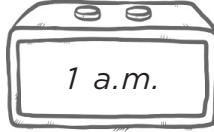


Chapter 1



Blood had been spilt and yet, it was a legacy which Aratrika had to honour. Her father had whispered to her in Telugu, *I will strangle you with my bare hands if you let them into my company.*

There was history, of course. But as pride was lashed by waves of fatigue, she also felt the seeming pointlessness of it all. It didn't appear to be about the company or the family any longer. This was about her. Her work. Her defying destiny and her battle with the Self. She wanted to break their bones and smash their skulls, but the vocabulary of war had been constrained to negotiations and numbers.

Was she as selfish as she needed to be? As ruthless as her father? Had she truly inherited his callousness or was she a poor shadow of this trait in him that she so admired?

Why was she doubting herself? Why was the rage waning? Why didn't she want to indulge herself with the smell of blood? She was walking restlessly across the room repeatedly gazing at her watch till she ripped it off, grazing her wrist, and let it drop on the carpet. It felt better, as she rubbed her hands around her wrist.

Her feet carried her towards the washroom and the reflection in the extravagantly large mirror startled her. The lips smiled and the deep black eyes sparkled, but she couldn't feel either. The dark circles below her eyes made her wonder if she indeed looked older than her thirty-three years. She had

always carried her façade to such perfection. It now eluded her, too. Could others sense the fear and anxiety that she felt?

Her long hair had been combed and held tightly back. Her forehead was adorned with a grand black bindi. She turned around and adjusted the maroon blouse, which matched the thin line of colour that streaked across the border of her saree. At 5'4", with a dusky complexion, she had once wished to be taller or even fairer, and wondered why it didn't matter to her any longer? She had lost close to ten pounds over the last year, but still felt twice as heavy.

The black Mysore silk saree had been laid neatly gift wrapped in the room when she had checked in, and considering that it didn't have a note on it, she figured it must have been from her father. The blouse had been tailored to perfection, and she dreaded to even imagine how that may have happened. It was her battle attire. From the man she despised.

As she adjusted the folds on her saree, she marvelled at the sight of the seventeen stitches that ran across her right arm. She allowed her fingers to play along the line of the stitches, as the memories of the agonizing pain resurfaced.

She remembered fondly the times when her mother had first draped a saree around her, persisting, till she had got it right. She could still feel her mother's soft hands brushing against her skin, folding the pleats, adjusting the length, placing a tiny speck of *kajal* on her cheek and then sitting on the floor and admiring her. She had the feeling that her mother would have remained seated, in that very pose, on that very floor for hours on end, even after she had left the room. How she wished she could hug her at that instant? Lie down on her lap, make pointless banter, and tease her about her dimples, luscious hair and long eyelashes. Did her

mother even have them now? She couldn't tell. She found greater comfort in the select images from her past rather than absorb the newer ones. They just seemed all so incoherent and unpleasant.

She shook herself out of it, picked up the mobile and read the draft minutes of the board meeting, which had concluded an hour earlier.

She allowed herself an indulgent moment, as she read her designation beside her name.

Aratrika Reddy—Managing Director and Vice Chairman, ARYA Holdings Ltd.

Her father had left a note scribbled in Telugu on her table, announcing her elevation to the post, three years earlier. The designation had caused much consternation to those around her. She had despised her title and hadn't even printed the designation on her business card. The years had taught her not to take it for granted.

ARYA had rejected an offer for four billion dollars. It would have saved the company, but left Aratrika and her family penniless. The vagaries of money and the cruel trappings of having taken on too much debt.

She didn't know how much longer her company could remain afloat, and these were precious hours, as everything collapsed around her. She knew that the worst could only get worse, but then, that had become the norm. ARYA was under siege, and so was she.

A spat between her father Madhusudhan Reddy and an obstinate branch manager, Sundar Das, of Imperial Bank, two decades earlier, could lead to their demise, as he took over the reins of the bank as its Chairman and Managing Director at 9 a.m.

Her father and Das had first crossed swords when Das

had been a loan manager and refused a loan. Her father, however, had bribed and wined his way through the senior ranks at the bank, and got what he wanted. Das emerged a couple of years later, having risen up the ranks, chasing them down for defaulting on loan payments. Das had been threatened with his life and found himself transferred to a rural posting in the Northeast.

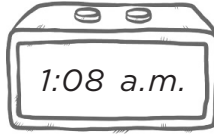
Das remerged at the bank's head office, having substantially grown the outpost into a region of reckoning and drawing favour with the North Block. His proximity to the new Home Minister had, of course, eased the situation considerably. He began influencing the corridors of power within the bank to tighten the noose, and surprisingly found even greater favour with New Delhi as the lead contender to be at the helm. The times had turned the tide and so had his fate. Her father had unleashed a volley of threats and manoeuvres to prevent his appointment, but this was his time. She realized that there were larger forces at play. Ones that could not be wished away by bribes or murder!

Das had sent her a telegram. *'You owe ten thousand crores. I will take that and much more...'*

She had wanted to bash his rotten teeth in and kick him in his groin. This, despite knowing quite well that her father was largely responsible for the situation they found themselves in. He should have murdered Das, years ago!

She now had under eight hours to save ARYA before Das assumed the reins at Imperial Bank.

Chapter 2



She noticed a scratch on the table beside the sofa. It wasn't easily visible against the dark mahogany polish, but she would have spotted it had she been inspecting the room.

Aratrika had joined ARYA ten years earlier. The initial years had been spent resenting herself and her situation. She would meander through her father's large office building, seating herself at tables and in cabins that were at a safe distance from her father's. ARYA had grown to become one of India's largest liquor companies, churning out cheap brandy, rum and whiskey. And yet, miraculously, it was loss-making. The miracles of private enterprise!

The large wooden tables, laden with files and papers, were anchored in their position by glass paperweight as the ceiling fans whizzed above. The men smoked and cursed with abandon. The women were gawked at, like objects. After a while, they grew immune to the constant stares at their cleavages and the marginally exposed bellies beneath their sarees. *Paan* stains were all over the floor. Yet, as the patriarch of the Reddy family walked past, they all knelt, bent and some even lay prostrate on the floor.

Madhusudhan had picked most of his employees at the ARYA headquarters in Hyderabad. It was an establishment of sycophants, cronies and bootlickers. Their adulation for her father initially confounded Aratrika, then repulsed and eventually amused her. He was their life. He was the food on

their plates. He was their ticket to financial security, free liquor and, for a select few, access to political power and stature.

ARYA had spawned twenty-seven MLAs and three members of Parliament from within its fold. It wasn't a company; it was a mafia in the garb of an organization. Excise duties and sales tax didn't figure in their financial lexicon. Money was thrown at bureaucrats, MPs and MLAs in plain sight. An entire floor in the decrepit building had been refurbished and a top-class bar built, just to humour politicians. Luscious women served the finest single malts and an extensive selection of marijuana and cocaine in bone china on granite counter tops and veneered tables.

Initially, Aratrika tiptoed into the forbidden space to eavesdrop on her father's conversations with politicians and ganglords. These conversations had shocked her sensibilities and jolted her moral fibre, but later it all just settled in. It had ceased to shock her as much, and this had worried her. It still did.

She was trapped in this life, due to circumstances and reasons well beyond her control or liking. Jagannath Rao, her father's cousin, had been her lifeline. With him, she had useful and lengthy conversations. He prodded her to set her own course within her father's empire, urged her to challenge herself and find her own feet.

Encouraged, she initially toyed with the idea of setting up an apparel business. A conversation about the hospitality sector, at a social gathering, had piqued her curiosity. She set about visiting hotels in India and abroad, and sold Jagannath the idea of ARYA buying a three-star hotel in Hyderabad. She plunged herself into turning it around and her next couple of years were invested in understanding the nuances of running the hospitality business. From fixing the plumbing

to evicting prostitutes from the premises, she had relished it all and was thrilled when the property attained a four-star status. This had set her into the trajectory of setting up a hospitality empire.

She had spent thousands of hours finalizing each and every detail of the twenty-three hotels that ARYA was setting up. Twenty-three properties that were being constructed in record time. Three thousand people who had already been hired, thousands more in the months ahead if the hotels were to become functional. And now, they were lying in a state of abandon. They hadn't received the clearances to launch them.

And then the three power projects and the steel plant, which, too, had been stalled midway, embroiled in environmental and technical snags. The residential projects weren't being supplied cement as the supply of labour had been brutally cut. They lay there, deserted ghost towns of concrete shells, beams and equipment, plagued with vandalism.

The elections, which had taken place two years earlier, had resulted in a massive shift in power and shakedown. ARYA and her father's affiliations and connections with the new powers at both the Centre and state governments had withered overnight. For decades, millions of dollars had funded the international holidays and escort services of politicians and bureaucrats. But the change in government saw the Elixir group and its invigorated CEO, Rajyavardhan Rathore, being significantly more fleet-footed and astute in managing the new powers-that-be. Rajyavardhan's cousin was now the Home Minister, and Elixir was now firmly entrenched with direct access to the highest levels.

ARYA had refreshed its *emergency fund*, funnelling funds from the family's offshore accounts. Yet, its crack team camped at the Ashoka Hotel in New Delhi, found itself overwhelmed.

It was a new order. The rules of engagement had changed overnight, and they didn't seem to have the currency to steer their way around the corridors of power. It was just an all-new vocabulary of power and influence. Madhusudhan's failing health and ever deepening infatuation with toddy hadn't helped. His influence in Andhra Pradesh politics was a legend, but there was something about his grasp of the national stage that was beyond him.

ARYA had been brought to its knees. The banks had released additional funds a year earlier and some of the loans had been recast, but ARYA was bleeding cash every second. It had grown too large. In the past, the cash had come in from the liquor business. This had kept them afloat. But with time, they had managed to run the tap dry in that business as well.

Aratrika had been on the verge of defeat, but had managed to wrangle yet another lifeline—with Prince Said, a Director on the ARYA board, throwing in an additional hundred million dollars into the ring as a lifeline during a tumultuous board meeting. It had been a hesitant verbal offer. The Prince could see that the end was inevitable, but her persistence appeared to have stirred him.

The lifeline from the Prince could be used to repay a small portion of the interest due to the consortium of banks led by Imperial, and overdue salaries to some of the critical staff. It could give them a lifeline for a few more months or possibly days at best. But it couldn't address the other ridiculously complex existential issues at hand.

One hundred million was all that stood between her and the immediate demise of ARYA. The Piers–Elixir deal was not an option, not till the members of the Reddy family were still alive.

She picked up the phone and messaged Peter.

'Happy Birthday Peter!'

He replied instantly. *'Thanks Aratrika. Happy birthday to your father as well.'*

He then messaged again. *'I'm sorry to hear about the Prince.'*

She shot up instantly and called up the Prince.

The Prince's assistant spoke. *'The Prince is resting.'*

She didn't respond, as she breathed heavily. She remained silent for several seconds, refusing to disconnect. She could hear his gentle footsteps on the soft carpet.

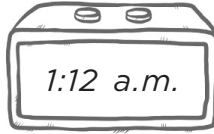
'He has changed his mind.' The Prince's assistant whispered and hung up.

She impulsively messaged Peter, *'How did you know?'*, and then felt foolish.

He replied: *'I was with him 😊.'*

She wanted to rip his guts out.

Chapter 3



At 6'2", with impossibly light brown eyes, a mildly fair complexion and long black hair bound in a ponytail and flaunted unabashedly, Peter made for a strikingly handsome investment banker. He had, of course, lost ninety pounds from his younger years.

Her mobile rang and her eyes reddened when she saw his name flashing on the screen.

'Hi, Aratrika.' The emotions were mixed, but it was rage that overwhelmed all else.

'Hi, Peter...' she whispered.

She could hear him dropping ice cubes into a glass. She poured herself a drink as well and sat down on the carpet with her back resting against the sofa.

'Why are you having the board meeting in Mumbai?'

She was taken aback by the question.

'Why?'

'The meeting should have been at your head office in Hyderabad. It was an obvious question.'

She paused before replying.

'It doesn't matter.'

The silence persisted as they both gulped down their drinks.

'And ... the Taj?'

'Why does it matter, Peter?'

He persisted 'Just tell me, Aratrika...'

‘The board wanted it here...’

‘You are the board.’

Their sexual liaisons at the Taj flashed in her mind. The races down the Queen’s necklace and the Ducati crashing into the divider. The stitches sewn by the doctor as he sat beside her in the hospital. The rides to Lonavla and nights spent in each other’s arms at the guest house there, the cruise in Denmark, in which he had proposed to her...

Peter huffed and continued. ‘You didn’t take our offer. You would have been out of the woods by now, Aratrika.’

She wanted to know how he had turned the Prince around, but then knew that it would be a futile attempt.

‘Why do I get the feeling this is going to be a long night?’

Peter was distracted. The fatigue was having its effect on him. ‘You should have taken our offer, Aratrika,’ he repeated.

‘It’s like a Dutch auction, isn’t it? The price keeps dropping each minute.’

‘No one else is going to touch ARYA with a bargepole, and you know it.’

‘I made them reject it, Peter. It’s me you’re up against, not one else. I don’t want you in ARYA ... it’s never going to happen. Just let it sink in ... not with Elixir.’

‘This is your father talking, Aratrika, this isn’t you. You would rather have Imperial call in the loans and declare you bankrupt, rather than taking our offer? Even you couldn’t be that foolish.’

‘We will pull through this, Peter.’

Peter shook his head.

‘You are worse than Madhusudhan. You know that, right?’

‘Don’t ever compare me to my father!’ she replied icily.

‘You’re going to be on the road in a few hours from now. It’s time to call it in. The Prince has.’

She wanted to throttle him and chop him into a thousand pieces. And she wanted him to run across to her room, rip off her clothes and make passionate love to her.

‘Why did you reject the offer, Aratrika?’

‘I’m not going to let you get a free ride on my hard work.’

‘Your company’s valuation has dropped from 15 billion dollars to almost nothing in the last three years, Aratrika. This is not a junkyard sale. I will ensure that the company stays together. There are going to be some job losses, but I will try and see what best I can do for them. But remember...’ he paused to take a sip. ‘No one can ever take away what you have achieved in all these years. No one...’

He continued when she didn’t respond.

‘This will save thousands of jobs. This has to be about them as well. We are not the vultures.’

‘Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Peter. You should know that more than anyone else.’

‘It’s there in the contract. This is me, Aratrika.’

She huffed.

Peter continued. ‘You’re overleveraged. The interest costs are bleeding you. The Prince knew that the money would just get sucked into the system. It would have helped you stay afloat for a few days at most. Just drive some sense into your board and your father. I’ve given you a lifeline. Rajyavardhan is not going to back off. He will continue tightening the noose, and you know it. He’s the one that got you to where you are in the first place.’

Aratrika glared ‘He couldn’t have done this without you!’

‘If it hadn’t been me, it would have been someone else. Maybe it’s better that ARYA comes under my shelter.’

‘What could be worse than this, Peter? Then why don’t you just wait by the ringside and watch us haemorrhage to death? That’s what Rajyavardhan wants.’

‘That’s not our game. When Imperial Bank calls it in at 9 a.m., we are out of here. ARYA is then in open play and legal tangles, and then everyone is going to move in for the scraps. It just wouldn’t be worth it. And Rajyavardhan is going to be unleashing even more. This is nothing. More legal cases, even criminal. Also, corruption charges. Just too murky. You’re still clean for the next few hours, and after that it just goes one way, Aratrika. Down!’

‘And if we were to agree to the offer and you did get ARYA, how’re you going to manage Rajyavardhan? You really think he’s going to be a silent partner? He is going to suck the blood out of you as well.’

‘You would know how that works, Aratrika. You work with your father, after all!’

‘Piers isn’t stupid, Peter. What do you have up your sleeve?’
Peter repeated himself.

‘Take the deal. For god’s sake. Don’t be so goddamn obstinate.’

‘Go to hell!’

She read an email on her laptop.

‘You raised the offer by another 250 million dollars?’

‘That was for you, Aratrika.’

‘Are you sure about the number?’

‘I’m sure. This is the final offer. This is it. Imperial Bank is calling in the loans. I have a copy of the letter signed by Das. The global vendors are going to strike at 9.15 a.m., the unions are going to be filing claims by ... I’m guessing ... 9.30 a.m. for unpaid salaries. They’ve already shut you down in most of your locations. And then ... there will be no looking back. ARYA will make Enron look like a walk in the park!’

He sat down, emptied his glass and continued.

‘Here’s how it goes, Aratrika. Your board gives the nod.

The revised contracts have been drawn. We make the call to Mr. Das informing him that ARYA is being recapitalized and we are covering your loans. The calls to New Delhi happen. That should be quite a feather in his cap for his first day in office ... don't you think?

'Damn you, Peter!' she screamed.

'You were the one that ... nudged ... me down this path. This is just not about me now. It's about Piers. And if the situation continues to slide as it is, there will be no enterprise. Just your family name perhaps. And think of the upside here!'

'Upside?'

'You'll get to spend some time with your family. Just get away from all this. Who knows? It may just do you a world of good. You could do with some fun in your life, you know?'

'You're not my marriage counsellor?'

'You're the one that got yourself into your marriage. Remember?'

'That I will never forget!' She heaved a deep breath. 'I'm not selling.'

'Then you have nothing to worry about, do you?'

'My father will burn down his own empire before he sells to you and Rajyavardhan. He has built this company from nothing.'

'This is just a deal, Aratrika.'

'Don't make this personal, Peter.'

'Personal? He has killed, tortured, humiliated and corrupted more people than you and I can count. Neither of us should be discussing the morality of Mr. Madhusudhan Reddy. Yes ... he is a good man! See what he's done to you.'

'This is about protecting me in some twisted, perverted way.'

'You've become everything you despised about him.'

'You're not my knight, Peter.'

'You're no saint either.'