



# Prologue

*Two babies are born in the same hospital. Two tiny voices cry out, then fall silent. Their hearts stutter. Their lungs stop filling. People run. Machines bleep. A parent screams.*

*After an eternity, air returns to the tiny lungs. The little hearts are beating. The parents sob happy tears. All is right with the world.*

*Except...*

*A rip in the universe has been torn, from our world to another. And someone is watching. She knows, if she waits long enough, the hole will grow. She knows, if she watches closely enough, she'll find her moment and claim her prize.*

*Time rolls on, until one day she sees the flames, and she knows: it's now.*

*Those babies are going to wish they'd never been born.*





# 1

## Hurricane Myra

Myra's mum gave her hand a squeeze and smiled at her from beneath her bright-red clown nose. "Happy deathday, Myra," she said.

"Thanks, Ma!" said Myra. She gave her mum a big toothy grin and tried to feel excited. They were walking to Myra's joint birthday party, which she had every year with her not-exactly-friend Rohan. Spending time with perfect Rohan always set her on edge. Standing next to him felt like turning up to school in your dirty pyjamas when everyone else is wearing perfectly ironed white clothes.

She scuffed her neon wellingtons along the ground as they passed the kebab shops and key cutters of the long, litter-strewn high street where she lived, and gave herself a talking-to. *It's my birthday*, she thought. *It's a happy day. Think happy thoughts.* But the gloom kept spreading through her, like that damp patch in the corner of the living room.

She looked at her mother and made herself smile again. It felt like trying to control a sad, wet puppet, only the puppet was her face. Her mother smiled back.

“Aren’t birthdays amazing?” she said.

Myra nodded. “Amazing.”

To celebrate Myra’s birthday, her mother was dressed as a clown and holding a large armful of red helium balloons. It was one of her more restrained fancy-dress outfits.

As they walked through the brightly lit shopping centre, hand in hand, Myra’s mum got a lot of dirty looks from passers-by but Myra didn’t care. They were just jealous that they didn’t have their own clown.

She looked up at her mother with a chest full of pride. Bridget Duffy was such a big personality, sometimes Myra felt a little squished beside her. That meant she just needed to puff herself up and be as much fun as physically possible, didn’t it?

Myra was dressed in her birthday best, with a flower behind each ear and her curly brown hair loose and wild. She wore a bright-green ballet tutu, a neon-yellow T-shirt reading **NOW PANIC AND FREAK OUT** and a pair of luminous-green wellingtons. As she walked beside her mum, she had a moment’s worry that she should have worn a fancy-dress costume too.

*Worries aren't for birthdays, remember?* she told herself. It was one of her mother's many sayings, along with *No one likes a whiner* and *Never trust a Virgo*.

"Rohan's part of town is so boring, isn't it?" said her mum. "It's like a morgue round here."

They were turning on to the street where Rohan lived. It was lined with trees and everything was quiet and calm and smelled faintly of roses. The street where Myra lived was a car-clogged main road, and it smelled mostly of exhaust and chips.

"So boring," agreed Myra. The silence on the road made her thoughts feel loud.

"What's in the bag, sweetie?" asked her mother, apparently only just noticing that Myra was carrying a rucksack.

"It's a surprise!" said Myra mysteriously.

"That's my girl!" chuckled her mother, handing her a balloon. "Let it go and watch it soar!" she suggested.

Myra let go of the string and the balloon floated away into the sky. She wondered what that would feel like, being so light and so high.

Soon they reached Rohan's neat, freshly painted house and Myra rang the bell. A millisecond later, she reached out to ring it again in case they hadn't heard, but the door swung open. Rohan was standing just inside, like

he'd been waiting there.

"Hello," said Rohan. He looked worried.

Then again, Rohan always looked worried. He was five foot five inches of worry in human form. His black hair was gelled up, contributing at least one of those inches. Myra wasn't sure how it was physically possible for hair to look worried, but Rohan's did. His dark eyes were wide, looking at Myra like you might look at a bomb ticking down to the last second of its timer.

Myra thought he looked like he was dressed for a funeral. And not in a fun, morbid, "it's my deathday" way. He had on a dark-blue shirt and darker-blue trousers. The only hint of colour was his tie, which was red. But also: it was a *tie*. He was wearing an actual tie. It made him look like a grown-up who'd been on the wrong end of a shrink-ray.

"HELLO!" said Myra, at capital-letter volume. "HAPPY DEATHDAY TO US! SCREAM!" She followed the word "scream" with a proper, ear-piercing scream, holding her hands on either side of her face. Making an entrance was important, especially at a party.

Rohan covered his ears until she'd finished. He looked up and down the street, checking if anyone was nearby, then beckoned, hissing, "Please come in?"

"Yeah! Let's get this party started!" said Myra's mum,

pumping the air with her frilly-sleeved arm. “WOO!”

“Er, hello, Mrs Duffy,” said Rohan, blinking up at the clown in his doorway. “You know it’s just going to be us and a few aunties this year, right? Because of last year...?” Rohan tailed off, looking at Myra then looking away.

Myra’s stomach dropped remembering that. Well, she hadn’t forgotten so much as buried the knowledge under her happy thoughts.

The Myra and Rohan joint party was traditional. Myra and Rohan were born in the same hospital, on the same night, and both of them had died after they were born. It had only been for a minute, and they’d recovered completely thanks to some very quick-thinking doctors and nurses. It was a medical miracle that the two families got together to celebrate once a year.

Myra thought the miracle might be a cursed one, given that something always went wrong at these parties.

The things that went wrong were never exactly Myra’s fault, unless you were fussy and defined “her fault” as “happening because of something she’d done”.

Last year had been worse than usual. She’d opened the door so enthusiastically to the magician that he’d ended up with a broken hand, and his only trick had been turning himself into a hospital patient. There

had also been an incident with some superglue and Rohan's cousin's hair, which led to an emergency hairdresser visit.

Her mum hadn't punished her, luckily. Myra's mum never told her off or gave her punishments of any kind. It wasn't part of her parenting philosophy. "I don't like to limit my Myra," she liked to say. "I want her to find her own limits."

However, it turned out that Rohan's mum wasn't keen on allowing Myra to find her own limits while under her roof. So this year Myra had been sent a list of rules.

No matches

No superglue

No opening the front door

No fun

OK, that last one wasn't strictly on the list. But it seemed to be what Rohan's parents were getting at. What kind of party has *rules*?

Rohan looked up and down at Myra's mother's clown wig, patchwork trousers and full facepaint with a doubtful expression.

"So, yeah ... there won't be any kids," he said.

Myra thought it was about right that Rohan didn't count himself as a child.

"So what?" said Mrs Duffy. "The smaller the party, the



more effort we have to put into making it fun, don't we?" Her voice was slightly muffled by a big red nose pinching her actual nose. She reached to her clown lapel and a jet of water squirted out of a plastic flower, right into Rohan's face. "Happy deathday, sweetheart!" she chuckled.

"Thank you?" said Rohan, wiping his eye and flattening himself to the wall to let them past. Myra thought he stayed flattened longer than he needed to, as though he trusted the wall more than he trusted Myra and her mother.

"Balloon?" said Myra's mum, holding one out for Rohan to take.

"I ... why not," said Rohan.

"Later, we can inhale the helium and talk in tiny ant voices!" suggested Myra's mum.

Rohan made a horrified face. "That's very bad for you!"

Myra's mum shrugged. "Is it? Ah! Hello, little one! Give Aunty Bridget a squish!" She held out her arms as Rohan's little sister, Shilpa, came toddling along, giggling to herself.

But, seeing the clown in her hallway, Shilpa squealed and ran to Rohan instead, grabbing on to his trouser leg.

Myra thought her mum looked sad for a moment. But that was impossible. Myra's mum was never sad at parties.

“Awww, she loves her brother,” was all Bridget Duffy said.

Rohan stroked Shilpa’s dark curly head gently. The little girl was wearing Spider-Man pyjamas and yawning her face off. “Not sleepy!” she said to Rohan. “Party games!”

“You need to have your nap first,” said Rohan. “Then you can play party games.”

“Party games!” repeated Shilpa excitedly. “Now?”

“Later. Sleepy time now. Shall I sing you a lullaby? Your favourite?”

“K,” said Shilpa, nestling into his leg like a koala clinging to a tree. Then, just in case anyone was under the impression she was going to take any of this lying down, she added, “Play now!”

“Shh, later,” said Rohan. He tried to look stern, but as Shilpa looked up at him with her big dark eyes, he melted and gave her a tickle.

“PLAYYYYYY!” she shrieked, then dissolved into giggles of joy.

Rohan’s mother came downstairs just then, smelling of perfume and looking film-star elegant. Myra was half convinced she wasn’t a real person, but instead some kind of hologram. She wore a very pretty green dress with a wispy, shiny scarf and everything about her seemed to

glow with perfection.

Rohan hurriedly picked up Shilpa and tried to shhh her out of her giggle fit.

“Priyamvada!” said Mrs Duffy. She looked down awkwardly at her clown costume for a moment, then back up at Rohan’s mum, her smile faltering slightly under her clown nose. “You look gorgeous!”

“Thank you!” Rohan’s mum replied. “Though now I feel underdressed. LOVE the clown costume!”

Myra’s mum beamed at that.

“Would you like some chai while we wait for the food to be ready?” Rohan’s mum went on.

Myra could smell the food. Spiced warmth and fresh bread.

Myra’s mum honked her red nose, which meant she was indeed interested in some chai, and the adults filed off into the kitchen. Myra went to follow them but Myra’s mother shook her head.

“You go and play,” she said. “I need some grown-up time!”

Myra swallowed. The fresh-baked smells soured in her nostrils. “Let’s do something fun!” she said to Rohan, who was holding a struggling Shilpa.

“I’m going to put her down for her nap, then we can play Thronehammer,” said Rohan, hoiking his sister up

further into his arms. She giggled and pulled his hair down over his eyes. “It’s set up under the awning, in case it rains. Shilpa, don’t do that. I need to go upstairs and I can’t see.”

That made Shilpa giggle and mess with his hair even more as he carried her upstairs.

“Rohaaaaa!” she cooed. “Rohaaaa! Not sleep! Not sleep!”

“Come on, I don’t want to drop you,” said Rohan, wrestling Shilpa away from his face as he mounted the stairs.

Myra smiled. Shilpa never did what she was told, and Myra appreciated that in a person, even a very small person.

“Can’t she play for a bit?” asked Myra, thinking Shilpa would probably be more fun than Rohan.

“Play Myra!” agreed Shilpa, holding out her fat arms to Myra.

“No!” Rohan was halfway up the stairs. “You’re not helping, shh!”

“Fine!” said Myra, feeling a slight sting, but pushing it down. *This is going to be fun, remember. Nothing can stop it being fun. It doesn’t matter that Mum doesn’t want to hang out with me. She’s had all morning with me, hasn’t she? So other people should get to be with me too!*

OK, so there weren't any other people nearby. But Rohan would be back down soon. She headed out to the garden, with her bag on her shoulder. It contained precious things and could not be let out of her sight. The bag was covered in badges. One of them read, "Death to the Patriarchy!" One said, "Save the animals, eat plants!" and another said, simply, "Puppies!" Myra had broad-ranging tastes, but was consistent in her love for exclamation marks on everything. They just made words look more exciting!

Myra sat down in one of the garden chairs, with her Very Important Bag at her side, and surveyed the Thronehammer board like a general preparing for battle.

The pieces were laid out neatly, with the dice beside the board and the rule book in pride of place. Myra loved all the characters in the game, and the art on the box. It showed a dwarf, and an elf, and a human warrior battling a giant spider. The reality of the game never quite lived up to the art. It was a role-playing game, where you pretended to be fantastical characters, go on quests, and fight monsters. She was happy with all of that, but there were so many rules!

No eating magical food!

No using iron weapons with a fairy character!

No carrying on fighting when you've taken 900 hit

points after a particularly enthusiastic solo attack on a troll...

...and Rohan was a real stickler about it all. For instance, she didn't see why she wasn't allowed to cast a ninth-level spell with a fourth-level wizard character, but he'd go ballistic when she tried it.

She'd be like, "But what if I'm feeling EXTRA powerful today? KABAM! Fireball!" This made Rohan start hopping from foot to foot with anxiety.

There was a scraping noise, and the window to the kitchen opened. Sounds of plates and bowls and cups emerged, and various aunties offering better ways to do things, until Mrs Patel suggested they go and lay the table.

Myra turned her attention back to the board, deciding which character she wanted to be today. Rohan had a ninth-level wizard he'd been playing for the last year, but she'd managed to kill all her characters so far, except a berserker. The good thing about berserkers was that when you rushed in without a plan to attack the enemy, that was actually what you were supposed to do, and as a result, her Thorag the Foolhardy character wasn't dead. Yet.

Adult voices drifted boringly out of the kitchen.

"How's the business going?" Mrs Patel was asking.

"Oh, you know," said Myra's mum. "Slowly. I'm not

sure people are quite ready for healing yoghurt. And it's so hard, juggling the business and looking after Myra."

At the sound of her own name, her ears pricked up.

"I'm sorry, that sounds hard," said Mrs Patel. "I don't know how you do it."

"What they don't tell you when you have a kid is how hard it is to get anything done. Love her, but she never stops talking when I'm trying to concentrate."

The words were like nails on a chalkboard, but inside her ribcage. Myra gritted her teeth.

"Well, if you ever want her to come here to give you a break, just say the word," said Mrs Patel.

"Dangerous words, my friend. You might find I've packed a trunk and Myra's living with you before too long!" laughed Myra's mother.

Myra didn't want to hear any more of that. She knew she cramped her mum's style, but she didn't want to listen to her saying it out loud. She got up suddenly, knocking her bare knees against the Thronehammer table and scattering pieces all over the patio.

The voices in the kitchen suddenly hushed, and someone reached out to close the window.

Myra looked down at the fallen pieces, biting her lip. Rohan was going to be angry. He spent ages setting up

Thronehammer games and always did it so carefully and perfectly. She got down on her knees and started to rescue the meticulously painted little warriors and wizards, and the dice and the monsters. She placed them back on the board, but she couldn't remember where they'd been to begin with. She put a cave troll in the tavern where they started the game, instead of somewhere predictable like a dungeon. Why not start the game with a bang?

In fact, why not start the party with a bang? She glanced back at her bag. When she'd packed it, she hadn't been sure she'd actually go through with it. But now ... she'd show her mum she wasn't just a drag. She could be fun to be around, and not just in the way!

Just then, Rohan came out. He stared at the board with horror. "What did you do?"

Myra shrugged. "I moved things around a bit. But let's play Thronehammer later. I've got an idea for something much more exciting. Come on!"

She snatched up her bag full of precious things and beckoned him to follow.

"What?" asked Rohan. "Where are you going?" He trotted to catch up with her, looking like he'd swallowed a bag of spiders, and every one of those spiders was having an emotional crisis inside him. What did he have to worry about? This was a party! And it wasn't like his



mum thought *he* was a dead weight. No, he was Mr Never Naughty, Mr Perfect, Captain Can Do No Wrong!

“Keep up!” she said, and disappeared into the damp bushes that sectioned off the main part of the garden from the bit with the fish pond at the back. Rohan’s parents’ garden was huge. He and Myra used to play that there were monsters living back there when they were little, except Myra wasn’t playing. She had fully believed they were real, and used to leave food out for them. The local rats and foxes LOVED that. Rohan’s parents did not.

Myra opened her bag, glancing up at the sky. It might rain any moment, so it was now or never.

By the time Rohan reached her, she was lining up fireworks, sticking each one into the ground, then tying a string between the blue paper bits at the bottom. She smiled as she did it. This was going to be amazing.

“What are you doing?” asked Rohan.

As Myra stuck the last firework in the ground, she turned to him, dusting off her hands. She was excited to share her incredibly clever and very scientific plan. “I thought, since it’s daytime, the fireworks won’t show up very well against the sky. So I thought I’d connect a few together so they’d be more...” She gestured. “BOOM! Shall I light them or do you want to?”

“But...” said Rohan. “You’re not supposed to have matches.”

“Aha!” She pulled the cigarette lighter out of her pocket and waved it at him in triumph. “I’m not going to use *matches* to light them. See! I’m totally following the rules!”

“I don’t think the no-matches rule was strictly about matches...” Rohan sighed. “I think the point was that you weren’t supposed to set things on fire. You know, like the time you set all my birthday cards on fire trying to light the candles on the cake?”

“But ‘no setting things on fire’ wasn’t what your mum SAID, was it?” Myra shook her head. He wasn’t getting it. “It said no matches. How am I supposed to obey stuff she hasn’t said? I’m not psychic. Even though my mum says it does run in the family...” Myra flicked the lighter with a loud SNICK. She bent down and lit the string at one end of the uber-firework chain.

Myra wasn’t entirely sure what happened next.

There were definitely some very loud bangs, flashes, crashes and a high-pitched whining that sounded like a devil escaping from hell and entering a dance contest against a cannon.

Then she looked up to discover that the shed was on fire.

Adult screaming came from the house. Running footsteps. More shouting. A crying toddler.

“Oops,” said Myra. She frowned. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“The shed, Myra,” said Rohan. He ran his fingers through his hair, looking as terrified as a hamster at a cat show. “You set fire to the shed.”

“Yeah,” said Myra. She started feeling a bit glum. Then, realising something, a smile flashed out, and she made a triumphant gesture at the blazing structure. “But at least I didn’t break the rules!”

Beside her, Rohan put his head in his hands and panicked, energetically.