



***THERE MAY BE AN ASTERISK INVOLVED**

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“Advertising is the most fun you can have with your clothes on.”

-Jerry Della Femina

*Conditions apply.

- Most ads written after the 1950s.

This book is a work of fiction. That means it's not based on any people who are, or ever will be in a position to give me a job.

Just saying.

PROLOGUE

‘Thee!...Seez!...N!...Hapn!’ Ira Bhat said.

She was panting. That was one reason why ‘This is not happening’ had come out sounding like a voodoo chant. The other reason was a combination of panic and incoherent rage.

She looked at the girl running alongside her.

Preeti Shastri looked guilty. It was not a good look on her. Sweet, yes. Coquettish, definitely. Outrageously flirtatious, always. But guilty, just seemed wrong. She had tried to come on time, apparently. *No really, Ira, God promise.* It was just so difficult to get a rickshaw sometimes. And then, that ass of a driver had tried to fleece them with a tampered meter, which would mean some five extra bucks and of course, that wasn’t going to happen, so she had argued and he had made them get out a good kilometre away from the airport and...long story short, here she was with Ira, running to catch a flight that they’d almost certainly miss.

‘*Yubra...bee...*’ Ira hissed at her.

She and Preeti had known each other since junior college. When Preeti’s boyfriend had dumped her, it was Ira who had comforted her and taken her out partying every night, till the point where she no longer felt like killing herself after watching a Hugh Grant movie. When Ira’s parents had moved to Poona, it was Preeti’s place that Ira had crashed at till she found a flat she could afford to rent. When Preeti had decided to study architecture, Ira had stood in the queue with her to get

the entrance forms. When Ira had decided to get into advertising, Preeti had given her a weird look.

‘Ira,’ she had told her friend, ‘you annoy people enough just by being yourself. Why do you want to go and make ads that’ll do that for you?’

‘My ads won’t be annoying,’ Ira had said, throwing a pillow at her, ‘And even if they are, at least I’ll be having fun writing them.’

Now, as she hurriedly dropped her backpack at the entrance to the airport to show her ticket to the security guard, the conversation made her smirk. Some fun that was, she thought. A moment later she was sprinting again towards the Go Air check-in counter, Preeti close behind.

Predictably – because that’s exactly what you’d expect from nightmares coming to life – there was a longish queue at the counter. Ira pushed away the stray wisps of hair that were sticking to her sweat-soaked face and caught her breath, clutching her side. This is what that cycle-rickshaw guy from *Do Bigha Zameen* must’ve felt like, she thought.

‘Five...’ she said, ‘You...made...me run...five...rupees.’

Preeti, who was unloading her backpack to the floor, didn’t say anything. She was done apologizing. Now she just had to wait for Mount Ira to finish spewing.

‘You *know* how much I need this vacation,’ the volcano in question was saying. ‘It’s the first break

I've got in *ages* and now...thanks to you...it looks like...'

Preeti ignored her and tapped the shoulder of the man standing in front of them in the queue.

'Hi!' she chirped, 'Do you mind if we go ahead of you in the line? Our flight leaves in like, ten minutes.' And then, summoning the most charming, most vulnerable smile in her arsenal, she added, *Please?*

The man – some sort of business executive judging from his laptop bag—took in the tiny shorts, the tight tank top and the eyelash-fluttering helplessness on Preeti's face. He melted. 'Sure, sure, of course,' he said with a daft smile.

Standing out of his field of vision, Ira made a face. Damsel-in-distress was her least favourite act in the world. That it worked so well with men, didn't make a difference.

'You're shameless, you know,' she whispered to Preeti.

'And one step closer to the check-in counter, thank you,' Preeti whispered back.

Ira was about to launch into a speech about self-respect and how it's good to have some, when loud strains of 'Smack My Bitch Up' interrupted her. With an exasperated sigh, she fished out her mobile phone from her back pocket and put it to her ear.

'Hello? Yeah, Vikram?'

Preeti watched with interest as a variety of expressions passed over Ira's face. Her mouth was having some trouble keeping up. There was a 'but'. Then an 'I'. Then a high-pitched 'What, *now*?' Then the call ended and there was some swearing.

Shaking her cell-phone as if willing it to self-destruct, Ira met Preeti's questioning look with a nervous smile.

'So, here's the thing...' she said.

CHAPTER ONE

‘How did she take it?’ Rohit Mukherji asked.

Vikram Verma blew a ring of smoke towards the ceiling. He was a tall man in his late thirties, with the kind of frame that spoke of hours spent in the gym, but years ago. A touch of grey at the temples and a forehead etched with permanent worry lines, gave him the look of someone who didn’t like his time wasted. Reclined at an impossible angle on his swivel chair, he was holding the cigarette with practised ease. He shifted his gaze from the ceiling to his second-in-command.

‘How do you think?’

Rohit grinned. They were sitting in Vikram’s cabin in the Mumbai office of J. McCarthy, one of India’s top advertising agencies. It was an interesting office; most ad agencies are. When you’re building a place for people to sit and think up creative ways to sell toothpaste for twelve hours a day, you try to make it fun. So apart from the regulation display case for all the advertising awards the agency had won over the years, the J. McCarthy office also had a pool table in the lobby, beanbags to sprawl on and a small glass cabin where you could go and scream quietly when you started getting scary daydreams about dancing sanitary napkins.

Vikram’s cabin, on the other hand, was the starkest, most austere, place in the whole agency. Like the cabins of the three other Senior Creative Directors in the agency, it was painted plain black, had black laminate furniture and a window with a view of the sprawling office district below.

Unlike those other cabins however, it had absolutely nothing else in it – no family photos, no mock-ups of past and present ad campaigns, no decorative knick-knacks, not even an interestingly kitschy calendar. Nothing at all, except Vikram’s silver MacBook Pro and five dull golden trophies, each in the shape of a lion.

Even now, after years of watching them pile up, Rohit found his gaze being drawn to them every few minutes. A Cannes Lion is to advertising what an Oscar is to film folk, what a Grammy is to the music industry, what a YouTube comment is to people who post YouTube comments. ‘I can imagine her expression when you told her...’ he began.

‘Are you going with him?’

Rohit fell silent. He was a colour-inside-the-lines kind of guy. Clean-shaven and tidy, he wore his shirts tucked-in and his side-parting razor sharp. He ran a hand over his hair now, a little thrown by Vikram’s ability to cut through small talk and land neatly on a subject others would’ve chosen to avoid. But then, his boss was special in so many ways.

‘Are you quitting?’ Vikram asked again, taking a drag of his cigarette, ‘Because I need to know, Rohit. As soon as possible.’

‘I’m not. Rakesh asked me, but I said no.’

‘Any chance you’ll suddenly change your mind?’

Rohit laughed.

‘Any chance we won’t be working this weekend?’

‘We *won’t* be working? You mean all this is some kind of a stupid prank?’

Ira was standing at the door of the cabin, righteous indignation plastered all over her face. A pair of Aviators perched on her damp forehead, holding back wavy hair tied up in a messy bun. She wore a pair of denim cut-offs and a light, white cotton shirt that emphasized her flushed face. On anyone else, the whole look would’ve come across as ‘carefully careless’. On her, it was more ‘hot and bothered’.

Vikram smiled pleasantly at her. ‘Ira! How was Goa?’

Ira’s eyes narrowed.

‘You’re evil, has anyone ever told you that?’

‘You’re a drama queen, has anyone told *you* that?’

‘I’m *not* a drama queen! You have to admit, Vikram, this is a bit much. I mean, I haven’t had a holiday in what, a year now? This is just...just...’

‘Unfair?’ Vikram supplied.

‘Yes!’

‘Well kid, I hate to break this to you, but so is life,’ Vikram put out the stub of his cigarette and lit another one. ‘If you ask HR to pull out your contract, you’ll see that the fine folk at J. McCarthy were very careful not to put any fairness clauses in there.’

‘But...’

‘*We promise always to treat you fairly and in a just manner...nope, sorry, not in there.*’

‘Fine,’ Ira said, making a face, ‘What are we pitching for? And what the hell happened to Ra...’

At which point, noticing Rohit's warning look, she stopped.

'The pitch is for Maxwell Life Insurance,' Vikram replied, apparently not noticing that Ira had trailed off mid-question. 'Aditi has the brief, go mull over it and we'll sit in a bit, with whatever ideas you guys have.'

Outside Vikram's cabin, Ira grabbed Rohit by the sleeve. 'What the hell happened?'

'Rakesh... he and Vikram had a bit of a showdown.'

'What was it this time?'

'*Arre*, there were a lot of issues. Complicated stuff.'

Ira stared at Rohit. He was a friend – one of the best art directors she knew and a pretty good Associate Creative Director too – but sometimes, just sometimes, she wished he would throw political correctness to the wind and act like a normal person.

'Are you going to tell me what happened, or am I going to have to ask Aditi for the details?' 'What details?'

Giving up on him, Ira turned to face her art partner and one of her best friends in the agency. She and Aditi Mehta had met only three years ago, but fourteen-hour workdays have a way of cementing friendships that nine-to-five types just don't. Aditi was everything Ira wasn't: patient, reasonable and fashion-forward enough to be comfortable in clothes that weren't denim. Today, she was wearing a nautical sun dress, a glittery clip on one side of her graduated bob and a slightly strained smile.

‘What happened between Rakesh and Vikram?’ Ira asked her.

‘Oh, you should’ve been there! Rakesh called Vikram a *maader*...’ Aditi looked at Rohit, ‘*really* bad word’ she finished.

‘Ooh, what did Vikram do?’

‘Same thing he always does. Threw stuff at him.’

Ira thought of Vikram’s cabin. ‘What did he find to throw?’

Aditi gave her a pained look.

Ira gasped. ‘No! Not Dud!’

Just weeks ago, a well-meaning colleague had given Vikram a mug inscribed ‘World’s Coolest Dude’, so that he could add a ‘personal touch’ to his cabin. Overenthusiastic attention from the canteen staff had resulted in the ‘e’ being washed off, so the mug now declared to all and sundry that its owner was the World’s Coolest Dud. Vikram had kept it for the unabashed joy it brought his juniors.

‘Yes, and then he told Rakesh to get out and show his face in office only when he’d come to his senses.’

‘Was Rakesh...?’ Ira brought her thumb and forefinger together to form an imaginary joint.

‘When *isn’t* he?’ Aditi asked her.

‘Good point.’

It was, too. Rakesh Raina, copywriter, ACD, bane of interns everywhere, had always come in to work with the red-rimmed eyes of a serious pothead. Nobody said anything to him about it – it isn't an uncommon sight to see people shiftily rolling joints in the parking lots of agencies. As long as work doesn't suffer, other people pretend not to notice. And to Rakesh's credit, he had managed to meet most deadlines and keep his head above the water. Even if it was filled with shiny, happy creatures the whole time. But that was Rakesh the copywriter. Rakesh the boss was a whole different kettle of fish. Ira remembered all the times he had approved her headline, only to call it a load of crap the next day; the times he'd forgotten to brief her on a job and then yelled at her for not meeting the deadline on it; the one unforgettable time he had made her cry in front of the whole office for a spelling mistake she'd let slip in the terms and conditions part of a promotional leaflet. And she still had a better deal than Sreedhar, the other copywriter in Vikram's team, who shook gently in his sneakers every time he had to present a headline to Rakesh for approval.

But bully that he was, him quitting meant that Ira's life was going to change in complicated ways. And while she brooded on this, it struck her that she was still missing a key detail of the events of the previous evening.

'Hold on,' she said to Aditi. 'You still haven't told me what started this whole thing.'

Aditi and Rohit exchanged glances.

'Umm, I've heard there were lots of issues, actually,' Aditi said guardedly. 'Complicated ones.'

Ira's mouth dropped open. This was in direct violation of the art/copy partner code of conduct, where each partner had exclusive rights to any and all gossip the other knew. Before she could protest though, Rohit jumped in.

'Look, the bottom line is, it's Saturday morning, Rakesh is gone, we have a life insurance pitch on Monday and only two writers on it.'

'Sree?' Ira asked

'Down with a stomach bug,' Rohit said.

'Lucky bastard,' Ira muttered.

'Oh, wait till you hear the brief, *then* call him that,' Aditi said.

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'Have a good life?' Ira read out from the PowerPoint presentation open on her desktop. 'What does that even mean? What the hell is a good life?'

'You tell me,' Aditi said, yawning. 'You're supposed to be good with words, copywriter.' 'I am. What do you think the words "shove it" mean, by the way?'

They were in the four-by-four cubicle they shared, J. McCarthy management being of the opinion that there *is* such a thing as too much personal space. For a tiny place, it wasn't too bad. The girls had each done up their workstations in their own individual styles. Aditi's was filled with quirky odds and ends she had picked up at handicraft exhibitions over the years, interesting design samples pinned to the tack-board and a bunch of graphic design books held together by bookends

shaped like fairies. In stark contrast, Ira's side of the cubicle was covered almost entirely by travel postcards of virgin beaches and picturesque hills. The only non-travel piece was a quote by Douglas Adams printed out in 14 point Century Gothic that was stuck to her tack-board with drawing pins. It read, *I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they fly by.*'

This is where they had been sitting for the past two hours, going over the advertising done by Maxwell's competitors, visiting the company website, reading and re-reading the brief and cursing the account planners who had thought of it. A large empty pizza box and a couple of half empty (or half-full, depending on your take on life) bottles of Coke stood witness to this ridiculous way of spending a Saturday.

'It means to push something, usually up someone's something. Who wants to know?'

This came from the other side of their cubicle. Ira crumpled an old printout and chucked it across the cubicle wall.

'Nobody asked you!'

'Sure sounded like you did,' Sameer Agrawal said, standing up and chucking the paper ball right back at her.

Ira saw the trajectory of the paper ball and ducked. In the grand old tradition of farce, it hit the back of Aditi's head.

'Oh grow up, you two!' she snapped, not taking her eyes off her monitor.

Sameer was Ira's other best friend at J. McCarthy. It was one of those bizarre relationships where two people have the utmost regard for each other but each also considers the other a total moron when it comes to most things in life.

Sam ignored her, choosing instead to stand up on his desk. He had a lean, athletic frame, which he chose to cover with t-shirt-and-denim ensembles that looked straight out of Men's Vogue. Gelspiked hair and Air Nikes completed the look otherwise known as Fashion Victim in A Juvenile Detention Centre. He seemed to be taking the part seriously, as he stepped over the divider separating his cubicle from the girls' and jumped down, landing right next to Ira's chair. Looking at her outfit, he whistled.

'Na-hai-ce shorts.'

'Screw you. I'm coming straight from the airport.'

'They're having a beach-bum convention there, is it?'

He spotted her backpack lying in the corner and realization struck. 'Wait a minute. You're supposed to be in Goa.'

'Yes, Sam, and you're supposed to have a life. Tough luck all around, huh?'

Sam ignored the jibe and perched himself on her desk. 'So what happened?'

Ira filled him in on the dramatic turn of events that had peed all over her vacation plans.

'Ouch,' Sam said, 'Need help?'

'Psychiatric? Yes. Yours? No.'

'Sam, please just buzz off and let us work, okay?' Aditi said, clearly irritated.

Sameer looked at Ira and asked in a loud stage whisper, 'Is it... *that* time of the month?'

'She's been reading an insurance company's mission statement for two hours,' Ira paused dramatically, 'On a *Saturday*. You want to get yourself killed or something?'

'Okay, okay, I'm sorry,' Sam said. 'It's just that I've been waiting for the past hour to sign artworks and I'm bored out of my mind. Just let me hang around here, okay? I'll shut up, promise.'

Ira looked at Aditi, who gave her a reluctant nod.

'Fine,' Ira said, 'But first, tell us what's a good life.'

Sam looked suspiciously from Ira to Aditi. 'How would *I* know? I work in advertising,' he joked. 'Oh yeah, sure, what would *you* know of a good life, right?' Aditi asked, hands on her hips. Sam gave her a resigned smile. He had grown up in the posh lanes of Malabar Hill, graduated from an uppity business school and decided halfway into his first job that he'd rather be a copywriter than an investment banker. To nobody's surprise, his family hadn't jumped for joy. The subject still sparked off uncomfortable silences in the Agrawal household. After sitting through about a dozen of these, Sam had packed his bags and moved into a small studio apartment in the suburbs, which he shared with a client-servicing guy from Publicis. It wasn't a dream scenario, he still kicked himself after every college reunion, but that didn't stop people from making snide comments about his privileged past.

'Okay, imagine you *weren't* in advertising,' Ira said wearily. 'What would you do?'

A dreamy smile appeared on Sam's face. 'Scarlett Johansson,' he breathed.

Ira burst out laughing as Aditi lunged at him.

'Okay, okay, calm down!' Sam yelled, holding her back, 'Let me think.'

A moment later, he spoke. 'For me, I guess a good life would be if I could do...everything. Travel to exotic places, try different cuisines, oh, skydiving, scuba-diving...I don't know, man. You get one life, you have to make the most of it...' he broke off, seeing the bored expression on Aditi's face. 'Why,' he asked her, 'What would *you* do?'

Something fizzled in Ira's brain. Her forehead wrinkled. Something was pushing Aditi and Sam's voices into the background.

'I'd get a cheetah' Aditi was saying.

'You... what?'

'A baby cheetah. They're cute.'

'So are actual babies. Doesn't mean you just get one!'

Ira grabbed a piece of paper and scribbled the thought down quickly. She'd lost too many ideas to death-by-lack-of-pencil. Once the words were safely pinned down on the paper, Aditi and Sam's argument began to register again.

'Okay, eww, no, actual babies crap all the time.'

'Oh, as opposed to baby cheetahs who have pink candy floss coming out of their asses?'

Ira shook her head to clear the mental image of candyfloss-pooping cheetahs. She turned to Aditi and said the words that stand for limitless hope and joy in advertising: 'I have an idea.'

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Meb.'

In ad school, one of Ira's professors had compared creative people to mothers. A creative person gives birth to an idea, he had said, much like a mother gives birth to a baby. Back then, Ira had thought that the man had some serious Oedipal issues, but now she saw his point. Like a mother, a creative person nurtures the idea, makes it strong, gives it a sense of purpose. S/he braids little ribbons in the idea's hair, puts it in a pretty little dress, makes it wear wee little socks and tiny satin slippers and then leads it proudly by the hand to the Creative Director, who takes one look at it and goes: *'Meh.'*

That's what Vikram had said when Ira had told him her idea. Maxwell Life Insurance – Live it up. It had sounded so good in her head. You have one life, so go ahead and live it, do everything you want to without worrying about the future, because Maxwell is here to ensure that your loved ones are taken care of. It still seemed like a great thought to her. Vikram clearly didn't share her opinion. 'It's very...basic, guys' he said, 'Superficial. We need something solid, creative, insightful. This is...fluff.'

Then, looking at the angst-ridden expressions on Aditi and Ira's faces, he said, 'Pull up a chair, let us figure this out right now.'

'Okay, but first someone tell me why people get life insurance,' Aditi said, easing into a swivel chair.

'To get a tax rebate,' Ira muttered, dropping on to the beanbag in the corner of the cabin. 'People get life insurance so that their family has something to fall back on when they're gone,'

Vikram answered, glaring at Ira.

'But that's exactly what all the other insurance brands are saying,' Aditi said.

'And they're saying it so badly,' Ira said. 'The other day, I saw a billboard that said "Be good father. Be insured."'

‘Oh, freelancing again, are you?’ Aditi asked her, and then ducked to avoid a ballistic pencil.

‘Can we focus?’ Vikram asked wearily. There was no mistaking the seriousness in his tone.

The girls shut up.

‘Everybody is doing emotional stuff because thinking about your own death tends to make one emotional,’ Vikram said. ‘If you can come up with a campaign that’s not emotional, but comes from a real insight, be my guest.’

‘But will the Maxwell guys be open to a campaign like that?’ Aditi asked.

‘Don’t worry about that. Rohit and I are working on a safer, more staid campaign. But this is a pitch. We need to show them how far we can push the envelope. So I need a campaign from you guys that’s sharp, fresh and real. Now think: what do real people feel when they think about death?’

‘I’m guessing it scares the crap out of them,’ Ira said, ‘You know... it’s funny. You spend your whole life being afraid of death. And then... you just die.’ There was a pause. A slow smile spread over Vikram’s face.

‘Unless...you don’t,’ he said.

‘Huh?’ Aditi looked totally confused.

‘People who buy life insurance don’t die. Because, in a sense, they’re always there, taking care of their loved ones.’

‘They live forever,’ Ira whispered. ‘Maxwell Life Insurance...Live forever.’

Vikram sat back in his chair and lit up a cigarette.

‘Ladies, I believe we have a campaign idea.’

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PRAISE FOR 'THERE MAY BE AN ASTERISK INVOLVED'

"... a fresh blend of sarcasm, humour and everything in between."

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