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PRIVILEGE

A TRILOGY

BHARAT KRISHNAN



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This book is more personal to me than my memoir. The gratitude I feel towards the women (for they were all women) who made it the best product possible is beyond words, but I'll do my best to convey it here.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	5
BOOK ONE	
Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	5
Chapter Three.....	11
Chapter Four.....	21
Chapter Five.....	38
Chapter Six.....	58
Chapter Seven.....	71
Chapter Eight.....	79
Chapter Nine.....	87
Chapter Ten.....	100
Chapter Eleven.....	124
Chapter Twelve.....	142
BOOK TWO	
Chapter One.....	157
Chapter Two.....	166
Chapter Three.....	172
Chapter Four.....	181
Chapter Five.....	194
Chapter Six.....	208
Chapter Seven.....	223
Chapter Eight.....	235
Chapter Nine.....	250
Chapter Ten.....	256
Chapter Eleven.....	262
Chapter Twelve.....	272
Chapter Thirteen.....	277
Chapter Fourteen.....	287
Chapter Fifteen.....	292
Chapter Sixteen.....	296
Chapter Seventeen.....	310
Chapter Eighteen.....	326
Epilogue.....	332
BOOK THREE	
Chapter One.....	337
Chapter Two.....	347

Chapter Three.....	362
Chapter Four.....	371
Chapter Five.....	381
Chapter Six.....	392
Chapter Seven.....	408
Chapter Eight.....	423
Chapter Nine.....	436
Chapter Ten.....	445
Chapter Eleven.....	459
Chapter Twelve.....	471
Chapter Thirteen.....	484
Chapter Fourteen.....	490
Epilogue.....	502
Afterword.....	512

PRIVILEGE

BOOK ONE



For anyone who's ever been embarrassed to bring food from their native country to school.

Apna time aayega
Hindi translation: Our time will come

Chapter One

Aditya Shetty inhaled deeply as he kicked off his Bolvaint loafers and rolled up the sleeves of his blue Oxford shirt. The windows of his penthouse stood open and Union Square was alive with the sound of street musicians and the smell of New York. It was the smell of sewers that swallowed the dreams of men whole. The odors of waste wafted up from the city's manholes to blend with the smell of cheese bubbling in ovens at pizzerias across its five boroughs, bringing together an unavoidable marriage of the heavenly and the putrid. Aditya took it all in.

Though September had begun, Mother Nature was still stuck in summer, as evidenced by the tangible smell of humid air. Aditya's fingers thrummed on his counter to the beat of trumpets and violins outside, a mix of cultures one could only find in the capital of the world. Opening a drawer his interior decorator had fallen in love with, Aditya retrieved a plastic bag and carefully poured its contents onto the marble countertop. This was the good stuff, straight from Guatemala and cut with caffeine to give it a purity level above fifty percent. Using his credit card to separate out what looked like ten milligrams, he spooned it up and set it on a digital scale to confirm the dosage. He'd only been using for a few months, but was smart enough to know a person should always triple-check. Satisfied, he bent down, inhaled, closed his eyes, and let the drug transport him to a new world.

Though Union Square was eleven floors below, conversations floated up to Aditya's ears like balloons. He heard everything—from the sweet nothings of a man whispering in his lover's ear to a street musician riffing to the tune of "La Bamba." The sun would rise in less than six hours, but for now everyone could be their true selves under the calming presence of darkness. Opening his eyes, Aditya heard the whispers of the wind speak

to him. It was the wind that told a lion to tackle a gazelle, and it was the wind that now compelled him to run out to his balcony. Jumping higher than any man his height should be able, he did a flip and landed right on a table he used to entertain outside. The wood snapped under his weight and he would have fallen on his side if not for his heightened alertness.

Oh well. He didn't care about money right now, not when the world made sense to him for the first time.

"How did we live so long without this stuff?" *No wonder the government doesn't hand this out like candy.*

Aditya wanted to tell his mom, his dad, but no one could ever understand what he was going through. He would never share the drug known as WP with anyone. Yes, he pulled in an annual salary in the seven figures running his hedge fund, Adrsta, in Bryant Park, but he only got a taste of real power after midnight most days. Not only could he hear his neighbors "sleeping" three floors above, not only could he smell the onions and parathas below as a street vendor made kati rolls, but he could also hear the tempo of the city. It beat in his ears like a tabla, calm but persistent. If something was off, if a silent intruder mugged his doorman or somehow made their way into his apartment, Aditya would sense it. The beat of the tabla would alert him long before the hairs on his back could.

Yes—WP was a hell of a drug.

Aditya moved to his bedroom, but sleep wasn't on his mind. Though it was a Tuesday and he had a big pitch tomorrow, how could he care about anything but the power coursing through his fingers? How could anyone walk away from this type of raw energy?

I need more. Investing in the Medulla account would propel Adrsta to the next level. It would also mean more WP for Aditya, since start-up companies founded by Caucasians frequently offered up the drug to investors in lieu of more equity. As the drug was almost impossible for non-Caucasians to acquire legally, it was a much more attractive option for someone like him.

Taking WP the night before the meeting was risky, but Aditya knew the boost to his senses would be worth it. He'd spent months snorting the drug weekly, hoping it would stay in his system beyond his next bathroom break. So far, no luck. Still, there was always tomorrow. If he was a little late because of the WP—well, Rakshan would keep the Medulla brothers happy if he knew what was good for him. And if not? Aditya had been thinking about canning the man-boy, anyway. His initial thoughts of grooming Rakshan faded with each day. In Rakshan's year at Adrsta, he'd never signed a client all on his own. The kid had hustle and a sense of

PRIVILEGE

humor that delighted clients, but also a girlfriend and childhood friends who still lived in the city.

What a waste. Such things slowed a man down.

Licking his lips, Aditya slipped into the king-sized sleigh bed in his bedroom and grabbed a book from his side table: *A Dark Moon Rises: WP and the Vietnam War*. It was an old book from the '80s, written for conspiracy theorists and published anonymously, but it had some key insights about WP and Aditya absorbed any information about the drug like a sponge. Though many claimed to know the drug's full powers, the government most of all, Aditya doubted anyone really understood what the drug was capable of, what it enabled. How could anyone truly say they understood privilege and power? Because that was what the drug stood for above all else.

The book's author claimed to be a West Point grad who'd fought the Vietcong and seen the Johnson administration test-drive a new campaign to distribute WP to American allies. In the decades since the book's publication, no one had found any record of anyone resembling the author's description in either West Point's or the government's records. He was informed, though, that was apparent. The author knew about key battles and negotiations and the whole cast of characters involved in that godforsaken affair. But claiming the U.S. government had given WP to the South Vietnamese? And that those savages had then, in turn, distributed the drug to African-American soldiers? That the drug had addled their untrained brains and led to such epic blunders as the My Lai Massacre? That was insane.

Personally, Aditya wouldn't have been surprised to learn that someone within the government had written the book under President Reagan's orders. The 1965 Civil Rights Act had infamously left out any mention of expanding WP access to non-Caucasians, and it'd left a bitter taste in the mouth of Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill. With the Drug War in full swing and people like Pablo Escobar and Whitey Bulger in the public's lexicon, blaming Black people for a war crime committed during an unpopular war seemed like a convenient way to convince Democrats it wasn't worth their time to keep fighting for WP distribution rights to be expanded. That, and losing forty-nine states to President Nixon, had scared them out of ever mentioning it again. It was only now, almost fifty years later, that Democrats were willing to fight over the issue again.

Not that it'll matter, Aditya thought. *The house always wins.* Legalization would never happen, no matter what Congress said. If WP was legal for minorities, everyone would have it. And if everyone had it, it

BHARAT KRISHNAN

wasn't special. Privilege and power, these were the keys to American success. Now, Aditya had both.

Putting the book down and telling Alexa to turn off the lights, he noticed a fly enter from an open window—thanks to the WP, Aditya saw every flap of its wings. Snatching it in mid-air, he snuffed the creature's life out like it was nothing.

Chapter Two

Rakshan groaned and tried kicking his legs out from his bedsheets, only to twist them further as he struggled to wake up. His entire body seemed to fight against the weight of the day ahead. But if all went well, he'd have both a promotion and a fiancée by nightfall.

Mom and Dad will be proud.

He didn't believe the words, but they crossed his mind at least once a week, anyway. It'd been months since he'd heard from either of his parents. With the engagement, he'd have an excuse to call them. Soon after he'd started his grad work at Princeton, they'd both moved away to California to retire.

Like Dad needed a reason to leave.

His mom had tried her best, but a mother couldn't be a father, too. He'd heard her excuses his whole life, "your father works so hard to provide for us." That didn't justify his absence, though.

Moving from his bed to the closet next to his bathroom, Rakshan opened it to find an array of shirts, slacks, and suits. Crammed into a corner at the bottom was a half-filled wicker basket of letters from his parents. He'd given up writing them weekly when they'd made it clear they preferred quarterly.

Retired, but he still doesn't have time for me.

No matter, though. Rakshan would have his perfect family after tonight.

Rakshan slapped himself before heading into the bathroom to shower. He needed to be in top form for this morning's pitch to a new tech company Adrsta was looking to invest in. His boss had made it clear he wasn't needed for the meeting, but since Famóre would be Adrsta's largest

BHARAT KRISHNAN

investment, Rakshan knew that impressing the Medulla brothers could be his ticket to a promotion. In addition to being the founders of a new mobile app, the Medulla brothers were also immigrants.

We all speak the same language, Rakshan thought as he brushed his teeth before turning on his rainforest shower.

Cool water streamed down Rakshan's body as if attacking him. His muscles tensed in response to the sudden drop in temperature, yet he welcomed the assault. The cold let him feel alive, present. He needed the icy water to shape his mind. It calmed him. Today was the most important day of his life. The deal mattered to him, more than he wanted to admit, but today, he would also propose to Sadiya. He was so nervous that the icy liquid running down his skin felt like sweat. He'd been too scared to ask for her parents' blessing, but the chill of the water focused him. They'd be thrilled Sadiya was marrying another boy from Karnataka. *Sure, Mom and Dad moved to New York before I was born, but we all hail from the motherland nonetheless, right?*

Rakshan checked his watch as his elevator plunged down to the teeming metropolis that awaited below. It was about twenty minutes on the subway from his home in Chelsea to the office at One Bryant Park, but he had plenty of time. Rebelling against his father's habits came second nature to him, and one of the clearest acts of rebellion he'd adopted was to defy the stereotype of Indian Standard Time (IST). To be late was to disrespect someone's time, and time was the most valuable resource a person had.

Stepping out from the steel doors, Rakshan nodded to his doorman, Tyrone, as the man placed copies of the *New York Times* atop a granite counter.

"Good morning, Mr. Baliga."

"Good morning, Mr. James." Rakshan chuckled as he made his daily joke.

His doorman flashed a grin, but Rakshan was never sure if Tyrone was just going along with it or actually found the nickname funny. Saved from having to speak further with the doorman, Rakshan noticed an older gentleman he thought was named Philip tapping his leg impatiently at the counter.

"Your taxi will be here soon, sir," Tyrone told Philip. Rakshan recognized the older man as another tenant, but they'd never spoken before.

PRIVILEGE

“Have a good day,” he said to Tyrone before reaching for a copy of the *New York Times*. Just before Rakshan took the topmost paper, though, Philip reached out as well. His hand forced under the top copy, Rakshan suffered the smallest paper cut imaginable. He barely felt it.

“Sorry, man,” Rakshan said.

Glaring at him, Philip left for his taxi. Rakshan looked to Tyrone for some words of support, but the doorman only offered a shrug.

The moment Rakshan left his building, the smells of Middle Eastern food stalls and the sewers below assaulted him. The city reminded him of the Greek sirens who ensnared their victims with promises of beauty and pleasure. Scaffolding protected Rakshan from the maintenance crews working on the shops all around him. As he walked to the subway on Fourteenth Street, he smiled upon seeing a young mom in yoga pants pushing her baby in a stroller, then recognized that his grin might come off as creepy. Breaking his glance, he walked down the stairs to the station and took out his monthly pass to get on the M train.

God, he thought. A baby would round out his perfect family.

Rakshan couldn't get a seat on the subway, but instead wrapped his arms around a metal pole and finally got to reading his paper.

CONGRESS PLANS FOR LANDMARK HEARINGS AS DEMOCRATS AIM TO FULFILL CAMPAIGN PROMISE

By Harold Mueller

After an historic election cycle last year that saw record numbers of women and minorities sent to Congress, the U.S. Senate is set to hear testimony in a series of hearings from experts and witnesses alike in an attempt to determine the full effects the government-sanctioned drug, WP, has on non-Caucasian users.

Of course, WP was first discovered during the California Gold Rush. It was treated to be as valuable as gold itself, but few could determine the drug's effects with any consistency. Over the next decade, many reports emerged of people experiencing moments of super-strength, above-average intelligence, and even mind control.

BHARAT KRISHNAN

After the Civil War, Congress banned the use of WP for non-Caucasians, with some theorizing the South would have won if not for the drug. Today, those same theorists, who think WP has the capacity to bend not only internal capabilities but external motivations, too, believe the #MeToo movement has emerged as a result of WP use by non-Caucasians. Waitresses, cleaning staff, janitors, and other minimum-wage service jobs are traditionally held by non-Caucasians, and some believe that as these people gain access to the drug, they've become more outspoken in exposing the sexual harassment that's plagued these industries for years. A black market has always existed for WP, but new technologies make its use and the need for additional regulation more prevalent than ever.

The issue of jailing people of color over WP use became a hot topic during last year's election cycle, and Democrats flipped control of the U.S. Senate, in part, by promising hearings on the issue of legalization. It is expected that Senator Joseph Begaye (D-NM) will set the tone and scope for any hearings as the chairman of the Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism. With oversight of the DEA and U.S. Sentencing Commission in addition to playing a role in shaping any criminal justice legislation, the committee hearings are being viewed as a big win for Democrats and perhaps a ticket back to the White House.

"This is not about politics," Senator Begaye said. "This is personal for me." (continues on A5)

What a joke this debate is, Rakshan thought as he licked his finger to flip the page. It was only then that he noticed his paper cut, tasting the drying blood with his tongue.

"My father worked his whole life trying to achieve the American Dream," Begaye continued. "He couldn't get there; it didn't exist for him. One day I came home to find him sitting in a chair with white powder buried in his fingernails, a gunshot wound in his head, and a gun on the floor. We need to study WP to understand its full effects on minorities once and for all, and legalizing it in small quantities will allow us to get there. My father had a hole in

PRIVILEGE

his heart he thought drugs could fill. Maybe he was right and maybe he wasn't, but I owe it to him to find the answer.”

The answer is important, as more and more outrageous tales have been broadcast about the effects of WP on non-Caucasian users in recent years. Indeed, one Chinese student from Boston College claimed in a viral YouTube video that a friend of his was able to fly after taking the drug.

Though supporters of legalizing WP claim it would restore equity to the justice system, some scientists are skeptical and argue for more research before doing anything dramatic. Dr. Jocelyne Clark, a researcher at the Foundation for Actions against Injustice and Racism (FAIR), thinks legalization might actually harm minorities. “My ancestors were taken from Africa, the same as so many other Blacks in America today, but legalization isn't the solution for the inequalities plaguing us. WP is too unreliable. Sometimes non-Caucasian subjects gain the strength of a lion, but other times they gain the cunningness of a fox or the fortitude of an elephant. I even read of a case where people in a control group suffered memory loss when merely placed in physical proximity with people who'd taken WP for the first time. The Chinese boy from that viral video may actually believe he saw his friend flying because of what WP does to the hippocampus. We know far too little right now about its effects on different racial minorities. Mankind has had over a century to analyze how WP use by Caucasians affects non-Caucasians, but we're just now starting to get actionable data on how people exposed to the drug for the first time interact with Caucasians. What's needed now more than anything else is more funding to continue that research.”

Efforts are underway to secure that funding, but it will take time and the hearings are not expected to commence for another few months. In the meantime, Americans on both sides of this divide remain hungry for action.

BHARAT KRISHNAN

No shit Americans are hungry for action, Rakshan thought as he spotted an empty seat and took it. The train was only one station from his stop on Forty-Second Street. Closing his eyes, he remembered a story about a rival from high school who'd OD'ed on WP. The idiot had been white, blessed with the drug from birth, and yet he'd still bought some off the black market. Rakshan had heard through a friend of a friend that the guy had thought he needed an extra boost to help him get through USC's film program. He'd fancied himself the next Spielberg until one day he jumped off a building in search of his creative integrity.

Rakshan balled up his fists in disgust. Opening his eyes, he remembered one of the few meaningful conversations he'd shared with his dad.

"Apna time aayega," Rakshan whispered under his breath. It meant "our time will come." Whenever he'd complained about some kid picking on him or some teacher giving him a B when he deserved an A, his dad had comforted him with those words. His dad had meant that waiting was worth it, but Rakshan had learned the truth at Princeton. People had to seize opportunity, they had to grab it by the balls.

Until Democrats learn that, too, this incrementalism shit will never work. The hearings would be a farce.

The subway hissed to a stop. Rakshan left the newspaper on his seat as he got up, dried blood apparent on the edges of the faded paper. As he walked out, he saw a mariachi band walk on.

Good thing I'm leaving, he thought to himself. *I hate foreign music...*