

VIKAS SWARUP

THE

ACCIDENTAL APPRENTICE

IMAGINE IF YOUR LIFE CHANGED IN AN INSTANT



FROM THE
AUTHOR OF
SLUMDOG
MILLIONAIRE

The Accidental Apprentice

By the same author

Q & A / Slumdog Millionaire
Six Suspects

The Accidental Apprentice

VIKAS SWARUP



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For Aditya and Varun
who heard my first stories

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Prologue

In life you never get what you deserve: you get what you negotiate.

That was the first lesson he taught me.

For the last three days I have been putting that guidance into practice, negotiating frantically with my prosecutors and persecutors in a desperate bid to stave off the death penalty, which they all believe I deserve.

Outside the lockup, the press are circling like vultures. The news channels cannot get enough of me, holding me up as a cautionary tale of what happens when greed and gullibility collide to create the blood-speckled train wreck called culpable homicide of the first degree. They keep recycling that police mugshot taken after my arrest. Sunlight TV has even dug up a grainy class photograph of me in school in Nainital, sitting stiffly in the front row next to Mrs Saunders, our Grade 8 teacher. But Nainital seems a world away now, a never-never land of lush mountains and silvery lakes, where, once upon a time, my youthful optimism had tricked me into

believing that the future was limitless and the human spirit indomitable.

I want to hope, to dream, to have faith again, but the soulless weight of reality keeps crushing me down.

I feel as if I am living a nightmare, trapped in a deep, dark well of endless despair, from which there is no way out.

As I sit in my sweltering, windowless jail cell, my thoughts keep straying to that fateful day when it all began. Though it was more than six months ago, I can still recall every detail with an unwavering clarity as if it were yesterday. In my mind's eye, I can see myself walking towards the Hanuman Temple in Connaught Place on that cold grey afternoon . . .

It is Friday, 10 December, and traffic on Baba Kharak Singh Marg is the usual chaotic snarl of heat and noise. The road is jammed with lumbering buses, honking cars, whining scooters and spluttering auto-rickshaws. The sky is cloudless but the sun is invisible behind that toxic cocktail of smog that smothers the city every winter.

I am wearing a grey cardigan over a demure, sky-blue salwar kameez, having prudently changed from my work uniform. It is a routine I follow every Friday, slipping out of the showroom during the lunch hour to make the short walk across the marketplace to the ancient temple dedicated to the monkey god, Hanuman.

Most people go to temples to pray; I go to expiate. I have still not forgiven myself for Alka's death. Part of me will always think what happened to her was my fault. Since that horrific tragedy, God is my only refuge. And I

have a special bond with Goddess Durga, who also has a shrine inside the Hanuman Mandir.

Lauren Lockwood, my American friend, is perpetually fascinated by the fact that we have 330 million gods. 'Jeez, you Hindus sure like to hedge your bets,' she says. That's probably an exaggeration, but every temple worth its salt does have shrines to at least half a dozen deities.

Each of these deities has some special powers. Goddess Durga is the Invincible One who can redeem situations of utmost distress. After Alka's death, when my life was a dark tunnel of sorrow, pain and regret, She gave me strength. She is always with me whenever I need her.

The temple is unusually crowded for a Friday afternoon and I am caught up in the ceaseless scrum of devotees jostling to get to the sanctum sanctorum. The marble floor feels cool under my bare feet and the air is heavy with the intoxicating blend of sweat, sandalwood, flowers and incense.

I get into the ladies' queue, which is considerably shorter and manage to make my communion with Durga Ma in less than ten minutes.

Having finished my *darshan*, I am about to go down the stairs when a hand drops on my shoulder. I whirl around and discover a man gazing at me intently.

When an unknown adult male accosts a young woman in Delhi, the instinctive thing to do is to reach for that bottle of pepper spray one always keeps handy. But the stranger looking at me is no street loafer. He is an elderly man, dressed in an off-white silk kurta pyjama, with a white pashmina shawl draped casually across his shoulders. Fair and tall, he has an aquiline nose, a hard, resolute

mouth and a head crowned by a shock of backswept, snowy-white hair. A vermilion tika adorns his forehead. His fingers are loaded with rings glinting with diamonds and emeralds. But it is his penetrating brown eyes that unsettle me. They seem to search me with a directness I find slightly intimidating. This is a man who likes to be in control.

‘Could I have a word with you?’ he asks in a clipped tone.

‘What do you want?’ I respond curtly, less acerbic than I would normally have been out of respect for his age.

‘My name is Vinay Mohan Acharya,’ he says evenly. ‘I am the owner of Acharya Business Consortium. Have you heard of the ABC Group of Companies?’

My eyebrows arch in acknowledgement. The ABC Group is well known as one of India’s largest conglomerates, making everything from toothpaste to turbines.

‘I have a proposition for you,’ he continues. ‘Something that will change your life for ever. Will you give me ten minutes to explain?’

I have heard these words before. From pesky insurance peddlers and door-to-door detergent salesmen. And they always make me wary. ‘I don’t have ten minutes,’ I say. ‘I have to return to work.’

‘Just hear me out,’ he persists.

‘What is it? Say it.’

‘I would like to give you a chance to become the CEO of the ABC Group of Companies. I am offering you the opportunity of heading a business empire worth ten billion dollars.’

Now I know he’s not to be trusted. He sounds just like

a confidence trickster, no different from those ubiquitous hawkers on Janpath trying to flog shoddy Rexine belts and packs of cheap handkerchiefs. I wait for that half-smile that will tell me he is kidding, but his face remains impassive.

‘I’m not interested,’ I say firmly, and begin descending the stairs. He follows me.

‘You mean to say you are turning down the offer of the century, more money than you will ever see in seven lifetimes?’ His tone is sharp, cutting like a whip.

‘Look, Mr Acharya, or whoever you are. I don’t know what your game is, but I’m not interested in playing it. So please stop pestering me,’ I say, as I retrieve my Bata slippers from the old lady at the temple entrance who safeguards unattended footwear for a small tip.

‘I know you probably think this is all a joke,’ he declares, slipping into a pair of brown sandals.

‘Well, isn’t it?’

‘I’ve never been more serious in my life.’

‘Then you must be from a TV prank show. I suppose the moment I say yes you will show me the secret camera that’s following you around.’

‘You expect a man of my stature to be doing silly TV shows?’

‘Well, isn’t it silly to be offering your business empire to random strangers? It makes me doubt if you are even who you say you are.’

‘Good point.’ He nods. ‘A little scepticism is always healthy.’ He reaches into his kurta’s pocket and retrieves a black leather wallet. Extracting a business card, he offers it to me. ‘Perhaps this might convince you.’

I examine it cursorily. It does look impressive, made of some kind of semitransparent plastic, with an embossed logo of the ABC Group and 'VINAY MOHAN ACHARYA, CHAIRMAN' etched below it in bold, black letters.

'Anyone can get these printed for a few hundred rupees,' I say, returning his card.

He pulls out another piece of plastic from his wallet and holds it up. 'How about this one?'

It is an all-black American Express Centurion card, with 'VINAY MOHAN ACHARYA' engraved at the bottom. I have encountered this rare species just once before, when a flashy builder from Noida used it to pay for a 60-inch Sony LX-900 TV costing almost 400,000 rupees. 'It still doesn't change anything,' I shrug. 'How do I know this isn't a forgery?'

By now we have crossed the temple's forecourt and are in proximity of the road. 'That's my car,' he says, pointing out a shiny vehicle parked alongside the kerb. A chauffeur is in the driver's seat, wearing a peaked cap and a starched white uniform. An armed guard in military fatigues scrambles out of the front seat and stiffens to attention. Acharya flicks a finger and he opens the rear door with alacrity. His zealous servility does not seem fake; it looks like it has been honed by years of unquestioning subservience. The car, I note admiringly, is a silver Mercedes-Benz CLS-500, with a price tag of over nine million rupees.

'Just give me a second,' Acharya says, and ducks inside the car. He removes a magazine from the rear seat and hands it to me. 'I had kept this as a last resort. If this won't convince you, nothing will.'

It is the December 2008 issue of *Business Times*. A man's portrait is on the cover, with the blazing headline, 'BUSINESSMAN OF THE YEAR'. I glance at the face on the cover and then at the man standing in front of me. They are identical. There is no mistaking the distinctive, back-swept, silvery hair, the curved nose or the piercing brown eyes. I am indeed in the presence of industrialist Vinay Mohan Acharya. 'Okay,' I concede. 'So you are Mr Acharya. What do you want from me?'

'I already told you. I want to make you my CEO.'

'And you expect me to believe you?'

'Then give me ten minutes and I will *make* you believe me. Can we sit down somewhere and talk?'

I look at my watch. There are still twenty minutes of my lunch break left. 'We could go to the Coffee House,' I say, indicating the rundown building on the opposite side of the road that serves as the social hub of the chattering classes.

'I would have preferred the Lobby Lounge at the Shangri La,' he says with the reluctant air of a man accepting a poor choice. 'Do you mind if a colleague of mine also joins us?'

Even as he says this, a man materialises out of the crowd of pedestrians like a ghost and stands by his side. He is much younger, probably in his early thirties, and dressed casually in a dark-blue Reebok tracksuit. Just under six feet, he has the sinewy, wiry frame of an athlete. I take in his crew-cut hair, small, ferret-like eyes and thin, cruel mouth. His nose is slightly out of joint, as though it has been broken once, providing the only memorable accent in an otherwise unremarkable face. I reckon he

must have been shadowing Acharya all this while. Even now his gimlet eyes dart constantly from side to side, scanning the surroundings like a professional bodyguard, before fixing on me.

‘This is Rana, my right-hand man,’ Acharya says, introducing him. I nod politely, withering under his icy stare.

‘Should we go?’ Rana asks. He has a weathered, raspy voice, like dry leaves rustling along the ground. Without waiting for my reply, he begins leading the way to the underpass.

The heavy smell of frying dosas and roasting coffee assails my senses the moment I step through the eatery’s swinging door. It has all the ambience of a hospital cafeteria. I can see Acharya wrinkling his nose, already regretting the decision to come here. This being lunch hour, the place is packed. ‘Minimum twenty minutes’ wait, please,’ the manager informs us.

I observe Rana slip him a folded hundred-rupee note and instantly a corner table is readied for us. Acharya and his flunkey sit down on one side, and I take the lone seat opposite them. Rana brusquely orders three filter coffees and then Acharya takes over. He looks me in the eye, his gaze steady. ‘Let me be frank with you. This is like a blind bet for me. So, before I explain my proposal to you, would you tell me a little bit about yourself?’

‘Well, there’s nothing much to tell.’

‘You could begin with your name.’

‘I’m Sapna. Sapna Sinha.’

‘Sapna.’ He rolls the word around on his tongue, before nodding in apparent satisfaction. ‘Good name. How old are you, Sapna, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘Twenty-three.’

‘And what do you do? Are you a student?’

‘I did my graduation from Kumaun University in Nainital. Now I’m working as a sales assistant at Gulati & Sons. They have a showroom in Connaught Place for electronics and home appliances.’

‘I’ve been there. Isn’t it close to here?’

‘Yes. In B-Block.’

‘And how long have you been working there?’

‘Just over a year.’

‘What about your family?’

‘I live with my mother, and Neha, my younger sister. She’s doing her BA from Kamala Nehru College.’

‘What about your father?’

‘He passed away, a year and a half ago.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. So are you the breadwinner in the family now?’

I nod.

‘If you don’t mind telling me, how much do you earn in a month?’

‘With my sales commission, around eighteen thousand rupees.’

‘That’s all? Then shouldn’t you be jumping at the chance to lead a multimillion-dollar company and acquire a fortune?’

‘Look, Mr Acharya, I’m still quite confused about your offer. I mean, first of all, why do you need a CEO?’

‘Why? Because I’m sixty-eight years old and not getting any younger. God made the human body like a machine with built-in obsolescence. I’m about to reach my expiry date. But, before I go, I want to ensure an

orderly transition at the organisation I have nurtured for forty years. I want to ensure that I am followed by someone who believes in the same values that I do.'

'But why me? Why not your own son or daughter?'

'Well, for one, I don't have a family any more. My wife and daughter died in a plane crash eighteen years ago.'

'Oh! Then what about someone from your company?'

'I've searched far and wide within the company. I couldn't find anyone remotely suitable. My executives are good implementers, excellent subordinates, but I don't see the traits of a great leader in any of them.'

'And what do you see in me? I don't know a thing about running a business. I'm not even an MBA.'

'These degrees are simply a piece of paper. They don't teach you how to lead people, only how to manage stuff. That's why I didn't go to a management institute to pick my CEO. I came to a temple.'

'You've still not answered my question. Why me?'

'There was something in your eyes, a sparkle that I'd never seen anywhere before.' He searches my eyes for confirmation before glancing away. 'I have always been an observer of people,' he continues, looking around the hall, at the middle-class shoppers and office workers sitting on the other tables. 'And, of all the people I observed in the temple, you seemed the most focused. Call it intuition, psychic sense, whatever you want, but something told me that you could be the one. You alone had the compelling mix of determination and desperation I was looking for.'

'I thought desperation was a negative virtue.'

He shakes his head. 'Happy people don't make good

CEOs. Contentment breeds laziness. It is aspiration that drives achievement. I want people with hunger. Hunger that is born in the desert of dissatisfaction. You seem to have that want, that hunger.'

I am getting caught up in his sweeping statements and grand assumptions. But the logic behind his rhetoric still eludes me. 'Do you always take decisions based on whims?'

'Never underestimate the power of intuition. Eleven years ago, I bought a troubled factory in Romania called Iancu Steel. It was losing money every day. All my experts advised me against the purchase. They said I was throwing good money after bad. But I remained firm in my decision. I was attracted to the factory only because of its name. Iancu means "God is Gracious". Today, fifty-three per cent of our steel revenues come from that factory in Romania. God is indeed gracious.'

'So you do believe in God?'

'Isn't this proof enough?' He points at the vermilion mark on his forehead. 'The main reason I came to a temple to select my successor is because I wanted a devout like me. We are living in Kalyug, the dark age, full of sin and corruption. Religion is no longer in fashion. The youngsters working for me are consumed by consumption. They've probably not visited a temple to pray in years. I'm not saying they are all atheists, but their god is money, first and foremost. But you ...' He nods at me approvingly. 'You seem to be just the pious, God-fearing candidate I was looking for.'

'Okay, I get it. You act on whims, and your latest whim tells you that I'm the chosen one. Now tell me: what's the catch?'

‘There is no catch. But there are some terms and conditions. You will have to pass a few tests.’

‘Tests?’

‘Don’t worry: I’m not taking you back to school. A school simply tests your memory. But life tests your character. My seven tests are rites of passage, designed to gauge your mettle and potential as a CEO.’

‘Why seven?’

‘In my forty years of running a business, I have learnt one thing: a company is only as good as the person who runs it. And I have whittled down the traits of a successful CEO to seven basic attributes. So each of the seven tests will focus on one of those seven traits.’

‘And what exactly will I have to do to pass those tests?’

‘Nothing that you wouldn’t do in your daily life. I will not ask you to steal or kill or do anything illegal. In fact, you won’t even be aware of the tests.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘My tests will come from the textbook of life. Doesn’t life test us every day? Don’t we make choices every day? I will simply evaluate your choices, your responses to life’s daily challenges. That will reveal the stuff you are made of.’

‘And what if I fail any of those tests?’

‘Well, then I will have to look for someone else. But my gut instinct tells me you won’t fail. It almost seems destined. The biggest lottery ticket of all time will be yours.’

‘In that case my decision is quite clear. I’m not interested in your offer.’

He seems astounded. ‘But why?’

‘I don’t believe in lottery tickets.’

‘But you believe in God. And sometimes God gives you much more than you ask for.’

‘I’m not that greedy,’ I say, rising from the table. ‘Thank you, Mr Acharya. It was nice meeting you, but I really must get back to the showroom now.’

‘Sit!’ he orders me. There is steel in his voice. I swallow hard and sit down like an obedient student.

‘Listen, Sapna.’ His voice softens. ‘There are only two types of people in the world: winners and losers. I am giving you the chance to be a winner. All I ask in return is for you to sign this consent form.’ He gestures to Rana, who produces a printed sheet of paper from the inside pocket of his tracksuit and lays it in front of me.

Since Alka’s death, I’ve developed a sixth sense about some things, a little warning bell that goes off in my head whenever a situation is not quite right. That bell is ringing as I pick up the form. It is short, just five sentences:

1. The signer hereby agrees to be considered for the post of CEO of the ABC Group of Companies.
2. The signer hereby permits the ABC Group to perform necessary checks and procedures to assess the signer’s suitability for the job.
3. The signer is not permitted to terminate the agreement mid-way, while the necessary checks and procedures are still being conducted.
4. The signer agrees to maintain complete confidentiality of this agreement by not discussing it with any third party.
5. In consideration of the above, the signer has received a non-refundable advance of ₹100,000.

‘This only talks of one lakh rupees,’ I observe. ‘Didn’t I hear you mention the figure of ten billion dollars?’

‘The one lakh is simply to participate in the tests. If you fail, you get to keep the money. And, if you pass, you get the job. I assure you the CEO’s salary will have many more zeroes.’

By now the warning bell is clanging like a fire alarm. I know that this is a swindle, and that Acharya has tried this ploy before. ‘Tell me, how many people have you got to sign this form so far?’

‘You are candidate number seven.’ Acharya exhales. ‘But I know in my heart that you will be the last one. My quest is over.’

‘So is my time.’ I stand up decisively. ‘I have no intention of signing this form or participating in any test.’

Rana responds by laying a stack of thousand-rupee notes on the table. They look crisp and new, straight from a bank. He is baiting me, but I am not tempted. ‘You think you can buy me with your money?’

‘Well, this is a negotiation, after all,’ Acharya insists. ‘Remember, in business as in life, you never get what you deserve: you only get what you negotiate.’

‘I don’t negotiate with people I hardly know. What if this is some kind of trap?’

‘The only trap is that of low expectations. Look, I understand your reservations,’ Acharya says soothingly, leaning forward on his elbows. ‘But you need to take a less bleak view of human nature, Sapna. I sincerely and genuinely want to make you my CEO.’

‘Do you have any idea how ridiculous this conversation

sounds? Such things happen only in movies and books, not in real life.'

'Well, I am real and you are real and my offer is real. A man like me does not waste time in tomfoolery.'

'I am sure you can find other candidates who would be more than willing to accept your offer. I am not interested.'

'You are making a big mistake.' Acharya wags a finger at me. 'Perhaps the greatest mistake of your life. But I will not pressurise you. Take my card, and, if you change your mind within the next forty-eight hours, call me. The offer will still be valid.' He pushes a business card across the table, Rana watching me like a hawk.

I take it, smile tightly at them, and then, without as much as a backward glance, head for the door.

My mind is spinning faster than a CD as I hurry towards B-Block. The overwhelming feeling I have is one of relief, as though I had escaped from some grave danger by the skin of my teeth. I look over my shoulder periodically to make sure the duo are not following me. The more I reflect on what has just transpired, the more convinced I am that Acharya is either a devious shark or a raving lunatic. And I want no truck with either category.

I breathe easy only once I return to the safety of the showroom, to my air-conditioned world of plasma TVs, frost-free refrigerators and fuzzy-logic washing machines. Banishing Acharya and his crazy offer from my mind, I change back into my work uniform, and begin the habitual hunt for prospective buyers. Afternoons are generally a sluggish period for sales and there aren't too many

customers vying for attention. I try to interest a puzzled-looking shopper with a potbelly in the latest full-HD camcorder from Samsung, but he seems more interested in my legs sticking out of the short red skirt. Whoever designed this risqué costume (and the finger of suspicion has always pointed at Raja Gulati, the owner's wastrel son) meant to make us salesgirls look like air hostesses. Except, as my colleague Prachi says, 'We get the propositions, but not the pay.'

To be honest, I don't have to contend with as many lecherous advances as the other three salesgirls. They are the ones who look like flight attendants, with their coiffured hair, impeccable makeup and glowing skins. I look like an advertisement for Fair and Lovely cream with my awkward smile and a complexion that is described in matrimonial ads as 'wheatish', a polite way of saying 'not fair'. I was always the ugly duckling of the family. My two younger sisters, Alka and Neha, got their milky white complexions from Ma. I inherited my father's darker skin. And, in this part of the world, skin colour is destiny.

Only when I started working at the showroom did I discover that being dark and plain-looking also has its advantages. Wealthy women customers get intimidated by competition and can't stand it when other beautiful women are around. They feel more comfortable with me. And, since most family purchase decisions are made by women, I invariably reach my monthly sales targets faster than everyone else.

Another thing I've learnt is never to judge customers by their appearance. They come in all shapes, sizes and dresses. Like the middle-aged man who walks into the

showroom just after 3 p.m. dressed incongruously in a turban and dhoti. He looks like a bodybuilder, with a huge upper body, thick arms and a handlebar moustache he has teased and twirled into a work of art. He wanders through the aisles like a lost child, overwhelmed by the shop's glitter. Finding the other salesgirls sniggering at his rustic dress and manners, he latches onto me. Within ten minutes I have extracted his entire life story. His name is Kuldip Singh and he is the patriarch of a prosperous agricultural family from a village called Chandangarh, located in the Karnal district of Haryana, approximately 140 kilometres from Delhi. His eighteen-year-old daughter Babli is getting married next week and he has come to the capital to buy goods for her dowry.

It is another matter that his knowledge of machines extends only to tractors and tube wells. He has never seen a microwave oven in his life, and thinks the LG, 15-kg, top-loading washer is an ingenious device for churning lassi! He also wants to bargain with me for the price of things. I try to explain to him that all items in the showroom have a fixed price, but he refuses to accept it.

'*Dekh chhori*. Look here, girl,' he drawls in his homespun vernacular. 'We have a saying in our Haryana. However stubborn a goat may be, in the end it has to yield milk.'

He is so insistent that eventually I have to prevail upon the manager to offer him a 5 per cent discount, and he ends up buying a truckload worth of goods, including a 42-inch plasma TV, a three-door fridge, a washing machine, a DVD player and a music system. The other salesgirls look on in hushed awe as he pulls out a thick

wad of thousand-rupee notes to pay for his buying spree. Their country bumpkin has turned out to be a shopaholic baron. And I have notched up yet another sales record!

The rest of the day passes in a blur. I leave the showroom as usual at 8.15 p.m. and board the metro, as always, from Rajiv Chowk station.

The forty-five-minute journey takes me to Rohini, a sprawling middle-class suburb in northwest Delhi. Reputed to be the second biggest residential colony in Asia, it is a cheap, ugly tentacle of the capital, crammed with dismal, unimaginative concrete apartment blocks and chaotic markets.

I disembark at Rithala, the last stop on the Red Line. From here it is a twenty-minute walk to the LIG Colony in Pocket B-2, Sector 11, where I live. Of all the housing societies in Rohini, mine is the most melancholy. The name itself – LIG, shorthand for ‘Lower Income Group’ – is like a slap in the face. Built by the Delhi Development Authority in the 1980s, the four red-brick tower blocks look like a clump of brick kiln chimneys, their disfigured exteriors and defaced interiors bearing the telltale signs of shoddy government construction. Nevertheless, I am thankful to be living here. After Papa’s death we wouldn’t have been able to afford even these dreary 2-BHK flats which command rents in excess of twelve thousand a month. Luckily, we don’t have to pay any rent for B-29, our second-floor apartment, because it belongs to Mr Dinesh Sinha, Papa’s well-heeled younger brother. Deenu Uncle took pity on us and has allowed us to reside here for free. Well, it’s not completely free. Once in a while I am obligated to take his moronic sons Rolu and Golu out

to a fancy dinner. It beats me why they have to eat out at my expense when their father owns three tandoori restaurants himself.

The first thing you see on entering our flat is a framed black-and-white photo of Papa in the small foyer where we keep the fridge. Decorated with a garland of brittle roses, it shows him as a young man, not yet burdened by the responsibilities of a teacher with three grown-up daughters. The photographer has been kind to him, smoothing away some of the premature worry lines carved into his forehead. But he couldn't touch up the forbidding scowl that was fixed permanently around Papa's mouth.

Our modest drawing-cum-dining room is dominated by a colour blow-up of Alka on the centre wall. Wearing an outrageous red hat, she is posing like the ladies of Royal Ascot. Her head is tilted back slightly, her dark eyes are opened wide and her lips are puckered in a goofy smile. That is how I will always remember her: beautiful, young and carefree. Every time I see this picture, I can feel the room ringing with her infectious laughter. '*Didi! Didi! Kamaal ho gaya!* Something amazing happened today!' I can hear her eager voice greeting me, ready to spill the details of yet another silly prank she dreamt up in school.

Below the photo is a faded green sofa set with embroidered white dust covers, a couple of straight-back bamboo chairs with worn-out cushions, and an old Videocon TV perched on the sideboard where we store crockery and cutlery. To the left of this arrangement is a dining table made of recycled teakwood, which I picked

up dirt cheap from an embassy auction, complemented by four matching chairs.

Going through a bead curtain, you enter the first bedroom, which belongs to Ma. It has a bed, surrounded by two wooden almiraahs for clothes and a metal filing cabinet that is nowadays used mainly for storing her medicines. Ma's health was always frail; the sudden deaths of her youngest daughter and husband devastated her completely. She just withdrew into a shell, becoming distant and quiet, neglecting to eat and no longer caring about her appearance. The more she retreated from the world, the more disease took over her body. She now suffers from chronic diabetes, hypertension, arthritis and asthma, requiring regular trips to the government hospital. Looking at her gaunt body and silver hair, it is hard to believe she is only forty-seven.

The other bedroom is shared between Neha and myself. My younger sister has only one goal in life: to be famous. She has plastered the walls of our small room with posters of singers, models and film stars. One day she hopes to be as rich and successful as they. Blessed with a pretty face, an hourglass figure and flawless skin, Neha is shrewdly aware of the economic potential of hitting the gene jackpot, and is prepared to exploit her beauty to get what she wants. It helps that she is also a trained singer with a sound base of Indian music and a great natural voice.

All the boys in the neighbourhood have a crush on Neha, but she wouldn't give them the time of day. She has already summed up her future in three letters: B-I-G. And it doesn't include anyone belonging to the L-I-G.

She spends her days hanging out with her richie-rich college friends, and her nights writing application letters for participating in reality shows, talent contests and beauty pageants. Neha Sinha is the poster girl for vaulting ambition.

She also has a penchant for mindless consumerism, blindly aping the fashion of the moment. Half my salary every month goes in meeting her constantly evolving needs: skinny jeans, glossy lipsticks, designer handbags, blingy cell-phones . . . The list never ends.

For the last two months she has been pestering me for a laptop. But that is where I have drawn the line. A ₹800 belt is one thing, a ₹30,000 gadget quite another.

‘Welcome back, *didi*,’ Neha greets me the moment I step into the flat. She even manages to raise a smile instead of the sullen pout that is her default setting whenever I deny her something.

‘You know that Acer laptop I’ve been dying to get?’ She gives me that puppy-dog look of hers I know quite well. It usually precedes a new demand.

‘Yes,’ I respond guardedly.

‘Well, they’ve just discounted it. It’s now available for only twenty-two thousand. Surely you can buy it at this price.’

‘I can’t,’ I say firmly. ‘It’s still way too expensive.’

‘Please, *didi*. I’m the only one in my class without a laptop. I promise I won’t ask you for anything after this.’

‘I’m sorry, Neha, but we just can’t afford it. As it is, we’re barely making ends meet on my salary.’

‘Can’t you take a loan from the company?’

‘No, I can’t.’

‘You are being cruel.’

‘I’m being realistic. You have to get used to the fact that we are poor, Neha. And life is hard.’

‘I’d rather die than live such a life. I’m twenty years old and what have I got to show for it? I’ve never even seen the inside of a plane.’

‘Well, neither have I.’

‘Then you should. All my friends go to places like Switzerland and Singapore for their summer holidays. And we can’t even afford a hill station in India.’

‘We used to live in a hill station, Neha. Anyway, laptops and holidays aren’t important. Your number-one priority should be to get good grades.’

‘And what will good grades get me? Look where you landed after topping the university.’

Neha has always had this uncanny ability to hurt me, both with her silence and with her words. Even though I have got used to her caustic barbs, this one stings me for its brutal honesty, leaves me speechless. That is when my cell phone rings.

‘Hello,’ I answer.

It is Deenu Uncle, sounding very unlike himself. ‘Sapna, *beti*, I have something important to tell you. I’m afraid it’s bad news.’

I brace myself for yet another death in the family. Perhaps of some ailing aunt or distant grandmother. But what he says next is nothing short of a bombshell. ‘I need you to vacate the flat within two weeks.’

‘What?’

‘Yes. I’m very sorry, but my hands are tied. I’ve just invested in a new restaurant and need cash urgently. So

I've decided to put the Rohini flat out for rent. An agent called me today with a very good offer. In this situation I have no option but to ask you and your family to find another place.'

'But Uncle, how can we find a place so soon?'

'I'll help you find one. Only thing is, now you'll have to start paying rent.'

'If we have to pay rent, we might as well continue to stay here.'

Deenu Uncle thinks about it. 'I suppose that's reasonable,' he agrees reluctantly. 'But you won't be able to afford my flat.'

'How much is this new tenant going to pay you?'

'We have agreed on fourteen thousand per month. That's a full two thousand more than the going rate. And he is to pay me a one-year deposit in advance. If you accept the same terms I have no objection to your continued stay.'

'You mean you want us to pay you an advance of a hundred and sixty-eight thousand?'

'Exactly. Your maths was always quite good.'

'There's no way we can raise so much money, Chacha-ji.'

'Then look for another apartment.' His tone hardens. 'I've to think of my family too. I'm not running a charitable dispensary. As it is, I've allowed you people to stay for free for sixteen months.'

'Didn't Papa also do so much for you? Don't you have any consideration for your deceased brother? You want his family to come on the street? What kind of uncle are you, Chacha-ji?' I try to prick his conscience.

The strategy boomerangs. ‘You people are nothing but ungrateful freebooters,’ he says, rounding on me. ‘And listen, let’s cut out all this uncle sweet-talk. From now on, our relationship is strictly that of a landlord and tenant. So either you pay me the full sum within a week, or vacate my flat.’

‘At least give us a little more time to arrange the funds,’ I implore.

‘One week is all you’ve got. Pay up or leave,’ he says, and terminates the call.

I find my hands are trembling with indignation. I take a moment to wish all sorts of lingering painful deaths on Deenu Uncle, before narrating the conversation to the other two occupants of the flat. Ma shakes her head, more in sorrow than in anger. The wickedness of the world is something she has taken for granted.

‘I never trusted that man. God is watching everything. One day Deenu will pay for his sins.’

Neha is surprisingly upbeat. ‘I say if that swine is throwing us out, let’s get out of this dump. It suffocates me to live here.’

‘And where will we go?’ I counter. ‘You think it is child’s play to find a new house?’

Before a fresh argument breaks out between us, Mother brings the focus back to more practical issues. ‘How are we going to get all this money?’ The question looms over us like an ominous cloud.

Papa didn’t leave us much. He had raided his pension fund long ago to finance Deenu Uncle’s initial foray in the restaurant business. And his modest savings from his teaching job were used up in the establishment costs of

moving to a new city. At the time of his death, he had barely ten thousand rupees in his bank account.

Ma has already figured out the answer to the question. She unlocks her cupboard and retrieves two pairs of gold bangles. 'I had kept these for both your weddings. But, if we need to sell them to retain the house, then so be it.' She offers them to me with a wistful sigh.

My heart goes out to Ma. Since Papa's death, this is the third piece of heirloom jewellery she has been forced to part with: first to pay for Neha's education, then to cater for her own medical expenses, and now to save this flat.

A heavy silence hangs over our home as we sit down for dinner. I am haunted by an acute sense of failure, as though I'd let my family down when they needed me most. Never have I felt the lack of money more keenly. For a fleeting moment the vision of all those crisp notes lying on the table of the Coffee House swims into my mind, before I dismiss it as a sick joke. How can a madman like Acharya be taken seriously? Yet he keeps circling my brain like an irritating fly.

To satisfy my curiosity, I sit down at my computer after dinner. It is a decrepit Dell tower unit that I salvaged from the showroom just as they were about to dispose of it to a junk dealer. A dinosaur running on Windows 2000, it nevertheless allows me to surf the Internet, check my emails and use the word processor to tabulate the household expenditure at the end of every month.

I log on to the Internet and type in 'Vinay Mohan Acharya' in the search box. The query instantly registers 1.9 million hits.

The industrialist is all over cyberspace. There are news

reports about his business deals, speculation on his net worth, image galleries capturing his various moods, and YouTube videos of him making speeches at shareholder meetings and international conferences. Over the next half-hour, I learn many new facts about him, such as his passion for cricket, his occasional (and unsuccessful) forays into politics, his bitter rivalry with his twin brother Ajay Krishna Acharya, the owner of Premier Industries, and his active philanthropy. He apparently donates buckets of cash to all manner of charities and has twice been awarded the President's Medal for having the best CSR programme. I also confirm that he had indeed lost his wife and daughter in the crash of a Thai Airways flight from Bangkok to Kathmandu on 31 July 1992, which killed all 113 passengers.

As I trawl through the mire of information about him on the web, Acharya comes across as a complex and conflicted personality. He has admirers hailing him as India's most ethical businessman, and critics decrying his idiosyncrasies, his narcissism and megalomania. But there is no disputing his genius in single-handedly transforming the ABC Group from a startup into India's eighth-largest conglomerate with holdings in steel, cement, textiles, power generation, rayon, aluminium, consumer goods, chemicals, computers, consulting and even films.

My research makes one thing clear: the owner of the ABC Group is neither a raving lunatic nor a devious shark. By rejecting his offer out of hand, did I miss a big opportunity, I wonder, feeling the first pangs of doubt? The very next moment I chide myself for allowing naïve hope to override sound judgement. In this world, you

never get something for nothing, I remind myself. If an offer seems too good to be true, it usually is.

Still, I go to bed plagued with the feeling that time is passing me by. That I am stuck in a dead-end job, with a future on permanent hold. There was a time, not so long ago, when the ship of my life had direction and momentum. Now it seems like an aimless, rudderless drift, where one week leads to another, each day is the same and nothing ever changes.

At least my dreams that night are different. Through the confused farrago of fragmented images, I vividly remember sitting in a luxurious private plane and flying over the snow-capped mountains of Switzerland. There is only one little problem: the pilot happens to be the industrialist Vinay Mohan Acharya.

I start the long, treacherous commute to work the next morning with a positive attitude and a clear mind. The metro is less crowded on weekends, but I am extra careful with my handbag, laying a protective hand over it. A gift from my friend Lauren, it is a tan woven purse by Nine West with beige faux snakeskin and looks really classy. Today it also contains the four gold bangles on which depends my family's collective future.

At Inder Lok station, a familiar-looking man with dyed hair and long sideburns, clad in a politician's khadi dress, barges into the compartment. He is trailed by a band of supporters and a posse of gun-toting commandoes who start evicting commuters to make way for the VIP and his entourage. The man, I learn from one of his lackeys, is our local legislator Anwar Noorani, taking his 'weekly metro

ride to bond with the common man'. I have read about this gentleman in the newspapers, how he runs a chain of private hospitals allegedly funded by proceeds from an illegal hawala racket. 'If there are any local issues you wish to bring to my attention, please feel free to visit me in my constituency office located behind the Delhi Institute of Technology,' the MLA announces. His hooded, restless eyes flit across the compartment and come to rest on me. 'How are you, sister?' He flashes me a plastic smile. I avert my gaze and pretend to look out of the window. Mercifully, he disembarks at the very next station.

Delhi is a strange city, I reflect. Here, status is not based on whether you wear Armani, drive a Mercedes or quote Jean-Paul Sartre at cocktail parties. Your status is determined by how many rules you can break and how many people you can bully. That distinction alone puts you in the category of VIP.

The showroom is a hive of activity from morning itself. Saturday is our busiest day. Plus, with the Cricket World Cup approaching, our promotion campaign is in full swing. We expect sales of flat-screen TVs to peak during the next two months.

A newlywed couple approach me for advice on buying the right television. They are debating between LCD and plasma. It doesn't take me long to persuade them to go in for the latest Sony LED TV, with the added sweetener of a free electronic toaster in our two-for-one promotion, but it is not my best effort. I am distracted and impatient, waiting for the lunch break. As soon as the clock strikes one, I sneak out through the back door, only to bump into Raja Gulati, Delhi's most obnoxious playboy. For

some reason he is lounging in front of Beckett's, an Irish pub just four doors down from the showroom. Dressed in his trademark leather jacket, he is leaning against his Yamaha motorbike, and counting a sheaf of notes. The moment he sees me, he stashes away the cash and beams at me. Short and pudgy, with a stubbly face, a bushy moustache and long hair, Raja's only claim to fame is that his millionaire father is the owner of the showroom. His sole pastime is drinking alcohol and picking up girls. If office gossip is to be believed, he has already had success with one of the salesgirls. These days he keeps making crude passes at Prachi and me. But I'd rather eat live cockroaches than give in to this slimeball's amorous advances.

'Helloo, who do we have here? The Ice Maiden herself!' He gives me a wolfish grin, and pats the seat of his Yamaha. 'Would you like to come with me for a spin?'

'No, thanks,' I respond coldly.

'You have great legs.' His eyes descend my body. 'What time do they open?'

I feel the burn of anger rising in my face, but this is neither the time nor the place for a showdown. 'Why don't you ask your mother?' I retort, and walk past him. He sighs and heads into the pub, probably to drown his disappointment in drink.

Without wasting time, I proceed to Jhaveri Jewellers in N-Block. Prashant Jhaveri, the young owner, used to be Papa's student at one time, and always offers me a fair price. I expect him to quote well over ₹200,000 for the four gold bangles nestling inside my handbag.

At the crossing on Radial Road 6, traffic is held up by some kind of religious procession. There are hundreds of

men, women and children draped in saffron-coloured clothes, chanting and dancing to the tune of trumpet and dhol. Cars honk in frustration and pedestrians fume, but the group continues on its merry path, unmindful of the inconvenience and nuisance it is causing. And this is a daily occurrence. Delhi has become a city of rallies and roadblocks.

I am still waiting for the procession to pass when someone pokes me in the side. It is a street urchin in a tattered sweater. He is no more than eight years old, with a dusty face and grimy hair. He says nothing, just holds out a cupped palm in the universal gesture for need. Nothing upsets me more than seeing these child beggars. At an age when they should be in class, they are on the streets, trying to earn a living by exploiting the only working skill they possess: evoking pity. I almost never give alms to them, as it only encourages their begging habit. Worse, it often leads them into more dangerous addictions such as glue, booze and even drugs. What they really need is a lucky break, a supportive environment and a healthy dose of self-respect. Something that Lauren and her RMT Asha Foundation provide.

This particular beggar is not easily fobbed off. 'I haven't eaten in two days. Can you give me some money?' he mumbles, pressing a bony hand into his belly. Looking down into his large, pleading eyes, I just cannot say no. 'I won't give you money,' I tell him, 'but I'll buy you lunch.' His face lights up. There is a roadside hawker next to us selling chhole kulcha for ₹10 a plate. 'Would you like one of these?' I ask him.

'I love kulchas,' he replies, smacking his chapped lips.

I unhook my handbag from my shoulder and open the zip to take out cash. At that very instant, someone swoops at me from behind, snatching the purse from my hands. It all happens so quickly that I don't even catch the thief's face. All I see is a swish of saffron. Before I know it, he has melted into the crowd of devotees. I turn back and find that the beggar boy has also disappeared. I have fallen for the oldest trap in the book.

For a moment I stand motionless, totally stunned by this turn of events. My hands turn cold and my breathing almost stops. 'Nooo!' I let out an anguished cry and rush headlong into the sea of saffron. I am pummelled and crushed from all sides, but I continue to burrow through the human wall in blind pursuit of the thief.

I do not find the culprit, but, once the procession has passed, I find my handbag lying discarded by the side of the road. I rush to retrieve it. It still has my cell phone and house keys. My ID card and lipstick and sunglasses and pepper spray are intact. Everything is there except the four gold bangles.

I slump down on the side of the road, feeling dizzy and nauseous. My arms grow heavy and limp and my vision turns blurry. When things clear up, I find a policeman squatting next to me. 'Are you all right?' he asks.

'Yes,' I respond weakly. 'Someone stole my purse.'

'Then what is this?' He taps the Nine West in my lap with his baton.

'He – he took away my mother's gold bangles and left the bag behind.'

'Did you see his face? Can you give us the thief's description?'

‘No. But don’t the police know all the gangs operating in the area? I’m sure you can catch him.’ I clutch his arm like a lifeline. ‘Please, you must do something. We’ll be ruined if I don’t get back the bangles. If you want I can even file a report.’

‘It won’t do you any good. This happens here every day. Unless we have a description we can’t do anything. Take my advice. Don’t waste your time and ours by registering an FIR. Just be more careful with your belongings next time.’ He assists me to my feet, gives me a sympathetic look and walks off, tapping his baton on his palm.

I rummage desperately through the bag once again, hoping against hope to somehow discover those bangles, but miracles happen only in fairytales and films. A huge lump rises at the back of my throat, and tears start streaming down my cheeks as my mind absorbs the full magnitude of the loss. All around me people are laughing, eating, shopping, enjoying the sunshine. None of them can understand my inner torment. As a child I had once lost a favourite doll and cried two full days over it. Now I have lost my mother’s most precious jewellery. The thief has taken more than just gold: he has taken away our future.

I am still sobbing on the pavement when my eyes fall on a giant advertising billboard displaying the temperature and time. With a shock I realise it’s already past two o’clock. Madan, my obnoxious boss, does not take kindly to employees taking an extended lunch break. Having lost the bangles, I am in danger of losing my job as well.

I break into a run, my three-inch heels hurting and occasionally tripping me up, until I arrive breathless at the showroom – except that the showroom doesn't look the same any more. Loud voices are being raised, bewildered customers are being shepherded out with abject apologies, and the shutter is being hastily pulled down halfway, the equivalent of the flag at half-mast, a sure sign of trouble.

I duck inside the shutter to discover even more bedlam. There is a lot of yelling and swearing. Accusations are flying in the air like paper planes. Everyone seems to be gathered round the cashier's cubicle, including Mr O. P. Gulati himself, our venerable owner, and someone is crying out in agonised pain. I force my way through the crush of errand boys, back-office clerks, delivery-truck drivers and sales staff to discover that the shrieks are emanating from Mr Choubey, our balding, fifty-five-year-old cashier. He is rolling on the floor, being mercilessly beaten by Madan, our manager and the most hated man in the store. '*Namak-haram!* You traitorous bastard,' Madan rants, as he punches Choubey in the face and kicks him in the gut. A gruff, abrasive man, Madan has only two passions in life: sucking up to Mr Gulati and getting sadistic pleasure from reprimanding store employees.

'I don't know how it happened. I was away for just twenty minutes for lunch,' the cashier laments, but cannot prevent yet another lacerating blow. I wince in sympathy for him. I have only lost a few gold bangles; Choubey has lost his pride, his dignity.

'What's going on?' I nudge Prachi. She fills me in on what has happened during my absence. Apparently Mr

Gulati made a surprise inspection this afternoon and discovered a shortfall of almost ₹200,000 from the morning shift. Since the cash was under the cashier's direct supervision, Choubey was now being accused of embezzlement.

'I swear on my three children I didn't do it,' the cashier wails.

'Tell me where the money is and I might still spare you,' Mr Gulati says, his bushy eyebrows furrowed like two caterpillars trying to reach each other.

'Madan has already searched me. I don't have the money,' cries Choubey.

'The bastard must have passed it to his accomplice,' Madan theorises. 'I say we hand him over to the police. They'll get the truth out of him in no time. I've been cultivating Goswami, the inspector at the Connaught Place police station, for quite a while. Now is the time to use him.'

'Please don't do this, *sahib*.' Choubey clutches Mr Gulati's feet. 'I have served this shop for thirty years. My wife and children will die without me.'

'Then let them die,' Mr Gulati says spitefully, yanking his leg free. 'Madan, phone that inspector of yours,' he orders.

I don't know Choubey all that well. He is a quiet man who keeps to himself. Our interactions have been limited to the polite exchange of pleasantries, but I have always found him to be conscientious, courteous and diligent. It is inconceivable that he could defraud the company. And even a hardened criminal does not make a false oath on his children. That is when an image pops into my head: of Raja Gulati sitting on his bike, busy counting a sheaf

of notes. I know that the senior Gulati doesn't approve of Raja's drinking and womanising. And the rotten son is quite capable of surreptitiously raiding the till to fund his extravagant lifestyle.

'Wait!' I address Madan. 'How do you know Mr Choubey is the culprit?'

Everyone turns to look at me. Madan gives me a murderous glance, but deigns to answer. 'He is the only one with keys to the safe.'

'Isn't it true that the Gulati family also has keys to the safe?'

'What are you suggesting?' Mr O. P. Gulati interrupts me. 'That I have robbed my own shop?'

'I am not saying it was you, sir. But what about Raja?'

There is a collective intake of breath. Even I am amazed at my reckless audacity.

'Are you out of your mind?' Madan goes into an apoplectic fit. 'Raja-*babu* didn't even come to the shop today.'

'But I saw him outside the showroom an hour ago, counting a sheaf of notes.'

I can see that Mr O. P. Gulati is troubled by this news. He wrings his hands nervously, biting on his bottom lip, as he weighs up the possibilities. Eventually, paternal affection prevails over his doubts. 'How dare you make such a scurrilous accusation against my son?' he lambastes me, eyes glittering with anger. 'One more word and I will dismiss you on the spot.'

I turn silent, knowing that no amount of argument can overcome a father's blind love.

Half an hour later a police jeep arrives bearing Inspector Goswami, a tall, beefy-looking officer, who has been getting a 35 per cent discount from us on all his electronic purchases. He catches hold of the accountant as a butcher grabs a chicken. Choubey goes without protest, without making a scene, as though he has accepted his fate. I watch this travesty of justice unfold before my eyes with a helpless rage. Choubey had been branded a thief simply because he was weak and powerless. And Raja Gulati had got away with embezzlement because he was rich and pedigreed. I feel so nauseated, I want to puke. My entire body shudders with loathing for Raja and his father. I know what happened to Choubey today can quite easily happen to me tomorrow. And, like Choubey, I wouldn't be able to do anything about it. There are only two choices available to the powerless of this world: either accept the abuse or walk away, only to suffer the same abuse from some other powerful person.

Acharya was right. The world is indeed divided into winners and losers. People like the Gulatis are the winners and folk like Choubey and me the losers.

Life pivots on a few key moments. This is one of them. Slowly but surely a knot of resolve hardens inside my stomach. I open my handbag and fish out the visiting card Acharya has given me. That little warning bell inside my head begins trilling again, but I am past caring. A loser has got nothing to lose. I take a deep breath, and then dial the number on the card from my cell phone.

A carefully modulated female voice answers the phone. 'You have reached the ABC Group. How may I assist you?'

'I would like to speak to Mr Vinay Mohan Acharya.'

'May I know who is calling?'

'Sapna Sinha.'

I expect her to ask 'Sapna who?' and be passed around a dozen departments, but instead she says, 'Please hold on, ma'am,' and almost immediately Acharya comes on the line, as though he was waiting for my call.

'I'm glad you called,' he says.

'I've decided to accept your offer.'

'Good,' he says simply. There is no triumphal sniggering or I-told-you-so gloating. 'Meet me in my office at six p.m. sharp. The address is on the business card.'

'But my work doesn't get over until—' I begin, only to be cut off by Acharya. 'Six p.m.,' he repeats, and that's the end of the conversation.

I look at the address on the card. The ABC Group's headquarters are at Kyoko Chambers on Barakhamba Road, not far from Connaught Place. I look at the time. It is 3.15 p.m. I have less than three hours to prepare for the meeting that could change my life.

Madan, our tyrant boss, is notorious for not allowing employees to leave before time. And, today being Saturday, permission to leave early is ruled out – unless I can come up with a plausible excuse.

At 5.30 p.m. I approach Madan with a despondent look. 'Sir, my sister just called. My mother's had another asthma attack. I need to take her to the hospital. Can I leave right now?'

The manager scrunches up his face like he just smelled something bad. 'We are already short of a cashier. I cannot be short of a salesgirl too.'

‘But if something happens to Ma . . .’ I let the implication hang in the air. In the Indian pantheon, Mother is the highest ideal, next only to God. Even Madan dare not risk the opprobrium of rendering an employee motherless. ‘Go, then,’ he says resignedly, caving in to my emotional blackmail.

Ten minutes later I am sitting in an auto-rickshaw, on my way to Barakhamba Road. I am still wearing my office uniform of white blouse and red skirt, having decided against the comfortable but casual *salvar kameez*. I am going for a business meeting after all, not a family reunion.

Kyoko Chambers turns out to be an impressive fifteen-storey building with an all-glass façade. The security there is like that of a government facility. There are private guards patrolling the entrance and I have to put my bag through a screening machine to go inside. The foyer resembles an elegant hotel lobby, with an enormous crystal chandelier under which sits a huge bronze sculpture of Nandi the Bull, the ABC Group’s corporate symbol. A tall man, dressed in a dark suit and red tie, is waiting for me at the reception. It takes me a moment to recognise him as Rana, Acharya’s right-hand man.

‘Why so much security?’ I enquire.

‘It is necessary. There are rivals keen to steal our secrets,’ he responds curtly, and escorts me to an elevator, which whisks us soundlessly to the fifteenth floor.

I step into a dramatic atrium with Roman columns, a 20-foot waterfall, and a glass-domed ceiling refracting the dusk spreading in the evening sky. Rana leads me past

mahogany double doors into a brightly lit room that looks to be a front office. The place is all marble and mosaic. The walls are painted a mottled gold and the gilded décor is reminiscent of an opulent Parisian salon, with large murals, thick-pile carpeting and bronze statuary. Another sculpture of Nandi the Bull, this one gold-plated, guards the entrance to Acharya's private suite.

I am surprised to see a blonde white woman sitting behind the desk.

'This is Jennifer, Mr Acharya's private secretary,' Rana says by way of introduction.

'You must be Sapna,' she says, standing up and offering her hand. Her accent is just like Lauren's, so I assume she is American. Probably in her late twenties. The first thing I notice about her is her height: she must be at least five foot ten, towering over me like a telephone pole. Her startlingly blue eyes are framed behind rectangular, clear glasses, and her shoulder-length, fluffy blonde hair is magazine-ready. In her stylish blue blazer, worn over a cream-coloured buttoned shirt and grey trousers, she looks like a cross between a well-groomed CNN news-reader and a high-class hooker.

She appraises me like a mistress confronted by the wife. Her cool, sweeping glance is half curious, half condescending. I take an instant, instinctual dislike to her.

The wall clock shows the time as 5.58 p.m. I cool my heels for another two minutes till a buzzer sounds on Jennifer's desk. 'Mr Acharya will see you now.' She gives me a thin smile and ushers me into his private chamber.

The sanctum sanctorum is even more impressive, with a boardroom table, bookcases filled with books, and a

wall-mounted big-screen TV displaying the market rates of stocks. The furniture looks solid, the carpets expensive.

My eyes are drawn to the massive golden head of a woman watching over the boardroom table. From her large bulging eyes, I recognise it as one of those monumental fibreglass sculptures of Ravinder Reddy I had seen in the National Gallery. The original oil paintings on the mahogany-covered walls also seem familiar. There are horses by Husain, cows by Manjit Bawa, and a cubist rendition of a nude, which might have been painted by Picasso himself. If Acharya's aim in calling me to his office was to overawe me, he has succeeded admirably.

He himself sits on a thronelike chair behind an antique, horseshoe-shaped desk, overlooking a large bay window. In his pinstripe suit, with a pink silk handkerchief jutting out of his breast pocket, he looks every inch the corporate tycoon he is. If further proof is needed, it is provided by the wall behind him, which is covered with framed professional photographs of him hobnobbing with all manner of international luminaries from Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama to Bill Clinton and Nelson Mandela. I cannot shake off the feeling of being in a cosy private museum, Acharya's memorial to himself.

'So how do you like my office?' he asks, gesturing that I should sit down.

'It's very nice.' I nod, sinking into a plush leather chair opposite him. Only then do I notice the wooden plaque on his desk. It bears the inscription: 'CLEAR VISION, DETERMINATION, DISCIPLINE & HARD WORK'.

'These are the core values which guide our endeavours

in the ABC Group.' He taps the plaque. 'I would expect you to hold the same values when you become its CEO.'

'You mean *if* I become CEO.'

'That depends entirely on you. As chairman, my task is simply to select the right person and set the right direction. I am convinced you are the best person for this company. But you must also feel the same way. Remember, the first step to achieve success is that you must really want it.' He drops his eyelids, as though recollecting something, and quotes a verse in perfect Sanskrit: '*Kaama maya evayam purusha iti. Sa Yatha kaamo bhavati tat kratur bhavati. Yat kratur bhavati tat karma kurute. Yat karma kurte tad abhisam padyate.*'

I am familiar with the verse. It is from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. 'You are what your deep, driving desire is. As your desire is, so is your will. As your will is, so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny.'

'I've never really believed in destiny,' I respond.

'But destiny may believe in you,' he rejoins.

'Then let's get this over with. I suppose you'll need me to sign that undertaking.'

'That's right. Let me call Rana.' He presses a buzzer and Rana enters the room, bearing a leather folder. He sits down next to me and hands me a sheet of paper. It's the same form I had seen last time.

'Before you sign it, I need to know if you have discussed my offer with anyone,' Acharya says.

'No,' I reply. 'I haven't spoken to anyone about this.'

'Not even with your mother and sister?'

'No. But why all this secrecy?'

‘Well, as you can see, my methods are a bit . . . ah, unconventional. I don’t want my shareholders getting needlessly twitchy. Complete confidentiality is a necessity when going about such things. You must not utter a word about our arrangement to anyone.’

‘I won’t.’ I nod. ‘And what’s this clause about not being allowed to terminate the contract mid-period?’

‘It simply means that the contract remains in force till all seven tests have been completed. You cannot quit in between.’

‘But what if I fail any of those tests?’

‘Then I terminate the contract, not you.’

‘Please sign at the bottom,’ Rana says, offering me a pen.

‘Before I sign, I also want something.’

Acharya frowns. ‘What?’

‘I want double.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘According to this contract, you are to pay me a sum of one lakh rupees to participate in the tests. I am asking for two lakhs.’

‘And what makes you think I will agree to your demand?’

‘In life you don’t get what you deserve: you only get what you negotiate. Isn’t this what you told me in the Coffee House? Well, I’m only following your advice. I’m negotiating with you.’

‘Touché!’ Acharya claps grudgingly. ‘You are a fast learner. But in order to negotiate you need to have leverage of some kind. Do you have a choice in this case?’

‘I could ask you the same question. Do you have a choice? A better candidate?’

'I like your spunk.' Acharya nods. 'But why do you need so much money?'

'I have some urgent family commitments.'

Acharya gazes out of the bay window, brooding over my demand. From his vantage point, like an eagle on his perch, he can see Lutyens's Delhi spread out below him. There is something magical and mystical about seeing a city from a high-rise, far from the soot and dust of the concrete jungle, the heat and noise of the road. I crane my neck to catch a view of the capital. All I can see is a shimmering ribbon of glitter draped across the horizon, blurring the boundary between earth and sky.

After a few tension-filled minutes, Acharya finally looks up and nods as if arriving at a decision. 'Rana, give her two lakhs.'

Rana gives me a dirty look and exits the room.

I turn to Acharya. 'Can I ask you a question?'

'By all means.'

'Why didn't you consider Rana for the job you are offering me? After all, he is your trusted confidant.'

'For the same reason that I don't take investment tips from my barber,' he says, leaning back in his chair and fiddling with a crystal Ganesha paperweight. 'To use a cricketing analogy, Rana is a good all-rounder, but would make a poor captain. He doesn't have the mindset of a leader. He can never sit here.' He taps his chair. 'But you can, provided you succeed in my seven tests.'

'Your tests are making me apprehensive.'

'Don't be. My tests are not so much about passing or failing, as about discovering yourself. Through each of the

seven tests you will gain practical wisdom of running a business in the real world.'

'It reminds me of those ancient tales of kings who set tests for their children to decide who amongst them should inherit the crown.'

'My inspiration is more modern. I despise the feudal culture of inheritance. Of spoilt rich kids getting everything handed to them through hereditary succession. I am a self-made man and I have created a culture of achievement in the ABC Group. You have to fight for your dreams, earn your place in the company.'

Running a company was never my dream, I feel like telling him, when Rana returns. He plunks down a manila envelope in front of me. 'There is two lakhs inside. Check the cash.'

I open the envelope to discover it bulging with thousand-rupee notes. Counting the lot seems like a rude thing to do. 'I trust Mr Acharya,' I declare, and sign the form with a flourish.

Rana picks up the document and puts it back in the leather folder.

'When will the tests begin?' I enquire, stuffing the envelope inside my purse.

'They have already begun,' Acharya says cryptically.

Before I can probe any further, the intercom on his desk buzzes. He stares at it for a moment, before depressing a red button. 'Sir, the party from Hong Kong is on its way up,' Jennifer's perky voice comes through the speaker-phone.

Acharya nods and then looks up at me. 'Good luck,' he says, signalling that the meeting is over.

Five minutes later I am back on the street, pondering over the strangeness of all that has just happened. There is more money in my purse than I have ever possessed in my life and it fills me with a bizarre combination of elation and trepidation. I can already sense the shadowy hand of fate tapping my shoulder, as if warning me that I have made a Faustian pact, and now I must be prepared for the consequences.

The first thing I do after leaving Acharya's office is proceed to Hanuman Mandir to express my gratitude to Goddess Durga. She alone can help me navigate the treacherous currents of life that lie ahead.

After visiting the temple, I take a short detour to a shop in G-Block, before catching the metro. Tonight I don't go all the way to Rithala. I get down at Pitampura, and take an auto-rickshaw to Deenu Uncle's residence. Despite being a wealthy restaurateur, he still lives in a rundown, two-storey house adjacent to a fetid, refuse-clogged canal.

My aunt Manju Chachi, a lazy, overweight woman with a puzzling fondness for sleeveless blouses, opens the door. 'Hello, Sapna,' she greets me sleepily. Deenu Uncle is lounging in the living room, clad in just a vest and pyjamas, thanks to an electric heater going full blast. He has a chubby face, broad shoulders and a nonexistent neck, giving him the mien of a washed-up wrestler. I glance around the room, at the garish red sofa seats, lumpy and fraying at the edges, the haphazard collection of family photos on the mantel, the cobwebs in the corners. The room smells of dust and neglect. Having always seen Deenu Uncle through the tinted lens of a

family member, I hadn't realised how cheap and tawdry he really is.

'If you have come to beg me to allow you to stay in the Rohini flat, you are wasting your time,' he begins the moment I sit down. 'Unless you can come up with the money, be prepared to move in two weeks.'

For all his faults, my father was a man of uncompromising principles. His younger brother has none. Deenu is a fast-talking, opportunistic shyster without scruples of any kind. He routinely cheats on his taxes, and probably on his fat wife as well.

'I have brought the full amount,' I inform him, and count out ₹168,000.

He seems more shocked than pleased. 'How did you manage to raise so much money so quickly?' he says and flashes me a sly grin. 'Did you rob a bank?'

'None of your business, landlord,' I respond tartly, shutting him up. 'And, since we are now paying tenants, we expect you to draw up a proper rental agreement, repair the seepage in the bathroom wall, fix the leaking sink in the kitchen, and give the apartment a fresh coat of paint.'

He gapes at me like a startled monkey. I have never spoken to him like this. But, then, it is not I speaking. It is the power of all that money in my hand, giving me a voice, giving me a spine. With a smug smirk of triumph I swagger out of Deenu's house and hail another auto-rickshaw.

By the time I reach home, it is past 7.30 p.m. Mother is in the kitchen, preparing dinner, and Neha is sprawled on the sofa, watching a musical talent contest on Zee TV.

‘How much did the jeweller give you?’ Ma wants to know at once. ‘Was it enough?’

‘Enough to pay off our shameless uncle,’ I reply. ‘We can now stay here safely for a year.’

‘And what will happen after one year?’

‘We’ll deal with it when the time comes.’ I drop my handbag on the dining table and flop down next to Neha.

She is so engrossed in the show, she hardly notices me or the shopping bag at my feet. On screen, a willowy contestant is belting out a popular song from the film *Dabangg*. ‘I can sing much better than you,’ Neha mocks her, ‘and I certainly look much better.’

‘Stop talking to the TV and see what I’ve got for you,’ I instruct her.

Neha turns around and her eyes open wide when she sees what I have withdrawn from the shopping bag: a brand-new Acer laptop.

‘*Didi!*’ she squeals in delight, and hugs me tightly. ‘You’re the greatest.’

Grabbing the laptop from my hands, she begins fiddling with it like a child given a new toy, her face flushed with excitement. Mother gently squeezes my shoulder. ‘Your father would have been so proud of you,’ she says, dabbing at her eyes. ‘I have never seen Neha so happy.’

Who will make *me* happy? I feel like asking her, before surrendering to the occasion. For a brief while I am enveloped in the warm glow of family love and everything seems rosy and full of promise. Such moments come rarely these days, and disappear all too quickly. Before long, Ma will grow distant again; Neha will become her

usual bitchy self. And despair, heartache and pain, my daily companions, will return to haunt me.

But today at least I can keep them at bay. My mind is still buzzing with all the possibilities unleashed by Acharya's offer, and the house is too small to think in. So I head down to the garden just outside the colony gate. It is not really a garden, just a patch of earth contained by a low brick wall, with a few shrubs and fruit trees scattered around. During the day the neighbourhood kids use it for their cricket matches, causing quite a racket, but at this time of night it is deserted and silent. I park myself on one of the wooden benches. The night air is nippy and the ground is damp beneath my feet. I draw my woollen shawl more tightly around my shoulders, hugging the warmth closer.

I have been sitting for less than a minute when Kishore Kumar begins to serenade me with a song from the film *Amar Akbar Anthony*:

My name is Anthony Gonzalves.

I am alone in the world.

My heart is empty, my home is also empty,

In which will live someone very lucky.

Whenever she thinks of me, she should come visit

Palace of Beauty, Love Lane, house number 420!

I feel a warmth in my face, as if a faint flush of crimson has crept into my cheeks. I know that the legendary singer has not returned from the dead. And neither does he live in house number 420. The melodious voice belongs to Karan Kant, resident of apartment B-35.

Karan moved into the LIG Colony a month after we did. Over the last fifteen months he has become much more than a neighbour to me. He is an orphan with no family, and works as a call-centre agent in Indus Mobile, India's third-largest cellular service operator. Though he is twenty-five years old, his boyish looks make him appear five years younger. With his above-average height, perfectly sculpted body, chiselled, clean-shaven face and curly hair, he is easily the most handsome man in Rohini, if not in Delhi. Add to that his crinkly smile and dreamy eyes and it's enough to make schoolgirls swoon. Not just schoolgirls, but even the menopausal housewives in our colony are smitten by him. They find one excuse or another to come to the balcony in the evenings just to catch a glimpse of him returning from work. But Karan seems to have eyes only for me. I do not know what he sees in me. Perhaps he regards me as a kindred spirit. We are both high-potential underachievers, bruised by life, buffeted by fate. Of all the people in the colony, he has chosen me to be his confidante. We are each other's sounding board, staunchest supporter and most honest critic.

It is still too early to give a name to our relationship. Suffice it to say that he is my soulmate, my strength, my rock. Sometimes I look upon him as a brother; at other times as a trusted companion; and once in a while – dare I say it? – as a boyfriend. There is always the vulnerable note of courtship in his actions, though he tries to hide his feelings behind a flippant exterior and acts of buffoonery. He is a hugely talented mimicry artist who can impersonate the voice of just about anyone,

from the actor Shahrukh Khan to the cricketer Sachin Tendulkar.

For all his droll playfulness, there is an undercurrent of sadness in his eyes. I have often caught him looking at me with a tortured, haunted expression. At times like these I can almost touch the raw loneliness in his heart, and I bleed in sympathy. He is a true clown, making others laugh while crying silently inside.

‘Why so serious, Madam-ji?’ he says as he plonks down next to me.

‘It’s been a really crazy day.’ I exhale.

‘Did you (a) win a lottery, (b) get robbed, (c) get a job offer or (d) meet a celebrity?’ He is mimicking Amitabh Bachchan asking a question on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*.

‘All of the above,’ I reply.

He narrows his eyes. ‘Then would you like to phone a friend?’

It seems he has read my mind. So much has happened in the last twenty-four hours that I can’t keep it bottled up any more. I need to talk it over with someone, get it off my chest. And I can’t think of anyone better than Karan. I am mindful of Acharya’s stern admonition about maintaining strict confidentiality, but, if I can trust anyone to keep a secret, it is the man sitting next to me. I gaze into his soulful eyes and feel the world come to a standstill. ‘You won’t believe what I’m about to tell you.’

I tell him everything, starting with that chance encounter with Acharya in the temple to Deenu Uncle’s phone call, the theft of the bangles, the scene in the showroom with Choubey and the final meeting with

Acharya in his office resulting in the unexpected windfall of two lakh rupees in hard cash.

Karan listens to me in rapt attention. Then he lets out a long, low whistle. 'Boy, this is a story for my grandchildren!'

'So you think Acharya is serious about making me his CEO?'

He chuckles. 'Are you nuts? This is a scam if I ever saw one. Nobody suddenly offers a complete stranger a ten-billion-dollar company on a platter.'

'But I researched Acharya. He looks to be above board.'

'So does every conman before he gets caught. Big Bull Harshad Mehta was hailed as a financial wizard before he brought down the entire stock market.'

'But what can Acharya hope to get from me? I don't have any money to invest in his company.'

'Maybe he has a thing for dusky beauties.'

'He doesn't seem like a lecher. And I'm no Bipasha Basu.'

'Is there any chance at all that you might be his long-lost illegitimate daughter?'

'Don't be facetious. This is not a Bollywood film.'

'But I can already visualise the scene.' Karan holds up his hands like a director framing a shot. 'He calls you to his house late at night. You don't find him there, but you discover his wife lying in a pool of blood. She has been shot dead. And the gun that killed her has your fingerprints on it. Then you realise that all this was part of an ingenious plan to get rid of his wife and pin the murder on you.'

Before his hyperactive imagination conjures up yet

another gruesome scenario, I cut him off. ‘Acharya doesn’t have a wife. End of conspiracy.’

‘Then there must be some other devious design. It is common knowledge that Acharya loathes his twin brother Ajay Krishna Acharya. Premier Industries is the ABC Group’s biggest competitor. What if Acharya is making you a pawn to get to his twin?’

‘Acharya didn’t utter a word about his brother. And what am I, a stupid fool who will willingly become someone’s pawn?’

‘I’m not blaming you. It is a basic rule of human nature that the promise of unexpected wealth short-circuits both intelligence and common sense. That is why we have all these Ponzi schemes, chit-fund scams, timber-plantation frauds. I see it happen every day in the call centre, with gullible customers sucked into dubious deals floated by fly-by-night telemarketers who always manage to fly the coop before the cops show up.’

‘There’s also something called taking a risk. Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go.’

‘Did Acharya say this?’

‘It was T. S. Eliot. And *I’m* not even the one taking the risk here: Acharya is. He’s the one betting on me. How could I pass up the opportunity of a lifetime? For the first time, I sense a glimmer of hope about my future.’

‘Ha!’ he reacts dismissively. ‘Hope is a recreational drug, giving you an artificial high based on a dosage of unrealistic expectations. What you need is a reality check.’

‘And what you need is a dose of sunshine. Why do you always have to be so negative?’

‘Because I care for you, and I have a bad feeling about this, Sapna. You should never have taken Acharya’s money.’

‘I had no choice.’

‘I just hope you don’t end up regretting it. There’s bound to be a quid pro quo. And yet you know nothing about his so-called seven tests. What do they entail? How will they happen? When will they happen?’

‘Yes, I’m also a bit apprehensive about the tests.’

‘Let me tell you a little fable, Sapna. Once upon a time, there was a man who was desperate to be taller. So he prayed to God for twenty years and God finally granted his wish. But there was a condition. God said “I can make you taller, but, for every inch I add, five years will be deducted from your life.” The man agreed. So God made him three inches taller – and the man died instantly. Moral of the story: never enter into a deal without knowing all the facts.’

‘I have no intention of taking any tests. I’ll promptly fail the first one. And get to keep the two lakhs. End of story.’

‘If only it were that simple. A man like Acharya must have thought about this very carefully before he approached you.’

Karan’s morbid, unrelenting cynicism grows on me like a fungus. By the time I sit down with Ma and Neha for dinner, I am convinced that signing that contract with Acharya was the worst mistake of my life.

Whenever I am disturbed, I turn to poetry for solace. So, after dinner, I take out the secret black diary in which I have been jotting down my thoughts and feelings since

I was nine. As I flick through its well-thumbed pages, my eyes settle on a short poem titled 'Tomorrow'. It is dated 14 April 1999, when I was a callow, eleven-year-old schoolgirl. Perhaps because it was penned in a happier, simpler time, it is just the tonic I need. This is what I wrote:

Hope is a shining sun
That brightens every morrow.
Love is a mighty wind
That blows away the sorrow.
The future is an empty road
And I'm not afraid of tomorrow.