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SAN FRANCISCO, CA Present Day

THERE'S A SPECIAL PLACE in hell for incompetent customer service agents, and it's right between monsters who stick their bare feet up on airplane seats and mansplainers. Fake hair, false smiles, synthetic blazers that pool around their middles while they tell you that yes, they would love to help you, and thank you for your patience, and no, sorry for the inconvenience caused but they can't seem to find your paperwork even if it punched them square in the jaw.

I inhaled. *Be nice, Paloma. Be kind.*

My agent's name today is Bethany. Bethany, with badly dyed hair so red it looked like Elmo had a love child with Jessica Rabbit, and two buttons undone on her much-too-tight polka-dot polyester blouse. She smiled as if she had all the time in this crazy world, her gaze not wavering from the screen in front of her, refusing to meet my eye even when she knew she was royally messing up. She had a smear of livid coral lipstick on her teeth. It clashed hard against her hair.

My hands were trembling slightly, so I made sure they weren't on the table in front of me. I hate how they do that when I'm angry. I hate

it when I'm angry. It makes it hard to think straight. And I needed to think straight right now. I couldn't have that cunning, two-faced soon-to-be-ex-roommate of mine getting in my head. The actual nerve of Arun.

I kept thinking back to that no-good loser's grin. The one he wore when he told me that he knew. *He knew*. I'd made it eighteen god-damned years in this country, and now this absolute moron who tears up when he talks about his mother's alloo paratha had the gall, no, the actual balls to try to ruin it for me? He definitely didn't know who he was messing with.

I mean, I would fucking kill him. Wrap my fingers around his blackmailing little throat and smother the life out of him. How dare he? I can't believe I actually felt sorry for him. *I really can't afford any more rent than this, please. You have to help me out.* He totally played his poor-little-immigrant card, and I bought it all up. I knew what it was like to depend on the charity of others. To have your life decided by someone who just woke up one morning and thought they'd throw you a line.

And how the hell does he go ahead and repay me? He snoops around through my things. Finds out my worst secret. Demands I buy his silence.

Another pang of anger ricocheted through me.

I double-checked that the letter was still in my pocket. Good. I know it didn't do much to have it with me, now that Arun had already read it, but it gave me the tiniest bit of comfort having it back in my possession.

My hands gave another shudder. I sat on them and turned my focus back to Bethany. She shouldn't see me this upset. She sure as hell couldn't find out that my shit-bag of a roommate was one step away from ruining a life I had already sacrificed so much for.

Concentrate, Paloma.

I gave her my best smile. “Technology, huh? Supposed to make our lives easier . . .”

Score. Her relief was palpable, like a deer realizing that the oncoming headlights weren’t going to run it over. I wasn’t one of those assholes who would embarrass her by making a scene in this deathly quiet, needlessly ostentatious bank. Fair enough that I was dressed like a bum in sweatpants and an oversized sweatshirt—it’s not like I was in the best frame of mind to choose an outfit that would give bank tellers a good first impression of me, but I was making up for it by being so nice my jaw ached. *Model minority*, every part of me screamed. I wasn’t here to cause any issues. Just take care of my request and I’ll be on my way.

She smiled again, lipstick bleeding outside her lip line, as she keyed in something at a pace that made sloths look like Olympic sprinters. I resisted the urge to sigh out loud. Take your time, why don’t you, Bethany? I mean, it’s just my entire goddamned life that’s riding on your inability to look through a file.

“So, there seems to be a bit of confusion here. One of your accounts, it’s a joint checking account, I believe, is overdrawn.” Well, so are your eyebrows, Bethany, but you don’t hear me making a scene about it.

Don’t be mean, Paloma. My mother’s voice was always in my ear. She was right. No one ever got what they needed by being an asshole.

“There’s a hold on the rest of the funds. We’d need form 38F to be filled out and countersigned by”—she hesitated a little, her eyes flickering from the screen to my face—“a Mr. and Mrs. Evans?” My parents. Great. There was a better chance of Arun and me spontaneously breaking out into a Bollywood dance number when I got home. They weren’t signing anything for me anytime soon.

I arranged my face so that it showed nothing but amicability. I’m your friend, it said. I’m your sorority sister. I’m the girl next door who

baked cookies and gave you pointers on how to grow your hair thick and shiny, just like mine. Whatever it took to get this done with already.

"If you check, I'm sure you'll see that access was transferred over to me a few months ago."

"Um." Bethany blinked into the screen. "I'm sorry, I'm new." Her chubby fingers were trembling slightly on the mouse.

Goddamn it, Bethany. You're killing me here.

"We've all been there, don't worry. You're doing great. But if you could please just check." I managed a little laugh. "It's just that it's a bit of an emergency right now, that's all."

I know . . . Arun's leer clawed its way back into my head. I read the letter . . . I know what you did . . .

I didn't care how much cash it took for him to disappear from my life. I'd give him every single cent I had. But Bethany just wasn't cutting me a break.

"If you could please give me a few minutes . . ."

"Take your time, I've nowhere to be." My heart was beating hard. I just needed my money. There had been no transfers made from my parents in the last two months, and now I was being bled dry by my double-crossing roommate.

"I'm really sorry, Ms. Evans." Bethany's coral lips started to tremble. Great. Just great. Now I'm the bitch who made this poor girl cry. I didn't want to make her life miserable. Don't get me wrong, I'm no saint. But I know what it's like to be the new girl. The girl who has no clue. Who makes everyone impatient. Hell, most of us have been a Bethany at some point in our lives. Admittedly, I've done it without a hack dye job, but still.

"I—I could try again but the system won't let me override it. I could give you a printout of the form now, if you could just get it signed?"

Fuck me. I could demand to speak to the manager, but there was

no way someone who actually knew what they were doing would let me slip through the cracks. Damn my parents.

“Thank you, Bethany. You’ve been great.”

Bethany gave me a relieved smile.

“Thank you, Ms. Evans. You’ve been so patient. It’s my first week and it’s taken me a while to find my footing.” Nothing was more obvious in the world, but at least I wasn’t at risk of setting off her water-works again.

My hands gave another tremble.

“Oh, please, call me Paloma. And don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it sooner than later.” I mean, she would literally make customers kill themselves so they wouldn’t have to deal with her again, but there was no point in telling her that, was there?

“Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

Know a way to get rid of a roommate who’s trying to destroy your life?

“Not today. Thanks again.”

How the hell was I supposed to shut Arun up now?

My whole body felt like it was vibrating as I stood up and put my phone in my pocket. I double-checked that the letter was still in there. Good.

I didn’t have many options left. Maybe I could try reasoning with him again. Keep a closer handle on my rage this time.

I just really needed a drink first. I know, I know, it’s a cliché. And Nina, my therapist, would *not* be pleased if she found out. I can hear her voice in my head right now—*You can’t drink on this prescription, understand?* But I wasn’t going to get shit-faced tonight. A shot or two would help me think straight, that’s all. Besides, wasn’t it more cliché to not do something simply because it was a cliché? And Nina’s voice admonishing me at every sip was penance enough.

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RATMALANA, SRI LANKA 2002

THE SHADOWS FROM THE torch Maya held under her chin made her smile look evil, like the devil mask hung in the assembly hall to ward off the evil eye.

We were all too excited to sleep, so Maya called all the girls to her bunk to tell us ghost stories. I didn't really want to listen. I'm too old to believe in ghosts. But I didn't want to be the only one in bed when everyone else was all the way on the other side of the dormitory.

Lihini grabbed my hand and squeezed it. I gave it a squeeze back. She loved ghost stories, which I didn't really understand. Why would anyone want to be afraid on purpose?

"Relax, Paloma," she mouthed. I usually got annoyed when people told me to relax. Like saying the words was enough to make me forget what was upsetting me in the first place. As though ghosts and demons would just go away if we simply relaxed. But Lihini was my best friend. I could never get angry with her. I scooted a little closer to her on the

floor. There was no such thing as ghosts. It just made me feel safe to be near her.

Maya needed to hurry up. If we got caught out of our beds, we would definitely be scolded. Maybe even punished. They might even cancel the visit tomorrow.

I took a deep breath and shook my head. They would never do that. We hadn't gotten many visitors to the orphanage in a few months now. Tomorrow was important. Everyone told us so—our headmaster Perera sir, Miss Chandra, even Miss Sarah, our English teacher. We were to be on our best behaviour and make sure we knew exactly what we were supposed to do or say. Miss Chandra supervised the rehearsal today. Everything had to be perfect, and we were so excited that none of us could sleep.

Of course Maya would decide this was the best time to make it all about her. Sometimes I wondered if she even wanted to be adopted. She needed to be more responsible than this. She was twelve now, same as me. It's not like we were little children anymore.

"She walks slowly. Her feet are bare and dirty and covered in scratches. She wears a long, white dress." Maya purposely made her voice into a throaty whisper so every one of us leaned forward, barely breathing.

I knew this story. Vana-Mohini, or Mohini, as we call it. We've all heard it a million times. We've all told it a million times. But I still held tight to Maya's words.

"There's blood under her nails, and they are long and sharp, like talons." She made a sudden clawing motion, and Lihini leaped back, her hands over her mouth.

We all giggled nervously.

"And her long, black hair hangs over her face, like this." The torch flickered as Maya messed her hair over her face so just her eyes glinted through in the dim yellow light.

“Mohini walks only in the night, revealing herself to people who are all by themselves. *Help me. Help me*, she begs.” Maya made her voice high and raspy now, like when the chalk slips when you’re writing on a blackboard.

“Some people say Mohini’s eyes are red. Red as blood. And when you look into them, you can see straight into hell. And if you stop to help her, she smiles, and before you know it—”

Maya dropped the torch and lunged forward, wrapping her hands around Lihini’s throat. Lihini couldn’t help it this time. Her small scream rang like an alarm through the dormitory.

I pulled Lihini away from Maya and put my arms around her. If I could have slapped Maya, I definitely would, but there wasn’t time.

“*Haiyyo!* Quickly, everyone, to bed before we get caught,” I hissed, getting Lihini to her feet and pushing her into her bunk.

Thankfully, the other girls followed.

We all lay very, very still for a few minutes. I could hear nervous panting echoing through the dormitory. Maya really did give everyone a shock. But thankfully none of the matrons came.

What on earth was she thinking? Getting us into trouble the night before Mr. and Mrs. Evans got here. Those were their names. Mr. and Mrs. Evans. Perera sir told us so we could memorise them. Evans—like when Miss Sarah told us about Mary Ann Evans, who went by George Eliot, who wrote *The Mill on the Floss*. I suppose I could understand why you would want to pretend to be someone else. But I could never, ever understand why someone wouldn’t want to go by the name Evans. It was beautiful.

I whispered it out loud.

Mr. and Mrs. Evans. I hoped they liked us. And me. I really hoped they liked me.

“You okay, *sudhu?*” I called out to Lihini in the top bunk. She usually climbed down into mine after we offed the lights, but we had to

be careful after the scream. We both knew it would be stupid to mess up anything for tomorrow.

“Ah, are you scared?” Maya sounded delighted.

“No way! Why would a made-up ghost scare her?” I spoke up for Lihini.

“Mohini is not made up. She walks around here in the orphanage also!” Maya replied, a little too loudly.

I could hear gasps from all the bunks. It gave me goose bumps too.

“It’s true!” someone else said. “She’s here in the orphanage.”

This was really too much.

“Maya, stop scaring everyone, *men*. We need to sleep and be rested properly for tomorrow.” I’m not usually such a Goody Two-shoes. Lihini always told me that I’m the exact opposite. Tomorrow was just too important, and it really, really annoyed me that Maya didn’t seem to understand that.

“Okay, Miss,” she giggled. I heard a few of the girls giggle as well. I ignored them and shut my eyes.

But I couldn’t fall asleep.

I knew I was just wishing. And that just like ghosts, wishes were make-believe too. But I wished and wished and wished that the visit tomorrow would go well. That Mr. and Mrs. Evans would like me so much that they would want to make me their daughter.

Perera sir had told us that the Evanses were from America, but he didn’t say anything else. I wondered what they would be like. Would they be tall or short? Have blond hair or brown? Would they say *what’s up?* and *guys* like we saw when we were allowed to watch TV?

I don’t know how long I lay there imagining them when I heard someone climb off their bunk. I knew it wasn’t Lihini. I could hear her breathing from above me.

It was dark in the dormitory, so I stuck my head out to see who it

was. If it was Maya trying to scare us again, I'd have no choice but to complain to Miss Chandra tomorrow morning.

But it wasn't Maya.

It was Shanika.

I should have known. We gave up trying to stop her sleepwalking ages ago.

She hadn't joined us when we were telling ghost stories. Why should she, when it seemed like she was barely alive herself?

Shanika's eyes were unfocused and she was humming softly as she floated past the beds and towards the door. She held on to the dirty plastic doll that she took with her almost everywhere. The scars covering the side of her face seemed to glow, even in the darkness.

I strained to hear the words, even though I knew what they were. We sang it almost every day at the orphanage. We didn't have an official anthem or anything, but if we did, I'm certain it would be this. It's one of my favourites, when it wasn't being sung by Shanika in the middle of the night.

Que sera, sera

Whatever will be, will be

The future's not ours to see

I broke out in goose bumps again, though I wasn't quite sure why.

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SAN FRANCISCO, CA

THE NEAT SHOTS OF rum did nothing to dull my anger. If anything, it just made it throb and echo inside me, so it was all I could do to even get back to my apartment, I was trembling so much.

Screw him. This was the last thing I needed. I wish I had never met him. He'd seemed so meek when he responded to my ad online. Almost fearful. I practically held his damn chai for him while he stuck the knife in my back.

My keys rattled against the door. It took me a few tries to get them in. It was the anger, not the rum. I pushed my therapist's disappointed expression out of my mind. Definitely not the rum.

It was dark inside. Had he left? Fuck. I'd asked him to stay put. But then again, I had been gone for much longer than I said I'd be. Rum always made me lose track of time.

"Arun?" I called out. I was surprised at how much my voice trembled.

"Arun, you in here?"

I fumbled with the lights in the entryway. It was a clear line of sight from the front door into the kitchen.

The asshole had fallen asleep, his head resting on the table. How the hell could he sleep at a time like this? I mean, my entire life rested in his despicable, blackmailing hands, and he decided to take a nap?

“Arun, look, I think I have an idea about how we could work this out.” I didn’t really, but I needed to buy as much time as I could until I figured out how to gather up enough money to have him disappear from my life.

He didn’t move.

I crossed over to the kitchen. My feet felt unsteady beneath me. Focus, Paloma. You can’t afford to be a drunk bitch right now.

“Arun?”

There wasn’t as much light in the kitchen as there was in the living room.

“Arun? Hey?”

He didn’t stir. I rapped the table with my palm, hoping to wake him, but my fingers came away wet.

What the fuck, Arun? I hoped he hadn’t gone and spilled curry all over my spotless kitchen again. The last time he decided to make butter chicken, the walls were covered in a splatter of neon orange that took a round of bleach to remove.

I reached over to the wall and turned on the kitchen light.

There was a dark puddle on the table, around Arun’s head.

“Arun?”

I shook him on the shoulder first, but he didn’t move, so I grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him back on his chair.

His empty black eyes stared out. Blank, and unfocused, and definitely, surely dead.

Oh, fuck.

I stumbled backwards, grabbing on to the wall to steady myself. It was crimson when I pulled my hand away, the shape of those Thanksgiving turkeys we drew in the fall. My hand was sticky, like it was covered in glue. No sound escaped me, but I was screaming with every fiber of my being.

I needed to get it off me.

I rushed to the bathroom and yanked open the faucet. My hands shivered on their own as I held them under the cold water. Rust swirled down the drain in ribbons. Thick. Brown. Sticky.

What the fuck was happening?

Focus. I was stern with myself as I looked in the mirror.

How the hell had this happened? Healthy, blackmailing Indian boys don't just drop dead. There was blood. That meant—

My body went cold.

That meant he must have been killed.

And that meant that the killer could be in the apartment right now.

Oh, fuck.

I haphazardly looked around the bathroom for anything I could use as a weapon.

Something moved behind me, I could see it in the mirror.

I whipped around.

That's when I saw her. *Mohini*. It was just for a second. A fraction of a second, but I knew. I knew she was back. Her black hair, her pale face. All these years I had spent trying to convince myself that she didn't exist, that she was a ghost from my childhood, just a product of an overactive imagination, and now here she was.

Fresh waves of fear crashed down on me. I had to get out of here. I had to get out. Or I'd be next.

I bolted to the door and just about made it to my corridor when I sensed her behind me. I was moving and frozen all at the same time.

The elevator was too far. I ran to the stairwell. I needed to leave. I needed to get as far away as possible.

I had just reached the steps when I felt her fingers around my neck. Felt her breathing in my ear. I couldn't fight her again. I let the floor open up and swallow me whole.