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## Trouble in Kotagiri

Abhinav Bhattacharya

Arya stood near the doors of the half empty railway carriage – smiling at the cool winds streaming through the open doors as the train was about to reach Coimbatore. She was on her way to Kotagiri – a small tourist hamlet in the Nilgiri Hills – not for a quick vacation before the short winter weeks faded away – rather to take up her first job – a position with the First Mercantile Bank!

She had boarded the train early this afternoon, saying goodbyes to her panic stricken, worried mother, stoic as usual father and teary-eyed elder brother – all hoping desperately that the plucky bright girl they all loved and will dearly miss, will give up this crazy idea to go and join a low paying job in the middle of nowhere in northern Tamil Nadu and come to her senses and come back home soon.

When she had finished her masters and started looking for jobs, both her father and brother had asked her to come join the family business. The accounting firm was in the fourth generation now – having served clients big and small for better parts of the past century. Arya and her brother Arjun had both grown up around the firm, and both of them as well as their father had never considered anything other than the two of them joining the family business. But Arya – the forever rebel – had thrown a spanner in their neatly knit up plans and as always wanted to chart her own course. She wanted to go out and prove herself outside the sheltered environs of the family; find a job on her own merit and show herself that she could survive.

First Mercantile Bank was a shock! Even though her family was supportive of her finding a job on her own before joining the family establishment, they couldn't really understand why it couldn't be in Bangalore – she could have her pick of companies and stay at home and work wherever she chose to. But to pick an unknown bank – just setting up their operations – and then to choose an opening in commercial lending – perhaps the worst part of the entire banking operation – that too out of a small branch in Kotagiri – a small town in the Nilgiri Hills – they couldn't fathom that – no matter how hard they tried.

A sudden jerk of the BLW & Alco engine and shuddering of the entire carriage brought Arya out of her reminiscing. She looked at the luminous dials of her watch – almost Nine P.M. The train was already a bit behind schedule and seemed to be just puttering around at a leisurely pace right now. She had a booking at the Hilton Inn near the station and would spend the night in Coimbatore before hiring a car for the drive to Kotagiri tomorrow morning.

She tried to peer out into the darkness – blurry shapes seemed to be zipping by as the train seemed to thankfully pick up some speed for once. The tracker on her phone showed that the train was just a couple of miles outside the city. She quickly checked her bags – just the tote on her back and a huge suitcase – seemed to be awfully less for setting up a new life – but Kotagiri was only a short distance

away from Bangalore and her parents were already planning a trip once she was settled in.

As the train rumbled to a stop, Arya peered out from the carriage doors – the station seemed like any of the hundreds of others you see around the country! A few small shops scattered across the two platforms; a few disinterested looking onlookers hanging around, a couple of stray dogs next to the canteen hoping for a few morsels to feed on.

A gaggle of porters quickly surrounded the lanky, lithe Arya – ‘Cab madam? Know Tamil madam? Take to good hotel! Where you want to go madam?’ Slightly flustered, Arya wiggled her way through the crowd – ‘Nothing – I am good – thank you!’ She wheeled her suitcase down the platform ramp – and the Hilton sign was already visible from the gates of the station.

Walking into the comfortable Hilton Inn lobby, she was greeted by the familiar confident charming smiling receptionist – ‘Hello, I am Payel – how can I help you?’

Arya flashed a tired smile of her own – ‘Hi, I have a booking for the night under the name of Arya Singh?’

The whole checking in process handled with the usual expected efficiency, Arya enquired about available transport for the next morning – ‘Can I hire a car to drive up to Kotagiri tomorrow?’

Payel flashed her brilliant professional smile at her again – ‘Sure madam! Would you simply like a drop at Kotagiri or would you prefer a car for the duration of your stay?’

‘Oh, I am not visiting Kotagiri as a tourist – I am going to join my new job there!’

Payel looked at her with barely concealed surprise, ‘New job? In Kotagiri?’

Arya smiled at her ‘Yes – it’s a small new bank starting around here – the First Mercantile Bank – not many people know if it yet – I will be joining there!’

‘Oh wonderful!’ Payel responded while pecking away at the keys of her workstation – ‘Where exactly in Kotagiri would you need your drop?’

Arya fished out her phone from the pockets of her jeans, scrolling through the various emails which detailed where exactly she needed to go for the company guest house – ‘St Mary’s Church? That’s the nearest landmark to the guest house according to the information the company shared with me.’

Payel nodded – ‘Sure ma’am! We will arrange a car for you for tomorrow morning till St Mary’s Church, Kotagiri. What time will you like to leave?’

‘Oh, straight away after breakfast. Say by 9 in the morning? How long does it take from here to Kotagiri?’

‘Well, during peak monsoon it takes a while longer – with the frequent landslides and all. But the weather has been good lately and the roads are good. If you leave by 9 in the morning, you should easily reach Kotagiri by Noon at the latest!’

‘Great – please make the booking – here’s my card for the payment.’

Payel took the card from Arya and with her typical efficiency had the entire details printed out for her within a minute.

‘Here you go ma’am! Your receipt for the stay here plus the booking for the car tomorrow! I do hope you enjoy your stay here – and have a pleasant drive to Kotagiri tomorrow!’

‘Thank you!’

Waving a tired goodbye at the friendly receptionist, Arya put all the documents back in her tote bag and wheeled her suitcase towards the lift lobby. Feeling exhausted after the journey, she just wanted a quick shower, some light dinner and then straight to bed. Hopefully the drive down to Kotagiri wouldn’t be too bad tomorrow and she will be able to be fully recharged for joining her new job on Monday!

She wheeled her suitcase into the lift and pressed the key for her floor – the 5<sup>th</sup> one – she could see directly at the reception desk – Payel seemed to be on a call – having an animated discussion with someone with a lot of gesturing involved – she caught Arya’s eyes and flashed her a smile just as the lift doors closed on her.

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Arya sat in the passenger seat as the elderly gentleman who was driving the car paid the attendant at the fuel pump. They had started off from the hotel at half past 10 in the morning – quite a bit later than she had originally planned to.

She had just showered and was about to step out of her room to go to the breakfast buffet when the phone rang – an unknown number.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi Good Morning’ a cheery voice greeted her ‘Am I speaking to Ms. Arya Singh?’

‘Yes ...’

‘Hi Arya, this is Anshuman from First Mercantile – I look after the Human Resources for this region – and wanted to quickly call you and welcome you to Kotagiri!’

‘Oh thanks, Anshuman – great to talk to you! I am actually still in Coimbatore – about to start for Kotagiri. I should be there this afternoon and can drop by the branch later if anyone will be around.’

‘That’s why I called you Arya – the branch had a major electrical fault last night due to the sudden thunderstorm we had here – and our backup generator can only work for so long till it needs a break. Since it’s Saturday anyway, we will be closing the branch down early today.’

Arya chuckled – ‘Oh wow – okay! Sure – that gives me some time to settle in as well! Is it okay if I come in with all my documents and other details on Monday itself?’

‘Of course! Just another update – the company guest house near St. Mary’s Church was also a bit damaged in the storm – we’re making

alternative arrangements for you – just for the weekend. Please check in at the ‘Kota Gardens’ today when you come in! We have made all the arrangements for you already.’

Arya paused, ‘Okay ... sure! Can I call you if I have any problems?’

Anshuman quickly assured her, ‘Yes of course! Have a safe drive down and enjoy the weekend. We will welcome you to office on Monday!’

Sighing Arya hung up the call. What a way to start a new job in a new city a hundred miles away from home!

She took longer than planned at the breakfast buffet, taking her time to savour the delicious servings of Rawa Dosa and the special Sambar chutney of Tamil Nadu! Calling home while nursing a cup of coffee, she spoke to her parents, giving them a quick update. Her mom was predictably flustered by the sudden change of plans and was soon almost in tears asking her to give up the cockamamy idea of working in a commercial bank in a hilly hamlet in Tamil Nadu and wanted her back home. Her father, though obviously missing her, was never one to show unnecessary emotions; he was more supportive and wanted to her do a good job at whatever was thrown at her! Quickly finishing up the call, she settled the bill and hurriedly packed up her room – the car was here since 9 in the morning anyway – with the meter running.

She tried to find Payel, the friendly receptionist from the night before at the front desk – but it was someone else – equally efficient in that expected Hilton standard.

They had started an hour back and had only recently come out of the urban sprawl and started the climb up the hills. The gentleman driving – Peter Rayappar – wanted to check the fuel and the tyre pressures at what was the last good petrol pump before they reached Kotagiri. Friendly yet reserved, he had been content to drive with quiet efficiency. However, when Arya started asking him about suggestions of places to visit in Kotagiri, he became quite animated and was eager to tell her of the many wonderful places which she should absolutely must visit and small out of the way joints where

she must eat. Turns out he was from Kotagiri – his family all stayed there – while he travelled all around the Nilgiris with tourists in his car – a dream job for him!

He was surprised but pleased when Arya told him that she was going to Kotagiri to become a resident – not just a passing visitor. He hadn't heard of the First Mercantile Bank – but knew that a lot of new companies were starting up here. He was hopeful about what it might mean for the region.

‘Madam for me there was never any option of finding a good job here in Kotagiri – there were none to look for. After graduating from college, I went away to Chennai for a few years – working in a firm there. I hated the big city, the pollution and the humidity of the place! I came back as soon as I could! Thankfully I had some savings which I used to buy this car! And that's what I have been doing for the past three decades! Travelling in and around these beautiful hills and showing off the natural splendour to tourists from all over the world!’

Arya smiled at his enthusiasm! ‘How's the weather in Kotagiri now?’ she asked? She could see clouds scattering the blue sky and the air getting a bit colder as the car slowly climbed the mountains following the serpentine roads – she couldn't see any signs of the rains which Anshuman had spoken about.

‘The weather has been good now madam – you will find it getting a bit colder as we actually reach Kotagiri. It becomes a bit warmer in the summer – but much better than what you will find in the rest of the South!’

‘Was there a thunderstorm here last night Peter? Someone from my office called me this morning and said that there was a bad thunderstorm last night – a really bad one!’

Peter glanced at her in surprise – ‘Thunderstorm? Last night? Not that I heard of madam. I had spent last night in Coimbatore – but my wife didn't mention anything when I spoke to her!’

Arya felt puzzled – quickly fishing out her phone, she tried to check for the weather in Kotagiri – but it only showed her the weather

forecast – not the past data. Pushing the uneasiness aside – she looked out of the window.

They had already climbed up quite a bit already – and from the passenger window she could see the green valley stretching below – dotted with small hamlets and pieces of clouds floating in between. It was a beautiful place – one that she would be glad to call home!

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They arrived at the ‘Kota Gardens’ just after one in the afternoon. They had been caught by strong gusts of rain over the last few miles into town and driving had been slow out of necessity. Now checking into the Kota Gardens, Arya found herself shivering – quickly pulling on a thick sweatshirt from her rucksack – catching a cold right at the start of a new job wasn’t going to do.

Anshuman had been as good as his word – a booking had been made in Arya’s name for three days at the hotel. Evidently, they expected the wind damage to the guest house – whatever it may be – to be fixed by that time.

The hotel was beautiful – away from the centre of the town, it was up a secluded slope all on its own. Surrounded by tea estates and flowers, the view from her room was breath-taking – making her forget that she was here to join a job at a bank; she decided that the fates had indeed played into her hand – she was just going to enjoy today and Sunday – get ready early Monday morning – and head over to her office to start her first day at work! She deserved the break!

After a sumptuous lunch with the best fish and chips she had ever had, followed by the most delicious chocolate ganache tart, she headed out to explore the resort and its surroundings on foot. It was a glorious day out with a steady breeze and speckled clouds – the perfect weather to hike. She hiked up the path starting from the back of the dining hut, wandering between the coffee plantations and the flower gardens.

Sitting down at the base of a large eucalyptus – right at the edge of the coffee plantations, she sighed – this was wonderful. She had

barely spent a few hours in Kotagiri – and she was already in love with this place. So different from the normal hustle and bustle of Bangalore which she was used to. It was peaceful and calm, with blue skies and actual sounds of birds chirping. She grinned to herself – this was going to be fun!

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Arya woke up with a start! She had somehow managed to fall asleep – a full stomach and a hike tended to do that to you! She was still sitting at edge of the clump of eucalyptus – the sun was about to set – and the breeze had picked up! She was freezing. A quick glance at her phone showed the time – almost 5 in the evening!

Scrambling up, she started back for the main area of Kota Gardens. It wouldn't do at all to be lost in the middle of the coffee estate here. She didn't know the place and even though she was pretty sure there were no wild animals in this area – she didn't want to take any risks at all. Not on her first day.

Thankfully the Sun was still quite some way from setting completely and she was able to follow the path back; the first thing she saw while nearing the hotel – a small crowd of people near the lobby including some in uniform! The police were here!

Getting closer she found the only face she knew among the crowd – the young receptionist who now looked positively scared. She looked at Arya – and gasped – she quickly turned to the tall police officer who seemed to be in charge and pointed in Arya's direction – excitedly saying something which Arya couldn't quite catch!

Curious but not quite sure of what was going on, Arya quickly walked towards the group – the tall police officer stepped forward towards her.

'Ms. Singh? Ms. Arya Singh?'

Arya stared at the police officer not quite sure what to say. He was tall, quite a bit taller than her own 5 feet 8 inches. She looked up at his eyes – incredibly brown – questioning eyes – not threatening.

She glanced at his name tag – Kabir Shastri – ‘Yes – I am Arya Singh. Is anything wrong?’

‘Please come with me madam.’ Turning to the group of bystanders Kabir asked – ‘Is there any place where I can talk to Ms. Singh?’

Before anyone could answer, he seemed to change his mind – ‘Let’s go to your room madam. We can talk there!’

He told the others to wait and gave some other instructions to his staff to get going – and then followed Arya to her room.

Arya fumbled open the door – not quite sure what was going on. She gestured the police officer in – ‘Please come in – and do tell me what is going on?’

‘All in good time madam!’ Kabir smiled at her, ‘Please sit down – be comfortable – I am not here to arrest you.’

Arya clutched at her hands – not sure what to do – she sat down on the edge of the bed while the officer kept standing.

‘Do you have any ID available with you which you can show me?’

‘Sure – it’s in my purse’

‘Let me get it if you don’t mind – where is it?’

Arya gestured at the wooden cabinet – ‘It’s right in there.’

Kabir walked over to the cabinet, took out purse – and looked questioningly at her – as if asking her permission to open it. Arya nodded – still not sure what was happening.

Kabir opened her purse and took out her ID, taking a long look at it – throwing the occasional glance at Arya as if to confirm that it was really her.

Finally, seemingly satisfied, he closed the ID, kept it in his hands and strolled back towards Arya.

‘Madam, tell me the complete story please. Who exactly are you, when and why did you come here, everything, please don’t leave out any details.’

‘Why? Could you tell me what happened? What has gone wrong?’ Arya was near tears. Even though generally bold and confident, this was a completely new experience for her. Of all the things which could have gone wrong, even in the minds of her pessimistic mother, getting questioned by the police on the first day of her new job had to be pretty close to the top of the unthinkable list.

‘I will tell you everything madam – please tell me first how you came to be here – in Kotagiri – and also ‘Kota Gardens’. If I am not wrong – your booking was in the First Mercantile guest house wasn’t it?’

Arya stared at the officer – not sure of where to start. She told of her job search, how she had landed the position in First Mercantile after multiple rounds of interview. How, finally, after desperate opposition from her parents she had been able to convince them to let her come to Kotagiri – just yesterday she had boarded the train from Bangalore. Her stay in Hilton seemed to interest the officer even more – he asked in detail about seemingly every single step she had taken in the hotel – right from checking in, till booking her car and leaving this morning. He stopped her when she was telling him about the phone-call she received this morning from ‘Anshuman’ claiming to be from the bank and asking her to delay coming in today and wait till Monday. He asked for her phone, noting down the number she had received the call from and immediately calling up someone from his own phone and relaying the number and asking for some more detailed information.

Finally, he looked up at an obviously distraught Arya – a slight smile on his face.

‘You need to come with me madam. No – don’t worry, I am not arresting you! I need your detailed statement. Plus, other senior officers are also waiting at the police station, they will need to hear the details from you as well.’

‘Sir, you still haven’t told me what is going on – do I need to call a lawyer? I need to inform my parents at least! Please tell me what has happened?’

Kabir held his hands up – palms out – in the universal gesture of peace, ‘Calm down Ms. Singh. I understand your confusion – but again, you’re not under arrest! We just need some more details and an official statement from you at the station – then you’re free to go!’

Arya looked at him doubtfully – he seemed to be sincere – certainly not how she expected a police officer to treat a criminal or a suspect.

She nodded, ‘Okay – let’s go. The sooner I get done with this – the better!’

Kabir flashed a smile at her, opening the door, gesturing at Arya, ‘After you.’

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It was an unreal experience for Arya – leaving the hotel with a police officer, other guests and hotel staff staring at her – wonderment and fear on their faces! She could almost hear the whispered questions, ‘Oh my god!’, ‘Look at her – with the police’, ‘The innocent looking ones are always the most dangerous’, ‘Wonder what she did!’.

Coming into the police station, she was led to an interview room and was asked to again go through the details of her journey from Bangalore to Coimbatore, her stay for the night there in the Hilton, the phone call she received this morning and her drive over to Kotagiri. Once the officers were certain they had all the details right, they looked at each other – as if she was confirming what they already knew.

Kabir stood up, slowly pacing the small room, ‘Thank you Arya for sharing all the details. This helps us putting the pieces together.’

‘Really? Because I am still completely in the dark as to what has happened!’ Arya exclaimed.

Kabir smiled his smile at her again, ‘We do understand your annoyance, but believe us – it was unavoidable. You have been duped Ms. Singh. Your identity stolen – and used to commit a

crime. It could have been much worse, but luckily for you, we were able to catch the criminals pretty soon!’

The senior officer in the room spoke up, ‘You’re lucky Ms. Singh, that Detective Shastri was almost at the scene when the crime happened, and was able to catch the criminals as they were about to flee. Else you would be being charged with robbery right about now.’

Arya flinched, gaping at the officer, ‘Robbery? I don’t understand!’

Kabir gestured reassuringly at her, ‘Your identity was stolen the moment you stepped into the Hilton at Coimbatore last night Ms. Singh. We don’t know yet if you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, or were you specifically targeted.’

He sighed, sitting down opposite Arya again. The senior officer – Detective Bedi, left – thanking Arya for her co-operation.

Kabir started again.

‘First Mercantile Bank is perhaps the only private bank in this part of Kotagiri. And they’re trying to drum up business. As you know, a town this size doesn’t really have the scope to give a huge business to a commercial bank; you have your typical savers and small-time tradesmen and some salaried employees. So, the bank was trying to drum up some business with one of the large hotels here – they needed the business badly. So, they offered really great terms to the biggest resort here – and got the payroll responsibility for the bank.’

Arya nodded, following along so far, though still not sure where she, or rather, her identity fit in.

‘Some local crooks, looking to make an easy buck, found out about the change. They planned to rob the bank on the day of the payroll, when they knew the bank would have large amounts of cash in its vaults. Now they were quite smart about it. They didn’t want to go about arranging guns, bombs and all of that – they’re quite hard to get hold of and even more difficult to use – especially under pressure. Plus, they cost money – which they didn’t have! So, they

decided to be smart about it. They somehow found out that somebody new will be joining the bank.’

Gesturing at her, Kabir continued, ‘You! You were perhaps the last piece of puzzle they were missing. Again, not sure yet if they knew you were coming yesterday, or just got lucky. I would like to think they knew.’

‘Their accomplice sent them all your identity details last night – you will be amazed at what can be done with a good printer today. They had a complete set of identity documents, offer letter and every other detail ready – only the person who showed up – was not you Ms. Singh!’

Arya looked at him curiously, ‘Who was it then? And how did they manage to get all my documents last night? You saw with your own eyes, none of my documents were stolen, neither were they missing! And who showed up to the bank?’

Kabir smiled at her, getting up and opening the door, ‘Come with me Arya.’

Arya stood up uncertainly, realized she had no real choice, and followed him.

Kabir briskly walked down the corridor, stopping in front of the entrance of a similar meeting room they were using just now – this one had a uniformed guard posted outside. He knocked and leaned inside speaking to whoever was in there.

He gestured Arya forward. Sitting in the room in handcuffs in an outfit remarkably similar to hers was Payel! The friendly smiling receptionist from the Hilton! Only she wasn’t smiling as much now! She looked up and saw Arya – shocked, she quickly looked down.

Kabir closed the door behind him and lead Arya back to where they were seated.

‘So, now do you understand how they got your documents last night and who took your place? She is from Kotagiri. We don’t know if this her idea – whether she just acted when she had you check in last

night, or she knew you were coming and was working under orders from someone else. But we will know soon enough!’

Arya was still in shock, ‘But who called me this morning? Anshuman from the bank?’

‘A member of this gang. They only ever wanted to delay you from showing up – if it’s any consolation. They certainly didn’t mean to harm you. All they needed was someone to be able to walk into the bank, with all the accesses and trust from the other staff and walk out with a few bundles of notes – not that difficult you see. So, they fabricated the story of the thunderstorm – it barely rained a few drops yesterday and made sure you not only reached late, you didn’t actually reach the company guest house where you were expected. Ms. Payel showed up in your place. Boarded the cab from the bank, and walked in! Ready to walk out with a pile of cash from the vault! It really isn’t the most secure branch and who would expect someone to do something like that? Arya Singh will be caught in a day, disgraced and spend a long time in jail! Hardly worth it! The clincher was assuming someone else’s identity – someone who was supposed to be there – yet whom no-one knew! They could just walk in and walk out! A brilliant plan really if you think about it! And it almost worked!’

‘But why didn’t it? I mean how did you manage to catch them?’ Arya asked, ‘The other officer said you were at the right place at the right time and that’s why they were caught. What happened exactly?’

Kabir laughed, ‘Oh I was just lucky! I had gone to the bazaar area for a routine patrol, when I saw the young lady walk out of the bank hurriedly – holding a huge bulging canvas bag – quite obviously full of money. I was surprised and more than a little scared for her – Kotagiri is not a crime-haven, but if you’re walking down the main road with a sack full of money, you’re asking for trouble!’

‘I simply flashed my hooter at her, she dropped her bag, money spilling out. A few staff from the bank came out – wonder struck that the new girl who joined just an hour back was just walking out with a bagful of money!’ he smiled.

‘We brought her here – she put up no resistance whatsoever and slowly the story came spilling out. We went looking for you – just to confirm you were safe – but you were not there. We were about to start a search for you and threaten the girl with murder charges to get her to spill when you decided to stroll back in!’

Arya sighed, relief coursing through her. She shook her head, feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on. ‘What a way to start a job! Do I need to call First Mercantile? Do I even still have a job there?’

‘You do,’ Kabir reassured her. ‘We have spoken to the bank; they know what happened. If they say anything on Monday, just let us know – I will personally come to vouch for you!’

Arya flashed a tired smile at him – ‘Thank you Detective Shastri!’

Kabir continued, ‘However, if you really want me to vouch for you, I do need to get to know you better!’, he smiled his charming smile at her again, ‘Want to join me for a cup of coffee?’

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## **Abhinav Bhattacharya**

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Abhinav Bhattacharya has grown up reading books from authors across languages and genres in Kolkata. Always having dreamt of being an author, and spinning fiction – he is just starting out writing hoping it’s not too late! Crunching boring numbers during the day doesn’t leave much time – but he hopes to publish a novel soon!

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