which might reduce some of us to paupers if it is not implemented within the next 6 months.’ Nikhil said, his voice even throughout.

‘Yes! The lab, which is falling apart because of myriad management issues. Every two to three weeks the manager of operations keeps resigning or is fired because Viraj is worse than a stereotypical mad scientist. He is simply impossible to manage. A lab with a scientist who is nowhere close to beginning phase two of the project when he should have been completing the final one—phase 3 which involves testing!’ Sneha reminded evenly.

‘Why is he hard to manage?’ Gayatri asked her interest piqued.

‘Because he is borderline insane. Works odd hours, impossible to get through to and zero patience with people, including his financiers.’ Nandini said pointing at Nikhil with her spoon, ‘Actually, Nik is the only one Viraj can kind of stand.’

'I'm not sending Guy in a war zone.' Nikhil pushed his plate away from him.

'Ask her, don't decide for her!' Sneha persisted.

'No, Sneha! End of discussion!' Nikhil put down his fork.

'Her dad is one of the investors; he would probably feel good about his daughter overseeing something he has invested millions in,' Nandini suggested.

'True!' Sneha concurred.

*Not in a million years!* Gayatri focused on her food. *What are these two up to?*

Nikhil pushed his chair noisily and stood up. 'I'll make sure Vey has his dinner and then I'll join you guys back.' He planted a kiss on Sneha's cheek and left the room.

Nandini gaped at them. 'That is how you fight, a kiss on the cheek?'

'So I'm guessing this is not how all couples fight?' Gayatri smirked.

Nandini shook her head. 'Heck no! Most of us do it the good old-fashioned way. Shout, slam doors, don't answer calls, cold vibes in bed. Even a few broken plates!'

'Ignore her!' Sneha snorted 'Nik and I are not fighting, we are just disagreeing!' Sneha got to her feet. "Think it's time to feed Dad some dessert.' She winked and left.

Alone in the room, Gayatri and Nandini exchanged strained smiles and went back to eating.

Nandini put her spoon down with a loud clink. 'Why don't you call up your father. He won't say no to you. Use him as a leverage to convince Nikhil to work at the lab.'

Gayatri immediately shook her head. 'Let's leave him out of this.'

'What? No! Dads always help us daughters out.'

*Not mine, bimette!* 'Pass!' Gayatri accidentally dropped her napkin on the floor, but quickly bent down to pick it up.

'C'mon! He'll help! We'll call him right now!' Nandini reached over and grabbed Gayatri's cell.

'No! No! Give it back!' Gayatri tried to get the phone back but in vain.

'Oh look, you have missed call from him!' Nandini squealed hitting the call number. Gayatri could only stare in shock.

'It's ringing. Here, talk. I'll put you on speaker,' Nandini gestured excitedly.

'How dare you!' Gayatri hissed, suppressing the urge to slap Nandini.

Her father answered. 'Hello Gayatri!'

'Hi Dad!' Gayatri leaned forward.

'When are you coming back home?' her father's sternness came through even on the call.

Gayatri grimaced. 'About that Dad, I was thinking...umm maybe...umm...'

Her father made an impatient noise with his tongue. 'Hurry Gayatri, I don't have all day. What is it this time? Another rich bloke or another bad business idea?' The words were accompanied by a mocking chuckle.

Nandini lost her buoyant smile.

Gayatri saw pity in Nandini's wide eyes.

*I hate pity! And that too from her!* 'Dad, I was thinking of overseeing the lab where the new project is being readied. I just—'

'Pagal ho gayi ho? Absolutely not! Get this crazy idea out of your head right now!'

Nandini started to get up.

Gayatri tossed an angry glance at her. 'Sit down!' she hissed. Nandini sat down looking guiltier than a terrorist caught with a live bomb.

Gayatri's father wasn't done yelling. 'You stay away from that project. Am I clear, Gayatri? It has cost me millions. You will not screw this up too! Am I clear?' her father hollered.

'I heard you!' Gayatri's face turned a dull red. Her nails dug in her palms.

'Good! Now get back here to your mom. And stop bothering Nikhil, he has enough on his plate with work and a new family.'

'Fine!' Gayatri glared at Nandini who studied the ceiling, then her fork and then the wall.

'Jai Shri Krishna!' Gayatri's father added.

Gayatri stayed quiet.

'Jai Shri Krishna, Gayatri!' His voice was curt and demanding.

'Jai Shri Krishna!' Gayatri ended the call. She turned to Nandini, 'Are you happy now, Princess? Are you done humiliating me or do you and your damn husband have more in store for me.' She stood up and flung her napkin on the table.

'Don't curse Adi. And I was only trying to help!' Nandini spoke quietly.

'More food!' Sneha entered with a dish in her hand. Nikhil followed behind, with Advey piggy-riding on his back. Gayatri walked up to them, her face reflecting her emotions far too clearly.

'Thank you for your hospitality.' She looked at Sneha squarely in her eyes. 'I'm sorry, but I'm in no mood for food or...' she glanced over her shoulder pointedly at Nandini and concluded, '...or the present company.' Gayatri exited the room, her head held high, shoulders taugt. Sliding Advey down Nikhil went after Gayatri.

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Sneha put the dish on the table and decided to question the ‘present company’. ‘What did you do?’

Nandini shrugged as she pulled up Advey who was trying to get on her lap. ‘Nothing! Don’t look at me like that. It was her father!’

Sneha sat down, her mouth puckered. ‘Her father? Then why did she give you the evil eye.’

‘Maybe I look her like dad!’ Nandini avoided Sneha’s eyes and reached for the Hyderabadi biryani Sneha had just placed on the table.

Sneha narrowed her eyes. She recalled Gayatri’s father with his florid face, double chin, weak jaw line, over-exposed pores around his nose and under his eyes, and the white hair spotting his ears and temples. ‘You look nothing like him! But I know you did something because you are stuffing your face with food and reeking of guilt, Sethani!’

Sneha waited for Nandini to finish the morsel that was twice the size of her mouth.

‘We need to help Gayatri!’ Nandini said handing Advey what he wanted—her cell phone.

‘I was trying to!’ Sneha sighed. ‘Why do you think I convinced Nikhil to let her manage the operations of the lab?’

‘Good, so you have a plan?’ Nandini sat back.

Sneha raised an eyebrow. ‘So you did do something!’

Nandini winced. ‘Yes, but with good intentions!’

‘As always!’ Sneha helped herself to some biryani.

‘Aren’t you going to stop Gayatri from leaving?’

‘Only Nik can convince her to do anything!’

Advey, who was sitting on Nandini’s lap all this while, turned around and planted a big kiss on her chin and then snuggled against her. Nandini hugged him tight. ‘I so badly want one of these. Where can I get one?’

'From your vagina!' Sneha quipped. Nandini and she exchanged a look and then burst into laughter. Advay laughed along without understanding a word of what had been said. Sneha leaned over the table and tickled him under his chin. 'Buddhu!'

'So if Gayatri doesn't listen to anyone besides Nikhil, how will *we* help her?'

Sneha flashed a grin. 'By doing what we do best!'

Nandini nodded. 'Ah! You put the fear of god in her and scare the crap out of her?'

'Yes Ma'am!' Sneha raised her glass of water. And you emotionally blackmail her, kulta! Milk it!' Sneha squeezed her fingers.

'Aha good times!' Nandini said dreamily.

Sneha reached out with her glass and the two best buddies clinked their glasses. 'The best!'