

GOAN CHASE

TAKE THREE MYSTERIES

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And the Cradle Falls

‘You look nervous Mom. Is everything a-a-alright?’

Jai’s question took his mother by surprise. It took her a few seconds to smile back at him.

‘Nervous? No dear, I’m just tired. It’s a big party; we have about forty guests. And we’ve been up since morning organizing everything with the caterers.’

‘Can I get you something? Like the chocolate cupca-a-akes? They’re yummy.’

‘Good idea,’ his mother widened her smile. He knew that smile only too well. She smiled like that when she was anxious about something but didn’t want to show it.

‘I’ll go help myself. Are you enjoying the party?’

‘Yes,’ Jai answered quickly and stopped. His stutter grew worse when he lied and he didn’t want his mother to sense it.

She squeezed his shoulder lightly and disappeared into the crowd. Something was wrong but he couldn’t pinpoint exactly what. His father waved to him from the other end of the hall and he waved back. Looking at his father always

felt like looking at his reflection. He had the same short, black hair, light-brown eyes, and rounded features. He was as lanky too, although he was only fourteen.

Dad is anything but nervous. The story was different with his Mom and her sister, Ms Walia – or Sheila *masi* – the host of the house-warming party. The two sisters had exchanged nervous, fearful glances, during the party and had even argued over something before the party began. Too bad he'd been too far to hear any of it.

Lost in thoughts, he didn't notice a tall, young girl and a slightly plump boy come and stand next to him.

'Jai, where have you been? You've no idea what you're missing!' Nirvaan's jolly voice broke his reverie.

'You must absolutely try the canapés,' Ayesha said without waiting for Jai's reply. 'They're D-E-L-I-C-I-O-U-S.'

'And the fruit punch is to die for,' Nirvaan added and lovingly patted his stomach. 'My stomach is one happy customer today.'

Jai smiled. They both looked so different today! Nirvaan was in a coat too long and too tight for him, his curly black hair gelled back, his round, black eyes shining with glee as he talked about food. Ayesha looked uncomfortable in a sari, her dusky complexion covered in layers of make-up, her long, black hair arranged in a hairdo too complex for him to comprehend.

'Why so serious?' Ayesha asked.

Jai swallowed. 'I feel Mom is worried a-a-about something.'

It was never tough for him to speak his mind with his schoolmates and only friends. His stuttering had begun at

an early age, making him too shy and conscious to even try making friends. Being the butt of jokes every now and then had made him recede further into his shell - a shell that only Nirvaan and Ayesha had broken into.

‘You think she’s nervous about this place?’ Ayesha offered. ‘I think it’s kind of unnerving in some ways. That doesn’t mean I’m not glad to be spending our summer vacation in *Goa*, the hottest destination ever! Who wouldn’t want to be here?’

‘I agree,’ Nirvaan added. ‘And I know we’re in a glorious beachside bungalow and all that, but it’s probably a hundred years old or more. Places that old are spooky,’ he said, giving a theatrical little shiver.

Jai looked around. The long hallway where they stood led to a sitting room luxuriously furnished with ornate rugs, plush sofas, eclectic furniture, and Tanjore paintings. The massive glass chandelier gleamed as brightly as the Italian marble used throughout the bungalow.

Adjacent to the sitting room on the left was a spacious dining room, decked with full-length wooden cabinets and a dining table that could seat twenty guests at once. A door within the dining room led to the state-of-the-art kitchen, with appliances he had only seen on TV or in magazines.

Adjacent to the sitting room on the right was the comfortably furnished library and study room. Much of the space on the ground floor was also taken up by the regal teakwood staircase that led to the first floor. Add to this a breathtaking view of the sea from each of the three bedrooms on the first floor, and the three guest bedrooms on the ground floor, and you had a house that bordered on the magnificent.

The guests could not stop raving about the bungalow and he too could not stop admiring it. It was aptly titled Vaikunta – the abode of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi – but despite its obvious beauty and elegance, Jai had been uneasy. The life-like statues of ironclad warriors cast long shadows, the staircase creaked at night, and there were unexplained noises in empty corners. Who wouldn't be spooked?

'You should relax, Jai,' Ayesha said. 'Whatever it is, I'm sure Nilu aunty will take care of it. And I think you should enjoy the party. You've been all quiet and hiding in corners for far too long now.'

That's because I don't stutter if I don't speak! Jai started following his two friends towards the sitting room but didn't get too far as somebody grabbed his hand and pulled him back.

'Hullo boy,' his captor said and Jai found himself face-to-face with Abhay.

'Hello,' Jai said flatly. Abhay was his mother's brother, the late Dev Walia's, only son. And the only reason why Jai was civil with a man he disliked.

'I know of a speech therapist who can help with your problem,' Abhay told him. 'He's really good; he's cured stuttering in a lot of people. And he's good with kids like you, you know, kids with special needs. Remind me to give you his number after the party's over.'

Jai clenched his fists as he looked at his cousin. Abhay was in his early thirties, his mousy face, shifty black eyes, and unkempt personality a far cry from what his father had been like.

Abhay gave a sharp pat on his back and left him. Still clenching his fists, Jai started walking quickly towards his friends but was stopped again, this time by his mother.

‘Jai, I want you to meet somebody,’ she said as she linked her arm with his and led him to a stout woman with a kindly face. ‘Meet Naina Mathur, my childhood friend.’

‘My, Nilu, hasn’t he grown!’ Mrs Mathur gushed as she patted Jai’s shoulder. ‘I must say, he looks just like his father. Rakesh is going to have some competition when this one grows up!’

Both the women laughed heartily and Jai forced a smile.

‘How old are you now, Jai?’

‘Fourteen.’

‘Fourteen! My God, time does fly! It seems like yesterday when Nilu sent me a photograph of this beautiful, chubby baby boy. Which class are you in?’

Jai swallowed. ‘I’m in the ninth sta-a-a ...’

‘Ninth standard, right,’ Mrs Mathur finished for him. ‘So what other subjects do you need to study apart from languages, Science, and Social Studies?’

‘We have Ma-a-a ...’

‘Oh yes, Maths. How could I forget!’ Mrs Mathur finished again and Jai gritted his teeth. The two women started reminiscing about the past and after five minutes of listening to how times had changed, and how fast the children had grown, Jai excused himself as politely as possible and joined his friends in the sitting room.

‘Sheila aunty is one wealthy lady,’ Ayesha murmured to him. ‘Look at that necklace!’

Jai glanced towards Sheila masi, laughing and hobnobbing with her guests. Ayesha may have been impressed, but the necklace was too flashy for his liking. Rubies and sapphires the size of small rocks dazzled in an intricate pattern of white and yellow gold. The lights in the sitting room bounced off the precious gems, intensifying their sparkle.

‘I remember somebody mentioning that it’s a valuable family heirloom,’ Nirvaan said.

‘That, or she may have bought it,’ Ayesha said as she popped a slice of kiwi in her mouth. ‘She’s worked hard for it.’

Jai agreed with Ayesha. Sheila masi had led a highly successful and rewarding career and had recently taken voluntary retirement. She’d never married and without the financial burden of family responsibilities, she lived a cushioned life. All of that hardly mattered to Jai, as despite her affluence and fame in corporate circles, Ms Walia was and would remain his loving and caring masi.

The three chatted for a while before Ayesha and Nirvaan excused themselves to get a refill of their soft drinks. Moving away from the crowd, Jai went and stood by the staircase. He looked around listlessly till his gaze fell on Sheila masi again. She was posing near the gigantic, metal statue of a warrior for a photographer.

Of all the antique vases, art collected from various exhibitions across India, and other artefacts that dotted the house, that one was Jai’s least favourite. It stood near one of the two marble pillars that separated the sitting room from the dining room. Something about its hooded metal face, its multiple spears and swords, its menacing aura, always made him uncomfortable.

Behind the statue, richly embroidered curtains in deep red only added to his feelings of danger. Jai frowned. Did that thing move?

His heart skipped a beat.

The humungous mass of metal was falling.

Falling right on Sheila masi.



Whiff of a Curse

It all happened in a split second.

Jai tried to scream his aunt's name but choked. A man pushed Sheila masi out of the way as the massive sculpture came crashing down on the spot where she'd been standing seconds before.

In the minute of shocked silence that followed, Jai rushed to his aunt's side and helped her get up.

'Sheila, are you okay?' her saviour asked anxiously, holding her by the elbow.

Ms Walia nodded but Jai noticed her hands tremble as she brushed aside the strands of hair from her face.

Guests started gathering around Ms Walia, asking questions and expressing concern. Jai spotted his parents make their way through the crowd towards her. Mr Chopra had a quick word with the unidentified man beside Ms Walia. Together, the two men excused themselves and escorted Ms Walia towards the staircase and up to her bedroom. As soon as they'd left, the crowd split into clusters of people talking in hushed tones.

Mrs Chopra quickly took charge of the situation. She called for the house help who scurried into the sitting room and started dragging the statue into the adjoining library. Jai, his friends, and some other guests pitched in to help out. Once the statue had been shifted, Mrs Chopra closed the door of the library, smiled, and announced that dinner would be served shortly.

This dissipated some of the tension and the guests relaxed. Mrs Chopra got busy issuing instructions to the house helps and Nirvaan and Ayesha lend a hand.

Much as he tried to, Jai could not move away from the spot of the crash. There was a deep, wide gash in the floor, cracks emanating from it like the legs of a giant spider.

Mrs Chopra returned a short while later carrying a large rug and covered the gaping hole with assistance.

‘Now that was something, wasn’t it?’

Abhay joined Jai, pointing towards the damaged floor, an amused expression on his face. ‘See the size of that? That’s some serious damage. Do you think the statue would have killed our dear aunt had it fallen on her?’

With his father attending to Sheila masi, Jai and his friends helped Mrs Chopra attend to the guests. Dinner was served and laughter and gaiety returned to the party. Everybody seemed to have momentarily forgotten the unfortunate incident.

Then why did Mom still look nervous?

She was acting the part of the perfect hostess with aplomb, but he noticed anxiety flash in her eyes every now and then. Was it concern for her sister? Or was it something else?

She'd been nervous since the party had begun. Had she been expecting something like this to happen?

Jai remembered what Abhay had said about the damage. How could he talk about the statue falling on their aunt so casually? It was disturbing because he sensed something behind that comment. He sensed *dislike*.

'Care for some dinner?' Nirvaan asked.

Jai nodded and accompanied his friends to the dining table.

'I think food will do you good,' Ayesha commented. 'You look like hell.'

'Yes, you sure do,' Nirvaan said. 'Is everything ok?'

Jai nodded. He managed to curve his lips enough to resemble a smile. 'I'm oka-a-ay. Just hungry, I guess.'

'Me too,' Ayesha said. 'Let's dig in.'

It was thirty minutes past ten and guests had started leaving. Some were filing up the staircase to meet their hostess. By the time the trio finished dinner, all the guests had left and the house had fallen quiet again, its stillness broken only by the sounds and movements of the house helps clearing the after-party mess. They were considering if it was a good time to meet Sheila aunty when Mrs Chopra walked up to them.

'Thanks so much for helping out!' she said and hugged each one of them. 'I wonder how I would have managed without the three of you.'

'We're gla-a-ad to help, Mom,' Jai said. He hesitated for a moment. 'Can we meet ma-a-asi now?'

'It's better not to disturb her today,' Mrs Chopra said brusquely. 'After the excitement of the party and the incident,

Sheila didi needs to rest. All of you can meet her tomorrow morning; I'm sure she'll be better by then.'

She bid them goodnight and the trio walked under the staircase towards the right wing of the house. Of the three guestrooms, one was occupied by Ayesha, another by Abhay, and the remaining one by Jai and Nirvaan.

The pleasing and inviting interiors of their bedroom soothed Jai as he walked inside with Nirvaan. The wooden flooring was beige in colour and the neatly done single beds were propped with an array of fluffy pillows. The petite bedside lamps bathed the whole room in a warm yellow light as the white curtains ruffled ever so softly near the broad windows that overlooked the sea.

Nirvaan took off his coat and shoes and crashed on his bed. Jai was tired but his mind was whirring. He changed his clothes, walked up to the glass windows, and gazed out, captivated by the sight of the sea. His gaze shifted to the hillock of rocks that started from the beach and continued about 200 meters into the sea. Black and rugged, the rocks loomed in stark contrast to the sea, glistening in patches as the moon played hide and seek with the clouds.

Okay, time to crash. Something caught his eye and he stopped. He moved closer to the window to get a better look. A boat was bobbing up and down near the place where the hillock ended in the sea. What was a boat doing on his aunt's private beach at this hour? Was somebody in it? Why would somebody be in it?

Imagining foul play again? a small voice inside him asked. He thought about arguing with it, but in the end, the long day took its toll, and he gave in to slumber.

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