



The Wallflowers



VARSHA DIXIT

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF 'RIGHT AND WRONG' SERIES

The Wallflowers

Book 0 of The Wallflower Series / Prequel to The Wallflower Series

Varsha Dixit

Dedicated to all my readers . . .

Acknowledgements

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GINA BANSAL

29 August, 2008

9:00 am

Parking lot outside Sharda Kedia University
Bangalore, India

‘Oh my God. So many students... This place is crazy Dadu. Let’s go.’ Eighteen-year-old Gina Bansal placed her palms on the window of the car. She turned to her ‘Dadu’—her father who was sitting in the passenger seat next to the driver and was wiping his eyes with his ivory handkerchief. Gina leaned towards him. ‘Dadu, don’t cry.’ She put her arm around her father’s shoulder. ‘I will call you every day.’

‘Of course, you will.’ Her father, Satinder Bansal, nodded but kept dabbing his eyes.

‘Ma, tell Dadu-’ Gina turned to her mother. Her mother was seated next to her and was staring out of the window even as she wiped her cheeks. ‘Oh my, you too Maate?’ Gina hugged her mother. ‘You promised you wouldn’t cry.’

‘I’m not crying.’ Malti Bansal, Gina’s mother, patted her daughter’s hand.

‘You can still come back with us, Ginu, and study in Amritsar.’ Satinder turned towards her. His expression was pleading.

‘Please don’t do this, Dadu. I promise that I’ll come back if I don’t like SKU. Give me six months?’ Gina begged. For her protective father, it was a very big deal to let his darling daughter, his favorite amongst his three children and the youngest one in the family, stay and study in a city away from them.

‘That is my problem. I can never say “no” to you.’ Satinder replied even as he exhaled noisily. He took Gina’s hand in his. ‘You promise me and your mother that you will never do anything to break our trust.’

‘Yes, Ginu, promise us that.’ Her mother added.

Gina squeezed her father’s hand and smiled at her mother. ‘So filmy you all are. But I promise I will never break your trust. God promise. Now, can we go please? I don’t want to be late on my first day of college,’ she squealed.

Reluctantly, her parents got off the car. Gina could barely stand still. She was so excited. Since she was born, her father and mother had been helicopter parents—always hovering over her, especially her father. Sometimes Gina was sure her father forgot that he had two other children.

The college campus in front of her held a promise that beckoned her like the hand of an expert seductress. The promise of freedom; freedom from her family! Gina forced herself to walk slower. If she ran inside the college, her haste to get away would break her parent's heart.

I love them to death but I really want to get away from the constant questions, the bevy of house help always trailing me and how Dad and Mom have to know what I'm doing every single effing minute of my life. Gina clamped on a smile that was threatening to spill out of her face.

"I told your sister to be here. Some local guardian she is!" Satinder grumbled.

"She is newly married, Inder. She can't just leave the house and come." Malti reminded.

"Yeah Dadu, it's okay. You both are here. I'll call up Di and talk to her." Gina said.

"Some brother and sister you have." Satinder persisted. "One had to organize a business trip at this time and one is too engrossed in her house." He took the trolley bag from the driver's hand.

Gina exchanged a look with her mother. Her father never understood why his other children couldn't fawn over Gina and her beauty the way he and his wife did. But Malti knew that the other two resented the attention Gina got from their father. And Gina too knew it. After all it wasn't their fault that they were average to look at just like the rest of the clan and their younger sister a raving beauty, the only beauty in a few generations.

Growing up, Gina did not understand the maliciousness her siblings exhibited toward her when no one was watching, but as she grew older she understood it and sometimes even felt sorry for them.

Even her school friends were handpicked by her father. Her naive father didn't know that girls from rich and educated families could still be cruel

bitches. But Gina wasn't the kind to hurt anyone, especially her parents nor her siblings or the children her parents forced her to hang out with. She had too much guilt in her—guilt for taking all of her father's love and much of mother's too. She was used to hiding her feelings and always did as others bid her. No one around Gina could guess that a girl who always smiled was also always lonely.

Gina had studied her ass off after eighth class. Fantastic grades were her only way to get out of the clutches of her loving father and a mother who was obsessed with marrying her children off before the age of twenty-three. Schoolbooks and romance novels were her best friends once she hit puberty—one an assured opportunity and the other a fantasy.

Gina quickened her pace, her dark eyes shining with excitement. *Please let me make some amazing friends in there. I don't want to be lonely anymore.*

DOYAL BARUA

29 August, 2008

9:10 am

Gazebo inside Sharda Kedia University
Bangalore, India

Almost-eighteen-year-old Doyal Barua sat on a stone bench, watching the girls come inside the gate. The Freshers stood out like a sore thumb, unsure and uncertain as they came inside the college gates. And the seniors were parked at some distance, like predators ready to pounce on their prey. A typical first day of college.

No senior came to rag Doyal because of her looks. She wasn't scarred or anything like that. Just that she was from the North-East and the girls from there carried a reputation—that of being tough and party animals. *Stereotyping at its worst. But best for me. No one is going to bother me, so that's good.*

Very few knew that Doyal was as removed from parties as Islands of Fiji were from Siberia. From a very young age, Doyal had learnt that if one has not had food for two days, even watery tea and sweet biscuits will taste as delicious—if not more—than food prepared in expensive restaurants. Not that she and her seven other siblings could ever enter those, but they could dream! She also learnt that in this world there was only one God, one power that controlled the world, and it was not found in temples, mosques or churches; it was found in wallets and bank accounts.

If one had money one had the power of God. And Doyal wanted this God in her corner. Unlike the convoluted and mysterious prayers and rituals needed to attain the other Gods, this one could be attained by following a clear-cut path—the path of education and ruthless ambition. *Ambition I've always had and education I'm going to get here. The best possible education.*

Doyal reached into her skirt pocket and felt the folded sheaf of paper. She could not bring herself to keep it away from her. It wasn't just another letter, but a letter from Ms. Sharda Kedia herself. Simply marks or quota system wasn't enough to get admission in the college. Another thing that played a

very big important role in the admission process in SKU was an essay. Every applicant had to write a thousand-word essay narrating why she wanted to study in SKU. These essays were a deciding factor in the admission process. Some said that Mrs. Sharda Kedia, who was settled in the US, read these essays herself and chose students based on them.

When Doyal had received her acceptance letter and a handwritten note from Ms. Sharda Kedia, shock had rendered her speechless for nearly an hour. Then she along with her younger siblings had jumped around for another hour. Mrs. Kedia's handwritten note was now her most prized possession. She even slept with the note under her pillow.

Another group of Freshers entered the college. Enviously, Doyal ran her eyes over their clothes. She had finished her admission process one day earlier and checked in the hostel too as she did not want the other girls to see her tattered suitcases. Being studious had another advantage—studious girls weren't expected to be fashionistas. No one looked at their clothes closely enough to see mended tears or ask them where they liked to shop. Anyone who knew Doyal or her family also knew about her dire financial condition. *I won't let anyone here find out how poor I am. I won't ask Ma and Baba to visit me. I'll visit them.*

Doyal looked at the college building. *I can't wait to start studying here.*

Loud voices distracted her. Due to her short height, Doyal had to stand on her toes to see what the commotion was. Disgusted, she sat back, her smooth forehead marred by a frown. 'Idiots!' Doyal wrote off the two girls squabbling over something near the college gates. *Must be fighting over boys or something equally moronic. I hope I get nice roomies.*

MEHER CHAUDHARY

29 August, 2008

9:20 am

The road outside SKU College
Bengaluru, India

‘You kept your vitamins?’ The lady wearing a fluorescent-green sari with a golden border asked the girl sitting next to her.

‘Yes, Heer Bua.’ Meher Chaudhary, who had recently turned seventeen, adjusted her golden circular glasses on her fair round face.

‘And your Horlicks?’

Meher blushed. ‘Yes, Bua.’

‘And your —’

‘Bua, can you drop me off at a distance from the college?’

‘Why?’ Heer Bua looked like someone had slapped her. ‘I took out the Rolls just to drop you to college.’

It’s because of your Rolls only that I don’t want you to drop me off there. Too much attention. ‘It’s just that it might be too crowded, so I thought...’ Meher shrugged.

Heer Bua smiled. ‘And you packed all your romance novels?’

Meher nodded quickly. ‘The silver suitcase is full of them.’

‘Did you. . . did you speak with your parents?’

Meher inhaled deeply. She had promised herself that she would not cry on the first day of college. ‘No point. Abba will only say hurtful things.’

Meher Chaudhary was born in a middle-class family and had an autocratic father. Her mother was a Muslim and her father a Hindu. Theirs wasn’t a love match but a convenient barter. Her mother’s father worked in a garage. He was unable to pay an advance he had taken from his employer and when he was sure he would never be able to pay that loan back, he offered his

daughter as a bride to the son of his employer. An offer that was readily accepted for the employer's son was disabled; his one leg was twisted and shorter than the other thus he walked with a pronounced limp and with the help of a wooden staff. That employer was Meher's paternal grandfather and the disabled son was her father. Meher's father adopted the religious ways of his wife, but only as a reason to control his wife and children.

'Meher beta,' Heer Bua gently touched Meher's forehead. "No sad thoughts. You are frowning, bache.'

Meher clasped her Bua's hand and touched it to her forehead. 'Thank you, Bua. I owe you my life. If you hadn't come for me when you did, I don't know what would have happened to me.'

Heer Bua pulled her into an embrace. 'Women should always support other women. Always help other girls.' Meher nodded as she sat back, trying to compose her face that revealed her thoughts quicker than a trashy tabloid revealed celebrity secrets.

"And you are such a sweet girl. You will make an excellent orthodontic surgeon.'

Meher inhaled her Bua's lavender perfume. 'Orthopedic surgeon, Bua.'

'Dono different hain?'

Meher chuckled. 'Yes, one is of the tooth and the other of the foot.'

'Oh look, look. SKU!' Heer Bua pointed ahead of them.

Meher's stomach tightened and she felt goosebumps on her skin.

'Promise me, child, that you will never stop writing though.' Her Bua asked even as she dabbed her eyes.

The world is not yet ready for the kind of stories I like to write. Meher nodded. 'As long as you promise to read them.'

'Always! So, tell me what are you most excited about?' Heer Bua asked.

'Meeting new people and hopefully making some friends. Even one good friend will do.'

Heer Bua caressed her niece's head. 'The kind of person you are, I think you'll make more than one good friend.'

KYRA SAIGAL

29 August, 2008

9:30 pm

Inside SKU College

Bengaluru, India

The wooden curve of her hockey stick made a loud sound as eighteen-year-old Kyra went up the steps of the hostel. *Bloody hell. I was to arrive at 9:00 in the morning.*

Kyra had called up ahead of time and groveled over the phone to the Administrative Staff to allow her in late today. Delayed trains were her reason. And the kind and worried office staff believed her because it was the first day of College.

Kyra was positive her lie would go undetected, as no one would bother calling Railway Inquiry to find if Palam Express was running late that day. In fact, no one would even give a thought to find out if there was a Palam Express and whether it came to Bengaluru.

Kyra pulled her backpack strap, adjusting it better on her shoulder. She climbed up the hostel steps. She could hear some singing but it did not sound happy. Kyra knew what was happening. Freshers were being ragged.

Kyra passed a couple of girls who were lounging in the corridor.

‘Hey Fresher, come here,’ one of them called out. Their lofty tone and angry expression proclaimed that they were seniors.

‘Yes Ma’am?’ Kyra walked over to them, her gait slow, her head lowered.

‘*Murga bano!*’ The other girl instructed, tapping her foot impatiently.

‘Yes Ma’am.’ Meekly, Kyra placed her backpack and hockey stick down. ‘Oh sorry, the zip of my bag is open.’ She fumbled with the zip and purposely opened it further. A few things kept right at the top slid out. Kyra left her belongings on the floor, not bothering to pick them up. She sat down on her haunches, stretched her arms under her bent knees and looked up. The two seniors had disappeared.

Kyra caught them walking quickly down the corridor. In a direction away from her.

‘Ma’am! Sorry I did not catch your names. Ma’am, I’ll come there.’ Kyra called out.

The girls broke in a run, turned the corner, and vanished in the corridor. 'Chickens!' Laughing, Kyra gathered her red and silver Swiss knife, a brass knuckle duster, a mini taser gun and a mini nunchaku and carefully kept them back in her backpack.

Mighty pleased, Kyra started looking for room number 12B. She found it and opened the door without knocking.

The occupants inside jerked, startled out of their activities. They were all watching her, their expression wary. 'Shit! I have to share it with three other girls.'

A chubby girl was sitting on a cot near the window that opened to the side of the hostel building.

Kyra walked over to that girl and frowned at her. The girl clutched her throat nervously.

'I will take this bed.'

The chubby girl cleared her throat and avoided looking at Kyra. 'Why? I have already put my sheets on it.'

Kyra put her dusty sneaker on the neatly-made bed, not caring of the mark her shoe was going to leave on it. 'Because I say so, and because most nights, I will be slipping out of here to fuck my boyfriend.' She growled.

The chubby girl gasped and was quick to vacate the cot, taking her sheets and pillow with her.

Kyra cast a look at the other two girls. One of them was beautiful and was staring at Kyra with evident irritation.

'Kyra.' She introduced herself.

'Gina.' The beautiful girl sullenly replied.

Kyra turned to the north-eastern girl who was seated on the desk, busy writing on her notepad.

'Kyra.' She introduced herself again.

'Are you a senior?' the girl asked.

Kyra plunked down on the cot with a loud thump. 'No. First year, Political Science.'

'Doyal Barua.' The girl replied. 'Also, one more thing. Palam Express wasn't late today.'

Kyra lost her easy-going air and sat up. She had no idea how this girl Doyal knew about the Palam Express.

'I was in the admission office with the secretary when you called.' Doyal went back to whatever she was writing. 'One more thing, Kyra.'

'What?' Kyra tried to make her voice sound as angry as her expression.

'Don't try to bully any of us. I can share that detail about Palam Express with the Head of Admissions. He is from my town.' Doyal's glance was brief but pointed.

Kyra wanted to break Doyal's head with her stick, but she reigned in her anger. At no cost would she want to be expelled from SKU. She had big plans for her future. And that included finding a killer.

THE WALLFLOWERS

Two Weeks Later
Hossar, Bengaluru

Holding the three books close to her like they were jewels, Meher shut the wooden door of the tiny library behind her. ‘Shoot. It’s dark.’ She glanced at the simple wristwatch on her hand. It was seven thirty. *Why did I spend so much time in there?* She smacked her forehead. *Oh God, how will I get to the hostel by eight? It’s an hour away from here. What if they don’t allow me inside?*

Meher glanced up and down the street as she walked toward the bus stop. The street mostly housed small offices and warehouses and they were all closed. There was only one streetlight for the entire street.

‘Oooh!’ Meher jumped as a stray dog dashed in front of her. It bared its teeth at her. She froze. The thin and flea-bitten dog considered her a threat and gave a low growl. A small pebble came flying out of nowhere and hit the mutt on its leg. Yelping, the dog ran away, its tail tucked between its legs.

Meher looked up to thank her savior. She loved dogs but not dog bites, especially from a creature that looked like a poster for rabies. The gratitude died on her lips. *Shit!*

Four men stood at some distance from her. They appeared to be locals and were in their thirties and forties. What frightened Meher was the way they stood—in an arc, blocking her way. Their expressions were leery as they ran their eyes over her. They were laughing while they talked in Kannada. One of them spat close to her. Meher jumped back. That seemed to amuse them.

Meher did not have to know the language to understand what they were talking about—they were talking about her.

One of them was wearing a dirty white kurta pajama and stepped in front of the others. ‘I like plump girls. More flesh for all of us.’ He drawled.

Meher gave up any pretense of bravery and turned around and ran as fast as her legs could carry. Vulgar calls, raucous laughter and footsteps came after her. Meher picked up her pace, but it wasn’t fast enough to outrun them.

‘Help! Help! Please, help.’ She shouted but the street that was deserted five minutes ago, stayed that way five minutes

later. Meher's short legs were no match against the speed of her burly assailants. In seconds a filthy hand found her shoulder.

'Meher, duck!' A loud voice called out as somebody came running toward her from the front.

Meher did as told. The person running toward her knew her name and that was good enough for Meher. Something flew past Meher's head as she ducked. A sharp crack sounded and the man who had been about to haul Meher by her shoulder yelped, much like the dog he had pelted earlier.

Losing balance, Meher fell to the ground but she quickly scrambled up and turned around. She saw the man who had grabbed her lying on the ground rolling in pain, as he held his chin that was seeping dark liquid. Blood.

Meher looked the woman who had come to her rescue. She had moved past the fallen man and was fighting the three others. *With a hockey stick!* Meher murmured with awe. 'Kyra!'

Kyra pulled the stick up parallel to her chest, drew it back and swung it straight into the face of the man on her right. He howled and clutched his face in his hands, tottering around. Kyra threw the stick up, adjusted her hold and rammed it hard in the stomach of another guy. As he fell forward, Kyra stepped back and socked him right under his chin with her other hand. He flopped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. The third man grabbed Kyra by her neck and began to choke her.

'Kyra!' Meher screamed.

Kyra delivered a sharp kick to the man in his knees and as he rocked unsteadily, she jammed the stick in his nuts. The man screamed. He fell down and stayed on the ground.

#

Fifteen minutes later

In a BMTC bus

Meher and Kyra found an empty seat in the middle of the bus and slid into it.

Meher was still shaking as she gripped the handle of the seat in front of her. *I almost got raped.*

‘Are you going to cry now?’ Kyra asked.

Meher shook her head vigorously. 'Thank you so much for saving me. If you hadn't been there today-'

'But I was and you are fine and those men are not. Don't think too much about it.' Kyra dismissed her.

'Where did you learn to fight like that?' Meher asked.

Kyra ignored her question. 'Why were you in that area?'

'For these.' Meher extended her arms and revealed the books in her hand. 'What were you doing there?'

'My karate teacher lives in that area. He wasn't well so I went to drop some medicines off.'

Meher smiled. 'You are nice.'

'Don't sound so disappointed.' Grinning, Kyra picked up a book and snorted. 'Oh, these are those stupid pre-historical romance novels you like to read.'

'They are not stupid!' Meher protested, not in the least bit offended by Kyra's words.

'What just happened is real life. That is why these books are *bakwas*.'

'What just happened out there is real and ugly and that is why these books are not *bakwas*. They give you hope and leave you feeling all warm and fuzzy.'

'Whatever!' Kyra slapped her knee. 'So Doy was telling me you have made her, Gina and yourself a part of some club.' Meher, Gina and Doyal were beginning to build a rapport of sorts but Kyra only spoke with Doyal. She usually ignored her two other roommates.

'Yeah! A Wallflower Club.'

'What is that?' Kyra smirked.

'It is a club for smart, strong and opinionated women. And single.' Meher's eyes shone as she spoke. 'And we also like to read historical romances.'

Kyra nodded. 'How important is being single?'

Meher chewed her bottom lip. ‘Not much really. It’s just that you can’t be married. . . I guess.’

‘Doy reads these romance novels?’ Kyra raised a brow. In the two weeks since college started they might not know everything about each other, but they all knew one thing about Doyal Barua. She only read books in her syllabus or books that had something do with her syllabus.

Meher smiled. ‘Well she reads, so I guess that is okay too. Kyra, will you join our club?’

Kyra smiled and her pixie-like face lit up. ‘I would love to. And I hear all members have tags.’

‘Yup!’ Meher sat up, eager to share. ‘I’m “The Shy One” for obvious reasons. Gina is “The Pretty Awkward One”.’

‘She gets two descriptions in one tag?’

Meher pulled a face. ‘I wanted to give her “The Pretty One” but she wanted “The Awkward One,” so we compromised.’

Kyra rolled her eyes.

‘Doyal is the “The Duchess.”

‘What is that?’

‘That is the highest order in the societies shown at that time, only second to the Queen.’

Kyra nodded. ‘Yup, Doy is the boss for sure. Always telling us what to do.’ She perked up. ‘I know mine. “The Fucking Kickass One.”’

Meher wrinkled her nose. ‘Nooooo. That’s too crude, not Wallflower-ish. How about. . .how about “The Feisty one?”’

Kyra cocked her head to the side. ‘Hmmm! Is that kind of a historical way of saying “The Fucking Kickass one?”’

Two ladies sitting ahead of them turned around and looked at them. Their glances were disapproving.

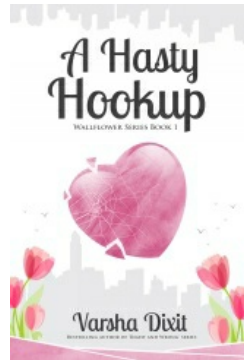
Kyra bared her teeth at them. They quickly looked away.

Meher giggled. ‘Even if your tag was “The Saintly One,” it would still mean “The fucking kickass one.”’

Kyra grinned back, not in the bit apologetic. 'Give me a fist bump, fellow Wallflower.'

Meher did just that and followed with a quick hug as she whispered, 'Here's to us, The Wallflowers.'

The first book in the Wallflower Series 'A Hasty Hookup' to release around Valentine's 2018.



Married to one, engaged to another!

Gina Bansal, twenty-eight, could never in her wildest dreams have imagined this to be her relationship status. It will soon only get murkier as she is determined to divorce one and marry another. Five years ago, a mistake committed in name of love cost Gina her family, friends and everything she held dear. She even had to move countries. But now she is back in India, determined to divorce her cad of a husband. However, she is forgetting that a true cad never fights decent nor fair.

Work and women have kept the reclusive and retired Colonel Ojas Purohit busy. Fate left him scarred, crippled and robbed him of a career that was his passion and his life. For him, fate has a name—Gina Bansal, his estranged wife of five years. And now she is back, wanting a divorce. Ojas is determined to put her through hell before he even gives her a minute of his time, forget a divorce. And this time luck is on his side for his enemy needs him more than he needs her. Or so he thinks.

Will Gina and Ojas survive each other? Will memories of their past complicate their present? Is desire forgotten same as desire dead? And who are these Gina's BFFs, the Wallflowers? What roles do they play in this Hasty Hookup?

All these answers and more in 'A Hasty Hookup,' first book in the Wallflower Series by Varsha Dixit. It is a story full of unexpected twists, wit, sizzling chemistry, and mature content. 'A Hasty Hookup' will release around Valentine's 2018. Don't forget to get your copy.

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MEET THE AUTHOR



Varsha Dixit is the author of the bestselling novels, *Right Fit Wrong Shoe* (2009), *Xcess Baggage* (2010), *Wrong Means Right End* (2012), *Only Wheat Not White* (2014), and *Rightfully Wrong Wrongfully Right* (2016). She worked in the Indian television industry before moving to the US with her family. She feels enriched and blessed to be an author and a woman.

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