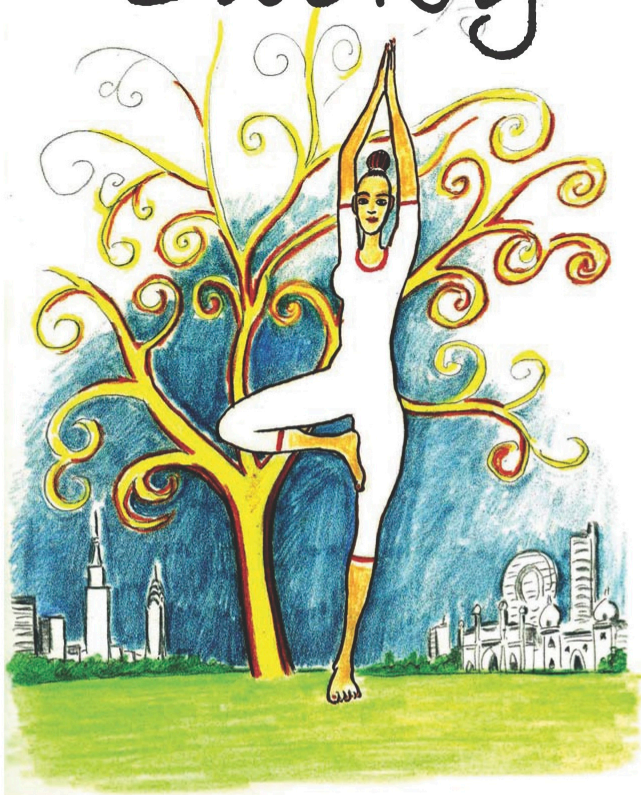


SEQUEL TO THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER *LUCKY EVERYDAY*

# A Star Called Lucky



**BAPSY JAIN**

# A STAR CALLED LUCKY

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## **BAPSY JAIN**

is a best-selling author, educator and entrepreneur, noted for the international success of her debut novel, *Lucky Everyday*.



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## THE PLAYERS

### The Realist

Vaala, Finland. September 16th, 1980. 6 a.m. The first heavy snow blanketed the woods, smothering shrubs and bending branches on the evergreens, turning the ground into a pillow-soft, featureless blur. It fell hard all night, just as the weatherman predicted, and it was still showering in light little balls of hard powder at dawn. The boy tumbled out of bed at the creak of the door of the old, cast iron Jøtul stove. In the unseen dark downstairs, his father stuffed a log into the coals, the door creaked and closed, and the latch snapped shut. The little loft grew hazy with wood smoke. The boy hurriedly pulled on his long johns and wool trousers, a flannel shirt, scarf, parka, gloves, and knit cap and laced up his boots. His father waited silently by the front door, a rifle cradled in his left arm. With his other hand, he held out a rifle to the boy. The boy silently took it and rubbed the long, smooth barrel with his gloved hand. The metal gleamed dully in the dim light. The rifle had been lovingly cleaned the night before, swabbed, oiled and inspected. The scope mounted and dialed in. The boy checked the magazine as he had been taught and secured the safety, then slung the gun over his shoulder and followed his father into the half-light of dawn. Outside, they trod a path so familiar they could walk it without a misstep, even under a six-inch blanket of snow. The path led into the woods, climbing a steep rise and then following a curving ridge line until it ended

abruptly at the bluff overlooking a creek and a meadow and the endless wilds of Finland that ran in unbroken undulations from Vaala, on Lake Oulujarvi, until far beyond the Arctic Circle. The trees grew smaller and smaller as one travelled north, until there was just stunted, windswept brush and shrub, and finally just tundra. Along the way, they munched on butter sandwiches and salted boiled eggs. At the top of the ridge they grew quiet, moving stealthily. They crawled the final meters to the lip of the bluff. The boy tried to still his heartbeat and his breath, breathing through his mouth and down into the snow so that he would not raise a telltale cloud of steam.

They waited. A half hour passed and then the deer appeared on the far side of the clearing. The does came first, hesitant and alert, ears twitching. When they had moved halfway across the open space, the buck appeared—a magnificent, muscular beast with a twelve-point rack of a crown.

No words passed between father and son. All that needed to be said had been said in the lazy and long summer evenings when they lay in the lush grass amid clouds of mosquitoes and the father—once a national biathlon champion—drilled the boy on sighting, breathing, focusing on the target, and anticipating the recoil as the boy gently nudged the trigger home.

“You must shoot to kill,” he said at last. “A clean shot causes no pain.”

But it was one thing to shatter bottles at 250 meters—it was another to bring down his first trophy buck. The boy’s hands trembled with cold and excitement. A cough welled up in his throat, a tickle no amount of will could force down. It was going to burst. In his mind, the boy saw the great deer cross the clearing in a single, blurry bound. It would disappear into the wood and that would be that. An instant before the cough his father said, in a voice barely audible, “Steady,” but it was too late. The finger clenched of its own volition, the shot cracked, the boy coughed, and the buck bolted into the wood, leaving behind a trail of bright red blood in the snow. The does, too, vanished.

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The father stood up and surveyed the scene. "He's throat shot," he said. "You'll have to track him down and finish the job."

"But it's cold," the boy said.

"And that buck suffers because of you."

"He'll die soon."

"Maybe, maybe not. Either way, you can't leave him in pain. You have to finish the job."

The boy looked around. It was ten degrees below zero centigrade, and the snow, like the temperature, was falling fast. "Go on," the father said. "It's your penance for rushing the shot. If you're going to shoot something, take it down with one bullet. And if you suffer, good. A lesson learned with a little pain ever after will remain. Now go on. Track him down. It won't be hard with all that blood. Kill him proper, then pack him home." The father turned and trudged back down the trail toward the cabin, the fire, and a hot breakfast.

The boy would track the bleeding buck, eventually walking in knee-deep snow until his feet were blue from cold. Three times he unlimbered his rifle only to have the buck rise and stagger off deeper into the wood. How much blood could one creature spill and live? How much cold could one boy endure? The hunt became a test of wills. It was afternoon when the boy found the buck collapsed and panting, exhausted in a mound of bloody snow. It looked at the boy with something like relief, or contempt, he couldn't tell. The boy sighted down the scope. The hole through the neck was so small, yet the buck was soaked in frozen blood all the way down to his front hooves. And as the boy aimed, the buck made a sound the boy would never forget—a short bark-like noise, followed by a high-pitched scream.

He gutted the buck in darkness. The blood froze to his hands. He wrapped the carcass in a sheet of canvas and bound it tightly with a long rope, leaving two long loops hanging from each end. These he took up like a harness, and walking until late evening, the boy dragged the deer home.

## THE MASTER PLANNER

Seattle. March 4, 1973. 10:14 a.m. It wasn't that the Kingdome was ugly (for it certainly was ugly), but for the boy from Kalispell, Montana, it was the biggest building he had ever seen, much less walked around inside. He had seen it before on television, but television could not capture the enormity—the machine-generated breeze, the echoing roar of the crowd, the cavernous emptiness he felt inside, and now he stood on the field, a little bit behind where second base ought to have been, and gazed up at the lighting console and the catwalk that marked the very center of the gray, concrete dome. He had been three days in Seattle, escorted by his step father to all the proper sights—the Pacific Science Center, the University of Washington, the Burke Museum, and the Woodland Park Zoo; they'd even dined at the Space Needle, but the real reason for his coming had been this, not a baseball game, not the crowded stadium, but the National Science Fair, and at stake was a wealth of scholarships and internship opportunities at places like Berkeley and Stanford and Harvard and MIT, and for a boy growing up in a poor family and a rodeo town, there was a lot on the line. That, and he had put his whole heart into the trip.

His stepfather, a strapping, die-hard cowboy wannabe in jeans, a checkered shirt, a white Stetson hat, and black, alligator skin, Tony Lama boots, had never been proud of his smaller stepson—the boy who favored his mother's slight build and fair complexion. There was an older stepbrother playing linebacker at Idaho, and two younger half-brothers already taller and heavier than this boy, but what he lacked in brawn he had made up for in brain—even the father had to admit this—and so, reluctantly, on the boy's mother's insistence, the father drove the boy to Seattle, with all the fragile and necessary equipment loaded into the back of a 1967 Ford F-150 pickup. They had looked so shabby on arrival that the parking lot attendants first directed them to the rear of the building, the place where the hired help clocked in. But no, the

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boy insisted, he was here by invitation, the winner of the Montana State Science Fair.

From the front entry, the boy watched the others arrive, RVs and panel vans and delivery vehicles, even a Mayflower truck—the equipment, delicate and expensive, attended to by hoards of friends and relatives. But he was neither jealous nor overawed by their displays. He had seen homemade motherboards and distillation towers, wind turbines and plastic models of chromosomes. It was nothing to him, and he had laid his plans with exacting precision. He was going to steal the show. He was not just going to win—he was going to RULE.

It was an exciting time to be a scientist. There was so much happening on so many fronts. The public was enthralled with Star Trek and the “final frontiers” of technology. His stepfather, who chewed tobacco, spat a long, greasy brown arc onto the pavement and said, “A waste of money, if you ask me. If you want to piss money away, get into politics. Politics is where it’s at, boy. Anybody who argues like you, ought to make a killing at it. Let everybody else do the work, then you take the credit.”

But the boy wasn’t listening. He was recounting the details in his mind. He ran down the list. It was like playing chess blindfolded. You just had to remember the details—and it was all about control. That’s the scientific method: the controlled environment. And the boy’s work wasn’t just good—it was groundbreaking. So good, in fact, that he shivered with excitement to think of the commercial potential. He would make a lot of money. He would prove his stepfather wrong.

For two years, the boy labored on experiments patterned after the work of Barbara McClintock, a rising star in the obscure field of cytogenetics—the structure and function of cells, especially chromosomes. It was heady work for most teens, but for this boy, it wasn’t all that far-fetched.

McClintock spent years studying the mutation and genetic modification of corn. She had been particularly successful identifying snippets of DNA called transposons, which could be



induced to break free and relocate on the chromosome, thus producing mutation. Of particular importance had been her observation that various types of stress could induce the phenomenon, so that, in a sense, species would mutate in response to their environment. The genetic triggers to the mutation were specific individual genes, which she labeled transposons.

The boy's work was relatively simple. Contamination and infection were natural sources of stress. His observation, however, his argument, was that species response to stress (microbial invasion) was not entirely random, but rather, was *intuitive* to or even *guided by* the genetics of the invading organism. Thus, corn exposed to fungus could selectively mutate (and breed) to be resistant to that fungus—a process that suggested an innate intelligence to genetics that went far beyond Darwinian random mutation. To prove his point, he had constructed a sterile, self-contained display into which he had inserted seed and fungus, a display that featured not only the carefully controlled environment but a microscope connected to an overhead projector and display monitor on which could be seen the corn, the chromosomes, and the fungus. The commercial potential was simple: if a field was infected, it was not necessary to breed entirely new seed crops, which would be resistant to the fungus. All that was required was to expose any seed to the relevant *transposon* and the seed would mutate on its own. The process would save manufacturers tens of millions of dollars and years of time. It would save farmers billions, not to mention (in cases of severe infestations), their farms.

The boy and his stepfather turned together and walked into the building and across the cavernous hall to the table and the display and the overhead projector—and there they stopped. The corn kernels—the showcase of the boy's display—glowed a dull, infected pink. The boy stared at the display. It was ruined. All of it. *Fusarium moniliforme*. He knew all thirteen common corn fungi by sight. But how? A suspicion dawned. He checked the display until he found the point of attack. Someone—somewhere—somehow—had punctured the seals with a syringe and injected a contaminant. The work was

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sabotaged. It did not matter that the infection was not the one the seeds had been immunized against. The viewers and the judges would see only the moldy seed of a failed experiment.

For a long time, the boy stared at the roof of the Kingdome. Eventually, his stepfather laid a hand across the boy's shoulder and said, "Politics, boy. That's where the money is. Let's go home."

They left the ruined display and the equipment behind. Someone would throw it out. The boy would not win the coveted scholarship. He would not go to Berkeley or Stanford or Harvard or MIT. He would not be moved when he learned that the winner was a boy from California with a chintzy display about an influenza virus.

They drove all night to reach Kalispell. In the morning, the boy tore up his college applications and wrote new ones. In his personal statement he wrote: *It has always been my ambition to be a leader of men.* He would view his acceptance to Georgetown with ambivalence. He found only small comfort when, six months later, he attended a science fair where he was able to shake hands with his hero, Barbara McClintock. And on March 26<sup>th</sup> of the year 2000, when the Kingdome was demolished, the boy, now a full-grown man, paid a lot of money to watch from the observation deck at the Space Needle. He did not join the crowd in cheering. When the blast was over, the dome lay in ruins; he took the elevator down and went to his hotel room alone.

## THE OUTSIDER

London, England. August 16, 2009. 6:33 PM. Chris Redfield (the protagonist of the first *Resident Evil* video game) takes a shotgun and blows off the head of a deranged farmer advancing on him with a pitchfork. Chris feels nothing. He is on a mission to rescue the Alpha team. They have been kidnapped by the followers of Los Illuminados, the "enlightened" ones who control the world by means of a mind-controlling parasitic infection. Inside the mansion halls, a mob advances on Chris, and he fires again and again and

again. The zombies fall in droves. Chris is on a roll, but time is running out. If Chris cannot rescue them, they will all die, as they are infected with the disease.

The teenage girl is looking over Chris's shoulder. Figuratively speaking. She is also stabbing at the controls that make Chris aim, shoot, and dodge. The girl is obsessed with this.

*A computer junkie?* She hunches her shoulders and draws closer to the screen.

Behind her, the door opens and a man's voice calls out something muffled and indistinct. He has dropped his briefcase in the hall and thrown his sport coat over the back of a chair, same as always. The girl knows, without looking, that her father will walk into the den and mix a Tom Collins, then call upstairs for his wife, her mother. But before he does, he glances into the living room and says, "Still at that nonsense, are ya? Won't ya give it a rest?"

*It's called Resident Evil*, she thinks. *Resident. Evil.*

The father stomps off to the bar. A minute later, he calls up the stairs and the mother shouts something down from the sanctity of her bedroom.

Her bedroom—he has his own, now, an arrangement that suits neither of them. The mother wants the father out of their house and the father wants the mother to keep her damn mouth shut and count her blessings. Their list of complaints is as endless as the computer-generated, zombie-like villagers methodically stalking Chris. The father may be called before the court on a tax evasion charge. And the banking regulators are rumbling again over on Downing Street. The mother may have hit someone speeding. There was dent in the grille on the Bentley and bloodstains. They have garaged the car and called for a sleazy Estonian car detailer they know. It is going to cost them a small fortune. Everything costs them a small fortune. The cars, the boats, the home, the time-shares, the clothes, the lawyers, the impending divorce.

The girl is distracted. Chris is almost crushed by a boulder. She mouths the words in sync with the father: "So, I see ya been lolling about in your nightie. Too much trouble to wait for dinner?"

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There is a chink of glass hitting the marble countertop hard. There will be another drink. And another. And another. The exchange will grow nastier until the father goes upstairs and opens his bedroom door and the mother follows, shouting. What happens then is anybody's guess.

The girl is leaning so close to the monitor that her face almost touches the screen. If it were cold, she would fog it with her breath. Her fingers fly over the controls as if of their own accord. Chris has broken down the door. She has never been to this place. Chris stalks down the hallway toward the chamber where they are chained. He fires the shotgun nonstop. The girl has never felt more alive. She is one with the machine. She is one with the machine. She is one with the machine. Chris has the Alpha team. The whole house can burn for all the girl cares. Chris has the Alpha team. She has won with the machine.

## THE DETACHED

Mumbai, India. November 3, 2012. 11:00 p.m. The doctor is gently sewing up a boy's cheek when he asks the nurse to go out of the examination room and see what all the commotion is outside. The doctor cannot be distracted from his patient—the boy fell through a window and his face is cut. But the needlework is almost done. He speaks soothingly to the boy as he sews, in spite of the distraction. The nurse steps away, leaving behind the gauze with which she has been staunching the flow of blood. She crosses the room in two quick strides.

A woman has arrived at the clinic, bypassing the line in the corridor and pushing past the old guard whose presence is intended to keep some semblance of order. The woman is nineteen, maybe, or twenty. She is leading a little line of small ones, a boy of four or five, a girl, and another, a shy one and of indeterminate sex hiding behind the older boy. Besides leading the children, she is supporting a man. The man is drenched in sweat, his chest heaving. He is only semi-conscious.

The nurse relieves the woman of the man. The man is dark skinned, a middle-class worker of some sort, dressed in gray western slacks with an open white cotton shirt. He is, perhaps, twenty-six or twenty-seven—no more. He should be the picture of health at his age, but his eyes are glassy, his face almost black with fever. His breath comes in short, pulse-like gasps that neither draw in air nor expel fluid. The nurse takes the man and half-drags him to the examination room and lays him on the bed.

The boy, frightened, sits up. The doctor, in one smooth stroke, follows the boy with his needle and completes the final stitch. He is good. Very good. He cuts the thread, pats the boy on the head, and turns to see the patient. He does not have to ask. The look on the nurse's face says more than the nurse's stammered, "Another one."

"This makes five this week," the doctor says. His tone is matter-of-fact. He sighs. "Fetch me some ice and we'll see what we can do." A new strain of Influenza. No hospital in the world can save this man. In another place, the doctor would roll the man over onto his side and try to drain the heavy green fluid from the man's lungs, but it is too viscous—too sticky to flow. The man is suffocating. It would not even help to insert a tube into the lungs. They've tried that, too, but the thick fluid won't be drawn out. The doctor looks at the wife. He knows that if he does not save her husband, she will become a widow doomed to a life of hell on earth, along with her children. His eyes brim with tears. He has been at the clinic since nine in the morning. With any luck, he will make it to bed by two or three. While the nurse is gone, he reaches inside his shirt and produces a tiny vial carried on a black thread. The vial is almost empty. It is light in his palm. He pries loose the stopper and cradles the man's head in his arms, and shielded from sight, tips some small bits onto the man's bloated tongue followed with a little water. "Try to swallow," he whispers. Then he recites a Buddhist mantra to ensure the mushroom bits administered will heal.

The man, delirious, rasps a sound that may or may not be a reply.

"Just try," the doctor says. He strokes the man's wet hair. "Just try."

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### THE CONFLICTED

Tollygunj Golf Club, Calcutta, India. January, 1992. Soli and Hutoxi are across the lawn sitting at a table under a tipping green awning sipping tea with Alec and Susan. Their laughter carries to the three children who peek at them through a small gap in the hedge surrounding the tennis club. There are twenty tables clustered on the south end of the courts, and a handful of servants in cream-colored suits with wide red sashes and red turbans and ridiculous, shiny green pointy-toed shoes, to wait on them. The children's scheme has been meticulously planned and rehearsed twice over the preceding weekends. When the order for lunch has been placed, they will have exactly nineteen minutes. Four for the drinks, five more for the salads, and then, ten minutes later (on the button), lunch will be served. The children will not be sought after or missed until their sandwiches arrive. By then, they will have returned—older, wiser, and having settled a dispute that has tormented them all summer. No one will know. There is even a small wager: Amay's prized collection of rare marbles versus the antique French cameo necklace with the profile of Marie Antoinette (that Susan bought from a reliable antique dealer in Prague and gave to Lucky for her most recent birthday). The third child is not invested in the argument. He is Amay's distant cousin, Varun, who is from Mumbai and has been left with Amay's family for a few weeks while his father takes his mother to London to seek treatment for an obscure medical complaint. Varun is younger than Lucky and Amay, a nervous child, a crybaby, and a despised tagalong. He has been alternately threatened and bribed until his silence and complicity are assured. Varun has no interest in the outcome of the bet other than proving his courage to his cousin and his cousin's friend. They have promised to quit tormenting him if he serves his task successfully. His job is to watch the door and make certain that no one ventures down the hall while Lucky and Amay inspect something strange and western—otherworldly, really—called a “sauna.” Here, it is rumored, Lucky's

hippopotamus-like spinster-aunt is supposed to lounge naked in a large oven, purportedly to help her shed weight. Lucky swears it is true. Amay swears Alec and Susan are pulling Lucky's leg.

The head waiter bends over the table, listening intently to the order even though all four have eaten the same lunch every Sunday for the past six months. With a glare and a warning finger, Lucky reminds Varun to stay put *no matter what*. She and Amay dart for the door. They have been gone only a few minutes. It seems like no time at all. When they return, they know right away that something is wrong. A crowd of adults stands by the gap in the hedge. Beyond them, two waiters run, their backs to Lucky and Amay. One of them carries a small bundle in his arms. On his right side, two thin legs flop like a gull's broken wing. On his left side, cradled like a football, is Varun's head. From the hedge comes a loud thwack and a shout, more of anger and relief than triumph. A moment later, a groundskeeper swings the body of a cobra over his head and cracks it again, like a whip. The snake is dead, but so, too, will be the boy. Over and over again, Soli and Hutoxi ask, "What were you thinking, leaving your little friend like that?" Lucky and Amay could only stare at the pools their tears made on the floor. There was no good answer and no excuse. It was an episode Lucky and Amay would never speak of again. Only once as an adult would Lucky discuss it—with Shanti, her friend and guru.

"Well," Shanti said, after Lucky told her the story, "the snake must have been there for a reason. Maybe they had an appointment."

"An appointment?" Lucky asked.

"Varun and the snake. Stop judging everything, Lucky. Things happen for a reason, and the universe doesn't owe us explanations. Varun was being a boy and the snake was being a snake. It's what we do. We follow our inherent nature. It wasn't personal to either of them, or to you. Sometimes, things like that happen. The real question is, why have you carried around the blame for all these years?"

"What do you mean?" Lucky asked.

"I mean, were you an adult? Did you start this situation just so that Varun would die? Did you know the snake was there?"

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“No,” Lucky said.

“Okay then. Let it go. It happened. It wasn’t like the universe went out and did something TO you. Or TO Varun, either, for that matter. Things happen. Sometimes, we are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. If you have no deliberate fault, then take no deliberate blame. What were you doing again?”

“We were trying to find out whether Aunt Benaifer really sat naked in the sauna.”

“And did she?”

Lucky thought about this. “I don’t remember,” she said. “I don’t remember a thing about it. Only that Varun was bit by the cobra and died. That, and for twenty years I thought it was my fault.”