

CHARACTER LIST

The Cast

Ashwini: The heroine of Kiki's drawings. Fierce, proud and brave, she is an Asura slayer and the leader of a group of rebel kids (the Crows).

Asura: A huge, monstrous demon from Hindu folklore.

Brahma: An incredibly powerful god from Hindu folklore. Brahma is the god of creation.

Chamundeshwari: An incredibly powerful goddess from Hindu folklore. She once rode into battle on the back of her great lion and defeated Mahishasura in a long, bitter fight.

Jojo: A member of the group of rebel kids (the Crows). Jojo is a tailor and the Crow's archer.

Kritika 'Kiki' Kallira: A creator and worrier. Armed with her pencil, Kiki is pulled into the mystical world she has drawn.

Lej: A member of the group of rebel kids (the Crows). Lej finds whatever the Crows need, whatever it takes.

Mahishasura: The cruellest and most powerful of all the Asuras. He is a buffalo demon and the king of all the Asuras. No god or man can kill him. He has been banished to a realm between worlds (the Nowhere Place).

Pip: A member of the group of rebel kids (the Crows). When Kiki was little, Pip was her imaginary friend and companion on endless adventures. Pip is the very first of Kiki's creations.

Samara: A member of the group of rebel kids (the Crows). Samara *loves* books and does research for the Crows.

Simha: Chamundeshwari's enormous, talking lion. He is a fighter and a fusser and drinks tea out of a ludicrously tiny cup. Simha means 'lion' in Kannada – a language spoken in several regions of South West India.

Suki: A member of the group of rebel kids (the Crows). Suki is the Crow's apothecary.

Vishnu: An incredibly powerful god from Hindu folklore. Vishnu is the god of preservation.

I

I had absolutely, definitely killed my mother.

OK, maybe not *definitely*, but I was pretty sure of it. Like ninety per cent sure. Maybe eight-five.

It all depended on whether I had locked the front door when I left our house earlier today, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't remember if I had. And if I *hadn't*, well, then there was a very good chance that Mum, who had been repainting the kitchen cabinets when I left, had since been murdered by a burglar.

Or had been eaten by an opportunistic goose, which only sounds ridiculous if you haven't met the geese that live in London.

The day hadn't started on such a tragic note. It was a hot July, and school had just finished for the summer, so I left home right after lunch to meet my best friend

Emily, her little sister Tam and two of Tam's friends. We took the bus halfway across the city to one of those pop-up amusement parks that always appear in the summer. We'd planned it for weeks and it was awesome at first. We had eaten ice creams in the sunshine, taken turns go-karting and tried to win those giant cuddly teddy bears.

We had just joined the queue for the Ferris wheel when Tam said something about a locked room in a mystery book she was reading, and it had suddenly occurred to me that I couldn't remember if I'd locked my front door.

Now I bit restlessly on the end of my thumb and screwed my forehead up as I tried, once *again*, to remember. I could picture myself stepping out of the front door, and I could kind of picture myself putting my silver key in the silver keyhole in the door, but was I remembering that from *today* or was I just remembering it from the gazillions of *other* times I had locked the door?

'Kiki?' Emily gave me a gentle jab with her elbow. 'You OK?'

I nodded and tried to concentrate on what she and the others were saying, but all I could think about was

the front door of my house. As far as I was concerned, the sequence of hypothetical consequences of an unlocked front door went something like this: burglar (or goose) sees unlocked front door; burglar (or goose) can't believe their good luck; burglar (or goose) bumps into Mum while attempting to loot the kitchen; and then, inevitably, burglar (or goose) murders (or eats) Mum.

Emily's eyes moved to my hand, and she watched with concern as I mauled my thumbnail. 'You're not OK,' she said, and lowered her voice so that Tam and Tam's friends wouldn't hear her. 'What's up?'

If it had been anyone other than Emily or Mum, I would have lied and pretended I felt sick or had a headache or something, but it *was* Emily, so I told her the truth.

And because she was Emily, she listened to me and then she nodded. 'And it won't matter if I tell you that your mother's death by goose is extremely unlikely, will it? Because once it's in your head, you can't get it out?'

She knew me so well.

'I should go home and check the door,' I said. Shame, anger and frustration made me grit my teeth.

‘If I don’t, I’ll just spend the rest of the day worrying about it.’

‘OK, I’ll come with you.’

‘No!’ I said at once. ‘Stay. I’ll just feel worse if you leave, too.’

Emily hesitated, but then she said, ‘My mum’s making Chinese chicken stew for dinner tonight. Come over and eat with us?’

‘Chinese *ginger* chicken stew?’ I asked, perking up.

Emily grinned. ‘Yep.’

So after promising her that I would go to hers for dinner, I left the park in slightly better spirits. On the bus ride home, I pulled my feet up on to the seat, took my overstuffed sketchbook out of my backpack and sketched a quick doodle of the Ferris wheel. I drew Emily’s tiny delighted face peeping out of the car at the very top, and then mine next to hers. I giggled to myself as I added a gull in the sky above us, pooping on Emily’s head. She’d love that when I showed her later.

I lowered my pencil and just looked at the sketch for a moment. Seeing the miniature version of me looking so happy on the Ferris wheel made me feel a little like I hadn’t missed out after all. And on top of that, the twenty minutes I had spent on the sketch was

twenty minutes I hadn't been thinking about my front door.

But when I got home and discovered that the front door *was* locked, all the warm, fuzzy feelings the doodle had given me dissolved as quickly as a lump of sugar in hot tea. I could see my blurry reflection in the panes of frosted glass in the door, so I just glared at her, the other me. I was furious with myself. I'd left a fun day out with my best friend because I hadn't been able to stop obsessing about a *door*.

I let myself into the house quietly, resisting the temptation to slam the door in question. I could have gone back to the amusement park, I suppose, but then Tam and her friends would think I was even stupider than they probably already did.

As far as I could tell, becoming obsessed with a stray thought or fear, to the point that I couldn't *not* act on it, was not something most people did. But I couldn't help it. I knew I had been all sunshine and fearlessness when I was little, but at some point, anxiousness had crept up on me. I got twitchy about all sorts of stuff now. I worried the spider that ran under the floorboard would reappear on my pillow. I worried a shark would sneak into my school's swimming pool (and, yes, I

did actually know how absurd that sounded, but I worried about it anyway). I worried that a random, inconsequential thing I had said three days before was actually quite a stupid thing to say, and maybe everyone who heard it was now convinced *I* was stupid. I worried that Mum wouldn't come home one day. I worried that one of us had forgot to close the kitchen window before bed—

And so on.

I guess it wouldn't be so bad if all I did was feel anxious for a little while, but that was never the end of it. Nope. I had to *do* something about it, or else I would never be able to get the worry or thought out of my head. That didn't matter so much when it was stuff like the spider, because Mum would come to my room, find it, and poof! The worrying would stop, just like that. But sometimes it wasn't quite that easy. Sometimes it was a lot harder to get my brain to be quiet again.

As I hung my backpack up on the hook in the hallway, the faint smell of paint and the sound of happy pop music drifted out of the kitchen, followed by Mum's perfectly alive voice: 'Kiki? Is that you?'

I stuck my head in the kitchen, where she was painting the last of the cupboards. There were yellow

splatters on her clothes, her hands, even on her dark hair, which was exactly like mine apart from the fact that hers was cut below her chin in a pretty bob and mine was longer and almost always up in a ponytail. I would have liked a bob, too, but I knew that if I didn't have my hair pulled away from my face and hands, I would never stop fidgeting with it, tucking it behind my ears, twirling it around a finger, all that. I already bit my fingernails every time I saw even a little of the white end-part grow back, so I really didn't need another distracting bad habit.

'You look like lemon pie,' I informed my mother, giggling. I snatched her phone off the counter and took a photo of her.

'Horrid thing,' she said affectionately. '*You* picked this colour.'

'It's nice on the cupboards, but pretty weird on a human.'

With a look in her eye I could only describe as evil, she flicked the wide paintbrush in my direction. I squealed as splotches of cold yellow paint sprayed my cheek and shoulder.

'You're right,' she said, grinning, 'it *does* look pretty weird on a human.'

She was the actual worst. I grinned back.

‘So,’ she went on, tossing me a tea towel to dab the paint off my face, ‘why are you back so early?’

‘Oh, I couldn’t remember if I’d locked the front door and I was pretty sure you’d been eaten by a goose, so I came back to check.’

It was the truth, but I said it cheerfully, like it was silly and funny. Mum knew about the anxiousness, the obsessions, the need to *do* something. She was always nice about it and never made me feel bad, not even that time last year when I woke her at four in the morning by leaning over her to make sure she was still breathing. She just said, ‘Well, I used to do it to you when you were a baby, so I guess this is payback,’ and let me sleep in her bed for the rest of the night.

But I didn’t think Mum knew just how bad it was for me. I had never told her, so how could she? It wasn’t that I didn’t want to. I just didn’t want to worry her.

And I guess maybe I also didn’t want to tell her because that would make this A Big Deal. A Giant Something. I didn’t want it to be Something. I wanted it to be Nothing; irrelevant, unimportant. I wanted it to be a Nothing that didn’t disrupt my life, or make me unhappy, or turn me into someone I didn’t even know

any more. A Nothing so unimportant, it would go away very soon, and I'd get the sunshiny version of me back.

Now, narrowing her eyes at me, Mum ignored my nonsense about geese and cut right to the important part: 'You were so worried about whether you'd locked the front door that you left your friends early and came all the way back?'

I didn't want to lie to her, so I tiptoed around it by saying, 'Well, and I felt a little sick. It was really hot.' Both true.

'Kiki—'

'Oh!' I said excitedly, shamelessly interrupting her before the conversation became Something. 'You'll never believe what Emily told me today! Her mum is going to have another baby.'

Just like that, Mum was distracted. It was cool that Emily was going to have a baby brother or another sister, but I wasn't really all that interested in babies. Mum, on the other hand, *loved* babies. I was pretty sure she'd have had at least five of her own if my dad hadn't died before I was born.

'A new baby!' Mum cooed. 'Hand me my phone, will you, duckling? I'll text Mei and see if she needs anything.'

‘Can I look through your stash of blank notebooks while you’re on the phone? I’ve run out of space in my sketchbook.’

‘Yes, of course.’

I left her excitedly tapping out a text to Emily’s mum, and went upstairs to the room Mum used as her home office. She worked in animation, so she usually went to a studio to work with a team of other animators on a project, but she also did some teaching and tried to work from home whenever she could. Which meant her home office got a lot of use and was filled with student essays, storyboards, piles of research materials, her shiny computer monitor and graphics tablet, and her bookshelves, including an entire shelf crammed with empty notebooks and sketchpads.

I edged around a stack of books to get to the shelf. I picked up the one on top – *The Illustrated Book of Indian Folklore: Vol. 1*, a beautiful, enormous thing Mum had read to me when I was little. And, yes, it was only volume one, because it turned out there was a *lot* of Indian folklore. Stories of monsters and gods and heroes, of goddesses who rode lions, of demons who kidnapped princesses, of kings and queens and cities

and snarky jackals and, well, a whole lot more than that, too.

I'd loved those stories. They'd been special to Mum, stories she'd grown up with in Karnataka, in the south of India, where she'd spent half her life before moving here.

After putting *The Illustrated Book of Indian Folklore: Vol. I* back on the stack of books, I checked the shelf of empty notebooks. There were a few that would do the trick, but I kept looking for The One. Like a warrior choosing her sword or a witch choosing her wand, I, Kiki Kallira, had to choose my new sketchbook. It was not a task to be taken lightly. The wrong choice could prove to be the undoing of the universe!

And then I found it. It was beautiful, bound in white spirals, with two hundred thick sheets of clean white art paper. The cover was a perfect, soft buttery yellow, the exact colour of evening sunshine.

It had been so nice and uncomplicated to be a sunshine girl. Not so long ago, I had found it easy to fall asleep at night. I hadn't needed to search the whole house just because I'd seen a shadow out of the corner of my eye, and never got a scratchy feeling inside my

brain when a book on a shelf had its spine facing in. Why wasn't I like that any more?

Maybe this *was* Something, after all. I knew this wasn't normal, but I couldn't help feeling like it was all my fault for not being stronger and braver. Why else would this anxiousness, this Something, sneak in and make itself so completely at home?

My eyes had filled with tears and I was clutching the yellow sketchbook so tightly my knuckles had gone white, so I turned quickly and went across the landing to my bedroom. Flopping down on to my rug with my box of art supplies, I opened my new sketchbook and started to draw the first thing that popped into my mind.

Monsters started to take shape on the first page. First the wolf from *Little Red Riding Hood*, then the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast*, and then an Asura – a huge, monstrous demon from Indian folklore. By the time I'd finished the pencil outline of the Asura, I felt calmer.

No, it was even better than that: as I stared at that third sketch, I felt the sudden, electric excitement you get when you have a totally brilliant idea.

One of the stories Mum had told me years ago, with my bedside lamp turned down low and *The Illustrated*

Book of Indian Folklore on her lap, was the story of the Asura king Mahishasura. It went something like this:

Hundreds of years ago, long before India became the country it is now, there was a kingdom in the south called Mysore. It was a rich, golden city, with beautiful shining palaces, gentle hills, and lush green land.

Then Mahishasura came to Mysore. He was the cruelest and most powerful of all the Asuras. He killed the kings of Mysore and took the city for himself. The people resisted, but they were no match for him or his Asura army. They stole children from their beds, burned the crops and threw anyone who tried to fight back into deep prisons so that they never saw the sun again. And Mysore became a sad, dark place, where the people lived in fear and where all hope seemed lost.

The first question I'd asked when Mum told me the story was, 'But why didn't the gods stop him?'

In Indian folklore, the gods are always incredibly powerful, and three of them in particular: Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. When I'd pointed this out to Mum, she rolled her eyes and said, 'If you keep your gob closed for longer than two seconds, Kiki, you might find out.'

Because, as it turned out, Mahishasura had a secret weapon. Before he came to Mysore, he had spent years praying to Brahma. Impressed with his persistence (and I guess because gods did this kind of thing all the time in the stories), Brahma had offered him a boon.

‘I want to be immortal,’ Mahishasura said.

‘I can’t do that,’ Brahma replied. ‘All I can do is make you so powerful that no god or man can kill you.’

Satisfied, Mahishasura accepted the gift. No god or man could kill him.

So when the whole destroying-Mysore thing happened, the gods were a *teensy* bit annoyed. They went to Brahma and demanded to know how they were supposed to defeat Mahishasura while he was protected by such a powerful boon.

‘Well,’ said Brahma, ‘I said no god or man could kill him. Perhaps you should send a goddess.’

So the gods combined their power and created the warrior goddess Chamundeshwari, who was every bit as awesome as she sounded. She rode into Mysore on the back of a great lion and, at the foot of the hills, she and Mahishasura had a long, bitter battle. In the end, she won. She killed the demon king and saved Mysore. Yay!

To show her how grateful they were, the people of Mysore gave the hills a new name in her honour. They called them the Chamundi Hills. ('The next time we visit Granny and Gramps,' Mum said, 'I'll take you to Mysore to see the real Chamundi Hills. You can even see a statue of Mahishasura and a temple for Chamundeshwari at the top!')

It was a fun story. Just a story. Much like Zeus and Thor and Osiris, Mahishasura had never *really* existed. I sometimes liked to think they had all been around once, because mythology was so cool, but I was eleven years old and I kind of knew myths were just myths. Jackals didn't talk, the sun wasn't pulled across the sky by a god in a chariot, and Asuras weren't real.

And the totally amazing idea I had right then, with the yellow sketchbook open in front of me, was to create a Kiki version of the old city of Mysore and retell the story of Mahishasura my own way.

I sketched quick, sharp lines with my pencil, went over them in black ink and filled the shapes in with shades of cream, white, gold and red. Mysore Palace sparkled back at me from the paper, almost exactly like the one I had seen in the real city the last time Mum and I visited India. It was so warm and alive that

I could almost hear the birds and feel the heat of the sun.

I drew outwards from there, taking pieces out of the story Mum had told me and jumbling them up with my own whimsical ideas. I drew palaces and clockwork trains, outdoor markets and rainbow houses. Red London double-decker buses and jackals in deep, dark woods. Cobblestone streets and lush green hills. A circus that never stopped, a castle in the sky. Sketch after sketch after sketch. Black ink and vivid colours. My hand cramped and my neck ached, but I barely noticed because I was so excited about the world growing right in front of me. *My world.*

I'd been having so much fun with my weird, perfect, patchwork Mysore that I didn't really want to ruin it by introducing Mahishasura and his army of demons into it. But all good stories need an enemy the heroes have to fight, right?

I started with his head. Mahishasura was a buffalo demon, so I drew a pair of thick, curled horns. It took me a little while to get the pencil lines just right, but once I was happy with them, I inked them in with bold, black strokes.

And that was when the real world got weird.

At first, it just felt like I was on a train. A bit rumbly, but fine. Then the rumble got rumblier and my whole bedroom shook. I looked up in time to see an empty cup rattle violently on my desk. My coloured pencils rolled away from me. The cup crashed to the floor.

The sky outside my window went dark. Not night-time dark, but the dark of storm clouds. They gathered and swept across the sky, churning in time to the rumble of the earth.

Somewhere below, Mum's voice called my name in alarm. I looked out of the window and saw that beyond our back garden, the river was choppy and frothy, like the waves on an ocean. A boat rocked back and forth while water splashed over the tall sides of the riverbank.

Then, abruptly, it stopped. Just like that. The room went still, the skies cleared, the sun came back out and the river went quiet.

'Kiki?' Mum was out of breath as she appeared in the doorway of my room. 'Are you OK?'

'What *was* that?'

'An earthquake, I think,' she said, perplexed.

Of course, it hadn't been an earthquake at all, but we didn't know that then. We didn't know that the

furious churning of the earth, water and sky had been a warning.

This was the point at which I should have thrown my beautiful yellow sketchbook into the river, but I didn't know that, either. Instead, I threw away the broken cup, made myself a cheese toastie and kept drawing.