

Fatal Mistakes

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'There is no justice. There is just us.'

—Terry Pratchett, *Mort*

*'They had it comin', they had it comin'
They had it comin' all along
I didn't do it, but if I'd done it
How could you tell me that I was wrong?'*

- Cellblock Tango, Chicago

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To angry women everywhere

How to Read This Book

This book has footnotes. They are fun. Especially if you like asides that allow you to have a private chuckle now and then. But not everyone enjoys footnotes. So, if you prefer to immerse yourself in the plot, get carried away by the protagonist's shenanigans, without having some omniscient narrator get into your head and whisper random shit, please, feel free to ignore them. Really, there is no obligation. Just pretend they're tweets from people you follow on Twitter but don't really know. Or care about *at all*. It's cool. And now, to the story.

Prologue

There are a number of words that can describe a local train station in Mumbai. Loud is one. Utter fucking mess comes a close second.

But come evening and there's only one word that truly captures the ethos of a Mumbai railway station and that is 'frantic'. Because evening is when your average office-goer shuts his (or her) last file, flees to the station and joins thousands of others like him—or her—jostling into the closed confines of a minuscule train compartment. Which eventually takes them to a station from where they can crawl into the smaller confines of a rickshaw or a cab or the somewhat larger yet equally crowded enclosure called a BEST bus. Which then hurtles along a potholed road, threatening various spinal injuries before finally taking them home. Where they can then possibly drown their job stress in alcohol or the accepted equivalent—any one of the numerous comedy shows on primetime television.

The next morning, they make the same journey backwards—rickshaw/cab/bus to station to crammed train compartment to another station, like so many human ping-pong balls hurtling along the railway line.

Bandra station isn't the worst of the lot. That dubious honour can probably be shared by Dadar and Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, or CST as it is known. Both are huge, and play host to all manner of trains: the slow, the fast, the ones headed out of the city. CST gets Central and Harbour line passengers, but Dadar levels up further, having Western line trains passing through it as well. Add to that the bonus mob of people heading into or out of the city and the result is utter chaos in both places.

No, Bandra isn't the worst by far. With its Victorian Gothic-style facade and high ceilings, it has the air of a colonial gentleman checking his pocket-watch in exasperation, waiting for the

insanity around him to die down. And perhaps it does, in those hours when it's so late it's almost early. At 6.30 p.m. on a weekday, however, it remains, like every other station, frantic.

As was Viral Patel that evening. He stood at the edge of platform number four on the Western line of Bandra station, waiting for a train to get back home. Inside his smart black backpack was a laptop with a PowerPoint presentation, to which his boss had suggested at least thirty-seven changes, 'to be done before you come in tomorrow, thanks very much'. The asshole. It would take him at least two hours to do this from home, so it would be great if he reached home really quickly, but did they care? Did the Western Railway actually give a fuck? No. They did not. Virar fast, after Virar fast, after Bhayandar fast and now, what, an out-of-station train? Oh, come on.

It was the Flying Ranee to Surat. Gujarat. Now that was a state to start over in. The economy was booming, the infrastructure actually existed, instead of pretending to, like this sorry lot here. And it was the one place in India nobody would call him Vairuhl instead of Veeruhl. Still, at least he wasn't named Anal, thank God.

He clicked his tongue and looked at the digital indicator, which displayed the time the next train was due. Ten minutes. Ten minutes! He could've caught three Borivali fast locals in that much time! There was nothing to do but look around at ... Oh, look, there were the usual women waiting to board the ladies' first-class compartment. They'd do. Except there seemed to be a madwoman among them today. Was it OK to call her that? he wondered. Wasn't it all 'mentally challenged' and 'psychologically unable' or whatever these days? The woman seemed too bedraggled to qualify for such fancy terms. She was old but looked older, in her grimy blouse and tattered saree as she sat splay-legged on the platform floor, right in the middle of the crowd of commuters. She stared straight ahead and muttered to herself, a constant barrage of sub-decibel nonsense. She wasn't begging or anything, but the women were carefully ignoring her anyway. Everybody was, except one young Sikh boy, who crouched next to her and gently murmured something. Probably asking her to push off, Viral thought. Till they both looked right at him for a minute. What the hell? Viral looked away. The woman reminded him of his mom. She had the same disapproving expression in her eyes.

He glanced at his watch. 6.36.

'Passengers on platform number four are requested to step away from the platform. A fast train is passing.'

The railway announcer was female today. She sounded bored, mechanical, practically comatose. But coherent, which was more than you could say for the male announcer, who, according to Viral, could be talking about his sex life for all anybody could make out.

He took a step back from the platform and checked his phone as it buzzed. A new text from his boss telling him the presentation could be submitted by lunch. Finally, Viral thought, some saving grace to the day. The shrill horn of the oncoming train announced its arrival and for the first time that day, Viral felt his spirits lift.

And then, to his utter surprise, the madwoman came charging at him and pushed him off the platform.

Straight into the path of the Flying Raneer that was speeding down the rails.

One

How is it, Avantika Pandit thought, that nobody has discovered what bastards Thursdays are. There you are, hating Monday and Wednesday, ignoring Tuesday and its middle-child self-esteem-issues, winking back at Flirty Friday. And all the while, this jackass, Thursday, is just whistling a merry tune, as it casually removes the pin from the grenade it's holding. Hindenburg disaster? Thursday. Malaysia Flight 17 disappears? Thursday. When is Corn and Peas the Sub of the Day? Fucking Thursday. Nothing good ever happened on a Thursday.

Today was a Thursday. And nothing good was happening in the cabin of Nathan Alvares, the chief editor of *The Mumbai Daily*. Which wouldn't have been a problem, except that was where Avantika was currently standing. And being yelled at by said editor. And for what? It wasn't as if she had done anything illegal. Was exploring a different angle for a potential scoop such a bad thing? Clearly, in Nathan's book it was, else she wouldn't be standing here in his cabin, next to her colleague and friend Uday Desai, at the receiving end of yet another lecture. They weren't alone either. She stole a look at the old woman sitting in the chair opposite Nathan.

Asha Bhise sat with her back ramrod straight and an expression of furious dislike on her face, arthritic fingers clenched into fists in her lap. Avantika had first met her a few days ago at the GSB Mandal's rangoli competition, with her granddaughter Prajakta. Now as she watched the grandmother turn passive aggression into an art form, Avantika pitied the girl. Prajakta was fifteen, bright, quite talented at rangoli ... well, she herself wasn't an expert judge or anything, but the pattern the girl had made at the competition had seemed pretty enough ... she was willing to talk about her classmate's suicide and—

'...a *minor!*' Nathan's words crashed through her thoughts, 'You both *know* we don't talk to children if their parents aren't present and ...'

'I had told her,' the woman's English had a strong Marathi lilt, as she threw a dirty look Avantika's way, 'I had told her at that competition only, not to ask Prajakta anything about that ... that *horrible* affair, but did she listen? No!'

Well, yeah, but Prajakta didn't mind, na, Avantika wanted to say. And if what she had told her and Uday about the boy and his friends was true ... If only this dragon lady hadn't popped up at the park the next day when they were talking to Prajakta, they would've got so much more. Avantika had been taken aback to see the old woman 'taking rounds' in the park at the precise moment Prajakta was getting to the good part. Almost as if the woman had decided to follow her fifteen-year-old granddaughter to see what she was up to behind her family's back. But she kept her thoughts to herself till Nathan led the woman out of his cabin, apologising and assuring her this kind of thing wouldn't happen again. Then she turned to Uday, who was standing next to her, his hands behind his back. The pose made him look more like a schoolboy than ever. A worried schoolboy, going by his expression.

'So ... now what?' Avantika asked him, but the answer came before he could open his mouth.

'Now ... you can start explaining to me what the hell you were thinking,' Nathan growled, shutting the cabin door and returning to his seat in angry strides.

'I—' Avantika began.

'I was talking to Uday,' Nathan snapped, pulling his chair roughly by its arms as he sat down in it. His expression was stormy.

'I'm sorry, Nathan ... I should've ...' Uday looked utterly crushed and Avantika felt a pang of sympathy for her friend.

'First, you involve *her* in the story without telling me,' Nathan counted off on his fingers. 'Second, you accost a child in a park, asking her about her friend's suicide. And you do this when her grandmom has categorically told you not to. What is going on, Uday? You're one of my most responsible guys, what the hell are you doing, pulling crap like this?'

'It wasn't his fault,' Avantika said. 'I told him ... See, I got the feeling that—'

'Of course! Of *course*, you told him, Pandit, who else could possibly engineer something this utterly idiotic? And I bet you had a good reason for it, too. Right?'

Avantika gulped. Nathan's voice was dangerously casual and when he descended from flaming anger to sweet sarcasm like this, the only sensible response was to run for your life.

'See, when I met Prajakta at that competition,' *an absurd event which you made me cover, by the way*, Avantika added mentally, 'she told me that the boy who committed suicide was actually the ring-leader of a gang of bullies, who routinely eve-teased girls. I thought, maybe there's more to the suicide than we know, so ...'

‘So, you thought ethics, bah, who needs them?’ Nathan said.

‘No, I thought we could ask her who his friends were and ...’

‘And talk to *them* without their parents’ permission?’

‘Look, Nathan, I don’t see what the big deal is. Nobody got hurt, everything is fine, only the grandmom is annoyed. If you ask me, she’s probably just pissed we didn’t listen to her. That or the fact that she didn’t win that rangoli competition. But I don’t blame her, Prajakta told me she has arthritis, her fingers can’t bend like they used to and—’

She stopped as Nathan took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair.

‘No, you’re right, Pandit, you’re absolutely right,’ he said. ‘You *don’t* see what the big deal is. Tell me something, you felt there was more to this suicide, right? So ... do you think it could be a murder?’ He looked questioningly at both of them.

‘I don’t ... I ... maybe ...’ Avantika shrugged.

‘And if it’s a murder, then whoever committed it, how do you think they’ll feel when they find out some kid has been talking to a reporter, because of which this whole suicide they staged will now come under investigation? Hmm?’

Avantika blinked.

‘Erm ...’

‘No, wait, my mistake; you didn’t think about this, did you?’

‘Not really,’ she said in a small voice.

‘What about you, Uday? Did *you* think about it or did you just let Pandit take over the driver’s seat while you went along for the ride?’

‘It won’t happen again, Nathan,’ Uday said slowly, not meeting his boss’s eyes. ‘I shouldn’t have let it come to this. I’m really sorry.’

Nathan looked away and when he spoke again, his voice had softened a bit.

‘Fine. Let me tell you what’s going to happen now. Uday, you’re going to handle this suicide story alone, like you were meant to—’

‘But, Nathan, I—’ Avantika said.

‘You, Pandit, are going to shut up and do the assignments I give you. Is that understood?’

‘But—’

‘It’s a yes or no question.’

‘Yes, but I wanted to cover crime! I thought after ... after...’ she faltered.

Nathan raised his eyebrows. ‘After?’ he asked.

‘After the ward-boy autopsy story ...’

‘Oh, so you think because you reported *one* story that wasn’t a feature you’re qualified to report on crime?’

It was a great story, she wanted to yell, none of the other papers covered it! It was an exclusive that made the authorities sit up and ask why the fuck ward boys were doing post mortems in a government hospital! And by the

way, it’s not like I haven’t covered real news before landing up at your precious newspaper! She took a deep breath.

‘Look, I—’ she said instead.

‘Let me summarize what just happened here, Pandit.’ Nathan glared at her. ‘You jumped on a story assigned to another reporter instead of passing him the lead you had found. You then did something just plain wrong from a journalistic point of view. And you did it with absolutely zero regard for any of the people involved. You know what that tells me?’

Something unflattering about me, Avantika thought, but held her tongue.

‘It tells me you’re impulsive and reckless. Not great survival traits for a crime reporter.’

Bingo, Avantika thought miserably.

‘Do I think you can cover crime? Maybe. Someday. But it sure as hell isn’t today. So now Uday can go do his job without you making him forget the difference between right and wrong, and you ...,’ he handed her a sheet of A4, ‘can write a story on this.’

Avantika took the sheet with misgivings. A quick glance confirmed her suspicions.

‘But—’ she began, ignoring the frantic waving from her survival instinct.

‘Have you finished the spy-gadget piece?’ Nathan demanded.

‘Almost, I ...’

‘Good. Knock it off, then do this. And now get back to work, you two.’

‘A waste-management farm,’ she said to Uday, disgusted, once they were outside Nathan’s cabin. ‘The glories of garbage and the beauty of biogas. As if Top 10 Gadgets for Would-Be Spies wasn’t bad enough.’

Bloody Nasir, she thought. The fool had pitched the story to Nathan, knowing full well that anything with a ‘top 10’ was like catnip to the chief editor, who had taken it into his head that his newspaper needed to appeal to a younger readership, in order to stay afloat. Enter *Spy Wars 4*, the

latest in a movie franchise that people with no understanding of how real spies worked called ‘Thrilling! Accurate! A must-watch!’ Nasir had pitched his piece saying it would be topical and Nathan had green lighted it, assuming all younger readers were the kind of nerdbos who’d lap it up. Only for Nasir to be then laid up in bed with malaria and the story passing on to Avantika, who was now calculating the odds of time travel being invented this week, so she could go back in time and kill the person who invented listicles. She turned to Uday, hoping for sympathy, or more realistically, a laugh at her expense. But Uday stayed quiet.

‘Didn’t you hear me?’ she nudged his elbow. ‘I’m going to cover a place that’ll probably smell like the inside of a fish ...’

‘Yeah, whatever,’ he muttered, walking towards his desk.

‘What’s up with *you*? I mean, I know it wasn’t exactly a party in there but—’

‘He’s disappointed in me, Avantika!’ Uday snapped. ‘Do you not get that?’

Avantika was taken aback.

‘I ... do, but ...’ she stammered.

‘But what? It doesn’t matter? It matters to me, OK? I’ve been here five years and that’s the first time Nathan has talked to me like that!’

‘Hey, I’m sorry about that but—’

‘Are you? You don’t *seem* sorry.’

‘What the hell, man?’ she said. ‘You’re acting like it’s my fault ...’

‘Isn’t it?’ Uday hissed. ‘Whose idea was it to go meet that girl in that park?’

‘You didn’t have to agree to it!’

‘No, I didn’t! But you shouldn’t have suggested it in the first place.’

Avantika’s eyes widened. She took a step backwards out of sheer outrage. Uday hadn’t shown any qualms while listening to Prajakta Bhise recount how Tushar Prasad was a dick and the rumours that had flown through All Bless High School about why that girl dropped out of school. But now he was acting as if—

‘Oh! So, what, this is all my fault?’ she spluttered. ‘Is that what you’re saying?’

Uday held out a hand as if to stop her.

‘Nathan’s right,’ he said softly, his chest rising and falling as he struggled to control his emotions. ‘I should just go do my job and not let you distract me.’

He walked away, leaving Avantika standing with her mouth open. *What the hell just happened?* she asked herself. But before she could even frame an answer, her phone buzzed. She looked at the screen. Incoming call from Aai. She answered.

‘Avanti? That photo na ...’ her mother’s voice sounded in her ear.

She rolled her eyes. Ah yes, the photograph. One of the many that had found their way into her inbox since her father had decided it was unacceptable to have an unmarried daughter in his house. Ignoring the lot of them clearly wasn’t working.

‘Aai, tell Baba this is not a good time to discuss boys with me.’

‘What? Arré, no, no. Sapna’s picture. Remember?’

‘Who?’

Her mother clicked her tongue.

‘Sapna? Radha’s daughter? You had put the missing ad in your paper?’

‘Oh, right, right,’ Avantika said, pinching the bridge of her nose. ‘What’s the problem?’

‘She hasn’t heard anything from anyone yet, so I was wondering if we should put the ad again. Maybe someone will see and ...’

Avantika listened to her mother’s voice as she tried to remember what the maid’s daughter looked like. She vaguely remembered Sapna as a cheerful, skinny girl who had come over once to draw mehendi on her hands before a friend’s wedding. The only other time she had actually met her was when she had come home with Radha to give them pedhas after passing her SSC Board exams. When Aai had asked her what she planned to do next, she had shyly confessed that she wanted to do a beautician’s course and start her own beauty parlour someday.

When news of her going missing had reached them, Avantika’s mom had asked if anything had troubled her at home, anything that might have made her run away, but Radha had turned down the idea. She had gone to the police two whole days after her daughter failed to return home, a genius-level move, Avantika thought, when she’d first heard. What kind of mother doesn’t report a missing daughter for forty-eight hours, she had asked. The kind that thinks twice before involving the police in her troubles, her mother had replied with a glare. The police had assured Radha that they were looking for Sapna, but with at least thirty-five people going missing every day in the city, Avantika didn’t think Sapna’s chances looked good. That was what she’d told her mom when the latter had first suggested she put a missing person ad in the *Mumbai Daily*. But Alka Pandit

had drawn herself to her full height of five feet three inches and asked what good it was to have a journalist for a daughter if she couldn't even help her own help.

So, despite knowing what she knew—that the likelihood of a teenage girl surviving alone on Mumbai's streets unharmed was microscopic, that the chances of finding someone who doesn't want to be found are marginal, that the search is exponentially tougher after the first forty-eight hours—Avantika had told her mom to send her Sapna's details along with a recent photo. The missing person ad had come out weeks ago and if there were no leads yet ... But she knew better than to dampen the hopes of a mother—especially her own. She assured Aai that she'd get the ad out again. One call to the guy she knew in the Response Department to sort out the details, and she was free.

Free to dwell on the fact that in the matter of a single afternoon, she had got her best and possibly only friend into trouble and lost all the progress she had made with her editor in the past year. She glanced at Uday, hunched over his computer, frowning with concentration. She owed him her job and most of her mental health. She had almost dragged him into the mud with her, and for what? The chance to get her byline above an exposé? The chance to prove to Nathan that she had what it takes? Well, duh. She wasn't just going to give up on that. And she would do whatever it took to get her way, whether Nathan liked it or not. She'd just have to keep Uday out of her shenanigans, but he'd probably be thankful for that anyway.

The question was, where was she going to get her big scoop, now that she had been ordered off that suicide. It definitely wasn't going to be at—she glanced at the A4 sheet Nathan had handed her—Dharini Farm. A waste-management farm, she thought, shaking her head. Of all the things he could've asked her to write about, he had chosen this garbage. Literally. She sneaked a look at Nathan. She could see him through the glass panels of his cabin, talking on the phone, the worry lines on his face pronounced in the harsh fluorescent light. Perhaps she needed to lie low awhile, till he calmed down. Even if it meant visiting a farm that processed actual, physical shit. She was about to dial the number on the sheet to set up an appointment with the manager of the farm, when her phone buzzed. A text from an unknown number? She frowned as she read it:

10062019Kandivali help avntika mam do smthng pls

What the hell? Who was this? How did they have her number? And what the fuck did this mea—

'Hey, there.'

She knew that voice.

‘Go away,’ she said, not looking up from the phone.

‘I would, if I thought you were being serious,’ Dhruv Juneja, ace photographer and one of the two heirs to the Juneja business empire, grinned as he sat down next to her.

‘Oh, you think I’m not serious?’ She raised her eyebrows. ‘Very presumptuous of you.’

‘God, I love it when you use long words!’ he grinned. It was a nice grin, with the dimples and the twinkly eyes.

Avantika shook her head in amused exasperation.

‘Do you mind, I’m trying to work,’ she lied, trying not to smile.

‘Sure, sure, just tell me when to pick you up.’

‘What?!?’

‘Nathan’s asked me to go with you to take some pictures. At a ... I’m not sure I heard it right, but it sounded like “waste farm”?’

‘No, you heard right.’ She scowled. ‘Why can’t Gupte come, though?’

The Mumbai Daily’s staff photographer was a veteran. Avantika got along with him in a way only two Maharashtrians with an unhealthy obsession for puran poli can.

‘Down with malaria, I heard,’ Dhruv said.

She cursed inwardly. Malaria. One good thundershower and Mumbai’s puddles turned into crèches for mosquitoes. Who then joyfully flitted about spreading malaria, dengue and other delightful diseases through the city. Financial capital of the country my ass, she thought.

Aloud she said, ‘Don’t you have some crumbling buildings or something to take pictures of?’

‘I do,’ he said, ‘But I like a challenge. Focusing on anything, and garbage of all things, when *you’re* around? That’s going to be pretty damn challenging.’

She rolled her eyes at the compliment, although secretly she was pleased. When she had first heard that he was photographing forgotten parts of the city for a *Mumbai Daily* photo feature, she’d assumed he’d barely be in the office. Except every time she looked up, there he was, hovering around, saying things that made fluttery things happen in her chest. Which wasn’t to say that he let his work slide or the pictures he turned in weren’t good. They had a nostalgic quality to them, making you want to be in the place in the picture, at the time it was taken; and somehow that time seemed to be a long time ago. They blew her mind, those pictures. Not something she was going to admit to *him* in a hurry, though. She cleared her throat.

‘Fine,’ she said, ‘I’m just making an appointment with the manager. Let’s try to do this tomorrow itself. I’ll keep you posted on the time.’

‘Can’t wait,’ he grinned.

It was a *really* nice grin.

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