




THE
BANDIT
QUEENS
A NOVEL
PARINI SHROFF



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ONE

The women were arguing. The loan officer was due to arrive in a few hours, and they were still missing two hundred rupees. Rather, Farah and her two hundred rupees were missing. The other four women of their loan group had convened, as they did every Tuesday, to aggregate their respective funds.

“Where is she?” Geeta asked.

No one answered. Instead, the women pieced their respective Farah sightings into a jigsaw of gossip that, to Geeta’s ears at least, failed to align. Saloni—a woman whose capacity for food was exceeded only by her capacity for venom—goaded most of the conversation.

“This isn’t the first time,” Priya said.

“And you know it won’t be the last,” Saloni finished.

When Preity mentioned she was fairly certain she’d seen Farah buying hashish, Geeta felt it best to nudge them to more prosaic matters. “Varunbhai is not going to like this.”

“Well, now we know where her money’s going,” Priya said.

“Some devout Muslim.” Saloni sniffed, the gesture dainty for a woman of her size. Lately she’d been attempting to rebrand her weight as evidence of her community status. Compounded with her preternatural talent for bullying, this guise worked on the women. But Geeta had known Saloni and her family since childhood—when she ruled the playground rather than their loan group—and could accurately attribute her heft to genetics betraying her in her thirtieth year rather than any posh mark of affluence. Ironic, considering Saloni had spent her first nineteen years perpetually malnourished, thin as paper, and just as prone to cut. She’d married well, curving into a stunning

woman who'd reclaimed her slim figure after her firstborn, but hadn't managed the same after the second.

Geeta listened to their rumors, observed how the women contributed and piled on, with clinical interest. This must've been the way they'd whispered about her after Ramesh left—a fallen woman “mixed with dirt”—then shushing each other when she approached, their lips peeling into sympathetic smiles as sincere as political promises. But now, five years after her husband's disappearance, Geeta found herself within the fold rather than shunned, thanks to Farah's absence. It was a dubious honor.

Her fingers toyed with her ear. When she used to wear earrings, she would often check to make sure the backs were secure. The sharp but benign prick of the stud against her thumb had been reassuring. The habit lingered even after Ramesh vanished and she'd stopped wearing jewelry altogether—no nose ring, no bangles, no earrings.

Tired of the gossip, she interrupted the women's musings on Farah's defection: “If each of us puts in another fifty, we can still give Varunbhai the full amount.”

That got their attention. The room quieted. Geeta heard the feeble hum of her fan stirring the air. The flywheel's tight circles oscillated like a tiny hula hoop. The blades were ornamental; the heat remained thick and unforgiving. The fan hung from a strong cord Ramesh had tied in their old house. It'd been early in their marriage, so when he'd stumbled on the ladder, it had been okay to laugh—he'd even joined her. Rage hadn't found Ramesh until their second year together, after her parents passed away. When she'd been forced to move into this smaller home, she'd tied the cord herself.

A lizard darted up the wall in a diagonal before hiding in the lintel's shadow. Geeta's mother used to tell her not to be afraid, that they brought good luck. She itched to see it plop from the dark pocket onto one of the women—preferably Saloni who was terrified of all animals except, inexplicably, spiders. The other two—sisters Priya and Preity—were neither kind nor cruel, but they deferred to their leader. Geeta could sympathize, having herself once served under Saloni.

“No way,” Saloni said. “It's Farah's problem.”

Geeta stared at the dark wall, willing the lizard to be a good sport. Nothing. “It’s *our* problem,” she snapped. “If we default, Varunbhai won’t give us another loan next year.” The women were somber; everyone knew the center extended loans to groups, not individuals.

Then began a communal metamorphosis from fishwives to martyrs: the women spilled their excuses onto each other, all pushy contestants in a competition with no judge to rule as to who was the most aggrieved party.

“I have to buy my kids’ schoolbooks. They keep getting more expensive.” Saloni’s lips compressed. “But it’s such a gift to be a mother.”

“We just bought another buffalo. My kids guzzle so much milk. I keep telling them ‘if you’re thirsty, drink water!’” Preity coughed. “But still, they bring me joy.”

“My boy needs medicine for his ear infection. He cries *all the time*.” Priya hurried to add, “But there’s no better blessing than a son.”

“Joys of motherhood,” they murmured.

“Such a privilege, na?”

Preity and Priya were twins, formerly identical. The scars across Preity’s face and neck shimmered like heat when she toggled her head in agreement.

“What about you, Geetaben?” Saloni asked. Her upper arms were plump and wide, straining against her sari blouse’s sleeves, but they then abruptly transitioned to the trim elbows and forearms of her youth. The two halves could’ve easily belonged to separate people.

“Well, I don’t have the joys of motherhood,” Geeta said after the women were emptied of excuses. Her voice was patient, but her smile was feral. “But I do have the joys of sleep and money.”

No one laughed. The women looked at the ceiling, the fan, each other, the door, anywhere but at her. Geeta had long ago released the idea that one needed eye contact in order to feel seen. She’d grown accustomed to their discomfort around her; people didn’t like being reminded that what you’d lost, they took for granted—though Geeta no longer felt like Ramesh had robbed her of anything by leaving. There were times she wanted to tell the women that they could keep their blood-sucking husbands, that she harbored no envy,

coveted no part of their messy, small lives. It was true she no longer had friends, but she did have freedom.

Another lizard skittered along the wall. While Geeta appreciated luck as much as anyone, she had no use for two lizards. It was said that if you happened across two lizards mating, you'd meet an old friend. If you saw them quarreling, you'd pick a fight with a friend instead.

"I'll pay," she told the women, as she reached for the grass broom she kept in the corner. "I don't have children, I don't have a husband and I don't have a buffalo." She tickled the ceiling corner with the *jhadu's* stiff bristles. When that failed to cajole the lizards, she thumped the wall twice.

Someone gasped at the loud sound. Priya scooted behind Saloni's larger frame as though Geeta were a threat. Which many assumed she was: a *churel* who, depending on the gossip, gobbled children, rendered women barren or men impotent. That a woman had to have perished in order to return as a *churel* did little to staunch the village's rumors.

Saloni blotted her upper lip with the back of her wrist. Fresh sweat bloomed quickly. She glared and Geeta could easily recall her at fourteen—slender and haughty as she held court, hip jutting against a bicycle while the boys sighed.

The lizard finally dropped from above—alas, missing Saloni's disdainful face—and scrambled for its bearings. With the broom, Geeta slapped the floor, herding it toward the open entrance.

"Right," Saloni said. "So we agree: Geetaben will cover it. You'll settle it with Farahben later, correct." It was not a question.

Given Saloni's stamp of oppressive approval, the others did not even pretend to mew or protest. Saloni's social weight was as robust as her physical. Her father-in-law was the head of the *panchayat*, the village council. Five years ago, when the government demanded their village observe the reservation system and elect a woman to fill one of the five council seats, Saloni was the obvious choice. In fact, these pre-loan meetings were usually conducted at Saloni's house, but this week Geeta's empty home had been selected for reasons no one had bothered explaining to her.

The twins stared at Geeta, wary, as though she were the death goddess Kali and her broom a sickle. She knew they were thinking of Ramesh, what had allegedly become of him at her hands. And just like that, she was no longer a part of the pack; they avoided her gaze and her touch as they handed her their money on their way out. Saloni alone met her eyes, and though Geeta recognized the scorn as easily as she would her own face, at least it was some manner of acknowledgment. A response, however negative, to the space Geeta occupied in this world, in their village, in their community.

She slammed the door shut after the three of them. “No, no,” she muttered effusively to no one. “Thank *you*.”

Farah visited that evening, wilted and scared, bearing a gourd as a gift. Her left eye was swollen shut, a tight pistil amidst a purple bloom. Geeta made it a point not to stare as Farah thrust the long green vegetable toward her.

“What’s this?”

Farah wagged the vegetable until Geeta took it. “You can’t show up to someone’s house empty-handed, everyone knows that. Saloniben came by my place. She said you covered for me. Thank you. She said I should work out an interest rate with you for—”

“Saloni’s a bitch.” Farah blinked at the language. “I only have one question,” Geeta said, leaning against her doorframe. She thumped one end of the gourd against her palm like a nightstick. That she should invite her guest inside was not lost on her.

Farah fidgeted. “I’ll pay you as soon—”

“Navratri just ended, so I know you had plenty of new dress orders.” Farah’s bent head nodded. “And I think we both know who did that to your face.”

“I don’t hear a question, Geetaben.” Farah’s hands cupped her opposite elbows, the movement further rounding her already stooped back.

“What’re you going to do when he takes the money again?”

She closed her eyes. “I don’t know.”

“What’s he doing with it?”

“Karembhai.” Farah sighed.

Geeta knew Karem; so had her husband. Karem sold his dead wife’s spectacularly ugly costume jewelry out of a small shop. That business was hardly thriving, but his bootleg liquor sales fed his litter of children. “If some of the other women complained to their husbands, maybe they could confront your husband.”

“No!” Farah’s thick eyebrows rose and her good eye stretched open in fear, making its swollen sister appear smaller. The image was so disturbing, Geeta focused on Farah’s collarbone instead.

“No, please,” Farah repeated. “He’d be so angry. And anyway, I doubt you could convince the other women—I’m not exactly their favorite.”

This bit of news surprised Geeta, who’d assumed she was the only outsider in their loan group. She sighed. “Can you hide some of your money away from home? Or just lie about what you’re making?”

“I thought of that last week, after I missed those other payments.” Farah swallowed and Geeta watched the walnut of her throat retreat and return. She pointed to her split lip. “But he found out.” She shuffled forward. “May I come in?”

Geeta asked, “Why?” even as she stepped aside. Farah removed her sandals, and Geeta noticed her shoulder blades protruding from her thin blouse like nascent wings.

Geeta did not offer her a place to sit, or a glass of water. A guest was to be treated like God, but Farah was not her guest; and while Geeta went to the temple about three times a year, she wasn’t the serial supplicant her mother had been.

The two women stood barefoot in the middle of Geeta’s single-roomed home. Farah moved closer and Geeta, alarmed, took a step back. It upset her, that intimate liberty, as though she were this woman’s confidante. They were not friends—covering the payment had been a necessity, not a kindness. And yet Farah had latched on to the gesture with the desperation of a neglected dog.

Geeta suddenly wanted to tell her to retain some pride. To withhold parts of herself because there were plenty of people like her husband waiting to pilfer what they could. It was unlike Geeta, not only to intrude in others' affairs, but also to offer advice. Advice was a cousin of caring; apathy was Geeta's mantra.

But then Farah said: "Y-you must remember how hard it is. Rameshbhai went to Karem all the time before..." and any desire to counsel the woman vanished. Farah trailed off due to some sense of belated tact, but the damage was already done, and stopping short was just lazy. Various endings to her abandoned sentence whipped around the room like detached lizard tails, all echoes of the gossip that had consumed their village on the heels of Ramesh's disappearance. *Before she'd sprinkled crushed glass in his food, before she'd used her fangs to desiccate him into a husk, before she'd chopped up his body and fed it to the dogs.*

"Yes," Geeta finally said. "Before." It was past time for Farah to leave, and Geeta itched to shut the door on Farah's swollen, judgmental eye and her presumptuous camaraderie.

But she pressed on. "I need your help—a favor."

It was a bold move, enough to surprise Geeta, which in turn cadged a bit of begrudging respect from her as well. "Piling on, are we? Well, I don't have any more money for you."

"No, I mean, I think I know how to stop him."

"Good," Geeta said. "You do that. Then you can pay me back." She herded her unwanted guest toward the door as she had the lizard earlier, all but thumping a broom at Farah's chapped heels.

"No, wait." Farah sidestepped deeper into the room. Geeta sighed. "You stopped Ramesh. He drank and he hit you, I know he did. I saw. We all did."

"You all did," Geeta repeated. "But nobody did anything about it."

Farah's head lowered, diffident once more. "It was a family matter."

Geeta nodded her agreement. "Yes, and so is this. Good luck, Farahben." The respectful suffix of "sister" was not required as Geeta was elder. However, she took comfort in the distance it created. She reached for her door handle.

“Just teach me!” Farah burst out, more hyper than Geeta had ever seen her. Her good eye was manic with possibility. “I can stop Samir, too. I just need to know how you did it, how you got away with it.”

“And by stop him, you mean you want to—”

“Kill him!” Farah said, her voice far too loud. She chopped one hand on the opposite’s palm with a meaty thunk. “Get rid of him. Take him out. Give him a dog’s death.” She clicked her tongue as her thumb sliced across her throat.

Geeta gaped at her. “Have *you* been buying from Karem?”

“Of course not!” Farah took deep umbrage, as though *that* prospect was morally repugnant. She was breathing heavily, too fast and nearly hiccuping. She fanned her face.

“Calm down,” Geeta instructed.

Farah nodded while hyperventilating, and began muttering with one long breath. “*Kabaddi, kabaddi, kabaddi...*”

Geeta stared. “The fuck’re you doing?”

Farah’s breathing steadied. “It helps me breathe deeper. You know? Like the game?” She shrugged. “Whenever I get stressed or scared, it soothes me. It’s, like, my mantra.”

“Your mantra is *kabaddi*.”

“I know it’s a little odd, but—”

“No, *you’re* a little odd. *That’s* super weird.”

Geeta inhaled. This meeting—which should’ve been a brief *ThankyouGeetaben–WhateverFarah* one-off—had derailed into insanity. That Geeta had even allowed it to get this far spoke of an unusual loss of control—was she really so starved for company that she’d indulged Farah’s madness? She smoothed wayward strands of hair against her crown and spoke calmly, “You have no idea what you’re saying, Farah. You’re not the Bandit Queen that you can run around killing men as you please. Go home and think of something else.”

“I *have* thought about this!” Farah said, her hands clenched into fists, the thumbs tucked in like little turtles. A child on the verge of a tantrum after being dismissed by the adults as adorable but untethered to reality. “If I don’t

get rid of him, I'll lose the loan and the business. Or, Ya'Allah, I could end up like poor Runiben." She shuddered. Even Geeta instinctively gulped at the mention of the unfortunate woman who'd once been a part of their loan group.

"He's the father of your children; think of what this would do to them."

"I'm doing this *for* my children, not *to* them. You don't know the things he's capable of. He—" She exhaled. "I think if it were just me, I could handle it. But I can't be everywhere at once, and there's three of them, and sometimes I—" She blinked. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Of course not."

"No, obviously, *obviously* I love the—"

And here Geeta chimed in, too: "Joys of motherhood."

Farah closed her eyes as though receiving a benediction. "So rewarding. But, Geetaben, everyone is better off without him. Me, the kids. Our loan group. Please," she begged, pressing her palms together. "Remove my nose ring." Though it was a figure of speech Geeta hadn't heard for many years, she understood Farah's plea: *Make a widow out of me*.

Geeta crossed her arms over her chest. "Two men disappearing in one village won't go unnoticed. What would you tell the police?"

Farah bobbed up and down, practically airborne with hope. Her enthusiasm was pathetic. "We'll leave the body for them to find. It'll look like an accident. Besides, Ramesh was what, five years ago now?"

"An accident? Where are your brains? What, he tripped and fell onto a knife a couple of times? He shot himself with a gun he doesn't own?"

"Okay fine, I don't have *all* the details sorted yet. That's where you come in! We'll do what you did, only we'll make it look like an accident."

"'We'?" Geeta held her hands up, palms out. She stepped back. "I'm not with you."

"Yes, yes you are." An odd calm spread over Farah's bruised features. Her shoulders relaxed and her voice lowered. Dignity uncurled her spine and seemed to elongate her limbs; the transformation unnerved Geeta. "The others will expect you to keep covering for me if Samir keeps stealing from me. Think about it. You're the only one without a family to take care of. But

if we end up losing the loan, you're the only one without a family to take care of *you*." Farah crept closer. "So it is 'we.'"

Her logic was immaculate; she had only spoken the truth. But Farah's sudden, clever bravery inspired Geeta's resentment. "Keep your filmy dialogues to yourself and get the hell out of my house."

Then Farah slumped, exhausted, and Geeta recognized her once again. "Please, Geetaben."

"No."

Farah left as she'd arrived: head lowered, back falcate as though the evening air presented too much of a burden. Watching her leave, Geeta felt an unexpected urge to call her back. Not to capitulate to her batty plan, but to make tea and talk about the terrifying loneliness and loathing that accompanied the black eyes and broken ribs. Then Geeta remembered that Farah was walking home to her family. And the urge cured itself.

