

A Fatal Distraction



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Samyukta Bhowmick

 juggernaut

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To Nainika and Kabir



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Prologue

A little way down the road from Kajal Puri's rambling farmhouse in Chhattarpur, her neighbours Mr and Mrs Ahuja were on their morning constitutional. They took a morning walk every day and had done so with only a few exceptions throughout their twenty-two years of marriage. Yesterday had been one such exception, when their lane had been clogged up with police cars, press and rubbernecking bystanders.

'I always thought that Kajal would bring trouble to this colony,' said Mrs Ahuja.

Mr Ahuja grunted. He agreed, but he was focusing on his breathing, which his doctor had told him must be in sync with his walking. Deep inhales and deep exhales. Suddenly, he stopped. Were those clothes he could see discarded in the bushes?

Still breathing noisily, Mr Ahuja pointed his wife towards the bushes with his phone. He watched as she strode towards the offending garments, watched as she froze. And then froze himself as his wife began to shriek in terror.



The Tangling



1

A Small Work Problem

i

Dhritiman Bhattacharya—DB to his friends—was worried, but not unduly so. With the happy oblivion of a man unaware that he would be murdered that night, he was preoccupied with what he considered a small work problem.

DB was the managing editor of a disappearing breed, a Delhi tabloid. The *Delhi Daily* was an afternoon paper that had once been handed out by the dozen at busy intersections to bored commuters. Now, with all the entertainment said commuters could possibly want fitting into pocket-sized phones, circulation had dipped dismally.

While other tabloids had disappeared altogether, the *Delhi Daily* clung on. This was partly due to the fact that it was the pet project of the family that owned it, the influential Kapoors who owned a power company, two supermarket chains, a handful of snack brands, a music label, TV channels, and magazines in addition to their little newspaper. And it was partly due to DB.

He had been the managing editor ever since the *Delhi Daily* was founded and through a mix of amiability, pliability and instinct for

self-preservation had managed to avoid most of the political squabbles that make life difficult for editors in India.

The paper had been conceived as a bit of fluff; a city go-to, with a mix of local news, particularly lurid crimes, gossip and reviews. But gradually, being of a serious bent of mind, DB had reinvented it as something more substantive. Now, reports about local political corruption rubbed shoulders with earnest features about Delhi's crumbling infrastructure and public goods.

The Kapoor family's scion, Abhishek Kapoor, had viewed these changes with an indulgent air, in the beginning dropping one or two hints to DB about the nature of tabloid journalism.

'Leave the serious stories to TV!' had been one of his refrains, and DB would only smile politely. (And, as an old-school journalist, if he had been baffled by this statement, he was too professional to show it.)

And soon, the strategy started to pay off, with stories about admissions scams, money laundering, bankrupt builders and high-living liquor barons going viral, after which Abhishek had mostly left DB alone to run things as he wanted.

Even so, DB could never quite shake the nagging doubt that someone from the Kapoor family would suddenly be called upon to replace him. And the main candidate in his mind had always been Anika, Abhishek's daughter, who was a columnist at the newspaper.

There were only two features that had remained consistent with the *Delhi Daily's* previous avatar. One was the two pages of word games, which DB secretly enjoyed in his rare moments of leisure. And the second was Anika's column.

As he sat in his office, a grey building on one of the busy roads near Connaught Place, DB considered Anika. In his mind, she had deliberately set out from the start to be as controversial as she could. Her column, 'Naming Names', was ostensibly about cutting through the noise with hard-hitting truths and exposing those in power, using information gleaned from her insider status. And it had been popular

for a while—until it became clear that Anika’s inclination was to use her few inches of print real estate less for hard-hitting truths, and more to settle personal grudges and spread gossip. The enemies she made, and the constant threat of legal action that trailed her, had made her an increasingly less likely successor to DB in the eyes of her father. And today, DB was going to stub out any lingering ambitions Anika might have of occupying his chair once and for all.

DB was essentially a decent man, and not given to vendettas. So he didn’t view his upcoming meeting with any sort of pleasure or relish, as one might when about to vanquish a long-standing rival. He also didn’t view it with any dread—it was simply a workplace problem that he was finally going to solve to the satisfaction (he hoped) of all parties.

But he knew that Anika could be . . . unpredictable. And so, he was a little worried.

A cough distracted him from his ruminations. He looked up and saw his colleague Mridula Majumdar, who had stumped in without waiting for permission. She sat down on one of the rickety office chairs facing his desk and said, without preamble, ‘Well, DB, I hope you know what you’re doing.’

DB’s office was a neat and orderly space, frugal but with signs everywhere of his devotion to the *Delhi Daily*. A few framed front pages hung on the walls, masking the peeling paint and the water damage, and copies of the paper, some dating back years, were stacked in piles on cabinets and shelves. His desk was a wide affair, strewn with drafts of articles yet to be published. He liked to print them out and edit them in the old-fashioned way, with a red pen, which he bought by the dozen and kept in his drawer.

‘What do you mean?’ asked DB, tentatively. He reached for a pen and started clicking it. ‘You mean . . . how she’ll take it?’

‘My darling DB, even you can’t be this oblivious. This meeting with Anika. You know she’s going to go off.’

‘I don’t know that, and neither do you,’ said DB. ‘Anika can be very reasonable.’

Mridula snorted. It was a sound that came very naturally to her. She had a range of snorts through which she managed to convey complex, nuanced messages. (This one conveyed disbelief, a generous portion of an eye roll and just a soupçon of pity.)

DB flinched and briefly wondered if he should perhaps be more worried. While he was an excellent editor and could trim the fat and get to the guts of any story with a butcher’s muscular efficiency, he was less certain when it came to the more conventional rules of social etiquette, and rarely knew how to read the room. Like that time when he mentioned casually to his sister-in-law that, in his opinion, her husband was likely embezzling with a free hand from his employer. (‘I thought she would feel better knowing!’ he had said later to his wife, after the inevitable showdown. And in his defence, although she did not feel better knowing *in that instant*, she did in the long run—in the very long run, when the divorce had finally gone through.)

‘Anika has quite a successful career as a writer now,’ he reasoned, as much for his own benefit as Mridula’s. ‘She barely shows up for work anymore. She just turns in her stuff via email. And, well, I *did* run it by her father.’

‘A fact that may make her more angry, not less,’ said Mridula.

‘Do you know, I’m not sure,’ said DB, in a thoughtful tone, and then added hurriedly, in response to Mridula’s eyebrow lift (also very eloquent), ‘Well, I just wonder if she may be in on this plan? Her father agreed with . . . alacrity, if I can put it that way. It made me wonder if it isn’t a sort of family scheme.’

‘A family scheme?’

‘Well, I went to him with my idea, you know—of expanding. I think we need an expanded city desk. I think we need boots on the ground. I think we need . . . well, I don’t have to tell you,’ said DB.

‘Yes, yes, I’m with you on all that. So, you went to him—and you

expected that he would shoot down the idea, didn't you?'

'I did. And he didn't. He just made the point that if we expanded in one place, we'd have to cut in another. It all came so organically, that I wonder if he was trying to make it seem like my idea, but it was actually his idea in the first place.'

'Really?' said Mridula. 'It sounds most unlikely. And—I mean this in the kindest way—you know you're not exactly best at reading that kind of subtext.'

'Is there a kind way to mean that?' asked DB, coldly. 'Look, it's all conjecture, I agree. But based on certain things he said . . . for instance, he definitely hinted that we were paying some high salaries that weren't pulling their weight. And if you really boil that comment down, who are the high salaries here?'

'Not me,' said Mridula with a short bark of a laugh.

'And I had to assume he didn't mean me. Firstly, I'm hardly raking it in. And, secondly, if he meant me, he wouldn't have made the remark *to me*, you see?'

'Yes, yes, he didn't mean you, innocent. But his own daughter?'

'She does make up rather a large percentage of our compensation costs.'

'Hmm. If you're right, it's quite fascinating. These industrialist families are all so ruthless.' Mridula sounded quite impressed.

'Well, that's the point, isn't it,' said DB. 'It's not the way you or I would treat a child of our own, but with these people, who knows? We've all heard of worse. And . . . er, he's not wrong. In the early days, she used to pull publicity at least, but she doesn't anymore. And some of her recent columns have been . . . well, they've been downright personal. I've been wondering about the risks of litigation. That so-called "anonymous" piece she wrote about the plastics tycoon and his mistress? We all know who that was about. I expect a show-cause notice any day. It really distracts from, well, from our actual work.'

His tone had become fretful. 'You know, I really didn't think she

would cut up rough. Maybe subconsciously, I thought that if it was coming from him, from the family, that maybe she wants to leave, and this is a roundabout way of getting there.'

'*Very* roundabout,' said Mridula, grimly. 'But I don't think so, you know. This column is important to her. She uses it like a weapon.'

DB shifted uncomfortably. 'You're right. Oh dear, I hope she won't be unpleasant.'

This time, Mridula had to laugh outright. 'My dear man. I think if there's one thing I can say with certainty, it's that she will be unpleasant. I have no idea if you're right about her father—if so, that will make her even more angry, because I assure you, she has no idea of leaving. This column is important to her. It underscores everything else—the books, Instagram, her whole social media profile. Oh yes, I think she will be unpleasant.'

'She's never behaved that way with me.'

'Well, the rest of the office has seen that side of her more than any other. It may be your introduction to a whole other part of Anika's personality.'

'Oh, dear,' said DB again. 'Well, I'm glad you're facing the music with me.'

Mridula nodded grimly. She also wasn't the type to partake in gossip, and she also felt no pleasure in the upcoming conversation. But unlike DB, she was under no delusions about Anika's inevitable reaction. He would need the cavalry.

'Of course,' she said. 'I wouldn't let you face the fire alone.'

ii

Anika Kapoor was an attractive woman in her early forties. She was very slim and always wore clothes that looked simple but were actually unfathomably expensive. They hung just so, and she moved in them

with a rather arrogant grace. She had long hair that fell almost down to her waist, the one jarring note in her otherwise modern silhouette. She thought the hair made her distinctive. And, somehow, in a country full of women with long, straight hair, it did.

She had taken her time today coming into the office. She had pushed this upcoming meeting out of her mind—it was a skill she had subconsciously acquired over the years, the ability to distract herself with various sundries while something unpleasant lay ahead. Sometimes in her procrastination, she found that by the time she got around to it, the unpleasant thing had just gone away. And so, she picked her clothes with care, and ate her breakfast, such as it was, slowly. She stopped for more coffee.

But then she was finally on her way. She could put it off no longer. She sank back in the passenger seat of her car and stared out the window, caught a faint glimpse of her own face reflected in the glass, and instantly felt a stab of disquiet. Dark thoughts rose quickly to the surface, as though they had been waiting for just such an opportunity, right below the surface of her mind, to manifest themselves.

She stared at her reflection. *Who was she?* Anika Kapoor, columnist, bestselling writer and all-around successful Delhi Socialite. She looked as immaculate as ever, not a wrinkle on her skin or a crinkle in her clothes. But—she gripped her armrest—these days, she felt more and more unravelled.

From a young age, Anika had been taught to believe in positive aphorisms—where there’s a will, there’s a way, she learned. With faith, one can move mountains. Believe in yourself and never give up. As she grew older, she continued to parrot these sayings as doors opened up before her (as they tend to do for the unusually wealthy). If she’d been asked, she would have said with a good deal of indignation that her success came through determination and hard work. She had never had to question this.

Any obstacle she’d had to deal with was swept away. There were,

in fact, only one or two—one was the editorial leadership of the *Delhi Daily*, which she had no sooner realised she would not get than convinced herself that she never really wanted; and there was one romantic entanglement that, even now, she could not make sense of. But that was it.

The rest of her life had been, essentially, strewn with roses. She had written a number of moderately successful books. She was touted as a social media ‘influencer’ by people for whom this was a thing. She had a long-running column in the city’s favourite afternoon paper. The fact that her family owned the paper seemed beside the point.

A lifetime of privilege had sheltered her from life’s uncertainties—until now.

This meeting with DB, she considered, may well be the final straw. DB did not often call her into his office, and she knew that this meeting meant an end. An end of something. Her grip on her armrest became tighter. She thought back to a conversation she had had with her father not more than a week before.

‘Beta,’ he had said. As though she were a child of eight. ‘When are you going to take this seriously? When are you going to take your life seriously?’

She had looked at him scornfully. He represented a bygone era, an era where power lay in tangible assets, things (or people) that you could point to and say that you owned. He didn’t understand that power today meant something completely different—the power of social media, the power of influence, of intangibles. These were out of his grasp.

She had said as much to him, and his face had changed colour.

In the ensuing argument, she felt she had given as much as she got. They had both left in a furious rage, hers a futile one, but his, she thought, may have been more fruitful.

When the car finally turned into her office, a burst of sunshine caused her already faint reflection to disappear completely, and she

felt a moment's panic. *Where was she?* She remained impassive, but her knuckles whitened as she further tightened her grip on the armrest.

She shook herself. *Pull yourself together. You'll survive this—like everything else.*

As she marched into the office and had her usual effect of making people jump and scurry out of her way, she felt a little better. And as she came upon a pretty young woman who was trying desperately to avoid her eye, she stopped.

'Ah, Devika. Have you reworked that story yet?'

'Anika,' said Devika, trying to sound determined. 'I . . . I've only just got in.'

'I sent you an email about this last night, Devika,' said Anika. 'Do try and remember that we're a newspaper—so we should try and get things out quickly, no? Don't you think?'

'Yes,' said Devika, looking down.

'We can't go on like this. We really can't, Devika. I don't want to make an example out of you, but I'm afraid we may have to. If the story's not on my desk by this afternoon, I'm reassigning it. And if I have to reassign it, I'm not sure what the point is of keeping you on staff. The last draft you submitted was just hopeless, I'm afraid. Hopeless! Now, take this as a learning experience and maybe next time you'll have a story that we can actually print? It involves going out, Devika. Talking to sources. Corroborating sources. Working for your living. I know your generation likes their comforts, but this isn't the way . . .'

As Anika went on, Devika's lower lip started to tremble.

iii

Fifteen minutes later, Devika had fled to meet her boyfriend Ishaan in a secluded conference room.

‘I could kill her,’ sobbed Devika, ‘I really could.’

Ishaan looked worried. Not because he felt Devika would commit homicide, but because . . . well, partly because his girlfriend was crying on his shoulder, and he felt bad for her, and also partly because he felt anyone was likely to walk into the room at any moment, demand to know what was going on and jump to the most embarrassing conclusions. How would he tell his mother he had been fired because they thought he had been making out in the office?

‘I know,’ he said, ‘I know.’ He tried to pat her head and simultaneously take half a step away without her noticing.

Eventually, her sobs subsided, and she looked up at him. He stopped stealing looks at the door and assumed an expression of utmost sympathy.

‘You’re so sweet,’ she said, and moved away a little. ‘I don’t know what came over me.’

‘It’s Anika,’ he said, ‘I understand. She has this effect on everyone.’

‘I just . . . I sometimes think she targets me, you know?’

‘I know,’ Ishaan nodded. ‘But she doesn’t. Believe me. She’s the same with everyone.’

‘You should read this email,’ said Devika, her voice quavering again. ‘There are so many people copied on it. And she called me out, so condescendingly.’ She pulled out her phone, and Ishaan was torn between his all-consuming curiosity about the email and his equally potent desire to end this little tête-à-tête before his pain of a boss wandered in and caught them. He wavered, and then curiosity won. He leaned over to look.

‘I think it is a poor idea for Devika to make suggestions for the inputs to . . . blah blah blah,’ read Devika, ‘. . . without first understanding the system more generally. I think it is a great idea for Devika to understand the system better, as I think she will then contribute to it more effectively, and I value her thoughts. Hence my offer to explain to her . . . ugh! She just goes on and on!’

‘Oh, wow. That is rude,’ said Ishaan, his boss forgotten for the moment.

‘It’s beyond rude!’ said Devika. She gave a frustrated little scream. ‘Ugh! She just makes me so mad! And it’s relentless, every single day. And what’s more, it’s getting worse. Everyone can see it. My boss, my friends. I don’t know if my work is worse than anyone else’s, but right now it feels like I’m being singled out. I don’t even want to come into work anymore in the mornings.’

‘That’s what she’s like,’ said Ishaan, sympathetically. He pulled her to him. His boss would just have to lump it. ‘She picks and picks and picks away until she finally gets to you. It’s . . . it’s a kind of sadism.’

‘But why *me*?’

‘Who knows? Maybe it’s because you’re so pretty . . .’

Devika gave a watery giggle, and at this, Ishaan threw caution to the winds and leaned in quickly. After all, you only live once.

iv

‘DB,’ said Anika, walking into DB’s office. ‘You have to do something about our features team. They’re just not pulling their weight.’

Why don’t people say hello anymore, thought DB peevishly. But he didn’t want to sound churlish, given the nature of their upcoming discussion, so he merely said, ‘What have they done this time, Anika?’ in what he hoped was a discouraging tone. This was a constant refrain of Anika’s. She seemed to think that she should be the *de facto* leader of this team without actually ever being in the office or deigning to take on any daily management tasks.

‘That story about the plight of gig workers. It’s a little immature, no? It reads like an undergraduate essay for a writing seminar. And borderline Marxist too. You seem to be running some sort of Bengali communist cabal!’

‘It’s hardly immature to write about workers’ rights,’ said Mridula mildly. ‘The way things are going, most of our readers will eventually become gig workers at a certain point.’

‘Oh, are you here, Mridula?’ said Anika, raising an eyebrow. There was a short, awkward pause. Finally, she continued, ‘They’re all a bunch of kids. And they seem to be getting younger and younger. I just had to talk some sense into a so-called journalist who looked like she was about twelve years old! And their ringleader, that Monami. She might think she’s French or something, with a name like that, but the *Delhi Daily* isn’t her private Jacobin Club.’

‘Let’s not get personal here,’ said DB, bristling. ‘The gig worker story had been his idea, and Monami, as far as he knew, was a very respectable Bengali name. ‘After all—’

‘But it could be harmful to the *brand*, DB,’ said Anika, barrelling on, ‘if these kids assume they can do what they like! Let’s face it, that Monami is practically a kid herself. They need some overseeing, DB. We have to think about the optics here.’

‘Never mind all that now,’ said DB, after trying and failing to come up with a more diplomatic response. ‘Anika, we’ve called you in here for a different reason entirely.’

‘Oh?’ said Anika. DB wasn’t sure why she sounded surprised. He had mentioned very definitely in his meeting note that he had a specific matter to discuss, and anyway, she couldn’t possibly think she had been called in to debate the failings of the features team. More mind games of the rich and famous, he assumed.

‘Er, yes.’ He braced himself. This was it. *Best foot forward.*