

# STRANGE AS IT MAY SEEM

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# Chapter 1

Mr Biyani stood, tapping his fingers on the bunch of papers he was clutching onto. Tall and gangly, his speckled face resembled that of Jack, her favourite villain who killed without mercy in *The Graveyard Book*. A book she took solace in.

Jack as described by the writer was fast, sharp and merciless. *He might have had a broken jaw and an icy glare*, she thought. Mr Biyani, on the other hand, she observed -- smiled. But his smile was insincere. It only made him appear more disagreeable.

“So what do you think, Trishna? Mrs. Chatterjee? Do you agree to this?”

He asked loudly, still smiling.

She turned around to her grandmother, observing her. A woman of sixty moons, she didn't look a day older than fifty. Short and olive-skinned, with salt and pepper short cropped hair, her grandmother whom she lovingly called Didu was a woman of few words. Mostly, she nodded, shrugged or puckered and spoke only when she deemed it necessary. When she did speak, she sounded like a queen passing a royal decree. *The only missing element as she issued her orders*, Trishna impishly thought – were *the drumbeats*. Mrs Binodini Chatterjee, the loud and commanding sexagenarian was Trisha's only family, her sun and her universe.

“We should agree to this, Didu. Ten crores is a large sum.” She muttered without looking at her.

Mrs Chatterjee nodded. The large wooden Roman clock was ticking in the background of their spacious yet ramshackle living room. Mr Biyani toyed with his mobile phone and alternately gasped and snickered, staring at the timeworn mahogany divan where the women of the house sat, next to each other. They were silently observing the property lawyer.

“Why five lakhs? Why is there a need for deposit money in an inheritance?” Didu asked, loud enough to make Mr Biyani drop his mobile. It took him a minute to collect himself, pick his mobile up and frame an answer.

“I’m the messenger, the one who ensures that the money goes to the intended party.”

“I’m not doubting that. *Why?* That is what I want to know?” Didu demanded.

“Your brother had no family—”

“I am aware of that. I knew that Jyotirmoy would leave a part of his money to Trishna. He was very fond of her. What I didn’t apprehend is this! He left his entire fortune but with a condition.”

“A clause actually. Five lakhs is not a deal breaker in today’s market.”

“For an old woman with a limited income and a granddaughter who doesn’t have a college degree, it is as you flippantly term it, a deal breaker.”

“I do earn a little through my writing.” Trishna mumbled defensively, her head bent down.

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“I am not blaming you. It was my decision to home school you. Earning a college degree is not a big achievement. Learning is. And you, my dear, have learnt more than anyone can learn in a college.”

Beaming with pride, raising her round angelic face at the old lady’s words, she moved her doe-eyes in slow motion and blinked, with her dark and sweeping eye lashes towards Mr Biyani. He gave her a nonchalant look, cleared his throat and said:

“If you want, I can help you. I know someone who can lend.”

“A bank?”

“A bank will not loan *you* money. A sixty year old woman dependent on her deceased husband’s pension and hence deemed unfit to return the borrowed sum.”

“That’s unkind but I am afraid that is true.” Didu conceded running her fingers over her mouth. A sign that she was thirsty.

“Didu, I will get you water.” Trishna scurried away to the kitchen.

“I know someone, a close friend who might be willing to help.” The lawyer said empathically.

The old woman didn’t speak. Instead she looked at the approaching young girl carrying a glass of water. Happy and carefree.

“That’s great Mr. Biyani. You know someone who might be willing to help.” Trishna cried excitedly handing over the glass of water to the old woman, who gulped the liquid at one go and refocussed her attention on the lawyer. “Let’s talk to him, Didu. Find out. If you don’t like his terms, you can always say, no.” She pleaded.

Didu shrugged. The clock ticked. Exasperatedly, Mr Biyani began browsing on his mobile and surreptitiously kept looking at the old woman. He didn't want to drop his mobile on the concrete floor, when the old woman shouted again. Being the owner of the latest iPhone did not come easy – it came with a truckload of responsibilities and anxieties.

On the other hand, Trishna wondered at the possibilities of having ten crores in their bank balance. With rosy eyes, she dreamt of a day when they would wear fancy clothes and walk into the Bannerghatta branch and the bank manager would greet them reverentially with an orange cold drink and a toothy grin. Her mind leaped forward to a perfect day when she would carry a brown-papered carry bag with a new pair of shorts and tee shirts in it and gift it to a surprised and overjoyed Bhombol.

“I will speak to him. What is his name?” She cried. She couldn't let this golden opportunity pass.

“Great!” Mr Biyani exclaimed in happiness. “You can take my reference when you speak.”

“Should we call before we go to the meeting?”

“You are in luck. He is in town.”

“What is his name?” Didu finally intervened like a reluctant commander general unhappy about having to negotiate with the enemy.

“Darvesh.” He blurted, stared at the dictatorial old woman and added with a serious expression, “Darvesh Singh and he means business so be careful when you talk to him. Once you have the money, let me know. I'll hand over the inheritance and a hand-written letter from Mr Jyotirmoy Chatterjee.”

“A letter?” The old woman asked incredulously.

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“Yes.”

“Hand it over to me now. I need to judge its authenticity. My brother was not someone who wrote letters.” She commanded.

“Well, he did write a letter and the letter will be given to you along with the inheritance. Not prior to that.” He said decisively hoicking his black leather bag from the floor and darted out of the room heaving a sigh of relief. The old woman had been getting on his nerves.

Now, all he had to do was call Darvesh.

# Chapter 2

Darvesh has never been in one place for too long. But being in Bangalore made him want to stay. There was something strange about this place. It pulled even a homeless drifter in. He had always been weary of forging ties, connecting emotionally, building friendships – unless it could serve a purpose, but this city had been warm, way too warm for his comfort.

The other day, when he was shopping for shirts from Commercial Street, a bunny-toothed old lady with a lined forehead selling clothes gave him a tee-shirt for free. When he insisted on paying her, she in turn insisted that he pay only for the five tee-shirts he had purchased, the sixth one was on her.

“You remind me of my son. He was in the army. Jawan. Died fighting against the Pakistani terrorists in Jammu.” She said with pride, without a hint of breaking down into tears.

He couldn’t say a word. There was nothing to say. He pressed her shoulders and bought her a cup of tea from the young chap selling masala tea in a cart next to her stall.

These are the people he connected with, the ones who talked unguardedly, shared their happiness and sorrow without reservations. He liked chatting with them – if he was in a mood to chat. He had been one of them for a large part of his twenty nine years spent on this peculiar planet -- one which celebrated money more than life.

He, however, had no regrets and was definitely not complaining. By making most of the bad in this world, he intended to build a fortune soon, fighting fire with fire. So when Biyani called to give him a lead, he was pleased. He had to spend some time pretending to be his best buddy and shell out a few thousands on drinks to get to the bottom of the story. But it was worth every rupee he had spent on the wily lawyer. When the long and tedious evening finally came to pass, he was pleased to learn that his next clients were a young naïve woman and her loud but old grandmother – a dream combo to execute his plan. A plan if executed well could fetch him a few crores.

Now all he had to do was to set the stage and trap the spider. *Spiders*, he told himself. Chuckling, he got into an air-conditioned bus – a common sight in the IT city, where every nook and cranny had an IT office working for an offshore client.

The passengers in the bus looked like employees who needed a vacation badly. It might seem incredible now, but once upon a time Bangalore or Bengaluru was a favoured military and administrative spot of the British colonisers. A quaint little town blessed with salubrious weather and a small population. This city changed drastically in the 90s with the IT boom and the ensuing large-scale immigration from across the country leading to high rises, depletion of green cover and a distressing increase in vehicles on the road. It came as no surprise that the bus moved like an ant carrying a mound of food on its back, stopping after every thirty seconds.

Glued to their mobiles, everyone in the bus stared absentmindedly at faces and objects around them. Viewing every passing thing, yet, noticing nothing. He was the only one who wasn't fixated on his pocket screen.



Few minutes later, when the bus halted at a bus stop and not due to a traffic congestion, a pretty tall woman entered the bus and sat right opposite to him. As he caught the eyes of the young woman sizing him up, a set of eyes he was positive could sizzle on the king size bed of his hotel room, his phone buzzed. Keeping his eyes pinned to Ms Hazel-Eyes, he reluctantly answered the call.

“Hello. Is this Mr Darvesh?”

“Who is this?”

“My name is Trishna Sen. Mr Ramesh Biyani suggested that we speak to you. My grandmother, Mrs Binodini Chatterjee would like to have a word with you.”

“Sure, I’m at your service ma’am.”

“Please be on the line. She is on her way to talk to you.”

“With pleasure. In fact, while she makes her grand entrance, why don’t we get to know each other?”

The ease with which he had uttered those words hoping that it would break the ice and establish his friendly nature was met with an awkward silence, disappointing him for a split second. Sensing her discomfort, he changed track and said in a business-like fashion:

“Ramesh spoke very highly of you. Usually, I don’t talk to clients on the phone. I prefer to meet them directly.”

“We can come down to meet you. Where are you staying? M-my grandmother Mrs Binodini Chatterjee is here---”

“I’ll take it from here.”

“Hello. Mr Dorbesh. How are you?” A feminine yet forceful voice boomed.

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“I’m all right.” He chuckled at the Bong twist of his name. Then as much respect as he could pour into words, he said: “How are you ma’am?”

“I am fine, thank you. I believe you have spoken to my granddaughter.”

“Yes, we were talking about meeting face to face. Will Sunday, this Sunday be convenient for you?”

“This Sunday? What is the date?”

“Tenth of February, ma’am.”

“I think I can fit an hour into my schedule.”

“That will be great. I’m sure there are several things that need your attention.” He retorted with utmost sincerity, smiling to himself.

Without noticing the sarcasm, she promptly declared: “I have to visit the doctor. Look into the financial documents. Make sure Bhombol buys fresh hilsa fish from the nearby market. They get fresh produce only on Sundays, you see.”

“I’m a big fan of *bhapa ilish*.” He remarked with confidence. He had dated enough Bong women to know that the mention of this Bengali delicacy can melt the stoniest of hearts.

“I will get some for you, then, when we meet.”

“Oh, no, no. That would be an inconvenience and I don’t want to bother a busy woman. Can I invite you and your granddaughter to join me for lunch at my hotel? I’m sure I can influence the cook to rustle up Bengali delicacies for you ma’am.”

“Thank you. We can do that. But we will not be able to make it before 1 PM.”

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“Of course. Thank you, ma’am for giving me a chance to extend my hospitality.” He smiled content with what he considered his first victory and quickly disembarked from the bus following the young hazel-eyed beauty.