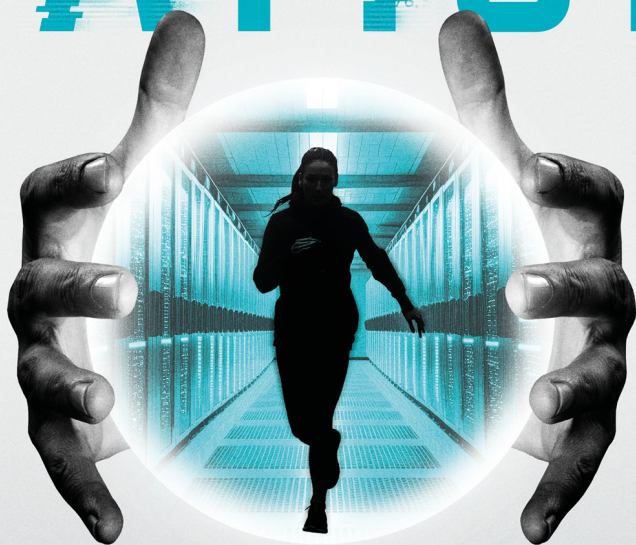


WHAT IF YOU COULD PREDICT THE FUTURE?

ANTICIPATION



NEIL
TAYLOR

ANTICIPATION

NEIL TAYLOR

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ANTICIPATION

NEIL TAYLOR



NEEM TREE
PRESS

“The fundamental purpose of brains is to produce future.”

“All brains are, in essence, anticipation machines.”

Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*

“You can do two very useful things with data: explain and understand the past, and predict the future.”

Michal Kosinski, Data Scientist

PROLOGUE

Her father's face appeared on the phone, smiling.
“Hey, Dad.” Riya kicked off her trainers by the kitchen door, picked up a towel with her free hand and mopped the sweat from her face.

“Hello, Riya. Is everything OK? Your face is all red.” He ran a hand through silver-flecked hair. He looked tired.

“Yeah, just back from a run. It's August, Dad; it's hot out there. Where are you?” Riya clocked his signature white open-neck shirt—he must be going somewhere for work. There was a low hum in the background. “Sounds like you're on a plane? You didn't mention a business trip.”

“I'm afraid something urgent came up. I'm on my way to New York with Victor.”

Victor was her father's business partner. So it *was* work. Riya's heckles rose. “Is there any chance you're going to be back for the race in a couple of days?”

“I—”

He didn't need to answer, she could see it in his eyes. “*Your* company is sponsoring the event. It's in *Mum's* memory. How's it going to look if you're not there?” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “God! I should have known!”

Riya heard a loud bang and her father's image shook.

“Dad? What was that?”

He frowned, looking around. “I don't know—turbulence, maybe?”

Riya was not going to be distracted. “OK, so you sponsor a 10K race in memory of your wife, which—by the way—your *daughter* is running in, and then you can't be bothered to turn up?” She really needed her father to show he cared about this. “You always do this!”

“Look, Riya, I know, but if this trip is successful, I will be around a *lot* more, I promise.”

She snorted. She'd heard it all before.

Victor's gruff Russian voice interrupted. "Sanjay, something is not right here."

Her father looked up, frowning. "Hang on, Riya, I'm just going to find out what's going on." His voice was tight. He rose from his seat and began walking down the plane. A second bang. The screen shook, the image swirled. He must have dropped the phone. She could see what looked like the underside of a seat.

"Dad? Dad!" She was scared now. This did not sound like turbulence.

"Please, Mr. Sudame, you need to return to your seat and fasten your seat belt." An anxious female voice. The stewardess?

"I need to find my phone."

"Dad! What's happening? Please..." Riya was yelling into the phone now, but she doubted they could hear her.

"What's going on?" Her father's voice again.

"The engines have failed. We're...we will have to make an emergency landing." The female voice was struggling for control.

"Land!" roared Victor. "We're over the sea!"

"Both engines have failed—"

"*Both* engines have failed?" yelled Victor. "What is the probability of such an event?"

"I...I don't know. I've never heard of anything like this."

Her father's voice, calm and analytical as always: "Please, I need to find my phone. I was speaking to my daughter."

"Dad! Dad!" Tears filled Riya's eyes, her heart pounded her ribcage.

The stewardess again: "We don't have much time. Please, fasten your seat belts and listen for the pilot to give further instructions."

The background noise was increasing, it was becoming difficult to hear.

Victor was yelling above the noise. "*Both* engines? It is too much coincidence. Perhaps our Mr. B is more informed than we thought, eh?"

“You may be right. Perhaps we should have run that simulation, after all?” her father shouted back.

“Is it too late to say, ‘I told you so?’” said Victor.

The noise increased again. Her father’s voice was quiet, Riya could only catch snatches: “Almost, I fear...we knew...a possibility...we have a plan...J...will not win this game, even if you and I are gone...trust in our...now.”

Victor’s voice was louder: “It has been an honour to work with you, old friend.”

Riya stared at the screen in helpless disbelief, tears streaming down her face.

A series of bangs, the video feed blurred, then... “Call ended.”

THE VISITOR

Riya sat cross-legged on the floor of the study, surrounded by piles of paperwork, books, and boxes. Absently nibbling the frayed sleeve of her cardigan—a habit since her father’s funeral—she stared down at the picture in her lap. She was younger in the photo, standing between her smiling mother and her father, who was dressed in his university doctoral robes.

The door clicked open. Riya sniffed, quickly wiped the tears from her eyes, and, flinging a sheet of black hair over her shoulder, looked up.

Her Auntie Hannah’s face appeared around the door. “How’s it going?”

Riya forced a smile. “Slowly.”

Hannah looked over at the shelves lined with books on machine learning, mathematics, computer coding. “Do you want a hand boxing them up for the university?”

Riya shook her head. “That’s the easy bit—it’s figuring out what I want to keep that’s hard.”

Hannah raised her hand, clutching a sheaf of letters, and looked apologetic. “The mail. Looks like more condolences, I’m afraid.”

It had been two months since Riya’s father and his business partner, Victor Parfenov, had been killed in the plane crash, but still the condolences trickled in as word spread through the scientific community. They had been on their way to an artificial-intelligence conference in New York when their plane crashed into the sea.

Riya shook her head, trying to stop that final phone call from replaying inside her head. “Put them on the desk. I’ll go through them later.”

Hannah walked over and placed the letters on the desk. She tilted her head, looking at the picture in Riya’s lap. “That’s a nice one of the three of you.”

"It was on Dad's bookshelf."

"When was it taken?"

"I must've been eleven, so about six years ago, just before Mum got sick. Dad was still a professor and we'd been to some awards ceremony at the university. I remember they took me for ice cream after. A reward for putting up with the boring ceremony. It was a good day."

Hannah's face creased. "Oh, Riya. First your mother, now your father. I'm so sorry."

Riya nodded mutely. She couldn't respond to that, not without breaking down, and if she started crying, she wouldn't be able to stop. She changed the subject. "Talking of photos, I came across this one of you and Mum." She got to her feet and reached into one of the boxes marked *Keep* and pulled out a framed picture of her mother and Hannah together. She handed it to her aunt. "You can keep it, if you want."

Hannah's eyes glistened. "I remember it. We'd been out for lunch, just the two of us... Thank you."

"I know you miss her." Riya did her best to smile, but she couldn't keep the tremble out of her bottom lip.

Hannah looked at Riya, placed the picture on the desk, and wrapped her arms around her.

Riya hugged her back. "I'm so glad you're staying with me."

Hannah kissed her head. "Oh, sweetie, it's the least I could do."

Riya hadn't been able to face leaving the house after her father's death and had begged to be allowed to stay on for a few weeks, so Auntie Hannah had been staying with her since the funeral. Her aunt had been fantastic: arranging the funeral, fielding condolence calls, and dealing with her father's business affairs while Riya wallowed in grief. Yes, "wallowed" was the right word, but she couldn't snap out of it, actually didn't *want* to snap out of it. However, "a few weeks" had now dragged on into two months, and, although she only lived three miles away, Riya felt guilty about keeping Hannah from her own family.

She let go of Hannah and cleared her throat. “Any news on the house sale?”

Hannah stepped back from Riya, wiping her eyes. “Not yet, but the estate agent was asking when the property would be empty?”

Riya knew Hannah’s question was really, *When will you be ready to leave?* Riya looked at her sheepishly. “Maybe another week?”

“Are you sure that’s long enough?”

Hannah was just being polite. Riya nodded. She couldn’t delay leaving any longer. Most of the furniture would be sold with the house—but she’d been putting off clearing out her father’s study. It felt way too personal; everything was as he’d left it, as though he would walk through the door at any moment, sit down at the desk, and start working at his computer.

Hannah nodded at the corner of the office. “You still haven’t found the combination to that thing, then?”

They both turned to the ancient-looking safe tucked away under the bookcase.

Riya grimaced. “No. But I don’t actually think Dad used it—it was here when we moved in, and I remember him talking about chucking it out to make more room for books.”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Typical Sanjay...books take priority over everything. Still, we’d better check. I’ll make some enquiries, but I’m not sure who to ask—maybe a locksmith or something?”

Riya shrugged. “OK.”

Hannah snapped her fingers. “By the way, I thought perhaps we’d go into town this afternoon. There’s a new clothes shop opened, Chrysalis. I thought we might get you something, maybe something brighter—you always wear such dark colours.”

Riya looked at her charcoal cardigan and dark-blue jeans.

“C’mon. It’ll do you good to get out of the house—you haven’t been out for days...”

“I just don’t feel like it.”

Hannah gently stroked the back of Riya's head. "I know it's difficult, but you need to think about restarting your life. You're seventeen, and your whole life is ahead of you."

"I know, I just... She didn't really have a good answer. All she knew was that she didn't want to let go of the grief, because it felt like, if she did, she'd be letting go of her father, and she wasn't ready to do that, not yet."

"Your father wouldn't want you giving up everything you've worked for. He was very proud of what you've achieved: your athletics, your great exam results, the way you threw yourself into fundraising after your mother..." Hannah stalled. It had been four years since Riya's mother had died, but she knew her aunt still found it hard to talk about.

"Actually, I was going to go for a run this afternoon," Riya said, trying to sound bright. "I need to get back to training. Then, I'd better carry on packing if we're leaving in a week."

"That's not exactly re-engaging with the outside world, Riya." Hannah sighed. "Well, I'm going into town anyway, so the offer's there if you change your mind."

An hour later, a red-faced Riya hefted another box on to the growing stack and stood back, blowing out her cheeks. Not bad, for an hour's work. Her phone rang, making her jump. She pulled it from her back pocket. Her stomach lurched...

Ethan Zimmerman.

A video call. Damn it!

After all that crying, then heaving boxes of books around, she probably looked like crap. Too late to do anything about it now. Tucking wayward strands of hair behind her ears, she thumbed the screen.

"Hi, Ethan."

"Hey, Riya. How's it goin'?" His smile flashed a bright white rack of perfect teeth. God, he seemed more gorgeous every time she spoke to him. His face became serious. "How are you coping?"

She shrugged, looking away for a second. "I'm OK."

She'd met Ethan a year ago at a conference her father had been invited to speak at in Los Angeles. Riya had no interest in the conference, but she got to go sightseeing while he worked. On the day her father was speaking, Ethan found her sitting on the steps outside the conference centre, stuffing her face with a bean burrito. His father was attending the same conference. They'd got on like a house on fire, finding a lot in common, like the fact that his father, like her own, was obsessed with his work. He didn't get on with his father at all and just clammed up when she'd asked about him. Ethan was tall, good-looking, two years older, and exotically American—Riya had been hooked instantly. He was way out of her league, but for some reason seemed interested in her. They'd kept in touch via the socials, then a month ago he'd contacted her saying he was coming to London and could they hang out?

She looked back at the screen, smiled a little too brightly, and said, "So, how's London?"

"Awesome. It's London! But, hey, what I'm really pumped about is coming up to Cambridge to see you. We still on for Saturday?"

"Yeah. Your train gets in at twelve, right? I'll meet you at the station, we can go into town, grab some lunch, and I'll show you the sights. Do you still want to go punting?"

"Yeah. Sounds kinda fun."

"So, does your dad know you're coming up here?"

"Ha! Nah, he never asks what I'm doing, and I don't tell him—he'd only criticize and spoil it. He's here on business, I only tagged along for the free trip, and I knew we wouldn't see much of each other." He grinned roguishly. "I also thought it would be a good opportunity to look in on my English rose. Man, it'll be good to see you again, Riya."

She felt herself blush. "You too."

He nodded. "Great. See you Saturday, then."

"OK. Bye" She gave him a wide smile and the screen went blank.

She was hit by a sudden wave of guilt. A few minutes ago, she'd been crying with grief, then one phone call from Mr. Gorgeous

and she was all smiles. But Ethan coming to visit was too good to miss. Who knew when he'd be over next, and, if she blew him off this time, maybe she'd never see him again. And why shouldn't she, really? Hadn't Hannah just said she should be restarting her life?

She glanced at her watch; better get going if she was going to fit in a run.

Riya pounded along her favourite running route through the Cambridge Backs. Her mood had improved. She slowed to a steady jog as she entered the park, following the riverside path and watching a few hardy students fighting the cold, blustery October wind to punt their way along the River Cam. Their faces suggested the idea had seemed far more appealing from a warm pub than it did now they were out on the water.

"Hello, Riya."

She was already past the speaker, and nearly tripped over her own feet as she spun to look over her shoulder.

Sprawling leisurely on a bench, inspecting her long emerald-green fingernails, was a young woman: early twenties, thin and pale, with purple pixie hair and black lipstick. A black biker jacket hung over a hoodie emblazoned with a picture of a seductive female Grim Reaper flipping the bird. On her face sat a pair of funky wraparound glasses with cool black frames and clear lenses, like some type of cycling glasses.

Riya pulled out her ear buds. "Natalya?"

Natalya Romanov was one of several software programmers her father's business partner, Victor Parfenov, had brought with him from Russia when he and Sanjay had started their company, Predictive Technologies. Victor liked to employ people he could shout at in Russian. What was she doing here?

Natalya looked at Riya with a bored, deadpan expression. She eased herself off the bench and slunk towards her. "I am sorry your father is dead." She was not one to sugar-coat things. She wasn't trying to be rude; she was just blunt.

"Thanks." Recovering from her surprise, Riya remembered how angry she'd been that none of her father's close colleagues

from Predictive Tech had bothered turning up to the funeral. It was her turn to be blunt. “Why weren’t you at Dad’s funeral?”

A flash of emotion passed over Natalya’s face. Pain? Regret? “I am sorry. Your father meant a lot to me.” Her thick Russian accent sounded uncharacteristically soft. “We all wanted to be at the funeral, but something—”

“Let me guess: something important came up at work? That was Dad’s usual line.”

“Actually, yes. But—”

Riya snorted. “In that case, I’m surprised Dad didn’t miss his own funeral to be there.”

“It’s not what you think—”

“So not interested, Natalya.” Riya turned to leave. It was too late for condolences—and she wasn’t interested in belated excuses.

“You need to listen to me.”

Something in her voice made Riya pause. She sighed. “What?”

Natalya glanced around the park. “You want to walk? Yes. You need a walk. Come.” Seizing Riya’s arm, she turned away from the river path and marched off across the grass, pulling Riya behind her.

“Hey! Where are we going?” They didn’t seem to be following any path, and were now tramping through the trees.

Natalya shrugged. “Meh. Nice day for fresh air.”

Riya looked at the cold grey sky. “Really?”

Natalya’s head constantly swept from left to right, as if she was worried they’d be seen.

“What are you looking for?”

“Nothing.” She tugged Riya under a large weeping willow, stopped, and turned to face her. “Do you know what your father was working on before he died?”

“Not really. We hardly ever discussed his work—he knew I wasn’t really interested in techy stuff—”

“That is not an answer. This is important! Did he tell you *anything* about his work?”

Riya glared at Natalya, then sighed through gritted teeth. “I think he mentioned a while ago that he was working on some

system for internet marketing based on psychological profiling, or something. I don't really remember; I wasn't that interested."

"We did a little more than that," mumbled Natalya. "Did he ever mention something called the Anticipation Machine?"

"No."

Natalya looked searchingly at Riya.

"No!"

Natalya nodded. "Good."

"Why? What is it?"

Natalya waved dismissively. "Better for now you don't know. Forget I mention it."

"You can't get all dramatic, then say, 'Forget it!'"

Natalya ignored her. "Listen. You will have a visitor this afternoon. It is necessary you appear to know nothing about your father's work, especially the Anticipation Machine."

"I just told you, I *don't* know anything."

Natalya stopped again, scrutinizing Riya's face. "Good! Very convincing. Oh, and don't mention me. In fact, forget we met." She peered out between the willow fronds, then strode back into the open meadow again.

Riya ran after her.

"What is this all about? And what visitor? And why are we running around like fugitives?" It dawned on Riya that meeting Natalya was not a coincidence. "Hey, were you waiting for me on that bench?"

"I needed to speak to you."

"But how did you know I would be there? I only decided to go for a run a few hours ago."

Natalya looked distracted, seeming to look into the distance for a moment. She touched the side of her glasses. "I will explain later, but now you need to go. Fsst." She flicked her wrist in a shooing gesture. "You need to get back for your visitor. Remember, *tell him nothing*, get rid of him quick." With that, she sprinted off across the park and disappeared into another clump of trees.

Riya yelled after her, "You can't tell me all this and then run off!" But the trees were silent. Natalya was gone.

“Arghh!” She stamped her foot in frustration, then shivered as the wind chilled her sweat-dampened clothes. She needed to get moving again. Her father’s techies were all the same—caught up in their own techy world where a few new lines of computer code were the most important invention since sliced bread. Well, she wasn’t interested, and she would tell this visitor as much when and if he came calling. She stuck her ear buds back in, turned up her music, and ran hard.

Showered and back in her frayed cardie, Riya wandered to the study carrying a plate of flapjack—not the best “recovery food”, but, hey, it tasted good. She caught sight of the letters Hannah had brought in earlier. Putting the flapjack on the desk, she picked them up, shuffled through them, and sighed. Every time she opened another card or letter and read another kind message about her father, it brought a fresh torrent of emotion rushing to the surface.

She opened the first. Some professor from MIT who had collaborated with her father on a project when he’d been head of artificial-intelligence research at Cambridge University. The second was from a business colleague. Opening the third, she pursed her lips as she recognized the letterhead on the paper inside. Her father’s solicitor. It was clipped to a sealed envelope:

Dear Miss Sudame,

Your father requested that we forward this letter to you after his death.

Unfortunately, an administrative oversight meant this was overlooked until now. Apologies for the delay.

Kind regards,

Katrina Shaw

Legal Secretary

Jaret & Hayes Solicitors.

Her heart stopped as she saw the handwritten *Riya* on the envelope. Tearing it open, she unfolded the enclosed letter, snapping out the creases with shaky hands...

Dear Riya,

If you are reading this, then it seems my worst fears have been realized and I would hate to depart without saying a last goodbye. It does not seem all that long ago that your mother and I welcomed you into this world, and in spite of our amateurish parenting efforts, you have grown into a fine young woman. I would like you to know that I am extremely proud of you.

I am sorry that I shall not be there to see you finish your education and make your own way in the world, but I am sure, with the strength of character I have seen you develop, you will make the right choices and make a valuable contribution to society.

However, before you embark on your own journey, I must ask one last service of you. I need you to help ensure my work comes to fruition. There is much to explain, but this letter is not the place. Please reach out to Johanna O'Brien or Cord Dole, tell them I have nominated you to replace me as a Keyholder—they will help you understand what this means. You may, of course, choose to decline, but my hope is that you will graciously accept this charge; you always were a powerful advocate for doing what is right and I believe that your voice—and talents—will be needed. You will question why I did not prepare you for this, but I believe that will become clear in due course.

Please find enclosed the combination to the safe in my study. What is inside is for you. Please keep them safe—you will need them.

All my love,

Dad.

Riya's eyes were leaking again, and she shook with big heavy sobs. Seeing her father's handwriting had taken her by surprise. She reread the letter, blinking through a blur of tears, hearing his voice in her head, savouring the scraps of his personality emanating from the words.

After a minute, the meaning began to sink in.

She felt a flash of anger. This was about work again. She knew Johanna O'Brien and Cord Dole: like Natalya, they worked for her father, part of his inner circle of disciples. She loved her father, but it always felt like she'd had to share him with his work, competing for his time. Too often, it felt like his work

had won. Now, from beyond the grave, he was *still* working, and asking her to get involved. Why? She was no techy—they had both known that—so what could he possibly want her to do?

Riya looked inside the envelope and pulled out a slip of paper with a set of numbers scribbled on it. Wiping her eyes and sniffing, she went to the old safe in the corner and knelt down. She turned the dial left and right, according to the instructions. The lock clicked. She pulled open the heavy door. Inside lay a mobile phone and a glasses case, nothing more.

She took them out. The phone was small and chunky for a modern smartphone. It was encased in a thick ruggedized rubber cover—the sort of thing you would see the military using on TV. She tapped the home button. Nothing. She turned it over in her hand, found a button at the top of the phone, and held it down. Still nothing. Could it be the battery she wondered.

She put the phone on the floor beside her, picked up the glasses case and prised it open. Inside was a pair of cycling glasses identical to the ones Natalya had been wearing! Riya pulled them out. They felt expensively heavy and cold to the touch, made of metal rather than the plastic she'd expected. As she slid the arms behind her ears, a brief high-pitched hum seemed to surround her head and an array of lights and symbols lit up in front of her eyes, strangely three-dimensional, as though she could reach out and touch them. A message flashed in the centre of her vision: *No Connection*. She gasped in surprise and whipped them off again. "What was *that*?"

She pulled out her own phone, thumbed the contacts down to *Predictive Technologies*, and dialled.

"Good afternoon, Predictive Technologies, how may I direct your call?" The receptionist. Riya knew her well.

"Hi, Candice. It's Riya Sudame here. Could I speak to Johanna O'Brien or Cord Dole, please?"

"Oh, hello, Riya. I'm afraid Johanna and Cord are on extended leave. No one knows when they'll be back. Is there anyone else who can help?"

Riya paused. "Is Natalya Romanov around?"

"I'm afraid she is also on leave."

"What?" Riya was gobsmacked—that was three senior people missing. "When they get back, can you tell them I'm looking for them, please?"

"Will do. Take care, Riya."

"Thanks. You too." She hung up, confused. Three senior staff on extended leave, just two months after the owners of the company had died? They should be all hands to the pump, trying to keep the company going.

She picked up the glasses again, ready this time for the disorientating lights, but, just as she was about to put them on, a car door slammed outside. She jumped up and went to the window.

A long black Mercedes was parked in the driveway. A man in a peaked cap held open the rear door. A chauffeur? Riya's stomach jumped: this must be her visitor. A small, slender man wearing a hawkish frown stepped out of the car. His long overcoat whipped and flapped in the wind, while his short, slick black hair remained glued in place. He paused to adjust the waistband of his grey suit trousers, studying the house.

Riya instinctively disliked him. She wouldn't answer the door, and just pretend she wasn't in. But, as she backed away from the window, his black eyes fell on her, and his mouth pulled into a thin smile. He nodded. Damn! Now she'd have to answer the door. She hissed through her teeth, put the glasses together with the phone on her father's desk, and left the office. Her phone *bing-bonged* in her pocket—the doorbell app. She angrily swiped the phone to stop it, muttering under her breath, "Like I don't know you're there already."

She opened the front door. "Hello?" She tried to portray a delicate balance of politeness with just a hint of *make-it-quick-and-bog-off-because-I-don't-want-to-talk*.

"Hello, Riya?" He smiled, but it didn't feel friendly—all teeth, no humour.

"Yes?"

He gave a little bow and took a breath. "I am...was a friend of your father's." Riya noted the American accent.

"I don't remember seeing you at the funeral." She turned up the bog-off dial a tad.

"Hmm." His smile twisted, as though she'd scored a point against him in some game, before turning to a concerned frown. "Alas, that is correct. I'm sad to say the last time I saw Sanjay we parted on bad terms, so I felt it would not be fitting for me to attend the funeral, but, since I had business in the area, I thought I would drop in and offer you my belated condolences."

"Thanks."

There was an awkward silence. *Take the hint, dude, go away.*

"May I come in for a minute?"

"I'm in the middle of eating..." A lie, but he didn't know that.

"I'll only take a few minutes of your time. I would really appreciate the chance to share a few words about your father."

God! This guy was not giving up! Riya smiled stiffly. "Sure, come in."

She showed him through to the living room, where he immediately seated himself on one of the sofas, legs crossed, hands folded neatly in his lap. Riya had little option but to sit on the sofa opposite, facing him across the coffee table. She began to feel uneasy—vulnerable, even; she was alone and had invited a strange man into the house.

He smiled. Not in sympathy; it was more a questioning, assessing smile, as if trying to work something out. Just as the silence became uncomfortable, he spoke: "I was devastated to hear about your father—you have my deepest sympathies. He was a truly extraordinary man, a giant in his field. I understand it was a plane crash—have the investigators found a cause yet?"

He asked about the crash as though he were a close family member, rather than someone Riya had never set eyes on before. Her father's work associates usually fell into two categories: the jeans and T-shirt geeky-tech squad, or the smart but slightly shabby academic professor type. This man was neither. In a sharp suit and shiny shoes, he looked more like a lawyer.

"No, they haven't. Sorry, how did you know my dad?"

"I was one of his...customers. He was conducting some research for me. Did he talk about his work with you, Riya?" His stare was intense.

"No. We never really discussed his work."

"Really? Not at all? I am surprised he didn't want to talk about his achievements with his daughter. He was a genius, you know."

Anger flared in Riya's chest. She'd heard about her father's "genius" one too many times, constantly being told how brilliant he was. She often wondered whether she'd chosen arts subjects at school just to get out from under his shadow.

"Yeah, well, maybe he didn't think *I* was 'genius' enough to understand."

She expected some sort of reaction to this outburst, but the man just regarded her dispassionately, as if studying a zoo animal.

"Hmm," he mused, then looked away, vaguely scanning the room. "I heard that some of the top people from your father's company were missing from the funeral. Strange. I would have expected them to be there; they were all so very close, like a... family. Have you seen any of them?"

That stung. *Family*. Riya's hackles rose. "No. Why would I? I'm just his *real* family—you know, the one he had before he started his precious company."

She felt tears welling. These were feelings that she kept buried deep, feelings about her father she was ashamed of, and she was angry that an uninvited stranger had brought them rushing to the surface.

"So, no one from your father's company has contacted you?"

"No!"

The living-room door burst open and Hannah appeared. She looked from Riya to the man and back again. "Riya? Is everything all right? I just got back and heard raised voices."

Riya nodded, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Hannah turned to the man with a raised eyebrow. "And you are?"

The man got to his feet and stepped towards Hannah, hand outstretched. "Jim Booker, friend of Sanjay's."

Hannah blinked in surprise. "You're the man interested in buying Sanjay's company, aren't you?" She took his hand and shook it tentatively.

Riya's mouth dropped open. No wonder he was pumping her for information.

He smiled at her aunt. "Yes, but that is business. I came here today simply as a friend of Sanjay's, to pay my respects." Facing Riya again, his expression turned to deep concern. "I apologize if I have caused offence. None was intended, I assure you. I think I should leave."

"I'll show you out," said Hannah, frowning as she led him from the room.

Riya watched through the window as Jim Booker walked to his car, the chauffeur jumping out to open the rear door. "Jerk," she muttered.

Hannah returned. "Care to tell me what that was about?"

Riya watched the Mercedes retreating down the drive. "He said he wanted to offer his condolences, but I think he just wanted information on Dad's work." That's what he'd wanted to know, wasn't it? Whether she knew anything. "He's buying Dad's company?"

"Yes, he's one of the interested parties—the solicitors are dealing with all the negotiations, so I haven't met him, and I don't know the details." Hannah shuddered. "Well, I hope that's the last we see of him. A bit slimy, if you ask me."

"Yeah. Gave me the creeps too." Riya stared out of the window, thinking about her conversation with Natalya. What *had* her father been working on before he died?

Hannah was speaking.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said, did you get any further with clearing the office while I was out?"

"I found the combination to the safe."

"Really?" Hannah's eyes lit up.

Riya knew she *should* tell her aunt everything—about Natalya, Dad’s letter, the glasses, the people missing from her father’s company—but somehow this felt like something private between her and her father. Something she needed to figure out on her own.

“Yeah. Like I thought, it was empty.”

“Oh.” Hannah looked disappointed.

Riya decided to change the subject. “Sorry about not coming into town with you...”

“That’s OK.” Hannah came over and hugged her. “Maybe next time.” Disengaging from Riya, her eyes twinkled. “Now, come see the dress I bought you!” Hannah had made it her mission to “girlify” Riya’s jeans-and-T-shirt wardrobe.

Riya sighed. “I don’t wear dresses.”

“You’ll want to wear this one—wait till you see it.” Hannah beckoned Riya as she disappeared through the door.

Riya was about to follow when her phone pinged.

April: Hey! Remember me? Haven’t seen you in ages. How about a pre-race pizza and movie tonight, 7 pm??

Riya smiled. Her best friend, April, was running her first charity 10K on Sunday. They had both entered months ago, but Riya had dropped out after her father died, leaving April to run alone. April was definitely not athletic in any sense of the word, and Riya knew she was nervous.

Riya: OK. C ya then. Loads to tell you.

Going round to April’s would get Hannah off her case about “re-engaging” with the world. Besides, she might be the one person Riya could share the Natalya–Jim–Booker weirdness with.