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opening extract from

Bang Bang You're Dead

written by

Narinder Dhami

published by

Corgi Books

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BANG, BANG, YOU'RE DEAD!
A CORGI BOOK 978 0 552 56043 6

Published in Great Britain by Corgi Books,
an imprint of Random House Children's Books
A Random House Group Company

This edition published 2009

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Corgi Books are published by Random House Children's Books,
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA

www.**kids**at**randomhouse**.co.uk
www.**rbooks**.co.uk

Addresses for companies within
The Random House Group Limited can be found at:
www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

THE RANDOM HOUSE GROUP Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book proof printed and bound in the UK
by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD.

Dr Macdonald has asked me to tell her what happened that day.

I know she's trying to help me, but I also think she's trying to trick me.

She wants to find out exactly why I did what I did. She wants to see right inside my head, and I dislike her for that reason, amongst others.

Now that Jamie's dead and gone, I am on my own for the first time in my life.

But I think I'm strong enough to cope with that now.

So whatever Dr Macdonald thinks of me, I *will* tell her exactly what happened.

And I'll tell her the truth.

But I have a problem.

Who in the world is going to believe me?

One

Monday 10 March, 7.51 a.m.

The scene is normal: a family at breakfast on Monday morning before the kids go off to school.

But the people in the scene are not normal. Our mother is hurtling headlong into one of her manic phases after weeks of depression. She flits around the kitchen, unable to sit still, talking about nothing at all without stopping. Her latest idea is to keep chickens in the back garden to save on buying eggs. I don't like eggs, Jamie never eats them and Mum's allergic to feathers.

My twin brother sits opposite me. He doesn't eat anything, he doesn't speak and he doesn't look at either Mum or me. He stares morosely at the kitchen floor, lost in a world of his own. Jamie's long ago given up on Mum and the bizarre lottery of her behaviour,

the endless swings between highs and lows. They have no relationship with each other. Jamie and I were close once, but now that closeness is slipping away too. All he and I seem to do is argue. I can't rely on him like I used to. Some of the things he says frighten me.

I am Mia, the glue that holds this whole sinking ship together, and, believe me, we're sinking fast.

Our father isn't part of this happy scene. He left Mum before we were born and they divorced soon after. We've never seen him and we don't even know his name. Mum refuses to tell.

'We could take in lodgers,' Mum prattles on. She drags a stepladder over to the tall cupboards and energetically begins to fling pots and pans onto the worktop. 'This kitchen needs a good clean. I was thinking we could do up the attic. There's plenty of room in there.'

'Oh, God,' Jamie mutters, the first thing he's said this morning.

'It's certainly an idea, Mum,' I say in my usual placatory tone. 'We could do with the extra money.'

Jamie rolls his eyes and shoots me a contemptuous stare, blaming me for encouraging Mum. But I know that the lodgers, like the chickens in the back garden, will never happen. By the time Mum gets around to doing anything about it, she'll probably be depressed again and lie in bed for weeks.

She's had medication to help control the mood swings, but since Grandpa died she's stopped taking it. I can't bear to argue with her. That's another thing Jamie blames me for. He says I'm too soft. He says there must be *someone* who can help us – doctors, Social Services, *anyone*. We've tried all this before. But Mum hates doctors and hospitals and outside interference with a passion, and cries like a child if I suggest a visit to the surgery. She doesn't keep hospital appointments and hides if anyone official comes to the house.

'I'll go shopping today, then.' Mum abandons the cupboard half emptied, grabs a mop and begins swishing it vigorously around the floor. 'We'll need beds and curtains and carpets and wardrobes and—'

His face thunderous, Jamie jumps up and stalks

out of the kitchen, flinging the door open with a crash. Anxious to calm him down, I immediately get up to follow. But Mum does not even look.

I can't blame Jamie. We have no money and Mum can't hold down a job, so we live on benefits and every so often we have to sell some of Grandpa's precious treasures for pennies. That I *hate*, more than anything. But when Mum's manic, she shops. A few months ago we came home from school to find a brand-new black Mercedes convertible parked on the drive. It went straight back to the dealer and Mum sulked for days. Yesterday she was talking about getting a Harley Davidson motorbike. She doesn't have a driving licence.

Credit-card bills pile through the letter box every month, but Mum ignores them and simply applies for new cards. I don't know how she gets them. I have a nasty feeling that fraud may be involved.

When Jamie and I were three years old, we lost our home because Mum couldn't pay the rent, and that's how we ended up moving in with Grandpa. He was the only one who could do anything at all with Mum, but

he died just over a year ago. I can't describe how much I loved him and how much I miss him. I won't try.

This enormous, rambling, tumbledown old house feels too big and lonely now. It's a strange house, cold and overheated at the same time, with redbrick towers and turrets and gloomy stained-glass windows and doors, like a haunted church.

The kids in our street call us the Addams Family. That might be because of the house, or it could be because they think we're strange. They don't speak to us. They just shout names at us sometimes.

'Got to go, Mum.' I pause in the doorway. 'See you later.'

Mum drops the mop in the middle of the floor and rushes over to give me an enormous hug. She is so beautiful, tall and slender with the most amazing long black curls. You'd never know to look at her that she is ill.

'Have a lovely day, sweetheart!' Mum sings to the tune of the song playing on the radio. 'And don't worry about me, I'll be fine.'

I nod, although I *will* worry and she knows that I

will. But that doesn't stop her from being hair-raisingly reckless in everything she does when the mania overtakes her again.

Knowing that Jamie will be hovering accusingly in the hall, blaming me, I try desperately to salvage something from the situation.

'About the lodger, Mum. It's a good idea, but maybe you'd better wait until we've cleared out the attic before you buy any furniture—'

Mum's face changes. 'Why?' she snaps. Her whole stance is instantly angry and aggressive, and I wilt at the challenging expression in her eyes.

'Well . . .' I stumble, wishing I'd just let it go, like I do ninety-nine times out of a hundred. Caught between trying to please Mum and trying to placate Jamie, I end up pleasing no one. 'We're a bit short of money at the moment—'

Furiously Mum kicks out at the mop. It hurtles across the floor towards me and I jump backwards to avoid being struck.

'I have money!' Mum shouts. She is cold and hard and raging. 'I have three new credit cards!'

'I just thought maybe we could clear some space first,' I mutter, edging over to the door. I should have followed my survival instincts and said nothing. Why do I always make the wrong decision on those rare occasions when I make a decision at all?

'Mia, keep your nose out of my business!' Mum shrieks like a wild banshee. I've seen this unreasonable, ranting anger before and it doesn't last, but it always scares me. 'You're just a kid, so don't meddle in things that don't concern you! The money is *my* responsibility!'

'Shut *up*, Mum!' Jamie has returned to stand in the doorway beside me. He looks no less angry and aggressive than Mum herself. They're more alike than either of them realize. 'You're *pathetic*, do you know that? You don't give a toss about anyone but yourself—'

Mum grabs a plate and hurls it wildly at us. I duck, but Jamie does not move. The plate misses us and smashes into pieces as it hits the floor.

'Stop it,' Mum moans, clutching at her hair. 'I'm sick of you going on at me! Go away! Get out

of my face and leave me alone!'

'It's all right, Mum,' I say quickly. 'It's OK. Get whatever you like.'

I am desperate to leave now, but Jamie still stands there, furious and frustrated.

I grab his arm and drag him out into the hallway. There he pulls himself away from me and sits on the bottom stair, burying his head in his hands. I glance back into the kitchen and see that Mum is still shaking with rage. Leaving the mop on the floor, she sits down at the kitchen table, lifting her knees and curling herself into a tight ball. I close the door quietly.

It's her illness, I tell myself, as I always do. *She can't help it*.

But the mantra is losing its power after years of repetition. After the shattering events of last week, I know we can no longer go on like this. But the alternative fills me with cold dread.

Jamie is still angry and he's restless. As he sits, he taps his feet impatiently on the diamond-patterned floor of the hallway. The black and white Victorian tiles badly need polishing and at least six of them

are cracked. There are pieces of wood nailed over the missing rectangles of stained glass in the front door. The house is going downhill too since Grandpa died.

'Why do you do it, Mia?' Jamie demands. His dark eyes scald me, and I can sense the tension in him, like a cornered animal ready to fight to the death. 'Why do you give in to her?'

'Don't start,' I sigh.

'You know this can't go on,' Jamie mutters, mirroring my own thought of a moment ago.

'Well, help me then!' I cry in frustration. 'Tell me what to do!'

Jamie shakes his head. 'When will you learn, Mia?' he says wearily. 'I can't do this on my own and *you* won't stand up to Mum, so things are spinning out of control. You've *got* to get tough. You can't rely on me for ever.' He pauses, looks away from me, and I tense, guessing what is coming next. 'What would you do if – well, if I wasn't around any more?'

My insides freeze with fear. He has said something like this before, several times, and I still have no idea

what he really means. I don't ask. I *won't* ask. I'm too frightened.

'Don't be stupid,' I say with a nervous laugh. 'I wish you wouldn't say stuff like that. You're not going anywhere.'

Jamie looks away and does not answer. Terror closes up my throat and I can hardly speak. What's going on inside his head? Once, I would have known. Now my own brother is a deep, dark and, I think, dangerous mystery.

'You wouldn't . . . leave me to cope on my own?' I croak.

Jamie gives me an odd look. 'Everything's all wrong,' he says in a low voice, more intense and frightening than if he'd shouted the words aloud. 'And I'm tired of trying to make it right.'

Jamie stands and trudges up the stairs, grinding misery in every step he takes. I go after him, but he stops and looks back towards me at the turn of the stair.

'You remember what I said to you last week, Mia?' he murmurs quietly. 'I told you, I warned you. If Mum

won't help herself, then we have to force her to realize what her illness is doing to us.'

'Push her to the edge, you said,' I whisper. 'Make her sit up and take notice.'

I am shaking. This is the moment I knew was coming, and I'm terrified beyond belief. 'You said we have to make her see that she can't go on like this, and neither can we.'

Jamie nods. His dark eyes are burning through me. 'It's time,' he says.

My knees buckle at the grim determination in his voice. 'But – what are you going to do?' I gasp. 'Jamie? *What?*'

Jamie stares down at me. His expression is closed and unreadable, but there is a hint of sadness in his eyes.

'I can't tell you, Mia,' he says simply, and then he vanishes upstairs.

I am left sick with anxiety.

I know Jamie's right. This can't go on. But I'm too weak and too pathetic to do anything about it. I'm a quiet little mouse who likes to fade into the background

and stay there. Jamie and I look very much alike – anyone would guess that we're twins – but I'm a pale imitation of him, a shadow image. We both have dark hair, but Jamie's is shiny and glossy and mine is lank and drab. My brown eyes, the exact shade and shape of Jamie's, are as dull as his are alive. Jamie is tall and athletic while I'm the same size as him, but too bony with it. There's nothing special about me in any way whatsoever. Jamie is five minutes younger than I am, but he not only got the good looks, he also got all the spirit and the personality and the drive. He's not afraid of anything. Me, I'm not the type to make a fuss or stand up for myself. I take whatever's handed out to me.

Last week, stupid fool that I am, I started to think that maybe I *wasn't* so ordinary. It didn't last long, of course. I was so thrilled to win the essay competition, but now the whole thing has turned into a disaster. How could I not have known? Nothing good ever happens to me without something bad following close behind.

The essay was all Ms Kennedy's fault.

Ms Kennedy has been my favourite teacher ever since I started at Hollyfield School. She and I discuss novels all the time – *really* discuss them. We debate, and we even argue occasionally. Ms Kennedy lends me books and praises my stories, and she says I should think about a career as a writer. Me, Mia the mouse, a writer!

Ms Kennedy actually treats me seriously, as if I'm worthy of respect. Not many people do that. But it was Ms Kennedy who persuaded me to enter that essay competition, and I've been teased relentlessly about it ever since. Now I almost hate her. Well, I would if I could summon up the energy . . .

I pick up my school bag and into it I slip the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* that Ms Kennedy lent me. It's comfort reading, a world where everything is governed by good manners and rules of behaviour. It sounds heavenly.

I leave to get the bus to school. Jamie is nowhere to be seen, but that's nothing unusual these days. We always used to travel together but now he disappears and turns up at school whenever. I never see him on the

way, and I dare not enquire where he goes or whom he sees or what he's been doing. There is so much more to Jamie than meets the eye, and I'm too scared to ask him what I long to know.

Especially today.

I wish I had some idea what he was planning.

I can't tell you, Mia.

Does that mean Jamie doesn't yet know what he's going to do, or does he mean that it's too horrific to tell me? I hope desperately that it's the former option.

'How's your mum today, Mia?'

I am near the school gates when I hear the inevitable shout. I don't turn to look because I already know who it is. Kat Randall and her gang of witch-faced cronies, whose sole aim, since last week, is to make my school life a misery.

I don't reply to the question because it's the same every morning. For the first three years at Hollyfield, no one knew about Mum except some of the teachers and Bree, my best friend. Last week Kat Randall found out about her. I still go hot and cold with

humiliation when I think about what happened.

Kat Randall clumps over to me in designer trainers with thick rubber soles. Her school tie has the thickest knot and shortest length it can possibly have, and her skirt is twenty centimetres above her fat knees. She wears her dirty blonde hair gelled straight back, with two long curls stuck to her cheeks, one on each side. Kat is hard in every sense of the word. She had a fist fight with her ex-boyfriend, Lee Curtis, in the playground last week. And believe me, Lee Curtis – who has just been suspended for dealing weed at school – is bigger and harder and even more terrifying than Kat herself. But Kat seems to fear nothing and no one. Her quest in life is to seek out and destroy the vulnerable. Sadly, I am her latest target.

'Didn't you hear me, Jackson?' Kat enquires with a mock-friendly smile. 'I said, how's your mum?'

I long to keep quiet and defy her, but I'm not brave enough now she is standing right in front of me.

'She's fine,' I mumble. I hardly understand Mum's illness myself, and Jamie doesn't even try, so how can I expect a group of hatchet-faced, dead-eyed girls with

all the sense and intelligence of an amoeba to have any kind of sympathy?

'Still raving mad?' Kat asks gleefully, and her minions standing around us chortle at her wit. Kat Randall and her friends are in the lowest sets for every subject, and they are not intelligent. But they're very skilled in the subtleties of mental torture.

I wonder what Kat would do if I lunged forward, grabbed each ridiculous curl and pulled very hard.

'She's not mad, she's ill,' I mutter, trying to edge my way past them. 'I told you.'

Kat thrusts her face very close to mine. She's been eating salt and vinegar crisps for breakfast.

'And I told *you*, she's *mad*,' she spits. With one quick movement, so quick I don't even have time to gasp, she grabs my school tie and tightens it, almost choking me. I stagger back, frantically pulling to loosen it, and Kat smiles with complete satisfaction as she hangs onto it so I'm like a dog on a lead.

'All alone again, I see?' she remarks, making an elaborate pantomime of looking over her shoulder. 'So, are you going to run and tell tales to Ms Kennedy?

We all know how much you *luuurve* her, you lezzer.'

And Kat laughs and releases my tie and strolls away, glowing visibly with the knowledge of her power over me. Her cronies follow, twittering with admiration.

Shaking, I loosen my tie and take a gulp of air. I can't help feeling bitter. Jamie has kept well out of this situation with Kat Randall so far. At one time he would have rushed to defend me in some way, but not any longer.

So far it's only been the verbal stuff. I can put up with that. This is the first time Kat's ever actually touched me. That probably means we're escalating towards actual violence, and the thought leaves me strangely unmoved.

'You're so stupid, Mia. How long are you going to let them get away with this?'

I spin round. Jamie's come up silently behind me and he's staring at me with that same frightening, burning intensity. I guess he watched what was going on from a distance, but made no move to help me.

I shrug helplessly. 'What can I do?'

'*Mia!*'

Jamie's agonized cry of sheer frustration makes me squirm. I *know* I'm stupid and weak, but it just feels like I have no energy left any more, for *anything*. It seems like everything that was uniquely me, uniquely Mia, has drained away over the years of struggle and left me an empty shell.

'You could help—' I begin.

'You have to learn to stand up for *yourself*!' Jamie interrupts me. He sounds so fierce, almost evangelical. 'Do you really think you're worth so little, Mia? Christ, is this how you're going to live your life? Letting everyone walk all over you?'

I am silent. Sadly, that's exactly what I can see happening to me now and for ever.

'I've had enough.' Jamie's always restless, but today he can't stop tapping his feet, flexing his fingers, running his hands again and again through his long dark hair. His face is pure dead white. I get the fearful, maybe fanciful, notion that he has reached some sort of breaking point. That there is a line in the sand and he has crossed it and now there is no going back. 'I'm sick of it all.'

He looks not at me, but through me, something indefinable in his eyes. Recklessness? Whatever it is, it reminds me of Mum and I tremble.

'I'm going to make everyone sit up and take notice, including Mum,' he says softly. 'It's payback time.'

Before I can speak, Jamie marches away and there is a steely purpose in his manner. I run after him as he weaves his way through the groups of pupils in the playground, but he is quickly out of sight. I wonder if I should be worried. I think I know something about what Jamie is capable of from things that have happened in the past, but I push the fear away because I don't *want* to acknowledge it. That's my weakness again.

'Hey, Mia!'

My best friend Bree is waving at me from the other side of the playground. Cheerful, bouncy, blonde Bree with her smooth pink and white complexion. She should be in a TV ad for something healthy and wholesome like milk or Swiss cheese. We've been friends since primary school. Bree's always been prettier and more popular than me, but when we were in Year Four, her

mother had severe depression and Bree latched onto me for support. Her mum recovered eventually, but Bree didn't drop me. She's loyal and funny and kind. She talks too much, but I let her conversation wash over me a lot of the time. It's very healing, like lying in a warm, scented bath, because it's so *normal*.

'So, Daniel calls me last night . . .' Bree begins as soon as I join her.

I listen as she recounts her conversation with her boyfriend Daniel in mind-numbingly minute detail. Daniel is trying to persuade Bree to sleep with him, and Bree isn't sure she wants to. I think how wonderful it would be if my only problem was trying to decide whether to sleep with a good-looking (if slightly arrogant) boy or not. I've never had a boyfriend, unless you count Callum Carter, who used to chase me around the playground at primary school and kiss me. But I suppose someone who's desperate might ask me out eventually. I can't imagine *ever* introducing a boyfriend to Mum, though. If she's in a manic phase, she'd probably flirt with him and try to sit on his lap. If she's depressed, she might easily burst into tears in front

of him. It hardly seems worth the embarrassment.

'And then he said if I *really* loved him, I'd *want* to do it,' Bree goes on.

'That old line?' I say, raising my eyebrows. 'I would have thought Daniel could come up with something a bit more original than *that*.'

Bree giggles.

No, it's not the sex that would bother me, but I don't like the thought of sleeping with someone else. Someone who could watch me while I was sleeping. I can't imagine trusting anyone enough to let that happen.

Now I *know* you think I'm seriously strange.

The bell rings and we all shuffle reluctantly towards the school entrance.

From this point, things happen fast.

Bree and I go to our classroom on the second floor where the usual morning riot is taking place. Jamie is not there. I'm surprised, and also worried.

'Where's Jamie today, Mia?' someone calls across the classroom above the cacophony of gossip and giggles.

I ignore whoever it is, not even turning round. I know they're only being nasty, teasing me because they know how much my brother means to me now. But I can't talk about Jamie right at this moment. I don't know why, but a sense of doom, black and impenetrable, is sweeping over me, chilling my bones.

Bree glances at me and opens her mouth. I suspect she's going to ask me about Jamie too, and I don't want to hear it. Abruptly I turn away and pretend to be intent on searching for something in my bag.

'Sit down and get your books out and shut up, Nine A!' yells our form tutor, Ms Powell, arriving with the register.

Bree is now talking to Lee Hung, who sits on the other side of her. I rest my head against the window next to our table and wonder, with immense weariness, how long it will be before Kat Randall gets tired of tormenting me and searches for a fresh victim. I wish I could do something, anything, to get her off my back. But I can't because I'm a coward, pure and simple . . .

Then, as I stare into the playground below me, I see Jamie. His head is down and his shoulders are hunched,

but there is a grim purpose in his walk. He's not coming towards our part of the school. He's heading over to the other side, in the direction of the annexe. Hollyfield is quite old, built in the seventies, and extra bits have been added onto the main building over the last twenty years or so. The two-storey annexe is connected to the school by a long glass corridor. The annexe is where Class 9D have their form room on the first floor. Kat Randall and her friends are in Class 9D.

Jamie, what are you doing? I ask silently. *Speak to me.*

Once my brother and I had a kind of telepathy between us, as twins often do. It was rather hit-and-miss, and as elusive, fleeting and fragile as a butterfly's wing. But since Grandpa died we seem to have lost this too, most of the time. Jamie has become skilled at shutting me out and now, unsurprisingly, he does not answer me.

Why is he going to the annexe?

Something terrible is about to happen.

I know it.

I stumble to my feet. People are still milling around

the room, Bree is deep in conversation with Lee Hung, and Ms Powell is coping with lost dinner money and forgotten homework crises. I slip out of the classroom, unnoticed.

The corridors are deserted because no one is allowed out of their form rooms again until the bell for morning lessons. *I'm breaking a school rule*. The very thought of such a thing makes me feel sick. Mia Jackson doesn't break the rules. She's too much of a scaredy-cat. I'm shaking all over but it's not just because I'm doing something I'm not supposed to.

I am terrified, but I don't know why.

I head towards the nearest set of stairs, but I hear hurrying footsteps coming towards me. Panicking, I scurry out of sight behind a bookcase before whoever it is rounds the corner. Then I wait there for what seems like hours but is probably no more than five minutes. I hear more footsteps, then, a little later, muffled, urgent voices. More footsteps, running this time.

I am paralysed behind my bookcase with the fear of discovery. I don't even know why I came out of the classroom. Jamie may have had a perfectly acceptable

reason for going to the annexe, nothing to do with Kat Randall at all. In fact, he might even be on his way back to our classroom right now . . .

Suddenly the fire alarm bursts into life right above my head, shrill, insistent and unnerving.

With a shocked gasp, I leap out from behind the bookcase with my hands over my ears. But it doesn't matter that I'm out in the open now because a second later doors are flung wide, and pupils and teachers pour out of the classrooms and head towards the emergency exits like rivers streaming towards the sea.

I melt anonymously into the crowd. I can hear screaming behind me, and some of the teachers look dead white and very frightened. A real fire, then? My heart skips a beat. *Jamie?*

'Mia!' Someone grabs my arm as the stream of human beings flows past our classroom. I turn and look into Bree's petrified face.

'Where the *hell* have you been, Mia?' she shrieks hysterically, digging her nails painfully into my arm. 'We *have* to get out of here!'

'There's a fire, then?' I ask, dreading the answer,

wondering if it has been started deliberately . . .

Bree shakes her head. ‘Worse,’ she gasps. She is almost hyperventilating and is trembling violently from head to toe. ‘There’s a rumour that someone is in school with a gun.’