

Priya shook her head in panic at the bangle, stuck on her wrist. Was this her grandma's idea of helping her? To give her a magic bangle that had put some kind of curse, or spell, or who knows what on her? And now she couldn't get it off! She'd be trapped telling everyone the truth for the rest of her life. She'd ruin everything!

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THE GIRL WHO COULDN'T LIE



Chapter 1

Priya Shah jolted awake. She was having a terrible day. But that wasn't really a surprise because lately, all her days were slightly terrible. They had been ever since *that* day. The 13th of August. Almost a year ago. The most terrible of all the days. She felt a lump rising in her throat at the thought, but she forced it down with a heavy swallow. Now was not the time to think about the worst day of her life. She had enough problems happening this very second.

"Excuse me. Earth to Priya!" Mrs Lufthausen glared at Priya over the tops of her gold-rimmed spectacles. "For the last time, please can you explain to me why you thought that double maths was an appropriate time for a morning nap?"

Priya gulped. She felt a soft, cool hand slip into her right hand. Mei. Her best friend was telling her she had her back. She smiled.

"Do you think this is FUNNY?" demanded Mrs Lufthausen. "This is the *third* time that you have been caught napping in my lessons this term!"

"*Of course* she doesn't think it's funny!" cried a voice to her left. "She has a weird thing where her apologetic face looks like her happy face. It's, like, genetic. Right, Priya?" Sami. Her other best friend. Standing up for Priya like she always did. "And she wasn't *asleep*! She was thinking, obviously. Everyone knows you do the best thinking with your eyes closed. It's the only way to solve a quadratic equation, in my humble opinion."

"Samantha Levin, does it look like I was speaking to you?" thundered Mrs Lufthausen. "Get back to your equations. And Priya, it is completely unacceptable for you to keep falling asleep while I try to teach you basic mathematics. If you don't explain yourself now, I'm going to have to ask you to leave and wait outside."

Priya's cheeks burned with humiliation. She was a good student. She didn't get sent out of lessons! That was the kind of thing that happened to Katie and Angela. Not top students like her. But now she was going to get sent out for the first time in her entire school history and there was nothing she could do to stop it. It wasn't like she could tell Mrs Lufthausen the truth – that she was exhausted because, unlike her younger sister Pinkie, she was physically unable to fall asleep while her parents were shouting, and that when she finally

did get to sleep after they'd stopped arguing, it was time to wake up for gymnastics practice. Of course she was tired – she'd slept less than a gamer who stayed up all night playing people in Korea.

But Priya knew exactly what would happen if she said all that out loud. Mrs Lufthausen would tell the school counsellor who would tell her parents, and Priya would end up in big trouble. Because her parents' golden rule was *Don't Air Your Dirty Laundry in Public*, which basically translated to: *pretend everything is perfect at all times*. And if Priya admitted that her gymnastics practice was affecting her schoolwork, her teachers would want her to quit – especially because gymnastics was totally separate to school. Her parents would feel shamed into making Priya quit the team, which meant her chances at getting into the Teen Olympics would be over for ever, even though she'd been training for it her whole life. And worst of all, it would mean she'd never get to watch Dan Zhang do pull-ups ever again.

Priya looked up at Mrs Lufthausen and took a deep breath. "I'm so sorry, Mrs Lufthausen. I guess I stayed up too late watching videos of dancing baby goats. It's my fault."

The teacher shook her head. "I'm disappointed in you, Priya. Please go outside for the rest of the lesson. And next time you want to watch a goat dance, try to think about the consequences."

Priya got up and left the classroom. She stood outside

feeling a burning mix of shame and anger. It wasn't her fault any of this had happened. She hadn't *meant* to fall asleep. She knew Mrs Lufthausen took it personally, but if anything, it was a big compliment that it was only in *her* lessons that Priya fell asleep. It was just so warm and cosy in that classroom, with the sun streaming in from outside, Mei and Sami sitting on either side of her, and Mrs Lufthausen's monotonous voice explaining the wonderfully stable predictability of algebraic equations. It was a complete contrast to Priya's morning – her parents arguing as per always, Pinkie making everyone late, and Priya panicking because she couldn't find her brand new trainers. It turned out Pinkie had decided to "decorate" them with a permanent black marker and when Priya had shouted at her, their mum had rushed in to console *Pinkie,* not Priya. If that wasn't bad enough, she'd then told Priya off for "upsetting her younger sister". The unfairness of it all had left Priya speechless, and by the time she'd found her voice again, nobody had time to listen to her. They were late to drop her off for gymnastics. Which meant that when she arrived, her coach Olaf had told her off for her poor punctuality in front of everyone. In front of Dan Zhang.

Priya thought that would be the most humiliating moment of her day – until she was kicked out of maths. How was Dan ever going to realize he was the love of her life when the only time he saw her she was being told off like a schoolgirl? Okay, she *was* technically a schoolgirl – and he was also a schoolboy,

at the boys' school next door to hers – but that wasn't the *point.* Dan was in Year Nine – a whole year above Priya – and everyone knew boys liked sophisticated girls. Priya was going to have to try extra hard to prove her maturity if he was ever going to fall for her. She looked forlornly down at her bright purple and white New Balances, which were now decorated with wobbly smiley faces. This was not a good start.

Priya's stomach lurched as she inspected the invitation that Sami had just given her. It was thick, purple and sparkly. On the front, big capital letters proclaimed: *YOU'RE INVITED TO SAMI'S BAT MITZVAH!!!!!* But on the back, it said something so awful that Priya wanted to cry. She read the three words one more time – *Saturday 30th June* – and swallowed. Hard.

"Don't you just LOVE it?" cried Sami. "It's going to be the party of the year."

Mei raised an eyebrow. "Katie's parents hired out an actual nightclub for her party last month. And everyone got free iPhones. I think *that* might have been the party of the year."

"Uh, yes, but we're actually invited to this one," pointed out Sami.

"That's true," agreed Mei, glancing down at her phone that was definitely not a free iPhone. "It's going to be amazing. Right, Priya?"

Sami waved her hand in front of Priya's face. "Helloooo, Priya? Why are you still staring at the invitation?"

Priya looked up with a wide fake grin plastered on her face. "Because it's only the coolest invitation I've ever seen! And I happened to see one of Katie's invitations up close when it fell out of her bag."

"Why, thank you," said Sami proudly. "I designed it myself."

"But is your bat mitzvah *definitely* happening on the 30th of June?" asked Priya. "As in, that Saturday? For sure?"

Sami's green eyes narrowed. She scrunched up her nose suspiciously and tucked her bright red hair behind her ears. "Priya Shah. You had *better* not be telling me that you cannot come to my bat mitzvah, AKA the biggest day of a Jewish girl's life. The day I go from girlhood to womanhood."

"I thought you reached womanhood when you got your period last year?" said Priya, desperately trying to distract Sami from her original line of questioning.

"That is not the point," declared Sami. "The point is that you're my best friend in the entire world – I mean, you AND Mei are my best friends in the entire world."

Mei rolled her eyes beneath her block fringe. "It's cool. I'll be the afterthought."

"And," continued Sami, undeterred, "not only did you miss my starring role as Katniss Everdeen in Heartland Secondary School for Girls' performance of *Hunger Games: The Musical*,

but you missed Mei's *major* AquaSplash birthday takeover."

Priya's face fell. "I still can't believe I didn't get to swim down the space bowl. It's meant to be a twelve-metre drop."

"Fourteen," amended Sami, starting to count out all the things Priya had missed on her fingers. "On top of that you've also missed countless play rehearsals I've asked you to come to for moral support, basically *every* birthday party anyone in Year Eight has ever had, and ninety-eight per cent of our sleepovers."

"You know I want to come to everything," said Priya. "It's just—"

"Gymnastics," chorused Mei and Sami. "We know."

"Olaf thinks I could be the only person from our club to make the new Teen Olympics team," said Priya. "Which is major! If I get onto it, it's basically guaranteed that I'll be in the real Olympics when I'm older! I just have to make sure I keep up with all the training sessions and go to all the competitions. I hate that they're always on weekends – you know I do. It would be so much better if they happened on Tuesdays and I could miss double maths."

Sami cocked her head to the side, conceding Priya's point. "Fine. But all I'm saying is, you owe it to me. To come to my bat mitzvah. It's super important. You absolutely have to be there. No excuses. At all."

"I think she's trying to say she hopes you can make it," said Mei.

"No," corrected Sami. "I'm saying that if Priya tells me she can't come, I will officially have a fully-fledged breakdown right here in the school canteen. And then spontaneously combust."

Priya laughed nervously. "Okay, there is no need to be so dramatic. I never said I couldn't come."

Sami's eyes lit up. "Wait, do you mean—"

"Yes, of course I can come to your bat mitzvah," said Priya, despite a little voice in her head telling her that now would probably be a good time to STOP TALKING.

"Seriously? You don't have a competition that weekend?" asked Mei eagerly.

"Nope," said Priya, actively blocking out the voice that had now dramatically reached a crescendo to shout about the major competition Olaf had told her about that exact morning. A competition that the Teen Olympics scout would be at. A competition where the prize money would pay for her entire next year's training. A competition that could change her life – and was happening on Saturday 30th June. She swallowed one last time. "No competitions at all!"

Sami and Mei high-fived and whooped loudly. Priya forced her face into something she hoped looked like a smile and ignored the plummeting feeling in her stomach. Today really was an absolutely *terrible* day.

Chapter 2

"I'm home!" called out Priya as she opened the front door, kicking off her ruined trainers. She looked at them in annoyance one more time. The smiley faces were drawn so badly that all the faces looked mildly anxious instead of happy. Pinkie had unwittingly captured Priya's permanent mood.

"Hi, *beta*! We're in the kitchen!"

Priya followed her dad's voice into the kitchen and gasped. There were five pans on the cooker, discarded onion skins and okra ends on the chopping board, with an overpowering garlic odour pervading absolutely everything. Her dad was standing by the cooker, trying to stir all the pans at once, while Pinkie was sitting at the dining room table making a huge mess with a bunch of paintbrushes, a chocolate bar dangling precariously out of the side of her mouth.

"Oh no." Priya exhaled. "When's Mum coming back?"

"She should be here any minute," said her dad happily, adding way too much chilli powder to the curry.

Priya winced. This was not good. The top three things her mum hated were: mess, strong smells and refined sugar. If she walked in the door right now, there would be an argument that would last at *least* two hours. And from the sound of things, Priya had precisely one minute to fix everything.

She quickly turned on the ventilator fan and started tidying up the kitchen counters. She had no idea why her dad couldn't make a bit more of an effort. It was nice he tried to make dinner for their mum, who always came home exhausted after spending all day "managing complete morons", but it wasn't so nice when he forgot to do all the things her mum specifically asked him to do. Like avoiding messes, strong smells and refined sugar.

"What would I do without you?" Her dad beamed as Priya rescued the rice from burning while simultaneously wiping down the counter.

"I have absolutely no idea," muttered Priya.

"What's that?" asked her dad.

"Nothing, Dad! Happy to help!"

"Pinkie, can you tidy up your things?" he asked. "So we can lay the table?"

But Pinkie ignored him and carried on painting what looked like a multicoloured explosion.

"Pinkie?"

"I'm doing my homework, Dad."

Their dad turned to Priya apologetically. "Do you mind, Priya?"

Priya sighed and started to tidy up around Pinkie. Her sister was only two years younger than her, but she had ADHD which meant that she was hyperactive, inattentive, impulsive – and that, according to their parents, nothing was ever her fault. Sometimes, if her parents wanted to blame a human being and not a neurodevelopmental disorder for something that had happened, it became Priya's fault instead. Priya knew that none of this was in Pinkie's control, but it still wasn't easy being her older sister.

"What exactly is that meant to be?" asked Priya.

"It's an abstract portrayal of our family," explained Pinkie. "Me, Mum and Dad are the swirls. You're the square." She pointed to a tiny box in the corner of the painting.

Priya frowned and opened her mouth, then changed her mind. "Whatever. Can you just tidy it away? And you need to finish your chocolate before Mum comes back. Where did you even get it from? I haven't seen chocolate in this house since the Lakhanis brought that box of Ferrero Rocher over in 2019."

"School. If you hit the vending machine hard enough, free Kit Kats fall out."

Priya thought about asking her sister to get her one too,

then remembered that gymnasts who were in the country's top ten for their age group were not allowed to casually eat chocolate bars. Unless they were full of protein powder. "Okay, but hurry up and finish it. Or let me throw it away?"

Pinkie didn't reply – she looked very engrossed in colouring Priya's square blue – so Priya picked up her half-eaten chocolate and threw it into the bin. "Done."

"Oh my god! I can't believe you threw it away!" cried Pinkie. "Give it back!"

"You weren't even eating it!"

"It was *mine.* I want it back!"

"What do you want me to do? Climb into the bin?"

"Yes!"

"Girls, please…" begged their dad. "Just…"

Pinkie clambered across the table towards Priya, who batted her arm away. Suddenly there was a loud crash and they both froze. One of the bottles of paint had fallen off the table, splattering bright red paint all over the wooden floor.

"WHAT is happening?!"

Priya, Pinkie and their dad all turned in slow dread. Mum was standing in the hallway, clutching her shiny leather handbag, staring in horror at the crime scene in front of her. Priya closed her eyes and swallowed, hard.



Two hours later, their parents were still shouting.

"I just wish they'd *stop*." Priya sighed. She was sitting on the sofa in the living room with Pinkie. They were both eating bowls of rice and okra curry in front of the TV. This was technically strictly forbidden – all meals in the Shah household were meant to be eaten at the kitchen table. But if their parents were arguing in the kitchen, this rule was disregarded. Which meant Priya and Pinkie now ate in the living room on a daily basis.

"Uh huh," said Pinkie. She stared intently at the screen, and then howled with laughter as a cartoon rat bowed with a flourish.

Priya rolled her eyes. "'You've seen that film a hundred times. Can't we watch something else?"

"*Ratatouille* is a classic."

Priya sighed and spooned more curry into her mouth. She winced at the spiciness and tried to block out the sounds of her parents' fight. But unlike her sister, she couldn't lose herself in watching rats make dinner. Instead, she couldn't help listening to the real-life drama going on in the kitchen.

"You *know* you have to watch them," her mum was saying. "Pinkie needs extra attention! And Priya has to focus on her schoolwork. I can't do everything around here! I'm the one who—"

"Pays for everything," finished her dad flatly. "I know. You remind me of that every single day. But it was your idea that

I go part-time so I can be around more for the girls, and take Priya to her gymnastics, and Pinkie to her appointments. I'm doing what you wanted, but it's never enough, is it?"

"Yes, because I thought you'd actually *help*," cried her mum. "Not make a huge mess every single day – a mess that I have to clean up after spending all day managing those complete morons."

"If you hate your job so much, why don't you go part-time instead?"

"Because I earn more than you ever could!"

Priya closed her eyes. She couldn't bear it. It wasn't her dad's fault that he wasn't as clever as their mum. She didn't understand why Mum had to rub his face in it all the time. But it was also undeniably annoying that Dad always made such a mess – or at least, failed to stop Pinkie from making a mess. She frowned and decided this argument was sixty per cent her mum's fault and forty per cent her dad's. Last night's fight had been 70:30 to her dad. And the night before had been 55:45 to her mum. It turned out that the ratios and percentages Mrs Lufthausen had taught them were actually quite useful for keeping track of which parent was to blame.

But the boring truth was that, on average, they were both equally at fault. Her mum got stressed all the time and criticized her dad way too much. Her dad made endless silly mistakes and wasn't very good at all the things her mum wanted him to do. Priya tried to help him out, but it wasn't

enough. And it didn't always go well – tonight's efforts were a case in point. She just wished that both her parents would hurry up in realizing they'd married the wrong person and get a divorce, like Sami's parents had. But they never would. Because they were Indian.

In Priya's opinion, being Indian was not easy. Sure, you got to eat delicious food and celebrate Diwali with fireworks. But you also had to wear uncomfortable outfits whenever a relative got married, make sure your bra straps were *never* showing and – most importantly of all – pretend that absolutely everything was fine when it was the exact opposite of fine. Being Indian was the reason her parents didn't get divorced, the reason they never told anyone they were struggling with money and the reason that Pinkie's ADHD had to be kept secret from everybody in the community.

Worst of all, it was why Priya wasn't allowed to talk to Sami and Mei about anything that was going on at home. Like her parents' constant fights. Her mum relentlessly lectured her that "blood was thicker than water", which apparently meant you could only trust family, and not friends. This made no sense to Priya because she was so much closer to Sami and Mei than the dozens of Masis and Masas she only ever saw once a year. But her mum was adamant: any family secrets had to stay within the family. Except she didn't seem to ever want their relatives to know either. Not the cousins, because they would gossip. And it was best if Priya didn't tell Pinkie

either, because she was only ten and it wasn't fair to stress her out. Which meant there was nobody else Priya was allowed to speak to. Not since August 13th last year.

"Girls?" Her mum walked into the living room, looking apologetic. "You really shouldn't eat in front of the TV."

Priya decided not to point out the obvious. "Sorry."

"You…didn't hear any of that, did you?"

Priya shook her head. She turned to Pinkie who was watching the movie, oblivious. "We didn't hear a thing."

Her mum's face relaxed in relief. "Okay. Good. And…um, how was your day, *beta*? Did gymnastics go well? And school?"

Priya thought about every single thing that had gone wrong that day. She felt the lump come back in her throat and the tiniest of tears prick her eyelids. She swallowed it all away, shook her head and forced herself to smile. There was no point upsetting her mum when she was already so tired. "Everything was great, thanks, Mum. I had a…great day."

Her mum smiled at her. "Of course, you did. You always do. I'm so lucky to have you, Priya. I don't know what I'd do without you."

After dinner, Priya sat at her computer finishing her homework. She was so glad the day was almost over. All she had to do was add one last paragraph to her history essay and she could finally go to bed. As long as her parents didn't start

arguing again. She yawned as she typed out her conclusion to: *Which of Henry VIII's wives was the most sympathetic?* She'd spent ages proving it was Catherine of Aragon and she was quite proud of it. She felt sorry for the first queen – she'd just been living her life and trying to do everything as best as she could when suddenly Henry had brought Anne Boleyn into their lives, overcomplicating everything. Priya wasn't sure who the Anne Boleyn in her life was – her parents' money problems? The Olympics? – but somehow, she still felt she could relate to the Spanish queen.

Suddenly, the screen went blank and the lights went out. Priya clicked the keypad in confusion, but nothing happened. Her laptop was so old that it needed to be plugged in all the time, and if the power went off, it switched off too. She got up and tried to turn the light on, but blackness remained.

"Hello? What's happened?!" She opened her bedroom door and saw the whole house had fallen into darkness.

"Your sister thought it would be a good idea to turn all the kitchen appliances on at the same time," called out her dad. "A fuse tripped. But don't worry! I'll have it all fixed in a second!"

"I was *experimenting*," clarified Pinkie. "It was our physics homework."

"I think I'll need to have a word with Mr Jarvis." Her dad sighed. "Your homework is not conducive to me watching the Champions League."

"Dad! Are you saying my education is less important than football?"

Priya drowned out their voices and sat in silence, waiting for the electricity to come back on. When the lights flashed, she restarted her laptop. She opened up the file with her history essay on it, desperately wishing that this wouldn't be yet another thing she had to add to the list of things that had gone horribly wrong that day. But as the file opened, Priya's remaining hope died. The file was empty. There was nothing in there at all. Her entire essay was gone.

About the Author



Radhika Sanghani is an award-winning features journalist, acclaimed author, screenwriter, influential body positivity campaigner and a 2020 BBC Writers Room graduate.

Radhika writes regularly for the Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail, Elle, Guardian, Grazia, Glamour and Cosmopolitan; was recently featured in Italian Vogue as well BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour and is a regular guest on Sky News and Good Morning Britain. She is also a TedX speaker on body positivity, a yoga teacher and runs a charity initiative with AgeUK fighting loneliness in older women.

The Girl Who Couldn't Lie is Radhika's first book for children.

Look out for more laugh-out-loud, contemporary stories with a little twist of magic, from Radhika Sanghani.

Coming soon!