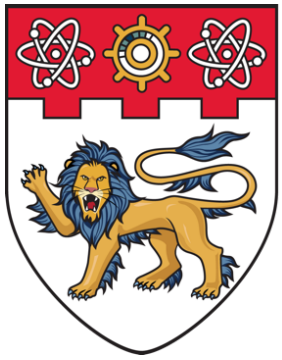

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
SINGAPORE

REBELLIOUS DAUGHTERS, SISTERS AND WIVES: NON-CONFORMING WOMEN IN SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA FICTION

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Rebellious Daughters, Sisters and Wives: Non-Conforming Women in South Asian Diaspora Fiction

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A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that all work submitted for this exegesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of the Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

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I have reviewed the content of the creative project and exegesis and to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain plagiarised materials. The presentation style is also consistent with what is expected of the degree awarded. To the best of my knowledge, the research hand writing are those of the candidate except as acknowledged in the Author Attribution statement. I confirm that the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

Date:	July 29th, 2020
Name of Supervisor:	Barrie Sherwood
Signature of Supervisor:	

AUTHORSHIP ATTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The creative project **contains** material that has been published as *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* (United States of America: William Morrow, 2019) under the pen name Balli Kaur Jaswal.

The exegesis **does not** contain any materials from papers published in peer-reviewed journals or from papers accepted at conferences in which I am listed as an author.

Date:	27/07/2020
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SUMMARY

This dissertation explores how identity is defined in contemporary South Asian diaspora fiction with an emphasis on female protagonists who rebel against traditional expectations of their familial roles. Drawing from a range of critical studies and fictional narratives, I explore the narrative shifts that occur when these daughters, sisters and wives reject patriarchal ownership in their bid for individuality. The dissertation comprises two main components: an extract of an original work of fiction written by me, and a critical exegesis that contextualises my fiction.

My creative work is a novel titled *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*. The novel follows three British-Indian sisters on a pilgrimage to Punjab, India to fulfill their late mother's last wishes and perform her final rites. My critical exegesis will explore the relevant themes and ideas that contributed to the creation of this narrative. Chapter One is an analysis of women's roles in Indian migrant success narratives. Chapter Two explores how minority characters and stories are represented in Western publishing. Chapter Three reflects on the process of writing and researching *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*.

CREATIVE PROJECT

The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters

Prologue

My dearest children,

If you are reading this, you know the end has finally come for me. I hope that our final moments together were peaceful and that I had a chance to tell each of you how much I love you. If not, I hope that you know how much you have enriched my life. I am so very proud of each of you and the individual paths you have trekked in this world. I am blessed to have been witness to your triumphs and challenges, your heartaches and your successes. Guiding you from infancy to adulthood allowed me to live life over and over again, and in this way, I feel that I have stepped into so many worlds in the course of my brief stay in this universe.

There are matters to be discussed of course, involving the will and my estate, but these will come later. I trust that the lawyers will discuss the inheritance and the division of property and assets with you after the other formalities are taken care of. If you would like to be informed ahead of time, please see the attached.

Please take care of yourselves and each other. Make time, not just on special occasions, to come together and enrich your bond as a family. I have learned that the most important thing in life is that we show appreciation to our loved ones. Remember that nothing matters more than this.

This was the letter that Sita Kaur Shergill overheard the old woman in the next bed dictating over the phone. A few times, her voice quavered and she had to pause to sigh and sniffle. Sita had turned down the volume on her television to listen to the part about the lawyers – she was most interested in what

this woman was leaving to her children, but 'the attached' was not available on this side of the partition. She had seen the children on their visits – two middle-aged sons who were possibly twins with vastly different diets and a handsome blonde woman who always repeated the same soothing words, 'We're here, Mum. We're here.' They often arrived separately but left together, squeezing each other's shoulders and making light conversation about parking spaces or the declining quality of the hospital canteen's coffee.

Sita pressed the buzzer on her remote control and when the nurse arrived, she requested a pen and piece of paper. These were the earliest hours of the morning, before visitors were allowed. It was the best time to think about dying. The pain encompassed her entire body, radiating from her toes to her temples and vibrating in her bones. Despite the morphine, the pain was always visible – she saw it edging in the shadows of her vision on the best days and wringing her frail body like a towel on the worst. Today she was feeling strong enough to sit up; the letter from the woman in the next bed had motivated her, and by some miracle, the nurses attended to her request within the minute.

My dearest daughters, she began. She stopped and frowned. When had she ever addressed her children as dears? She crossed out the line and began again. *To Rajni, Jezmeen and Shirina.* There – a command for their attention. She used to stand at the foot of the stairs and shout all three names even if she only wanted one of them to come down; she could always find something for the other two to do once they arrived. It only worked for a while, then Jezmeen started calling back: 'WHICH ONE OF US SPECIFICALLY?'

To Rajni, Jezmeen and Shirina:

By now, I am dead. It is just as well because I've had enough of this ghastly life – all this working and suffering and trying to take care of myself for no bloody reason. Please enjoy your health while you have it because once your body betrays you, no comforts in the world will make up for your loss.

No, she couldn't leave them with that. It was too honest. If these were her last words, they'd never forgive her. She folded the sheet and set it on her side table, weighing it down with the pen, and then she closed her eyes. How did she want to be remembered? She had been a wife, a mother, a widow and a grandmother. Sikh funerals didn't include eulogies, so her daughters would be spared the task of scraping together a list of her meagre achievements. On some days, she thought she knew which of her daughters would remember her least kindly and on better days, she assured herself that all of them would at least agree that she had tried her very best.

Sita pressed the button to call for the nurse again. It took a while this time, but eventually the rail-thin girl with the tattoos and half her head shaved arrived. She was not as friendly as the Jamaican nurse who sometimes squeezed Sita's hand and said, 'You rest now,' but she smiled when Sita asked her question: 'How old are you?'

'I'm twenty-seven,' she replied. There were zig-zag patterns shaved into the sides of the girl's scalp. Sita wondered what man found this sort of thing attractive.

'Have you ever been to India?' she asked.

'No,' the nurse said, a bit regretfully, which pleased Sita.

'If your mother asked you to do something for her, no matter what it was, would you do it?' she asked.

The nurse tugged at the edge of the blanket, which was bunched up at the foot of the bed. Her fingers grazed the knuckles of Sita's toes. 'Of course I would,' she said. 'Now, is there something you need, because—'

'What's your religion?' Sita asked.

Her question was met with narrowed eyes. 'I do believe that's a very personal question to ask.'

Sita frowned. There was a reason she liked the Jamaican nurse better. She wore a thin gold cross that hung just beneath the V-neck of her scrubs. 'Ho, Lord,' she wheezed quietly, stretching her back at the end of a long shift.

'Can you hand me my pen and paper please?' Sita asked. As the girl reached into the drawer

next to the bed, Sita's heart leapt into her throat. *Not there!*

'It's right there, on the table,' Sita snapped. Although the nurse was unlikely to pluck Sita's jewellery pouch from where it was nestled between a prayer book and her mobile phone charger, Sita had lived long enough to know that you could never be too careful. The girl handed her the paper and pen and then left, probably to grumble and tell the other nurses that they were right, old Mrs Shergill needed to cark it already. Last week, Rajni had stormed into the nurses' station and told them off for leaving Sita shivering during a particularly agonizing episode. 'I don't care if she's already got a blanket, get her another one,' Rajni nearly shouted, making Sita want to weep with gratitude and also chastise her daughter for making a scene.

The pain was inching into her body now, and she could sense that it was going to be a bad day. Her daughters would visit this afternoon – hopefully all three of them, since Rajni had called Shirina and informed her to fly over at once when it appeared that Sita's remaining days were down to single digits. She had to write this letter before the strength leached out of her.

To Rajni, Jezmeen and Shirina:

If you remember correctly, when I was first diagnosed with cancer, I wanted to go to India to do a pilgrimage to honour the principles of our great Gurus. You and the doctors convinced me that this was a bad idea because my health was already so fragile, but I think it would have enriched my spirit, if not my physical condition.

I am attaching a list of the places that I would like you to visit on my behalf, after I am gone. They are in Delhi, Amritsar and beyond. The whole journey will take a week. You should go together and do all the tasks as instructed: seva, to serve others and preserve your humility; a ritual sarovar bath, for cleansing and protecting your soul from ailments; and a trek to the high peaks of spirituality, to feel appreciation for that body which carries you in this life. I would also like my ashes to be scattered in India.

There are also some places I'd like you to visit because I won't have the chance to

do so. Simple pleasures, like watching the sunrise at India Gate, and sharing a humble dinner together. I will outline the itinerary in more detail on the next page. Please do this for me. It will be a way of completing my journey in this world and continuing yours.

Love,

Your mother, Sita Kaur Shergill.

Sita's vision began to blur as she read over the letter. There it was, the searing sensation in her bones. She squeezed her eyes shut and clutched the sides of her mattress. There was only so much morphine the nurses could administer in a day and no legal dose seemed to be enough to wash it all away. 'We're here, Mum, we're here,' she imagined her daughters saying, just like the blonde woman, as she presented the letter to them. Their faces would be awash with tears and they would take each other's hands, united for once.

As the wave of pain subsided, Sita picked up her pen again and turned over the sheet to work on the itinerary. Agony was quickly replaced by nostalgia – Sita's memories of India were stronger than ever. An end-of-life counsellor named Russ who visited last week said that it was common to remember the past vividly as death approached. 'Think of it as a transition,' Russ had said. 'You are finishing one stage and entering another.' Recalling those words, Sita considered her daughters' journey to India. She would insist that they do this – no excuses, no backing out. It was a comfort to know that while they returned to her origins, she would be busy entering the afterlife. Who knew how long it would take to adjust to her new surroundings there, make friends, find out how the coffee machine worked? What if Devinder had also ended up in this new place? She had decades of catching up to do with her late husband, after she'd finished telling him off for leaving so suddenly.

Thoughts and memories of those early years of marriage and having children flooded Sita's mind, reducing all remaining traces of pain to a dull ache that settled in her chest. Those were chaotic days – learning to be a wife and a mother, running a household and adjusting to life in a new country. When she finally got the hang of it all, her husband died. There was only a small fraction of Sita's

lifespan when her family was whole. She scribbled more items onto the itinerary. Her last trip to India had been nearly thirty years ago. In his explanation of the stages of grief, Russ had said that some people experienced an intense desire to turn back time. Although Sita prided herself on being too pragmatic for such wishes, she also hoped that her daughters found India just as she had left it.

There was something else Sita wanted to tell her daughters. It was a confession of sorts, for something she made up her mind to do after Russ left her bedside. She would have to find a suitable moment to tell them. It was not appropriate to write it down; she'd have to lower her voice and prompt her daughters to gather closer. They'd dismiss her at first, of course. 'Mum, don't be silly,' Rajni or Shirina would say. 'You're kidding, right?' Jezmeen would retort, because to Jezmeen, nothing was real, not even on a woman's deathbed. Then they'd begin to protest, telling her she didn't know what she was saying. That was by far the most frustrating thing about being terminally ill – everybody thought she was thinking through a haze of fear, a desperate need to cling to life. But death was the most certain thing in the world. To prove to her daughters that she was indeed being serious, she'd tell them to open the drawer and take out the jewellery pouch. Have a look inside. You see? Now, please don't argue with your mother.

Chapter One

I would prefer that you take this journey during a cooler time of the year, but since Rajni can only travel during school holidays, you will need to go to India in July/August. Book your tickets and hotels quickly – I know my last trip to India was over twenty years ago, but the last-minute bookings were very expensive.

Rajni was not built for fainting spells. Moments after Anil told her about the girlfriend, she considered pretending to faint, but she knew she'd throw her arms out at the last minute to break the fall. Nobody took a woman seriously if she staged her own collapses. A feigned faint, ha-ha.

So she stared at Anil as simple mathematical sums populated her mind:

36 – 18 = 18

The girlfriend was 18 years older than Anil.

36 ÷ 18 = 2

The girlfriend was exactly twice Anil's age.

43 – 36 = 7

The girlfriend was only seven years younger than Rajni herself.

This last fact made her light-headed. The overpowering smell of half-eaten fish wasn't helping. For dinner, she had baked three pieces of salmon because Omega Threes were supposed to make everybody live to a hundred. This girlfriend of Anil's, did she know about the nutritional benefits of Omega Threes? Probably not.

'Mum, come on,' said Anil. All Rajni could do was shake her head. No, no no. Tonight was supposed to be special: their last dinner together before she went off to India. If Anil had chosen this occasion to tell them about his girlfriend, then she was supposed to be . . . well, a *girl*. Somebody who called her Mrs Chadha and whose parents regarded Anil with a reasonable amount of suspicion until he won them over with good manners and clean fingernails.

Anil turned to Kabir. ‘Dad,’ he said in a slightly desperate way that made it clear to Rajni that they had already discussed this matter without her. Guilt rippled across Kabir’s expression. He stole a glance at Rajni.

‘You knew about this?’ Rajni asked Kabir. ‘For how long?’

Kabir had thin lips, which almost vanished when he was unhappy. ‘He came to me this morning,’ he said. ‘You were packing for your trip and I didn’t want to disturb you.’

Dinner time – morning = a whole day.

Rajni fixed Kabir with the kind of stare usually reserved for naughty students called into her office. ‘And how do you feel about this? Care to share your opinion?’

‘Obviously, I’m concerned, but Anil is old enough now to make his own decisions.’

‘Concerned? Concerned is how you feel about old Mrs Willis next door when she’s struggling to put her bins out. This is our son, Kabir. He finished Sixth Form mere weeks ago and now he tells us he wants to move in with a woman twice his age!’ Where did Anil even meet a thirty-six-year-old? A horrifying thought struck her. ‘She wasn’t a teacher of yours, was she?’

‘God, no,’ Anil said. Rajni let out a sigh. Thank goodness. She had always worried about Cass Finchley, a music teacher who swayed too suggestively on the edge of the dance floor while chaperoning school formals.

Kabir cleared his throat. ‘Anil, your mother and I just know you have a bright future ahead of you. We don’t want you squandering it on some . . . fling.’

‘It’s not a fling,’ Anil said. ‘We’re serious about each other.’

‘I’m sure you feel that way now, but there will be problems, son.’ Rajni used to find it touching when Kabir called Anil ‘son’. It was old-fashioned and charming and it brought a rush of warmth to her heart. Now he said the word like he was losing grip on its meaning.

‘There’s nothing we can’t work out, innit?’ Anil said.

‘Nothing?’ Rajni echoed.

Anil shrugged. ‘We’ve got the same cultural background. We get each other. People are always

saying that's the main thing.'

'You're from completely different generations. She's a grown woman. You're a boy! You might as well be from different planets.'

'Nothing,' Anil repeated tersely. With his jaw clenched like this, he looked so much like Kabir that Rajni wanted to suspend the argument and run for her camera. They say photos of the first-born child always outnumber those of subsequent children. As Anil was their first-and-only born, Rajni documented him thoroughly with no fears of sibling inequality. Their home was a shrine to Anil's childhood: portraits and finger paintings, pencil marks on the wall charting his growth over the years.

Crises about Anil's future were becoming an annual milestone. Last summer's fight had been about Anil's declaration that he wasn't going to apply to university – he wanted to be done with education after completing Sixth Form. 'They don't teach you nothing you can't learn on the internet these days, don't they?' Anil said. Rajni, head spinning from all the double negatives she had spent a lifetime correcting in her son, had left the room. When she returned, Kabir said he would talk some sense into Anil. It took months, but they finally arrived at a compromise: Anil would apply to university, but he could defer for a gap year. He was supposed to get a job during that time (his parents' hope being that the gap year would help him to recognize the limitations of being without a degree), but then his grandmother had died and left him a small inheritance, turning the gap year into a paid holiday.

'Think about this for a moment then, Anil,' Kabir said. 'She's surely at an age where she wants to settle down.'

'That's why we're planning on moving in together.'

'But do you realize what this entails? For her?'

Anil clutched the back of the dining chair in front of him. His news had brought them to their feet, standing before their unfinished meals. A scaly whiff from the salmon hit Rajni in the nostrils again. She picked up the plates and brought them to the kitchen.

'I understand exactly what Davina wants,' Anil was saying. As Rajni tipped the scraps into the

bin, she had an uninvited image of her son tumbling around in bed with an experienced woman. *Stop it,* she ordered her mind. She looked around the kitchen for something, anything, to focus on. There was a leaflet on the counter from the Jehovah's Witnesses who came by yesterday evening. They were such a bother but she found it impossible to shut the door on their faces – those pallid cheeks and impressively starched shirt collars. 'I'm busy at the moment but perhaps you can leave behind some literature,' she had offered as a consolation for not wanting to be saved, even though the leaflet would find its way to the bin within a day or two. *ALL SUFFERING IS SOON TO END*, declared the header over a painting of a sunny green meadow. How nice it would be to be so certain. The words brought Rajni only a brief shot of relief before she returned to reality.

'A woman at that stage in her life is looking for a long-term partner,' Kabir was saying to Anil.

'This isn't some kinda *phrase*, Dad.' He meant 'phase'. Rajni was too upset to correct him but she kept a mental note to educate him on the difference later.

'Son, listen for a moment. I'm saying that Davina probably has bigger, more permanent plans.'

Rajni rushed back into the living room. 'Tick-tock!' she cried, startling her family. 'That's what everyone says to a woman in her mid-thirties whether she wants children or not. "Have one before it's too late."' (In her case: 'Have another one, you're not just having one, are you? Finish what you started! Give the poor boy a sibling.' As if she and Kabir didn't try and try until sex became another routine household task like doing the laundry or paying the water bill.)

'Yes,' Kabir said. 'Societal pressures. They're bigger than you think, Anil, especially for adults.'

'Look, the only person pressuring me is you. Davina and me are just fine.'

'So if she wanted a baby tomorrow it would be okay? You'd give up all that travelling, your nights out with mates?' Kabir asked.

That ought to give him a fright, Rajni thought, noting the swell of unease on Anil's face. He'd been plotting his European holiday: skiing in Bulgaria; island-hopping in Greece; God-knows-what in Amsterdam.

‘I would. I am going to give it all up,’ Anil said quietly. He gripped the chair.

The room became still. Anil bit his lower lip and looked at his knuckles, which had turned white.

Kabir stared at him. ‘What are you saying?’

‘I am going to give it all up for her,’ Anil repeated.

‘Son?’

‘Mum. Dad. It’s not a big deal, alright? You have to promise not to overreact.’

The edges of the room began to blur and the floor tilted slightly. Rajni heard Kabir gently saying, ‘Okay, we promise. Now what is it?’

‘Davina’s pregnant,’ Anil said.

And then Rajni fainted.

The customer had seen a video online about how bronze highlighter could be used to take ten pounds off her face. ‘The girl just sweeps this brush across her face and suddenly she has cheekbones,’ she gushed.

‘Those videos are very helpful,’ Jezmeen agreed. ‘Lots of useful tips.’ Especially useful for a person like her, who had no experience doing make-up professionally. After being suspended from her job as a host on *DisasterTube*, one of the studio make-up artists had given Jezmeen the lead on this job. It was temporary, Jezmeen kept reminding herself. Everything would blow over, and she’d find another role soon. The last time Jezmeen checked online, the number of views on her video had hit 788, which was hardly viral, but her agent Cameron still believed they had to be cautious.

‘Lay low. Wait for the dust to settle,’ he had urged her. There was no end to his supply of banal encouragements whenever they spoke – ‘Take some time for yourself,’ was another favourite which roughly translated to: ‘Take the least humiliating job offer thrown your way and we’ll just have to wait for the anonymous masses on the internet to decide your fate.’

‘Are you going to use highlighter on me, then?’ Stella asked.

‘I’ve got other plans for you,’ Jezmeen said warmly. Starting with matching a more appropriate foundation to Stella’s skin tone. At the moment, she was less ‘Youthful Summer Glow’ and more ‘Fell Asleep in the Tanning Bed’.

As Jezmeen rubbed a wipe across Stella’s cheeks, she had a distinct sense of déjà vu. In another time in her life, Rajni used to apply make-up on her while she struggled to sit still and not turn to the mirror to see her reflection. Jezmeen remembered doing the same for Mum on the morning of Shirina’s wedding. The bridal make-up artist had chosen a deep-purple eye shadow and insisted on a crayon-thick line for Mum’s eyelids. Mum was horrified. ‘I can’t go to the temple like this,’ she’d gasped. ‘People will say . . .’ She didn’t finish that sentence; she rarely did. It was bad enough that people would say anything. ‘Jezmeen, get me some tissues,’ Mum had commanded. Helping to clean the make-up off Mum’s skin, Jezmeen had noticed the looseness of her cheeks, and the way her eyelids folded, and she vowed never to let herself grow old.

Jezmeen’s phone buzzed on the counter. ‘Excuse me, Stella,’ Jezmeen said, leaning over to see the screen. Message from Rajni. She ignored it. Rajni was likely panicking about the trip and asking everyone if they had taken their tetanus shots, or something similarly hysterical.

‘I’m going to use this primer on you,’ Jezmeen said. She showed Stella the bottle. ‘It’s a great base which keeps your make-up on for much longer during the day.’ Her phone buzzed again.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Jezmeen said. She shot a glare at her phone.

‘No worries, love. Your boyfriend must be anxious about you,’ Stella said.

Ha! If only there were an anxious boyfriend, or a boyfriend at all. Her last relationship had ended more disastrously than Stella could probably imagine.

‘Oh no, that’s my sister,’ Jezmeen said. ‘We’re going on a trip to India on Thursday and she’s probably just reminding me to pack sunscreen or something.’

‘A holiday! Just the two of you?’

‘The three of us. Our youngest sister’s flying there from Australia.’

‘That’s lovely,’ Stella said.

People always said this when Jezmeen mentioned having two sisters. Lovely. Cosy teas and long chats. Some sort of unbreakable bond. Stella's smile was so bright that Jezmeen didn't want to tell her how much she was dreading this trip with uppity Rajni and irritatingly perfect Shirina.

'We're going there for our mum,' Jezmeen explained. 'She passed away earlier this year and we're doing a pilgrimage in her memory and scattering her ashes there.'

'Oh, that's beautiful. What a tribute,' Stella breathed. She reached out and clasped Jezmeen's hand. Now Stella probably had an image of three dutiful daughters in matching loose white robes solemnly making their way up a misty mountain as they took turns carrying an urn filled with ashes. Again, inaccurate. Pilgrimages weren't even a requirement of their religion (she had done some quick Googling on Sikhism, and sent all the links to Rajni as part of her continuing campaign to oppose everything her older sister wanted them to do), but after the cancer treatments stopped working, Mum had turned to all kinds of holy remedies. There were rituals she had been too weak to do, places she had been unable to visit for the last time, so her daughters were tasked with completing the journey. Jezmeen noticed that Mum had sneaked in a few itinerary items that involved the sisters simply spending time together, probably because she knew they wouldn't bother to make the time otherwise. As far as Jezmeen saw it, this trip was less about spirituality and more about Mum forcing them to travel together.

This time Jezmeen's phone rang. 'For fuck's sakes,' she muttered.

'Just answer it, darling. It could be important.'

'Thank you, Stella.' Jezmeen picked up the phone. 'Rajni, I'm in the middle of work.'

'Did you see my messages? You'll have to find your own way to the airport. Something came up at home last night and . . . I just have some things to deal with. Kabir's driving me there directly.'

'Alright. Is that it?'

'Yes.' Rajni hesitated. 'What time do you plan on leaving?'

'I'll be at Heathrow two hours before we fly, Rajni, don't you worry about it.'

'You're still at work?'

‘Yes, and I have to get back to work. Bye now!’

Rajni had started saying something when Jezmeen hung up. She put the phone on ‘silent’ and turned back to Stella. ‘Now, I’ll be using two different concealers because we’re really working with two different shades of irregularities here.’

‘Do I mix these?’ Stella asked.

‘No, we’re using this one for under your eyes and this one for those blemishes on your chin.’ Jezmeen held up each bottle. While Stella inspected them, Jezmeen glanced at her phone. She had a funny feeling. Why did it matter to Rajni that she was still at work now if she was only flying out on Thursday?

‘I might need to write these down,’ Stella said, rummaging through her purse. ‘Otherwise, I’ll forget which one goes where.’

‘Here you go,’ Jezmeen said, handing her a pencil and a card with a face drawn on it. ‘Just draw an arrow to the eye area and write “Nude Secret 19”.’

Stella had careful penmanship. ‘Darling, you have such a lovely manner, has anyone ever told you that?’

Jezmeen smiled, surprised. ‘Thank you.’

‘I must take your name card. Do you do private sessions as well? My daughter’s looking for a good make-up artist for her wedding. It’s only next spring, but good services get booked up so quickly.’

Jezmeen’s smile faltered. Next spring! Her stomach contracted at the thought of still working at a make-up counter. No, no, it wasn’t possible. She was lying low and taking time for herself while the dust settled. People would move on. But Cameron said it wasn’t necessarily about her. ‘There’s a lack of roles for Indian actresses to begin with,’ he’d explained. ‘And directors can’t really afford any bad PR if they’re taking a chance on somebody new. So there’s just a lot working against you at the moment.’ What he avoided saying was that there was one Polly Mishra already. He knew that Jezmeen balked at the frequent comparisons between herself and that actress, who had overshadowed

Jezmeen's career as soon as she arrived on the scene.

While Stella labelled her card, Jezmeen stole a look at her phone. Three missed calls from Rajni in the last two minutes and a message:

'You DO realize that we're flying out tonight right?'

Jezmeen's heart stopped. She nearly dropped her phone. She texted Rajni back:

'YES of course I know. Just finishing up and leaving straight from work.'

How the hell had this happened? It was Thursday they were supposed to leave, not Tuesday. She had a vague memory of a conversation with Rajni about finding a cheaper flight for Thursday. 'It's at 2 a.m. though,' Rajni had said. 'I guess that's alright.' And something in her tone annoyed Jezmeen, so she had said, 'Not all of us have school holidays, you know.' Rajni *had* booked the Thursday flight, then.

Or had Jezmeen just imagined Rajni giving in? Sometimes she had entire conversations with Rajni in her mind. She used to do this with Mum too – it was easier than fighting out loud. In the fantasy arguments, Jezmeen always emerged the winner, with the other person apologizing and sometimes even grovelling for forgiveness. They were leaving tonight, then. They were leaving tonight! She would have to call the manager and tell her something had come up – this could count for a family emergency.

'What's the primer called?' Stella asked.

'It's just primer,' Jezmeen replied. *Shit, shit, shit.* She didn't even know where her suitcase was.

'Oh dear,' Stella murmured as the pointy end of her pencil punctured the card.

Oh dear indeed.

At Melbourne Airport, an elderly Indian couple were being seen off by their extended family. Shirina watched them move like a swarm of bees to the departure gate. 'Do you think they're returning home? Or going back to visit?' Shirina asked.

Sehaj shrugged. 'Doesn't make a difference. They all have to go through the same gate.' He

was busy scrolling through his phone. Shirina glanced at his screen. Numbers and graphs. Work stuff, he'd mutter if she asked what was keeping him so busy.

'They look like they're going to visit. What do you think?' Shirina asked, focusing on the family.

'Don't know,' Sehaj muttered.

'I'm just trying to make conversation,' Shirina said. Sehaj seemed to remember himself then. He put the phone aside and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. 'Sorry,' he murmured, pressing his lips to her temple.

Shirina let her head sink into his chest. Finally, in this bustling international airport terminal, a small chance at intimacy before she left. The past couple of days had been filled with tense silences. She shut her eyes. Sehaj's shirt smelled like a mix of cologne and that fabric softener his mother had recommended. Her life as a married woman smelled like pressed linens; it was the first thing she had noticed when she moved into the joint family home three years ago. His fingers stroked her hair. She thought she might start to cry, so she twisted away from him and then she felt a heavy weight rolling over her foot.

'Ow,' she said, drawing her foot back. It was a suitcase. The woman dragging it didn't notice. She trotted off towards the gate in stilettos that looked like they were stabbing the ground with each step she took.

'I'd say they live here and they're going back for a holiday,' Sehaj said, nodding at the elderly couple. 'The family's too cheerful.'

'Why would all their kids and grandkids be seeing them off then?' Shirina wondered aloud.

'Long trip, maybe?' Sehaj asked. 'They might have a home there where they spend a few months out of the year.'

These were a few good months to spend away from Melbourne. Every day, boulders of grey cloud rolled across the skies and showered the city with icy rain. Nobody in England thought it got cold in Australia; even Shirina refused to believe it until she married Sehaj and came here. Now,

whenever the news reported heatwaves in July in Europe, Shirina looked out the window at the slick wet roads and the tree branches bowing under the force of heavy wind and she thought, *How is that possible?*

'How about them?' Sehaj asked. He nodded at two young men. 'Brothers? Best friends?'

'Best friends,' Shirina said, delighted that they were playing this game again. On their honeymoon, stranded in the airport due to a snowstorm in Istanbul (another city Shirina did not expect to have winter, let alone snowstorms), they had passed the time making up stories about strangers. Three years wasn't such a long time ago, but Shirina felt she needed to remind Sehaj of that carefree period in their lives.

'Do you remember finally getting on that flight from Istanbul and sitting behind the Hollywood Spy Couple?' Shirina asked.

Sehaj's eyes lit up with recognition. 'The ones who looked like movie stars and couldn't keep their hands off each other?' They had kissed and snuggled the entire flight – honeymooners, Shirina and Sehaj decided, although those two put other newlyweds to shame with their public caresses and sighs. Then, just before the plane landed, they moved to two empty seats on opposite rows and they disembarked separately. Shirina and Sehaj watched them step into different lines at Customs and then part ways without even acknowledging each other, the woman heading to the Underground, the man staying behind at Baggage Claim.

'Definitely spies,' Sehaj said. He liked his Cold War-era thrillers.

Shirina checked the time. She needed to go soon. New destinations and boarding times winked on the Departures screen. There were flights going to Berlin and Jakarta, Pretoria and Chicago – from where Shirina was standing, it was possible to go anywhere. This thought electrified her. It was like sitting in front of the laptop screen again, scrolling through profiles of eligible men, each one a window to a new future.

Sehaj's body went tense, and her own stomach tightened. He looked like he was ready to say something.

‘I’d better get in there,’ Shirina said. ‘I told Jezmeen I’d get her some Duty Free stuff.’ It was a small, imperfect lie – when was the last time she and Jezmeen spoke? If Jezmeen needed something, she probably wouldn’t tell her.

‘Okay then,’ Sehaj said. He seemed distracted by his thoughts. They stood up and he took her bag. The Indian family was still hovering at the Departure gate and the elderly couple weren’t within view from here. ‘Excuse us,’ Sehaj said. The Indians didn’t budge. ‘Excuse us,’ he said again, this time with more force. They shifted a little bit, their conversation too engrossing to follow any orders.

‘Come on people, it’s an airport. Get out of the way,’ Sehaj said. This caught their attention. Shirina took his hand but he pulled away and elbowed through the crowd. ‘Sorry,’ she murmured, her head down, but she was annoyed at the family as well. Now her pleasant moment with Sehaj was gone.

Shirina hugged her husband, hoping that this would dissolve his anger. His body was still stiff. ‘I’m sorry, Sej,’ Shirina said. *How do some married couples fight all the time?* she wondered. It was hard enough trying to get through this one conflict. Apologizing made her feel better. Even though she hadn’t done anything wrong, she was sorry for the situation.

Then Sehaj took something from his pocket. Shirina recognized the stationery – that stiff cream-coloured card, premier quality – and his mother’s handwriting. Shirina took in the name and address and stared at Sehaj.

‘You can’t come back unless you do this,’ Sehaj said, pressing the card into Shirina’s hand. He didn’t give her any time to respond before he walked off and disappeared into the crowd.

Chapter Two

Day One: Arrival in Delhi

Be patient. India is not going to be like London. The pollution and the bustling crowds will overwhelm you immediately. You girls always joked that I talked too loudly, and I turned everything into chaos. When you enter India, I want you to think about how it felt to leave this place and go somewhere as orderly as Britain, with ruler-straight rows of houses and trains that run on time. I also want you to understand how hard it was for me, adjusting to all of that quiet.

Rajni's headache was returning, like fingers pressing against her skull. This newly built boutique hotel in Karol Bagh with its patio dining was far removed from the chaos of Delhi that they experienced on the journey from the airport – the hustling luggage handlers, the cab driver that dived into oncoming traffic to overtake his lane, the girls in tattered T-shirts that hung to their knees, dodging rickshaws and potholes with babies propped on their tiny hips. It had been a relief to finally arrive at the King's Paradise Hotel in one piece, but a glance around the lobby during check-in confirmed that the pictures on the booking website had been aspirational – the doormen's shoes left prints in the thin layer of plaster dust on the floor and there was some loud, clanging construction going on upstairs. The owner was putting finishing touches on the place, the staff explained as if their apologetic smiles could mask the strong smell of varnish that made Rajni's head throb. They promised, however, that the hotel café was 'one hundred per cent ready'.

The minute they sat down, Jezmeen began making fun of the menu. She pointed at a list of indulgent summer beverage offerings: *an iced vanilla mango smoothie topped with whipped cream and seasonal fruits.* 'Isn't that just a fancy mango lassi?' Jezmeen mused. 'Look at this one – *an iced turmeric latte sprinkled with cinnamon and coconut shavings*. That's just haldi doodh with ice and some toppings, isn't it?'

‘It sounds pretty good to me,’ Rajni said. She couldn’t believe she had complained about the warmer weather in London last week when it only hit 27 degrees. It was close to 40 here, a furious heat that seemed to demand an apology. If Mum wanted them to appreciate Britain, mission accomplished.

Jezmeen gave a performance of smug disapproval as she continued to read the menu aloud: ‘*King’s Paradise Hotel Café is a true crossroads between the traditions of the East and the modern comforts of the West.*’ She rolled her eyes. ‘So it’s for people who want to say they’ve been to India without having eaten the food or experienced the culture authentically.’

‘Could you not do that?’ Rajni said. She was annoyed enough with the hotel’s false advertising. ‘If I picked some three-star hotel with monkeys shitting in the lobby for the sake of authenticity, I’d never hear the end of it from you and Shirina.’ She only added ‘and Shirina’ to soften the blow. They both knew Shirina never complained about anything.

Jezmeen ignored her and held up the menu. ‘Our monkeys are very well trained not to shit in the lobby. They have their own toilets made of fair-trade ceramic by local artists and they wipe their own arses with organic cotton tissues hand woven by blind Himalayan nuns,’ she drawled.

‘Shut up,’ Rajni said but it felt good to smile. All through the flight, she didn’t stop replaying Anil’s revelation and its aftermath: the panic that seized his face as she collapsed; the lack of remorse once she recovered. ‘You’re being melodramatic,’ he’d cried, and it sounded so familiar that Rajni wondered if she’d fainted herself into a time warp where she was arguing with Mum. There had been a shouting match before Anil finally stormed out the door. Rajni and Kabir spent all of the next day fretting over his future. Anil finally returned about twenty minutes before they left for the airport, and he said, ‘Nothing’s going to come between us, right?’ For a moment, Rajni thought he was talking about their family. She nearly cried with relief. Then, as Anil began packing up his things, she understood.

Rajni felt the panic rising in her stomach again. Her son would soon have a new family with his thirty-six-year-old girlfriend. She pressed a hand to her chest and took a sharp breath.

‘Everything alright?’ Jezmeen asked.

‘Fine,’ Rajni said. Thank goodness for this trip. Let Kabir talk some sense into their son – she had done all she could (mostly fainting and shouting) to no avail. She looked past the hotel’s walled-in patio, where the foggy sky began. In the distance, a poorly tuned chorus of car horns pierced the atmosphere. The air smelled like burned rubber. Delhi. It couldn’t be helped, Rajni supposed, although she wouldn’t mind putting more mayhem at arm’s length for a while. She had no desire to go out into the city, not after her last trip here with Mum. ‘*I know my last trip to India was over twenty years ago, but the last-minute bookings were very expensive*’ – in that part of the letter, Rajni could hear Mum’s pointed tone. It took her years to recover her losses from that trip, and an even longer time to forgive Rajni for what happened.

There was a young European couple in the pool. The deep-golden curlicues of a recent *mehndi* pattern showed strongly on the woman’s pale hands as they cut through the water, a postcard picture of holiday tranquillity.

Rajni pulled copies of the trip itinerary from her bag. She had typed up Mum’s letter and made duplicates for Shirina and Jezmeen. Perhaps it was overkill – Jezmeen’s expression told her as much – but she had gone ahead and highlighted the activities according to three categories: Spiritual, Tourism and Sentimental.

‘Was your laminating machine broken?’ Jezmeen asked dryly, flapping the paper at Rajni.

As a matter of fact, it was, but Rajni didn’t say so. ‘I thought we’d look this over together.’

‘Shouldn’t we wait till Shirina wakes up from her nap? She might have some suggestions.’

‘Mum set the itinerary,’ Rajni reminded Jezmeen. ‘It’s not like there’s any discussion or negotiating involved.’

‘I’m sure we can tweak it a little.’

Rajni stared at Jezmeen. No, they could not ‘tweak it a little’. This tendency to apply her own interpretation to Mum’s wishes had nearly got them all into massive trouble recently – had Jezmeen forgotten? No. Jezmeen matched her with an even look. She knew what she was doing; insisting that

she was right.

‘Jesmeen, I think you’re missing the point—’

‘Can you call me Jezmeen, please?’ Jezmeen looked stricken all of a sudden. ‘With a zed? I changed it legally two years ago and you’re still the only person who calls me Jesmeen.’

‘I’ll try to remember,’ Rajni replied but she didn’t think she’d try too hard. She loved the name Jesmeen; Mum had let her choose it. It was the sort of privilege that came with being eleven when your younger sister was born. Two years ago, Jezmeen had gone through some crisis over turning thirty and sent out an email to close friends and family saying that she was legally changing her name. Rajni hadn’t paid too much attention – Jezmeen thrived on theatrical announcements – so she was surprised when Jezmeen followed through with it. What difference did one letter make? Rajni wondered, but she didn’t need to hear an explanation from Jezmeen, with all of the accompanying eye-rolling and pouting and the you-just-don’t-get-it looks.

Rajni pointed to the itinerary, her finger resting on the header, *The Golden Temple, Amritsar*. ‘If the purpose of this trip is to do a pilgrimage for Mum, then we’re following this itinerary,’ she tried again.

‘I get that, but I think there’s room to be flexible if, say, we don’t want to spend too much time in one place or we decide we want an extra day somewhere.’

‘It’s not that kind of trip,’ Rajni insisted.

Jezmeen plucked the sunglasses off her head and adjusted them on the bridge of her nose. She turned away so only her profile was visible to Rajni – those angular cheekbones, that small mole just at the top corner of her lip. The last time Rajni had stared so intently at her sister was at Mum’s funeral, when the bruise on Jezmeen’s cheek was just healing. There were no traces of it now.

‘We’ll have lots of quality time together, the three of us,’ Rajni added. Hearing the false cheer in her voice, she was grateful that she couldn’t fully catch Jezmeen’s reaction. They all needed to sit together and talk about what happened in Mum’s final hours – a calm and healing discussion now that they had some distance from all of it. Kabir had warned Rajni that it was naïve to think

reconciliation would be so easy, but she reckoned it was all in the atmosphere. The banks of the gently rippling waters surrounding the Golden Temple in Amritsar were much more conducive to open-heart conversation than a Pret A Manger in London – and how often were the three sisters in the same place now that Shirina had moved to Australia? Rajni was determined that they could make peace and move on.

'You know, pilgrimages aren't even a requirement of the Sikh religion,' Jezmeen said.

'I'm aware of that,' Rajni replied calmly. Jezmeen was not going to get under her skin. Of all people, Rajni knew the futility of rituals. She had been a teenager when Dad died and Mum began performing little ceremonies to improve their family's fate. Rajni thought that luck and fate were one and the same – Dad's death had been unlucky, but Mum saw connections to a greater plan that needed adjusting.

A waiter appeared at their table. He was young, with glossy gelled hair spiked upwards and a nametag that read 'Tarun'. He probably didn't think Rajni noticed his eyes lingering on the line of cleavage that ran into Jezmeen's tight tank top.

'I'll have an avocado lime and cilantro smoothie, please,' she said. Jezmeen made eye contact with Tarun and smiled.

'Madam, I'm so very sorry but this drink is unavailable,' he said.

'Okay then,' Rajni said, opening the menu. 'I'll have the . . . oh, this looks nice. The peach and strawberry daiquiri.'

Tarun looked embarrassed. 'Madam, we don't have any strawberries at the moment.'

'That's alright,' Jezmeen cooed. Honestly, did she have to be such a flirt?

Rajni scanned the menu. 'Here. This one.' She pointed at the description that Jezmeen had been making fun of earlier. Below it, there was a picture of the iced vanilla mango smoothie with whipped cream and seasonal fruits. 'I'll have one. Jezmeen, you want one?'

'No thanks,' Jezmeen said. 'I'll just have a cup of chai.'

He smiled brightly at Jezmeen. 'We have chai. So Madam, I repeat your order: one chai, one

vanilla mango smoothie.' He strutted off before Rajni could ask about the selection of seasonal fruit.

Rajni made another attempt with the itinerary. 'It's an early start tomorrow if we're going to do the morning seva at Bangla Sahib,' Rajni said.

Jezmeen did not respond. She was staring intently at her phone all of a sudden, her features scrunched in concentration. Moments later, she relaxed, but she continued to steal glimpses of the screen. 'Are you connected?' Rajni asked. 'They still haven't confirmed my account yet.' The staff at the mobile phone kiosk in the airport had assured Rajni it would take less than ten minutes to verify her details, but here they were, nearly two hours later, and she still didn't have any data.

'I'm using the hotel's WiFi,' Jezmeen said. 'So what are we doing tomorrow?'

'We'll cook and serve langar.' It was the foremost thing on Mum's itinerary, not that she could expect Jezmeen to have read it.

'So Mum sent us to India to wash dishes,' Jezmeen said. She looked up from her phone. 'She must have taken some joy putting that task in the itinerary – make my daughters do housework like good girls.'

'Men volunteer in the kitchen too,' Rajni reminded her.

'But when they go home, they get to put their feet up, don't they?'

Rajni thought of Kabir and Anil sitting in their twin recliners watching football while she flitted around them, sometimes still wearing her blazer and work shoes. 'Mmm,' she said, which was her standard reply when she agreed but didn't want to.

Her phone buzzed on the table. It was a message:

'MRS RAJNI SHERGILL CHADHA. WELCOME TO INDIA. YOU HAVE SIGNED UP FOR 2 MB OF DATA AND FREE CALLS WITHIN INDIA. PLEASE CALL THIS NUMBER TO CONFIRM YOUR IDENTITY.'

'Finally,' she said.

After keying in her birth date and the special pin code, Rajni was connected to an operator who asked her for one last confirmation of her identity. 'Your father's name, Ma'am.' Until she agreed to

make this trip to India, Rajni hadn't mentioned Dad's name in years, but everybody here needed to know. The visa forms asked for his name; the customs officer required her to confirm it before letting her past the gates, and now she couldn't register for a temporary mobile phone account without saying whose daughter she was. It didn't matter that he'd been dead since she was a teenager. 'Devinder Singh Shergill,' she said. The operator processed this information and after a series of clicks and rapid typing, pronounced her connected.

'When you and Shirina get your phones sorted, there's an app that you should download,' Rajni said. 'FindMe. It uses the GPS to keep track of each other's movements. I've used it on school trips.' Supposedly it used up lots of data but it had saved Rajni from losing other people's children, so the disadvantages were greatly outweighed by the benefits.

Jezmeen stared at her nails and picked at a cuticle with her teeth. 'Why do we need that?' she asked. 'We're going to be together all the time anyway.' She made it sound like a prison sentence.

'It's a big country,' Rajni replied. 'A big, unpredictable country. It's easy to get lost here.'

'Isn't that the point of coming to India?' Jezmeen asked, nodding at the European couple in the pool. They were both floating on their backs now and gently flipping their toes. 'To get lost? And then find ourselves again?'

Oh, you want to argue. This was what Mum would say if any of them were being contrary – it was a warning against proceeding any further with their case, whether it was extending a curfew or picking a quarrel for the sake of it, which was Jezmeen's speciality. Rajni had to bite her tongue to keep from saying the same thing to Anil whenever he questioned her.

Jezmeen waved to somebody in the distance. 'Hey, sleepyhead.'

Shirina entered the foyer wearing a brilliant turquoise caftan and white espadrille sandals that criss-crossed her slender ankles. It was the other women in the café who turned to stare. That was the difference between her two sisters, Rajni observed. Men looked at Jezmeen and hungered after her long legs; women took note of the details that assembled petite Shirina like a doll – the shiny shoulder-length hair, the bracelet that matched the bag.

And that ring! Rajni couldn't help staring as if it was the first time she'd noticed it. Had Shirina's diamond got bigger? Her white-gold wedding band sparkled as well, but the diamond engagement ring looked like something you saw on the news after a successful archaeological dig. *Tacky,* she'd thought immediately after seeing it the first time, even though she knew just how many carats it was worth. Shirina hadn't said anything, of course; Rajni had looked up 'huge diamond ring' on the internet and trawled through pictures until she found one that matched, and then looked up its value. If it was true that a man spent three months' salary on the engagement ring, then Sehaj was making very good money indeed – but then, they all knew that already. The heir to one of Australia's largest family-owned property businesses was not going to skimp on accessories for his fiancée.

'All caught up on your sleep?' Jezmeen asked.

'I'm getting there,' Shirina said. As she settled at the table, Rajni noticed dark circles under her eyes. 'Nice hotel, Raj,' Shirina said, looking around. 'It's pretty quiet here.'

'I'm so glad somebody appreciates my efforts,' Rajni said, giving Jezmeen a pointed look.

'That's a lovely dress,' Jezmeen said but Rajni noticed her studying Shirina as well. There was a small slump in her shoulders that the bright caftan could not disguise.

'Thanks,' Shirina said. 'I'm afraid it takes me a while to get over the jet lag, so if I sneak off for another nap, don't mind me.'

'As long as you're up at the crack of dawn tomorrow to serve at the temple,' Jezmeen said.

'That early?' Shirina asked.

'She's exaggerating,' Rajni said. 'We'll get up when we get up.'

'Okay,' said Shirina.

'No later than nine though,' Rajni added. 'So how's it all going, Shirina? You've been so quiet on Facebook.'

'I don't really do social media any more,' Shirina said with a shrug.

Being a school principal, Rajni wasn't crazy about it either but she used it to keep up with old friends and she found that Shirina had suddenly stopped posting pictures and status updates. Her last

activity was a condolence message on her wall from an old classmate dated the day after Mum's funeral. 'How's work?'

'It's good,' Shirina said quickly. 'Very busy lately. I'm glad to have some time off.'

'Oh,' Rajni said. That explained the dark circles then. She waited for Shirina to say more but she was leaning towards Jezmeen and staring right at her chest.

'Is that a new tattoo, Jez?' Shirina asked.

Jezmeen grinned and nodded. She pulled down the neck of her tank top to reveal a black letter Z with vines and tiny flowers woven through it. *For heaven's sakes,* Rajni thought. 'I'd been thinking about getting it ever since I made the name change official, but I didn't know where to get it.'

'"Where" as in the tattoo parlour or "where" on your body?' Shirina asked.

'Where on my body,' Jezmeen said. 'I didn't want it to be too obvious, like on my forearm or something. Then I thought about some really secret places, like my inner thigh, but I wanted it to be a little more visible than that.'

'Ouch. Inner thigh,' Shirina said, wincing.

'I like this spot,' Jezmeen said. She kept her neckline low. Rajni couldn't help herself.

'You need to be a little careful, Jezmeen,' she said. She knew what she sounded like and she didn't care.

'Oh, the instruments were all sterile. This was the same guy who did my first two tats.'

'I mean, you need to be careful about . . .' Rajni began to gesture at Jezmeen's blouse and ended up waving at her whole outfit.

Jezmeen looked amused. 'You don't think I only packed shorts and bikini tops for this trip, do you? It's Delhi. Supposedly we're in India for religious reasons. I've got other clothes.'

'I should hope so,' Rajni said.

Shirina picked up the menu. 'Hmm, these juices look refreshing.' She waved over the waiter. He came bounding back.

'Hello again, Tarun,' Jezmeen said, flashing him a warm smile. Her tattoo was on full display

and – Rajni was sure she did this just to spite her – she leaned forward slightly, exposing the deep line of her cleavage.

'I'll have the mint, green apple and carrot detox juice, please,' Shirina said.

'Madam, so sorry but unfortunately, we don't have any carrots at the moment,' Tarun said.

'Just the green apple on its own would be fine,' Shirina said.

Tarun looked very troubled. 'I must apologize, Madam, but we are out of all fruits at the moment.'

Which meant Rajni's mango smoothie with seasonal fruits would be made of what, exactly? 'What do you have then?' Rajni snapped. She handed him the menu. 'Go on. Point it out for me.'

Tarun nodded at the menu, his features squeezed as if she'd challenged him to conjure all of the missing menu items. The look of concentration on his face made Rajni momentarily ache for Anil. It had been a while since she'd seen him so vulnerable. Something happened around the time he became a teenager, when his whole existence suddenly depended upon appearing tough and streetwise. After Rajni reluctantly conceded to letting Anil take his gap year to work, she couldn't help pointing out that his regular outfits of hoodies and baggy pants weren't going to impress any employers. 'If they can't except my authentic self, then I ain't excepting their job offer,' Anil replied. 'Accept!' Rajni had snapped, and walked off as Anil scowled and muttered, 'It's what I said, though.'

'Madam, I really don't know what to tell you—' Tarun said.

'It's really alright, Tarun,' Jezmeen said. 'It's not your fault.'

Tarun uttered another apology and scrambled away. 'Really Raj, did you have to scold him like that?' Jezmeen asked.

'I'm sorry, but when I'm given a menu, I expect items I can actually order, not a wish list.'

'He's doing his best,' Jezmeen said. 'We're in India. Adjust your expectations. You can't throw your weight around like some colonial returnee. Nobody puts up with that nonsense any more.'

'You think you can just blend in with everyone here? I'd like to see you try to walk outside wearing that outfit and all that make-up and showing off that tattoo.'

There. It was done. She couldn't even create one day of peace with Jezmeen. 'I don't need another mother on my bloody case!' Jezmeen used to shout when she was a teenager. *Mother.* Jezmeen always said this word like a foul word was supposed to come after it.

Shirina had a talent for taking herself out of these arguments. Rajni had noticed her training her eyes on the couple in the pool as they splashed each other playfully. Now, she picked up the itinerary. 'Why don't we talk about tomorrow?' she suggested.

'Yes, why don't we?' Jezmeen said. She took the itinerary from Shirina and studied it. Rajni knew it by heart, she had studied it so many times. 'I was really hoping to take a side trip, but I guess that's not on the schedule.'

Rajni sighed. 'Where exactly were you planning on going, Jezmeen?'

'There's a music festival in Goa and then I thought I'd get a city fix in Bombay after getting through all these holy places. There are tons of cheap flights to the South.'

I'll get to Vitosha Mountain in Bulgaria for skiing season and then spend a few days in Sofia. Anil and Jezmeen were alike in this funny way. They talked about places they hadn't been to with such familiarity and confidence.

Like when Anil said, *I'm going to give it all up for her.* A shudder went through Rajni. What a fool, she kept on saying to Kabir. What a stupid fool our son turned out to be. They had spent all of Anil's life trying to steer him towards a steady future, giving him every opportunity at success. *More opportunities than children with siblings,* Rajni and Kabir told each other over the years, a salve for the pain of being unable to have any more kids. Anil had all of their resources and attention. And although Rajni didn't always understand her son – why, for example, did he insist on being from the streets when he grew up in a lovely Victorian terrace in North London? – she never expected his path to diverge this far from her expectations.

'I'm afraid my plans have changed slightly as well,' Shirina said. She pointed to the final item on the itinerary – the trek to Hemkund Sahib, where they were meant to scatter Mum's ashes in Lokpal Lake. 'I was going to email you about it but I thought it would be better to tell you in person.'

‘Tell us what?’ Rajni asked.

Shirina took in a deep breath. ‘It’s really a last-minute thing. Sehaj’s family – the extended family in Punjab – they haven’t met me yet. I agreed ages ago to visit their village at the end of July.’

Rajni stared at Shirina. Was she really telling them now that she would be skipping out on the most important part of the pilgrimage? The mountain trek would be the most strenuous part of their journey. Rajni hadn’t sent her sisters multiple links to websites about preventing Acute Mountain Sickness for Shirina to just opt out of going altogether.

‘I’m very sorry,’ Shirina said.

‘This is a crucial part of the journey, though. I’ve kept Mum’s ashes all this time and brought them to India so we could carry out her wishes. Can’t Sehaj’s family see you a few days later?’ Rajni asked.

‘They’re a huge family, people have already made plans to travel down. If I change the dates at the last minute, it’ll look bad.’

The last minute? Plans for this trip had been in the works since Mum’s death in November. Rajni saw an opportunity to lecture Shirina on priorities – she had missed her chance when Shirina returned to Australia so quickly after the funeral. But Shirina lowered her eyes, as if expecting to be scolded.

Rajni glanced at Jezmeen. There wasn’t much Rajni and Jezmeen agreed on, but Shirina’s marriage to Sehaj had united them, if only in a cursory way. They shared little observations about how Shirina had disappeared into her role. In that first year, every time Rajni sent a message to check in with Shirina, the replies were about Sehaj and his extended family – new business ventures, celebrations of other marriages. Jezmeen also reported to Rajni that she noticed Shirina had taken down all pictures of herself on social media in any skirts above the knee, or at parties where cocktail glasses and beer bottles were visible.

It was surprising, because although Shirina had always been obliging, she had never really struck Rajni as an aspiring conservative Indian trophy wife. In university, Shirina had been ambitious

enough to do summer internships at PR firms where she wanted to work one day, and after graduation, she landed a good job, earning a salary in her own right. Rajni knew that all sorts of women chose the arranged-marriage route these days, not just the traditional ones who wanted to keep house and have babies right away, yet Sehaj's wealth seemed to have bought a certain acquiescence from Shirina. 'The ring would have cost him six digits,' Rajni had confirmed to Jezmeen in a single-line email when Shirina got engaged, to which Jezmeen had responded,'OMG SERIOUSLY?' Rajni was hoping to catch Jezmeen's attention for another *Can you believe this?* moment, but Jezmeen was busy staring at her phone again. She thumbed urgently at the screen, her lips moving as she read something quietly to herself. Rajni was tempted to pluck the phone from Jezmeen's hands and toss it into the pool.

'Madam, your orders.' Tarun arrived with a tray and two drinks that looked nothing like the pictures. 'Thank you very much,' Shirina said, clearing the itinerary from the table. Rajni took a sip of her smoothie. It was a mango lassi and it was sickeningly sweet, like drinking pure syrup. The rapid fire of a drill went off in the lobby, rattling her nerves.

'Anything else I can get you, Madam?' Tarun asked tentatively.

Yes. I'd like to fast forward to the end of this trip, please, Rajni wanted to say. Being a wife and mother was complicated enough. She didn't want to be a daughter and a sister as well. *I'd like these ten days to be over as soon as possible.* Tarun wouldn't be able to grant this request but there was nothing new about that.

Chapter Three

Day Two: Gurdwara Bangla Sahib

If the doctors had let me travel to just one place, it would be to this holy shrine to honour the memory of our eighth Guru, Guru Harkrishan. He was invited to stay here as a guest when it was the magnificent bungalow of a Rajput prince. During our Guru's time here, an epidemic of smallpox and cholera swept over Delhi. Instead of resting in the comfort and safety of the bungalow, he went out to bring food and medicine to the suffering.

You will spend the morning serving others by working in the Gurdwara Bangla Sahib kitchen. Think about what this place once was and what it continues to represent – a home and a place of healing. It's a symbol of selflessness, sacrifice and service. If only I could get there, I know I'd be better.

Jezmeen woke up the next morning to a *ping!* and she lunged for her phone, nearly knocking over the bedside lamp. She had set up a Google alert for searches of her name to keep track of what people were saying about her. So far, nobody had made the connection between the host of *DisasterTube* and the security footage from the Feng Shui restaurant in Soho showing a woman going berserk and causing more expensive property damage than she could imagine. Jezmeen still maintained she was acting in self-defence, although she knew that the video didn't show the scale of the threat to her.

The alert that came up this morning was similar to those that had popped up yesterday while she was sitting by the pool with her sisters – somebody describing a clip he had seen on *DisasterTube*, and criticizing Jezmeen's introduction of it. 'Somebody tell Jezmeen Shergill to shut up already. God, she's annoying!' Yesterday's alert had been kinder: an entertainment feature on celebrities who could be twins. There were the usual comparisons between Jezmeen and Polly Mishra, although this writer did refer to Jezmeen as a 'fun and fabulous TV host' and Polly as simply an 'actress'. Was that a subtle snub at Polly? Jezmeen hoped so.

God, she's annoying. Jezmeen knew better than to let comments from strangers online bother her, but she found herself clicking on that guy's profile and searching for comments that he'd posted on other videos. It took a few minutes, but eventually she found another criticism. 'Are we supposed to believe that this guy did it all without the help of steroids – LOL gimme a break,' he'd posted under a video of a bodybuilder showcasing an impressive lifting routine using household objects. He was a serial troll, then. At least he wasn't one of those guys who sent around a petition to get Jezmeen and Polly Mishra to have a naked boxing match. Those sorts of things cropped up every now and then. Once outside the Tube station a few weeks ago, a man approached Jezmeen cautiously, saying, 'I hope you don't mind me saying, but you look a lot like Polly Mishra.' Jezmeen had flashed him a gracious smile and said, 'Yes, people say I look like her.' It was the deep-set eyes and the sharp cheekbones, she'd been told. She and Polly Mishra also both wore their shoulder-length hair loose and slightly wavy, although Jezmeen distinguished herself with caramel highlights. The man replied, 'Oh, I'm glad you're not offended. I met her once and when I told her she looked like Jezmeen Shergill, she was very annoyed.'

Screw Polly Mishra, Jezmeen thought. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and sprang up with more enthusiasm than intended. Her head swam to cope with the sudden rush of blood and the room went dark momentarily. Gripping the bedside table, Jezmeen was taken back to the days of her hypochondria phase. Every minor glitch in her system had been a potential symptom of impending death. Could she be blamed? Dad's death had been so careless and simple – he had slipped in the shower and hit his head, then carried on with his day. If he had gone to the doctor, a scan would have revealed the dangerous blood clot that resulted from the impact and killed him on his walk to his car after work several days later. Needless to say, Jezmeen was very careful when walking on slippery surfaces. But there was only so much she could do about inheriting weak, sickly genes from Mum. After Mum's cancer diagnosis, Jezmeen had made multiple mammogram appointments, which she was then forced to cancel because she was informed that she was abusing the National Health System.

After her shower, Jezmeen got dressed and went down to the lobby. Shirina and Rajni weren't

there yet, so Jezmeen stepped out for a moment into the haze of Delhi. The air was dense with noise and movement and the summer heat bored into her skin immediately. Horns blared incessantly here and the air was thick with dust. But this was also a city where disappearing was possible – a thrilling possibility. In a frank evaluation of her career prospects after her contract wasn't renewed, Jezmeen had considered packing up and moving to India because she had a chance of anonymity here, or at least starting over. But what did starting over mean? She had spent years flitting from one audition to another, landing only minor parts in commercials and extra roles in *EastEnders*. Her small chance at national visibility had arrived only nine months ago and then she had blown it over one moment of foolishness; there could be another decade of proving herself all over again.

The dizzying maze of shops, traffic and tea stands that made up Karol Bagh market was just around the corner. The King's Paradise Hotel was tucked away at the end of a service alley. Next door, a row of crumbling shop houses sat obscured behind tangled telephone wires and crisscrossed bamboo scaffolding. A stray dog with jutting ribs crouched under a parked van to seek shade. One of the alley walls was adorned with fading pictures of Hindu goddesses, under a sign saying, '*Do not disrespect.*' Jezmeen wondered if images of these deities really did anything to deter men from pissing on the walls, as they were intended. Judging from the acrid whiff of urine in the air, probably not.

A valet with gel-slicked hair approached her and asked if she needed a taxi. 'In a moment,' Jezmeen said, looking over her shoulder. Rajni was coming out of the lift, wearing beige linen pants and a flowy silk blouse which matched the scarf wrapped loosely around her neck for covering her head later.

'Where is Shirina?' Jezmeen asked. She self-consciously smoothed out the wrinkles in her own cotton kameez top. How did Rajni have the patience to press and iron everything, even on holiday?

'She was still asleep when I called her room,' Rajni said.

'Must be the jet lag again,' Jezmeen said.

The punishing heat burned through Jezmeen's clothes. They returned to the lobby and sank into the plush sofas. The air bore the potent smell of disinfectant. At the reception desk, a woman wearing

a red blazer held the phone to her ear. ‘This is your wake-up call, sir,’ she said and then she nodded and replaced the receiver.

‘Did you sleep well?’ Rajni asked.

‘A few hours,’ Jezmeen said. ‘You?’

‘I never sleep well in hotels.’

The television screen mounted on the wall flashed brightly. It was the morning news but the presenter only took up a small square on the screen. Banner ads rolled across the length of the screen and neon columns showed the latest stock market figures. It was like watching a casino machine.

‘I was watching one of those sing-along shows on TV last night,’ Jezmeen said. ‘Mum loved those.’

‘Mum and Dad used to watch them together,’ Rajni said. ‘Dad would hum along and Mum would shush him for ruining the song.’

Jezmeen smiled. ‘I think I remember that.’ It was hard to know which early memories were hers and which were constructed by Rajni’s recollections but she thought she could hear Dad’s off-key humming. She was only five years old when he died, and sometimes she envied Rajni for having known Dad for so many more years. Jezmeen longed to say things like, ‘I got my laugh from my father,’ or ‘My father used to say that.’ A sense of legacy would help her feel less lost, especially now that Mum was gone too.

‘I do the same thing now when those shows come on,’ Rajni said.

‘You hum along?’

‘I shush Kabir.’

No surprise there. ‘And does Anil watch as well?’

‘He did when he was little. Now he pops in his earphones and just watches whatever he wants on the iPad.’

That sounded like Anil – hypnotized by a world beyond his parents’ living room. Since he hit adolescence, Jezmeen had only seen about three emotions register on her nephew’s face: sullen, bored

and enthralled (but only by whatever was on his phone). His intrigue factor had spiked only briefly over the weekend when she spotted him skulking around the perfume counter at the mall. Excited that he might have a girlfriend (and at the prospect of torturing Rajni with the info), Jezmeen had waited for him to leave before sidling up to the counter girl to get the scoop. 'He wanted something mature,' she sighed, throwing a sorrowful look at the Sugar N Spice line for teen girls. Jezmeen was disappointed too. All of that anticipation and Anil turned out to be buying a gift for his mother, whose birthday was next month.

'Should we call Shirina again or something?' Jezmeen asked. 'She might have gone back to sleep.'

'Give her ten minutes,' Rajni said. She glanced towards the hotel lifts. 'Do you think it's weird that she didn't tell us about visiting Sehaj's family till yesterday?'

Jezmeen shrugged. 'Maybe she got the dates confused. It sounds like she's been really busy.'

Rajni frowned. She didn't look satisfied with this response, and truthfully, neither was Jezmeen, but it seemed that Shirina had become another casualty to marriage, like so many other women Jezmeen knew. Appointments were never set in stone and they often brought their partners along to dinner at the last minute.

'Is it just me, or does she look . . . different?' Rajni asked.

'She's gained weight, hasn't she?' Jezmeen said. She wanted to sound concerned but she could hear the glee in her voice. *Shame on you,* a voice scolded Jezmeen.

'I was thinking more about those dark circles under her eyes. She looks worn out.' There was pleasure in Rajni's tone as well. Jezmeen decided it couldn't be helped. All their lives, Shirina never had a blemish – on her face or her character. If they had to be petty to find one – or two! – so be it.

'I feel bad,' Jezmeen said anyway. 'Maybe something's going on.' That would certainly be interesting. After a lifetime of meeting parental expectations, Shirina was long overdue for a crisis. Develop a pill addiction. Join a cult. Something. It would certainly take the pressure off Jezmeen to be the default family screw-up.

‘I gained a bit of weight in the year after I got married as well,’ Rajni said. ‘If anything, it’s good to see some meat on her bones again. She was so skinny for her wedding. Near the end, she was on a steady diet of leaves and broth.’

Rajni had a point. Shirina had been a little obsessed with her figure. ‘I remember going over to Mum’s to help decorate the house for the wedding a couple of days before Sehaj’s relatives arrived. She’d bought all those fairy lights, which took ages to put up and we lost track of time and ordered pizza. Shirina ate one slice and then went to the gym for two hours,’ Jezmeen recalled. She had admired and secretly envied Shirina’s discipline. At an audition the next day, Jezmeen had to suck in her tummy to prevent the casting director from seeing the paunch created by her six slices. She didn’t get the role.

‘She’d tell us if she was pregnant, wouldn’t she?’ Rajni asked.

‘Shirina’s quite private about her life these days,’ Jezmeen reminded Rajni. Shirina hadn’t told them anything about searching for an arranged marriage online. She never even mentioned her courtship with Sehaj – all six months of it – until he came to London to meet her in person and proposed on their second date. Everything happened quickly from that point and nobody objected because Sehaj was such a catch – good-looking, wealthy, and from a respected family. Then she said yes, and moved all the way to Australia. If that wasn’t an effort to keep her distance from her family, Jezmeen didn’t know what was.

‘That’s not something she’d keep from us though,’ Rajni said.

‘Probably not, but I don’t think we’re necessarily the first to know about things with Shirina.’ *Were we ever?* Jezmeen wondered. For as long as she could remember, Shirina had preferred to keep her thoughts and emotions closely guarded. Next to her, Jezmeen always felt like she was exaggerating whenever she expressed her (admittedly wide and varied range of) emotions.

‘I wish it weren’t like that,’ Rajni replied.

Jezmeen shrugged. ‘It’s her choice,’ she said, although she had been hurt when Shirina announced her engagement. Why didn’t she even tell Jezmeen she was seeing someone?

‘It’s a shame if we can’t communicate. I’d like to think we can talk about things with each other.’

Jezmeen noticed that Rajni had turned to face her and was giving her a Meaningful Look. *Oh, don’t you dare,* she thought. They were not going to talk about Mum in the same space as speculating over Shirina’s weight gain. In fact, Jezmeen was determined to not discuss Mum’s final moments with anyone, least of all Rajni.

‘The weight gain is probably just a post-wedding thing,’ Jezmeen said. She made a deliberate shift towards the television screen and stared intently at it. The flashing graphics gave her an instant headache but at least Rajni couldn’t try to engage her in any more conversation. The newscaster wore a grim expression, which belied the brilliant hues of her sari and the ticker speeding across the screen announcing the engagement of two Bollywood stars.

When Shirina finally joined them in the lobby at 8.30 a.m., Jezmeen noticed the dark circles under her eyes were gone. Her lips shone with pink gloss and a touch of rouge, which brightened up her face. She was the only one of them wearing a traditional salwar-kameez, with her long hair also pulled back in a bun. The weight gain was still there though, a roundness in her cheeks that actually made her look – Jezmeen felt a twinge of jealousy – a little bit prettier.

It was a short distance from the hotel to the Gurdwara Bangla Sahib but the roads were already clogged with traffic by the time they left the hotel. The taxi could only inch along the wide boulevard under the Karol Bagh Metro bridge. The driver’s window was rolled down, letting in the sound of every puttering engine and trilling horn. People dodged around vehicles, taking their chances every time there was a pause in traffic. Heat shimmered atop the silver surfaces of street vendors’ carts as the taxi inched along the busy road. Shirina’s mouth watered when she caught a whiff of pakoras being deep-fried in bubbling oil.

On the taxi’s dashboard, a multicoloured row of miniature plastic deities created a shrine to Hinduism. It looked like the dashboard of that taxi Shirina had taken home from after-work drinks in

Melbourne one night, except it was populated with icons and symbols from all religions, plus one Pokémon bobblehead. Too much wine on an empty stomach had made Shirina chatty that night.

'Do these guys join forces to protect you?' she'd asked the driver.

'Yes,' he said with a laugh. 'More religions, more power.'

'What's your actual religion then?'

'I'm Muslim,' he said. 'From Somalia. You?'

'Sikh,' Shirina replied. 'From Britain by way of India.' She spotted a small card bearing Guru Nanak's picture between a miniature Buddha and a little Arabic scroll on the dashboard and pointed him out. 'He's one of mine,' she said. 'My mum always said just think of God as your father but that's wrong, I think.' The words just kept tumbling out of her mouth. 'My father died when I was just two.'

The outburst was met with silence. 'Sorry,' she mumbled.

The driver waited until he reached a traffic light before turning around, his warm, kind eyes meeting Shirina's. 'It's okay,' he said. 'In my car, you have countless blessings.'

Now Shirina focused her attention on the sprawl of Delhi. Shops were stacked like uneven bricks with shouting block-lettered signs: ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTITUTE; ALIYAH'S BEAUTY SCHOOL; ICCS TECH SOLUTIONS. Simpler services took place under the Karol Bagh Metro bridge – a barber arranged his tools on a low wooden stool and beckoned his first customer from a small crowd of men; a pair of toddlers, naked from the waist down, their limbs coated in soot, helped their mother sort through a pile of plastic bottles.

The road ahead narrowed and widened inexplicably, its borders determined by the debris that spilled out onto the edges – benches from chai stalls, a rusty abandoned wheelbarrow overflowing with rubbish. Rising behind them was a skyline of anaemic pink and beige buildings. The potholed surfaces of the road made Shirina jostle with her sisters in the back seat. A few times, she caught the driver looking at their reflections in the rear-view mirror and she realized his eyes were tracking the movements of their jiggling breasts.

‘Not obvious at all, mate,’ Jezmeen muttered but she shifted to occupy more space in the mirror.

‘You know what you’re supposed to say to put them in their place, right?’ Rajni said to Shirina. ‘“Don’t you have a sister? Don’t you have a mother?”’ Hearing these English words, the driver focused back on the road. ‘See? It works.’

‘So it’s our job to summon a woman the men own in some way?’ Jezmeen retorted.

This thought occurred to Shirina too but she suppressed it, knowing that this type of argument belonged in a different place. It was the sort of thing her friend Lauren from work would say. The driver’s eyes locked with Shirina’s. She adjusted her dupatta so it concealed her chest. Any easy solution. Nothing needed to be said.

Worshippers and tourists were already milling about outside the gurdwara when they pulled up. ‘Water, water, cold cold water,’ called a man pushing a cart full of plastic bottles ahead of him. Taut muscles bulged through the sheen of sweat on his skinny calves. A marbled walkway led the sisters away from the tangle of cars and people on the street and towards the temple. It was tiered and white like a wedding cake, finished with golden caramel on the domes. Nearby, the water of the sarovar rippled gently, catching flecks of sunlight.

First they had to deposit their shoes at a counter, which they swapped for metal tags. Then they returned to the gurdwara’s entrance and stepped in a shallow trough to clean their feet. They climbed the carpeted stairs and shuffled along with the crowd into the prayer hall. Ceiling fans and chandeliers dangled from the hall’s roof and the floor was covered in soft red carpet. At the centre was an elaborate golden trellis, its patterns delicate like embroidery. Three men sat cross-legged there, thumping on tablas and singing holy hymns. The *Guru Granth Sahib* lay open on a gilded platform, its pages framed by a thick garland of marigolds. Shirina found a small space to bow, touch her head to the floor and then slip her small tithing into the bank.

Pushing herself to her feet again, Shirina felt the discomfort of her padded body. This weight gain gave her an imbalance she was unused to. She stumbled slightly, and recovered. She sneaked a look at Jezmeen and Rajni to see if they had noticed, but they were pressing their own foreheads to

the floor and making their donations. Hopefully she was concealing it well enough but if anybody asked, she'd say, 'Just a bit of winter weight. I need to cut back.' She'd laugh and look embarrassed so they'd know she was trying and hopefully, they would know to drop the subject. The other day, she had made the mistake of opening her wedding album again and afterwards, she was unable to look at herself in the mirror, saddened by her fuller cheeks and her collarbone fading behind a new layer of skin.

Shirina had wanted to dive into those photographs and make her wedding day come to life again. As soon as she and Rajni and Jezmeen found a place to sit, she closed her eyes and little snapshots of the ceremony rushed into her consciousness. Her hennaed feet poking out from under a full lengha skirt that floated as she stepped closer to the altar; the walk around the Holy Book with Sehaj as their guests looked on approvingly. Peering out from under her heavily jewelled dupatta, she had been so pleased to see the abundance of her husband's guests – cousins, uncles, nephews, aunties, two sets of grandparents. They had flown a long way to see the firstborn son of the family get married, and when she presented herself in those glorious bridal adornments, she felt as if she had earned her place. She couldn't help comparing them to her own threadbare family – a smattering of distant relatives, her widowed mother, two sisters, always bickering, never just *listening* to one another. 'Do your family members get along with each other?' she'd asked Sehaj after they met on the Sikh matrimonial website and arranged a phone call. 'We rarely argue,' he'd replied. 'What's that like?' she'd asked. He thought she was joking. He told her that he had always had a good relationship with his mother. 'After my father died when I was sixteen, my mother and I became even closer,' he said.

That was when Shirina decided she wanted to keep getting to know Sehaj. She reminded herself not to get her hopes up; there were countless stories on the arranged marriage message boards about men being nothing like the pictures and personas they presented online. During the next conversation, she asked if they could do a video call, and she was both relieved and thrilled to see that Sehaj's handsome profile photo had not been altered or taken ten years ago during a fitter phase – there was not so much as a receding hairline to distinguish the live person on her screen from the one in the

picture on her Successful Matches list on the matrimonial site. Not wanting to seem desperate though, Shirina waited for Sehaj to initiate the first in-person meeting. After a few months of chatting on the phone, he finally said he wanted to come to London to see her. Again, Shirina was relieved to see that Sehaj was real, and just as much a gentleman as he was on the phone. He opened doors for her, kissed her lightly on the cheek at the end of their first date, and told her he was looking forward to seeing her again.

At one point, Shirina was bold enough to ask how Sehaj was still single. He was certainly the most eligible bachelor on the matrimonial site, and his membership had been active for a year before Shirina came along. 'There were other girls,' Sehaj shrugged. 'But they balked at the idea of living with my mother. I can't compromise on that though. She's family, and that's what I'm here for – if I don't look after her, who will?' Shirina thought it was sweet. She only met her mother-in-law for the first time at the wedding ceremony. Mother had pressed her palms to Shirina's cheeks so lovingly, and said, 'You are our daughter now.'

Shirina opened her eyes. The hall was filled with people she didn't know and her disappointment at being thrown back into the present was profound. She looked at her hands and noticed the flesh of her ring finger bulging around her gold wedding band. It was heat that made her fingers swell but she wiggled the ring, struggling at the knot of her knuckle. It was a relief that it came loose eventually, but she quickly pushed it back on. The men at the altar thumped the heels of their hands rapidly against the tight skins of their tablas. Each beat had an echo that bounced across the walls.

The memory that had surfaced in the cab was niggling at Shirina, filling the spaces between musical notes. She wished she knew how to pray but it was too late to learn now – it was like getting in touch with a neglected friend just to request a favour. And what could she pray for? That night had been her fault – for drinking so much, for stumbling up the driveway, for making the driver so concerned that he threw on his brakes and followed her. 'You're okay, one step at a time,' he said, just a pace behind her, his hands hovering at her waist, braced for a fall but not actually touching her.

She had struggled to find her keys so he reached into her bag to help her. She remembered leaning towards him, just to rest her head on his chest for a moment because she could fall asleep right there. The bag was squished between them. 'Hey,' the driver said with a nervous laugh. 'Wake up.' Then the door opened anyway.

'Shirina,' Jezmeen whispered. 'Are those guys looking at us?' Shirina followed her gaze and saw a group of young men sitting cross-legged and staring at them, their lips twitching into smiles. 'They are, aren't they?'

'They're looking at you,' Shirina said, which was true but it was also what Jezmeen wanted to hear. Shirina adjusted her dupatta again, this time so it obscured her profile.

'Do you think people here would mistake me for Polly Mishra?' Jezmeen wondered aloud. 'Or does that happen more in the UK because there are so few Indian women on television?'

'You do look alike,' Shirina said.

'That's the problem,' Jezmeen said with a sigh. 'There can only be one actress with our looks. She's had better luck than me, getting such a great break with *The Boathouse*.'

Sure, luck had some small role to play in Polly's success but Shirina had watched several episodes of *The Boathouse* and thought Polly was brilliant in it. She knew better than to say this to Jezmeen, who was sensitive about the whole rivalry. She had once read a celebrity blog site referring to Jezmeen as 'the poor man's Polly Mishra'.

Jezmeen was considering something now. 'Do you think, if I went up to those guys now and pretended to be Polly, they'd know the difference?'

'Jezmeen, this isn't the place to be impersonating actresses,' Rajni said.

'What *is* a place to be impersonating actresses, Rajni? I'm curious.'

'People come here to worship,' Rajni reminded her.

'Does it matter?' Jezmeen asked.

'Of course it matters.'

'We're not exactly sitting here praying. I've spent the past ten minutes mentally revising my

Christmas party invitation list.'

'It's July,' Rajni said accusingly.

The guy in the middle said something to his friend and grinned. He took out his phone and pointed it at Jezmeen. The flash went off. 'Now that's just rude,' Jezmeen said. She sprang to her feet and marched across the prayer hall. 'Oh my god,' Shirina said. She glanced at the bearded granthi serenely reading from the Holy Book, his cadence as hypnotic as a gentle tide. Now would be a good time to take up prayer.

Rajni went after Jezmeen, muttering something about inappropriate behaviour in the temple. One of the table players looked up and met eyes with Shirina. She gave him an apologetic smile. He shut his eyes, tipped his face towards the ceiling, and let out a string of melodic drumbeats. She got up and followed her sisters.

'Hello there,' Jezmeen said when they approached the men. She smiled sweetly. 'I noticed you took a picture of me and I thought you might like a close-up.'

The men exchanged looks and two of them were suddenly sheepish. Shirina noticed that they were younger than she'd thought – just boys. One had the patchy beginnings of a beard on his bony chin and the other was wearing a *Star Wars* T-shirt.

'So?' Jezmeen pressed. She placed one hand on her hip. 'Let's not be shy now.'

People were beginning to stare. Shirina tugged her sister's sleeve. 'Jezmeen, this is embarrassing.'

'Jezmeen Shergill,' one boy said. He was the one wearing the *Star Wars* shirt. 'So it is you.'

His British accent took Shirina by surprise. Jezmeen said nothing. The boy kept watching her, a slow grin spreading on his face. His friends were hiding their smiles behind their hands. The tabla thumped like a heartbeat.

'Yes, that's me,' Jezmeen said. 'Just because I'm on television, it doesn't give you the right—
,

'I'm a huge fan,' the boy continued.

Shirina caught the boy with the patchy facial hair discreetly pulling his phone from his pocket. When he noticed her looking, he dropped his hands.

'Really?' Jezmeen asked.

The smirk on *Star Wars* boy's face made Shirina nervous.

'Can we get a photo with you?' he asked.

Rajni poked her head between them. 'She's not Polly Mishra.'

'They know, Rajni,' Jezmeen said. 'He said my name. Are you boys fans of the show? Here, let's take a quick selfie together, and—'

The boys began to snicker and nudge each other again. 'Do it,' *Star Wars* boy whispered to the boy with patchy facial hair.

The boy let out a theatrical sigh. 'Oh, Jezmeen Shergill,' he said, 'I was *dying* to meet you.' And then he stuck out his tongue, crossed his eyes and flapped his hands. The other boys collapsed into laughter.

What the hell was he doing? Shirina stared at the boys, forgetting for a moment where they were and how much disruption they were creating. The boys scrambled to their feet and out of the hall. Jezmeen's face was ashen.

'You alright?' Shirina asked, still puzzled. She reached out but Jezmeen's shoulder flinched at her touch. Jezmeen turned away, pulling her phone from her bag and tapping away rapidly.

'I wonder where their parents are,' Rajni remarked, looking over her shoulder at the boys. 'I'd like to have a word with them.'

'Just drop it,' Jezmeen said, not looking up from her phone.

'They're obviously here on holidays with family – you'd think their parents brought them here to get some spiritual enlightenment, not sit around—'

'I said, "drop it",' Jezmeen said. Her eyes were blazing. 'Oh my god,' she whispered. '57,000.'

It meant nothing to Shirina. She looked at Rajni, who looked just as perplexed.

They stood for a while in tense silence. A pair of women walked past, looking at them curiously.

Shirina was conscious of the scene they were probably presenting to passers-by – three sisters at an impasse in a terrible family argument.

'Why don't we just start our work at the langar hall?' Shirina suggested brightly, eager to dismantle this tableau.

'I'll join you both in a few minutes,' Jezmeen said. Shirina and Rajni watched as she turned around and pushed her way out through the stream of people entering the prayer hall.

'Should one of us follow her?' Shirina asked.

Rajni shook her head and sighed. 'It's Jezmeen,' she said. A sufficient explanation for Shirina. Jezmeen existed in her own sphere, and trying to understand her crises was like walking late into a house party where all the other guests had already become friends. Over the past few years, Shirina's sense of solitude had grown more profound as Jezmeen chased auditions and pined to be noticed. Sometimes she forgot that they used to talk to each other more, because every conversation that Shirina could recall having with Jezmeen in adulthood was about Jezmeen: what she was doing, where she was going, what she wanted. Jezmeen never really thought about the consequences of her actions for other people. They were a long way now from when they'd been little girls, staying up so late into the night playing and chatting that Mum more or less gave up on setting a proper bedtime. When was the last time Shirina went breathless from giggling with Jezmeen? *You two, knock it off and go to bed now,* Rajni would call from downstairs, so much sterner and scarier than Mum. They would pretend to oblige, reducing their voices to whispers, which inevitably became louder until Rajni marched up the stairs to tell them off again.

This wasn't a good start to their journey. Mum believed that whatever happened in the morning set the tone for the rest of the day – all of her rituals were completed by the time the sun rose. If Mum were here, she wouldn't be happy. The morning wasn't even over and they were already down to two.

The langar hall throbbed with the same noise and energy of a Delhi street, but the scene was surprisingly organized. People sat on the floor in rows and ate with their hands from metal trays. Servers roamed up and down the lines, refilling plates with rotis and ladlefuls of dal. 'Of course you

already know that in the Sikh religion, we believe in serving food to anybody who comes to the temple, regardless of their creed, gender or income,' Mum had written in her letter, after explaining the significance of this temple. 'They don't have to worship here. They don't have to offer any services, or money. This is a very good system, and one that helped our family after your father died.'

Shirina was aware of the temple's welfare from the meals that Mum used to bring home from the morning service, usually at times when the cupboards were bare. 'We're still okay,' Mum would say, looking at a full plate before her. Her tone was never convincing enough. Shirina would look at the plate and see the thinness of the roti, the watery dal, and sense that there was only so much charity they could ask for.

Shirina and Rajni entered a wide back kitchen, which bustled with activity. Along one wall, enormous steel pots were being stirred slowly by young turbaned men with ladles the size and shape of oars. In the corner, a cluster of older women kneaded balls of dough. The serving line was being set up and there were young children pushing for a chance to put out the plates.

Rajni wandered off to the vegetable counter and, with a few quick nods and smiles with the other women there, she was handed a knife, a chopping board and a tubful of carrots. Shirina considered her options more carefully. There was a counter dedicated to roti-making but those women were experts – just look at how they were flattening the dough into such perfect circles with the flick of their wrists. They were deep in conversation as well; Shirina would be intruding. She almost turned a full circle considering her options before she felt somebody gripping her by the shoulders. She turned around to see a small elderly woman standing before her.

'Looking for something to do? Can you take my place kneading dough for a while? Young thing like you would do a faster job than these.' The woman held up her hands and showed Shirina her curled arthritic fingers. Shirina felt a pang of sadness, remembering the way Mum clutched the edges of her letter, her voice shaking slightly as she read it to them. Grief came to her like a series of aftershocks – every time she thought she had moved on, something new reminded her of Mum.

Shirina thought some introductions might be needed but as soon as they saw her approaching,

the women shifted and a space opened up for her. She drove the heel of her palm into the dough and then ran her knuckles over it and repeated this motion until the dough was soft and smooth. Then she started a fresh batch, combining the water and flour in a steel bowl. The fingers on one hand became sticky, so she switched to the other. Around her, pots crashed and voices shot into the air. The other women's chatter blended with the commotion around them. It was enough distraction, she thought at first, but as her motions quickly settled into a routine, the spaces between the noises began to open wide.

It had been quiet like this the moment Shirina's mother-in-law opened the door to find her resting her head against the taxi driver's chest. Mother had stood stiffly in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest as the driver apologetically explained that he was just making sure she got home safely. 'Thank you,' she said to the driver, before pulling Shirina into the house and shutting the door. 'Get upstairs,' she ordered.

The morning after, her skull still throbbing from the wine, she had joined Sehaj and his mother at the breakfast table. Sehaj gave her a terse smile and Mother didn't even look at her. Shirina sat still, unsure of what to do. In her family, disagreements were shouted out until voices went hoarse. Here, nobody said anything. So this was what Sehaj meant when he said that his family rarely fought. Shirina opened her mouth to say how sorry she was but nothing came out. She realized how scared she was of doing the wrong thing again. When Mother did finally speak, it was to announce that she was going back to bed. The silent treatment lasted all weekend until Mother announced she had a doctor's appointment the following Friday afternoon. 'You will drive me there,' she said, and Shirina was so grateful that Mother was speaking to her again, that she cancelled a meeting and took half a day off work. She wanted to make sure she was on time to pick Mother up and bring her home as well.

In the folded printout from a website about Sikhism that Rajni had read last night, there was a quote about the simplicity of service leading to meditative thoughts. She was supposed to feel a sense of

oneness with others and herself, so that her mind was free to focus on the present.

The work was certainly simple. Rajni chopped carrots into a pile until it threatened to topple over the edges of the board. Then she swept it into a big bowl and carried it to the station where a vegetarian curry was bubbling in a pot the size of a small bathtub.

She'd repeated this process a dozen times but the pinch in her shoulder interrupted any meditative thoughts. Then there was the pulsing pain just behind her eyes, now a constant presence. She had been unable to sleep last night from a combination of jet leg and flashes of acute anxiety about becoming a grandmother at forty-three. She cast a look at the gathering of older women kneading dough next to Shirina. *They* were grandmothers – dupattas tucked behind ears, backs stooped towards their work. She straightened her own posture and checked the time. Kabir would be fast asleep on his stomach with one leg thrown over the empty side of the bed.

The steam from the row of pots made beads of sweat prickle on Rajni's forehead. How many hours of service did one need to contribute in order to feel closer to God? It had only been about an hour and she already needed a break. She nodded to the women she was working with and as she moved towards the door she glanced over her shoulder at Shirina, quietly kneading dough, and Jezmeen, who had eventually returned and was elbow-deep in soap suds at the industrial sink.

Stepping out of the kitchen, Rajni expected to feel an instant release, but the langar hall was packed now. She pushed through the crowds, carefully tiptoeing past cups of tea that lined a narrow serving aisle. The fresh air and the sight of an unbroken blue sky above, when she finally descended the stairs, was gratifying. The grounds outside were a welcoming open space, with patterned tiled floors and strips of maroon carpet creating paths for worshippers between the low-domed buildings. Rajni walked up to the sarovar, a large pool at the temple's entrance. The water rippled from the movements of bathing worshippers, breaking Rajni's reflection. She pulled her short hair back and even through the movement of the water, she could see how much she looked like Mum these days – the sharp chin and dark eyebrows. Even when she smiled, she appeared stern and disapproving, or so her students said.

At the edge of the pool, a woman lowered her feet into the water, a small wave sweeping up to darken the border of her salwar. An elderly man wearing only a dhoti around his waist stood in the centre of the pool, bending his knees to reach down and scoop the water in his hands and pour it over his head. As it cascaded down his neck and shoulders, he tipped his head up to the sky and smiled beatifically. Plump orange fish cut their paths through the water, their tails flickering like faulty bulbs. With unexpected grace, the man folded at his hips to gather more water. Then he brought his cupped hands to his lips and drank.

Rajni flinched. She didn't mean to, it was an involuntary response to the man ingesting water that others were bathing in. Pissing in as well – surely the peaceful grin spreading on that child's face was not from a spiritual release?

The bathing was unnecessary, although Mum had told and re-told Rajni the story of her name and its roots in holy waters many times. Bibi Rajni, a woman married off to a leper, had remained devoted to her husband, carting him around in a wheelbarrow. One afternoon, he went to take a bath in the sarovar outside the Golden Temple in Amritsar and miraculously, his leprosy was cured. 'Remember your namesake,' was Mum's favourite character-building advice. The result was a childhood spent making tenuous allegorical connections (maybe being Asian was like having a terrible disease and she had to wash in the local pool so the girls on the bus didn't declare her street Paki Zone?).

Rajni and her sisters were expected to bathe in holy water once they got to the Golden Temple. It was one of those pilgrimage duties that Mum had stipulated, preceding a quote about bathing in God's immortal nectar that did not further clarify the difference between nectar and water, nor the figurative nature of this instruction. The power of metaphor was largely lost on Mum anyway. She had wanted physical proof of the presence of God when her symptoms first appeared, as if she could already sense the dire diagnosis. Wanting to help, Rajni had printed glossy pictures of all ten Gurus and pasted them around the house, which became a shrine of its own. Kirtan songs floated through the hallways, choral and sorrowful. Incense and birdseed and fruit platter offerings became

commonplace. It was all too reminiscent of the days after Dad died, when superstitions and rituals became Mum's insurance policy against further misfortune.

In the hospital as well, everything was done in the spirit of making Mum more comfortable when they knew that a painful end was upon her. *Do whatever she wants* had been Rajni's mantra since returning from her last trip to India, and now it was even more pertinent because denying Mum any hope was akin to torture. Rajni even began feeling guilty for resisting Mum years back, when she tried to prescribe religious rituals and herbal remedies for her fertility problems. 'I'm telling you, it worked for me. After eleven years of thinking I couldn't have any more children, out came Jezmeen and then Shirina three years after her,' Mum insisted. Unable to deter Mum, Rajni finally resorted to the humiliating revelation that she and Kabir had stopped trying – stopped having sex altogether, in fact. The last thing Mum said on the matter was: 'Well, at least you've got a son. At least you don't have to worry like I did, with three daughters.'

At least that.

Rajni looked down at the water and took a small step towards it. Her feet were still bare and as they made contact with the small puddles that other pilgrims had left on their way out, she felt some relief. The water was cool and it protected her soles from the sunbaked tiles. She took another step, and then another. Now her toes were touching the murky water. The ghostly bodies of fish curved and shot off. The man who had drunk the water was now taking slow strides across the length of the pool, his knees lifting high like a soldier. Rajni remained on the edges for a long time, the heat prompting her to inch closer and closer until her entire feet were submerged. She closed her eyes. Spots of light darted across the darkness and then eventually, they faded. The din of traffic – those angry, insistent horns – could be heard in the distance. A child's high-pitched squeal rang out, shattering Rajni's inner calm before she even began to summon it. She sighed and opened her eyes.

She didn't want to be here. Especially not now, with everything happening at home, but not ever. India did not suit her and not least because of the memories it evoked – physically, her body rebelled against the country: an itch from the soot-filled air was beginning in her throat, the bumpy

car rides made her stomach turn and a bout of indigestion was inevitable, no matter how staunchly she abstained from potentially contaminated food. Jezmeen and Shirina didn't understand Rajni's aversion to India because by the time they came of age, a wave of multicultural pride was sweeping over England and all of a sudden, it was trendy to have an ethnic background. While Rajni had waited by the radio with her finger poised over the deck to record her favourite *Top of the Pops* song, Jezmeen's speakers played Hindi song remixes. At sixteen, Rajni had spent Saturday afternoons dancing frantically at those nightclubs which opened in the daytime for Asian kids whose parents wouldn't let them out at night, while Shirina's twenty-fifth year saw her gladly uploading her picture onto a Sikh matrimonial website. Rajni had done her best to pave the way for her little sisters to be more English, and instead they went ahead and embraced their culture, proving Mum's point that Rajni had no business having an identity crisis in the first place.

There were other reasons behind Rajni's complicated history with this country, reasons she could not explain to Jezmeen and Shirina. When they were planning this trip, Jezmeen had wondered aloud at why they never visited India when they were growing up. 'Mum couldn't afford it,' Rajni reminded her. 'Single mother with three kids? There was no way she could make that trip.' The steep price of a holiday had always been a convenient excuse, and it stopped her sisters from asking any other questions. *I can never go back there,* Mum had cried one afternoon when Rajni was sixteen, and despite knowing better, she couldn't help feeling that this was her fault. She still felt responsible for Mum's banishment from her family.

In the rippled water, Rajni's reflection was distorted. Her chin multiplied and overlapped, and her cheeks sagged. She withdrew her feet from the water. The sight of her pruned toes filled her with sorrow as she remembered Mum's bare feet poking out from under her blanket at the hospital. Her slow and laboured breaths were painful to listen to. 'Why isn't she wearing any socks?' Rajni had demanded of the nurses, who scurried around the foot of the bed, eventually finding Mum's socks. Rajni dismissed them from the room and she rolled the socks onto Mum's feet herself. Her skin was ice cold to the touch, and Rajni had massaged her feet gently, hoping to ease those hard, heaving

breaths. She had pressed her hands into Mum’s bony heels and high arches until her own shoulders ached. She had waited for something divine to come from all this effort, all this wishing, and it didn’t.

Chapter Four

Purity of heart, soul and mind are all important for achieving spiritual healing. You should not be intoxicated at any point during this journey. Please try to refrain from drinking alcohol while in India. Please also dress modestly and be respectful to the culture. I happen to know of a very good tailor in Karol Bagh market – Madhuri Fashions – if you want something stylish but also suitable for this journey.

That part of Mum's letter was definitely aimed at Jezmeen. She noted the word 'try' and congratulated herself for not drinking until she was back in her hotel room after their morning of service in the temple. Jezmeen opened the fridge door and surveyed the mini-bar. This tiny bottle of Grey Goose fit in her palm, so she was only sinning a little bit. She twisted off the cap, opened her mouth and tipped the contents down her gullet. The current crisis definitely warranted morning boozing.

Don't Google yourself. The voice in her head was Cameron's – he had just sent her an email, urgently asking her to call him. 'Too late,' she had replied after the incident with the teenage boys earlier. 'I already saw it.' She was screwed. The video had gone viral, and she had been identified. The internet was screaming with laughter over the irony of Jezmeen Shergill – the host of a television show which poked fun at people being caught doing embarrassing things on video – being caught doing something so embarrassing on video.

Cameron had warned Jezmeen that things would happen rapidly, but she could not have anticipated this. In the few hours since it had caught fire, there were mentions of her name on blogs, trolling comments, a particularly nasty thread on the National Geographic nature preservation forum and of course, there was the video. The first thing that came up when you searched for her name used to be TELEVISION HOST (to distinguish her from a paediatric dentist named Jezmeen Shergill in Birmingham). Now it was: TELEVISION HOST JEZMEEN SHERGILL BRUTALLY MURDERS ENDANGERED ANIMAL.

Needless to say, Jezmeen had compulsively typed her name into Google every few minutes today, while she was supposed to be doing seva. She was aware of Rajni watching and disapproving as she tapped away on her phone. Now she sat in the hotel, watching her notoriety multiply in the search result count. Another email from Cameron popped up: SERIOUSLY. DON'T GOOGLE YOURSELF. Easy for him to warn her against it; she'd searched for his name once and found only three hits. One, his earnest and suited LinkedIn picture from at least a decade ago (he had hair then), gave the impression that his early career was in real estate or insurance brokering.

'Oh God,' Jezmeen uttered aloud into the empty room. Her Wikipedia page – previously only consisting of a short paragraph outlining her modest career achievements – had been updated. The most objective account of Jezmeen's incident was headed 'Arowana Fish Controversy'.

On February 19th, 2017, Shergill was dining in Feng Shui restaurant in South London when she became involved in an altercation with her dining partner.

Feng Shui, which boasts a ten-foot aquarium, hosts its own rare Albino Arowana fish (valued at £35,000). The fish is known to be very sensitive to conflict and is prone to hurting itself when it is provoked or aggravated. The argument between Shergill and her partner took place near the aquarium, despite numerous attempts from the restaurant owners to ask them to respect the fish and move the argument outside. Onlookers reported that after the restaurant owner tried to steer Shergill away from the aquarium, she slammed her hand against the glass, causing the fish great distress. It leaped out of the water and onto the floor, where Shergill kicked it repeatedly.

This was the most objective version of events? It was lacking in some key details. For starters, the 'dining partner' had been Jezmeen's boyfriend, Mark. Jezmeen had mistakenly thought that reservations at Feng Shui meant a proposal. She hadn't allowed herself to consider the possibility that he might be breaking up with her. 'You just don't seem very happy with yourself,' he'd said.

‘But my mum just died. I’m dealing with a lot,’ Jezmeen protested. It was an understatement, because Jezmeen couldn’t put in words how she felt about Mum’s death. The thought of death in general had always made Jezmeen desperately want to rewind time, even when she was little. After Dad died, she found it comforting to pretend Dad was just in hiding for a while, until Mum told her to knock it off. Mum’s death was still unreal to her. She was too old for fantasies of Mum’s absence being temporary, which was where alcohol certainly helped.

Mark shook his head. ‘It’s been like this for a long time,’ he said sadly, glancing pointedly at the bottle of wine, which had inched towards Jezmeen’s side of the table.

And did the restaurant owner really attempt to ‘steer’ Jezmeen away? Try, ‘grabbed her by the shoulders, leaving her no choice but to flail in self-defence, *accidentally* knocking on the aquarium.’ Also, she did not think that the restaurant owner was serious when he told her that the fish – a bloated, miserable old thing – was ‘emotionally vulnerable’. Those had been his words. It was only after the whole incident blew up that Jezmeen learned about the endangered Arowana fish and indeed its sensitive nature. Part of the reason there was so much interest in the many videos of the incident floating around was because although Arowanas were rumoured to be capable of putting themselves out of misery by flipping out of their tanks, nobody had actually captured it on video before. When Jezmeen and the restaurant owner started arguing, onlookers began filming, thinking they were just witnessing an entertaining tantrum. Now the death of the fish was taking on a life of its own.

Jezmeen sank back into the bed. She could feel the vodka working now – she had hardly eaten anything all day. After finding out that her video had gone viral, she had to return to the langar hall and wash old breakfast plates, which ruined what little appetite she had. Across the room, the dresser mirror presented an unflattering reflection, but not an unfamiliar one. If she clicked on Images, there’d be a few good headshots but even more stills from the videos: her brief and modest celebrity would turn into infamy now. She hadn’t been on television long enough to have a solid reputation to fall back on – she was an up-and-coming entertainment figure once, and Fish Killer forevermore.

Jezmeen scrolled to the bottom of the Wikipedia page where her few acting roles were listed.

Before she landed the *DisasterTube* hosting role, she had been a waitress on *EastEnders* – recurring for three episodes – and a receptionist in a television movie based on a real-life scandal in a London investment bank. Several other roles hadn't made it to this résumé, though, and for the sake of beefing up her filmography, Jezmeen considered adding them. She had been a non-speaking extra in a few things, and what about that black-and-white student film she helped to direct ages ago? Then again, Jezmeen was grateful that some roles never made it to her page, like the short film for an amusement park in Taiwan, which people watched before getting on a rather racist *Arabian Nights*-themed ride. Never again, Jezmeen had vowed, after prancing around in that belly-dancer outfit and imploring roller-coaster riders to save her from her impending marriage to a cruel, moustached king. Then there were the countless runners-up, speaking parts that would have set her up for more opportunities, if she'd got them. 'Second in line to be considered for Barista #2 in a romantic comedy starring Hugh Grant.' 'Was told voice too husky to narrate commercial for major adult nappy brand.' (Initially, Jezmeen thought the director was complimenting her when he said, '"Ultra-absorbent" doesn't usually sound so suggestive.') Nobody looking at this page would know how Jezmeen Shergill almost became famous before killing that fish and clearly deserved another chance.

Jezmeen needed a distraction from reading about herself on the internet, or there was a risk of polishing off all of the mini-bar's offerings before dinner time. She glanced at her open suitcase. In her haste to catch her flight from London at the last minute, she had thrown together a lot of clothes that really weren't suitable for Delhi – the only really appropriate bits were that long, mothball-scented cotton top she'd worn today, bought by Mum from a market in West London years ago, and her one pair of jeans which didn't have fashionable rips in them. *Please dress modestly.* Mum had found a way to lecture her about her skimpy clothing from beyond the grave. That was why Jezmeen bristled when Rajni told her off for revealing too much skin yesterday – it was enough to hear it from Mum's letter. Even though Jezmeen didn't want to admit that her mother and sister were right, she really needed a more modest wardrobe than tank tops and cut-off denim shorts for the temple tomorrow.

Jezmeen picked up the phone and dialled Rajni's room number according to the instructions. The response was a siren-like dial tone. She pressed 0 for the operator.

'Hi, how do I call another room?' she asked when the receptionist picked up.

'You dial their room number,' she said in a tone that suggested Jezmeen was very thick.

'I tried that . . . Never mind. Thanks,' she said. After hanging up, she tried Shirina and by some miracle, got connected.

'Hello,' Shirina said.

'Hey, it's me. Want to do some shopping at the market?'

'Okay. Where's Rajni?'

'Didn't have luck calling her. I'll knock on her door,' Jezmeen said.

They hung up. Jezmeen did a quick check in the mirror and ran her fingers through her hair. Brushing it wouldn't help much against the gritty air once they got outside.

Rajni's room was on the end of the hall on Jezmeen's floor. She knocked and waited, then knocked again. Eventually, there was a voice at the door. 'Yes?'

'Raj, it's Jezmeen. Open up.'

The door opened a crack through which Jezmeen could see one reddish eye. 'I was napping,' Rajni croaked.

'Shirina and I are going shopping. You coming?'

'Uh . . . no thanks. I'm going to stay in.'

'Come on, Rajni. You have to see some of India while you're here. You don't have to just do what Mum stated in her letter.' Jezmeen thought about it. 'In fact, this is a great way to honour her memory. Mum loved a bargain and never understood why I bought clothes from High Street stores when they sold every type of knock-off at the flea markets she loved going to.'

It was a joke, but Rajni's reaction didn't change. 'I think I'm coming down with something,' she said.

Jezmeen sighed. She tried to sympathize – after all, during her paranoia stage, she had driven

herself to A&E over a chest pain that turned out to be nothing but a reflux reaction to some salsa. But Rajni's aversion to India was so . . . wimpy. Ever since their pilgrimage plans were confirmed, Rajni had made a regular habit of forwarding cautionary articles. 'Make sure you bring hand sanitizer from home – not sure if we can trust the local brands!' read one subject line. 'HAVE YOU SEEN THIS?' read another. The email contained links to a story about a bridge that had collapsed in a rural northern town. Rajni's India was a land of disasters.

'We'll go ahead then,' Jezmeen said. 'Hope you get better soon.' Rajni sniffed loudly, mumbled her thanks and shut the door. Jezmeen stood there for a moment, contemplating her choices. Leave it or not? She knocked again. Rajni opened the door widely this time. Her eyes were puffy. It was clear that she'd been crying.

'Oh, Raj. I'm sorry,' Jezmeen stuttered. 'I didn't think . . .'

Rajni shut the door in her face.

Jezmeen stood in the hallway, stunned. She had never seen Rajni crying, not even during Mum's funeral. Her eyes had been bloodshot but it was clear that she had taken the time to cry in private before the ceremony. Did Rajni also blink sometimes and see Mum leaning over the edge of her bed, reaching for her jewellery case? Jezmeen woke abruptly some nights because that moment played back in her dreams, the details slightly different each time. Her subconscious exchanged the pale-pink colour of the hospital-room curtains for a cheery yellow and moved the dresser a few inches away, so Mum struggled to reach it and gave up. But even when Jezmeen was aware she was dreaming, she could never wake up before Mum died. That conclusion repeated itself in an infinite loop.

Jezmeen knocked on the door. 'Raj?' *You can talk to me,* she was about to say, but could she? She didn't know how they'd begin to talk about Mum's death and she suspected she knew how it would end – yet another fight.

Bargaining required no shortage of confidence. You had to be assured of your rightness from the

start, and willing to walk away from the item because pride was more important than purchase. This was why Shirina tried not to get too attached to anything she saw at the market – she didn't want to get into an argument like Jezmeen was having right now, which was verging on violence.

'You're expecting me to pay that much for these cheap chappal? Look at the workmanship. Look at these threads poking out.' Jezmeen waved a shoe in the shopkeeper's face. Rhinestones marched a path along overlapping plastic straps towards a shimmering plastic gem set in the centre. 'Cut the price in half and we'll talk.'

'In half?' the shopkeeper screeched. Shirina realized immediately that she'd underestimated him. He rolled up his sleeves as if listing the shoes' attributes was just as physically demanding as making them. Jezmeen did not look intimidated. As they continued to argue, the centrepiece came loose from the sandal and plopped to the dusty ground between them.

'We're done,' Jezmeen declared triumphantly, throwing her hands up and washing them clean of the sandals. She took Shirina's hand and led her to another stall. It was like being children again, except Jezmeen had always left Shirina trailing far behind. She held on tight. This was not a place where she wanted to get lost. The market bustled with activity but it was chaotic and full of men wandering in packs, their eyes sometimes connecting with Shirina's, at which point she hastily looked away. A stray dog with a ladder of ribs showing through his dingy fur weaved between two parked motorbikes at the side of the road. The row of shops seemed to stretch for miles, and where it ended, the main road was choked in peak-hour madness. She and Jezmeen had walked here, their feet traversing pavements that whittled into slivers and then vanished altogether, only to appear once more a few moments later.

'Honestly, they were bloody ugly shoes, weren't they?' Jezmeen muttered to Shirina.

'Why waste all that effort bargaining then?' Shirina asked.

'Sharpening my skills,' Jezmeen said. 'Look around. There's so much to buy.'

It was overwhelming – the columns of sari fabric and their dizzying brocade patterns, entire wall displays of shimmering bangles in every possible shade. In a magazine, Shirina had once seen a

sari made up entirely of tiny squares of every colour. Every single shade and variation in existence. It was beautiful and novel, but also functional, the designer's write-up explained. Women could wear the sari on their next trip to the tailor and pick out the exact colour they wanted from this wearable palette.

'I do need a pair of cheap sandals though,' Jezmeen said. 'I don't mind if they're a little gaudy, although those were just hideous. I need a decoy for the temple.'

Shirina smiled. She remembered shoe decoys from when they were young. It was always wise to wear your least expensive shoes to the gurdwara lest they get 'lost' or swiped from the cubbies outside. But they had to be presentable as well – tattered old Converse runners did not complete the Punjabi ensemble.

'Italian leather,' Shirina said, in a high-pitched imitation of their childhood friend, Sharanjeet Kaur.

'Custom-fitted with a one-of-a-kind in-sole,' Jezmeen replied in a matching pitch.

'Designed by our personal cobbler.'

Jezmeen and Shirina both laughed. This was how they used to be, kicking each other under the covers and listening out for Rajni's footsteps. It was when Jezmeen started getting them into too much trouble that they started drifting apart. The first time Shirina told Sehaj she had sisters, she expected him to ask her what they were like, but he didn't really want to know about them. He was an only child, and she envied his untethered existence. For Shirina, at least until she stopped following Jezmeen around, having a sister meant being complicit in schemes and being seen as part of a pair rather than an individual.

'I wonder what Sharanjeet Kaur is up to these days,' Jezmeen said. 'What a bloody snob. Marries a rich guy and all of a sudden she's name-dropping her designer at your wedding and talking about her holiday house in the South of France. And that fuss she made after the ceremony when she couldn't find their shoes right away, like we had stolen them. Wasn't that long ago that she was a restaurant hostess.'

‘I don’t think she came to the wedding for me,’ Shirina said. ‘She wanted to rub shoulders with Sehaj’s family.’ Shirina had been surprised at Sharanjeet’s appearance at all of her wedding events. A childhood friend who disappeared once she got married, she was eager to reconnect with Shirina when she discovered whose family she was marrying into.

‘Have you stayed in touch since then?’ Jezmeen asked.

Shirina shook her head. ‘I know she named her daughter Chanel,’ Shirina said.

Jezmeen rolled her eyes. ‘I saw pictures of Chanel on her Instagram account. I think Sharanjeet deleted me at some point, though. I haven’t seen anything from her in ages.’

‘I’m sure it’s all really superficial anyway.’ Shirina said this with a shrug, as if she had lost track of Sharanjeet as well. She didn’t want Jezmeen knowing that although she appeared inactive on social media, she still logged in to look up people like Sharanjeet, who publicized every inch of her privileged life. There were snapshots of designer bags and posed ‘deep-thinking’ pictures on the golden sands of Mediterranean beaches. The chorus of comments from Sharanjeet’s friends and followers was openly envious and admiring. With nobody questioning what Sharanjeet’s life was really like, Shirina felt petty doing so. Surely there were days when she fought with her husband or spent the afternoon simply waiting for the plumber to show up to fix the leaky tap was that driving her mad – but her pictures presented a life so unspoiled that Shirina didn’t mind only believing in this version of it.

‘You know who else recently had a baby?’ Jezmeen said as they followed the current of the crowd. ‘Auntie Roopi’s daughter. She added me on Facebook recently.’

‘Our old neighbour, Auntie Roopi?’

‘Yup, from across the street. We stayed with her one summer, but you’re probably too little to remember that. She had a cat that you desperately wanted to bring back to our house.’

Shirina vaguely recalled this cat, and the scent of channa masala bubbling on a stove in a kitchen that was bigger than theirs. She remembered going to Auntie Roopi’s house sometimes but didn’t remember living there. ‘Why did we stay with her?’

‘Mum and Rajni went to India together. It was just shortly after Dad died. I think they were gone for about a month.’

An image was beginning to surface: tickling competitions with Jezmeen and the cat: the cat flicking its tail at their ankles while they struggled to keep straight faces. Shirina was about four or five, and they were over at Auntie Roopi’s, having lunch. Auntie Roopi let them watch cartoons while she bustled around the house with a vacuum cleaner. At one point, she crossed the living room, blocking the television for a moment while she peered through the curtains. ‘Your Mum’s still away,’ she said. ‘You can stay for dinner.’ But Mum was home all day, and the curtains of their house were always drawn, so Auntie Roopi was just saying that for their benefit. Shirina and Jezmeen came home eventually to find Mum lying in bed, in the same place she’d been when they left. Rajni had told them off afterwards for upsetting Mum, and said to Jezmeen, ‘I expect better behaviour from you from now on.’

It seemed that Jezmeen was remembering the same thing, because she said, ‘Rajni was so strict with us when we were little.’

With you, Shirina thought. She learned it was better to avoid trouble after that incident, even if it meant also avoiding Jezmeen. ‘I suppose she was just helping Mum,’ Shirina said. ‘She probably felt she needed to help raise us since Dad wasn’t around.’

‘Oh sure, lots of things had to change after Dad died,’ Jezmeen said. ‘But she used to be more fun. You wouldn’t know it now, but Rajni was cool. She had this stash of glittery eye shadows and bold lipsticks – the sort of thing Mum probably wouldn’t let her wear, because I remember she always kept it hidden and didn’t tell me where it was. She used to put it on me sometimes, and we’d dance around in her room. I was probably four years old then.’

It didn’t sound like the Rajni that Shirina knew, and she was surprised to hear Jezmeen remember her this way. ‘What changed?’

Jezmeen shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Dad’s death, maybe? She and Mum fought a lot after that. There was also a visit from Dad’s older brother before that, and that sparked a couple of arguments.

They went to India the summer after Dad died. I remember she was really quiet when she came back from India with Mum and then soon after that, she was taking charge and being Sergeant Rajni – all about following the rules. And I have been resisting her ever since.'

Jezmeen said this with some pride, but any mention of Shirina's childhood, especially the teenage years, called to mind the sound of Shirina's sisters shouting. The arguments were so hostile and belligerent on both sides that it always felt as if the walls of their house were on the verge of collapsing. She had never fought with Rajni or Mum like that. She certainly refrained from taking every piece of bait her mother-in-law dangled before her; it was easier to say yes than to fight every battle. Life was so much more complicated if you always had to win. She recalled an Instagram post of Sharanjeet's from Christmas last year – mulled wine, a stack of presents wrapped with glittering ribbons and the soft glow of a fire in the background. *Baby, it's cold outside, but my love knows just how to keep me warm,* the caption read, followed by an unnecessary litany of hashtags: #winter #fireplace #mulledwine #xmascountdown #love #family #pressies #tiffanys #besthusbandever #besthubbyever #spoiled #butimworthit. Shirina had read the caption over and over again. Painstaking selection of filters enhanced the picture so she could almost hear the firewood softly crackling. Shirina had been so absorbed in the world of Sharanjeet's life that she only vaguely registered Mother talking behind her. *Look at me when I talk to you,* Mother snapped, plucking the phone from her hand. It gave Shirina a small fright, because she hadn't realized the conversation wasn't over. Later, she told Sehaj about it, who frowned and said, 'I'll talk to her.'

'Ah, there it is. Madhuri Fashions,' Jezmeen said, nodding at a stall with magazine cut-outs pasted on its walls above a sewing machine. An elderly man stooped over the machine, tiny gold-framed spectacles perched on the tip of his nose. For his sake, Shirina hoped that the bargaining process would be reasonable. 'I'll be in there,' she said, pointing to the bookshop next door.

Books were crammed into every space, making them impossible to remove. When a title caught Shirina's eye, she extracted it with her fingernails. 'Yes,' the bookshop owner said. 'Very good story.'

'You've read this?' she asked. It seemed unlikely. The title – *Mister Right Now* – was in raised

pink lettering and didn't exactly shout this man as its demographic.

'I've read them all,' he said.

Well, that was impossible. There were too many books here for one person to have read in a lifetime. There were books in German and some in Scandinavian languages too, left here by tourists probably. His earnestness was admirable though. Probably sensing that Shirina didn't believe him, he started pointing to the spines of books and giving her a brief synopsis of each.

'Very bad man starts a corrupt business. Mafia bosses turn against him. He becomes very good man.

'This one: a family moves into a new house after the father loses his job and they find out it is haunted.

'A scientist starts a research station in some faraway country and spends thirty years there trying to find out what happened to his lost love.'

Shirina was amazed until she realized she had no way of verifying his claim. She nodded. 'Okay, okay,' she said, signalling with a wave that she had given up doubting him.

'Buy a book and I will also give you a numerology reading,' the man said, pointing at a little sign next to his cash box. 'When is your birthday?'

'May 10th, 1990,' Shirina said.

He repeated the date and tapped rapidly on a calculator. 'Your life path number is seven,' he said. 'Seven is a good number.'

'Oh,' Shirina said. She waited for more, but he returned to the shelves and began smoothing out the stacks by jamming the spines of books even further in. 'What does seven mean?' she asked. She had never had a numerology reading before – they were like horoscopes, worded to suit every person in some way. But horoscopes were intriguing sometimes. The recognition of herself was thrilling.

'For that, you must pay,' the man said.

Shirina almost laughed. She reached into her purse and wondered if the man knew how lucky

she was that Jezmeen wasn't here. Once he took the money from her, he ducked back behind the counter again and opened up a slim silver laptop. Shirina's eyes followed its path of cables across the floor where they tangled and disappeared behind a cotton sheet nailed to a ceiling beam, serving as a curtain. The man waited, staring intently at his screen and then went to that back room. He appeared moments later with a printout.

'This is all the information about number seven,' he said.

Great. So she had just paid for a Google search. His face did not betray any acknowledgement that he had ripped her off. The ink was still damp on the paper; he took care to hand it to her on two flat hands, like a platter. Some words jumped out immediately at Shirina: 'sympathy', 'responsibility'. Then a sentence:

The number seven represents a person who will do anything to keep her family together. She keeps the peace and maintains harmony in situations of conflict.

This was why Shirina only read horoscopes once in a while in *Cosmo* or in the newspaper. If she subscribed regularly, their relevance became diluted. She saved them up and enjoyed the surprise of reading a description that matched her situation profoundly. The day before leaving Melbourne for Delhi, she had searched for her horoscope online – just one, she told herself, because it defeated the purpose to select the best of ten predictions.

You are at a crossroads but the power to make a decision is completely within your control. Consider the needs of your loved ones during this delicate time.

Words written so clearly that she could almost hear them.

Next door, Jezmeen was patiently standing with her arms stretched out while a silver-haired woman looped a measuring tape around her chest. 'I'm getting a blouse made,' she said when she

saw Shirina.

'They'll be able to sew it that quickly?' Shirina asked. They were only in Delhi for another day.

'Yeah, I think that's why Mum recommended this shop. She did like it when things could be done quickly. Hang on—' She looked down. The woman was pressing the measuring tape to her collar, far above the neckline of the blouse in the picture. 'I want it to look like that blouse,' Jezmeen said, nodding at a picture on the wall. She sliced her hand across her chest to show exactly where the neckline should be. 'And sleeveless, please. It's too hot for anything else.'

The woman looked at her husband, who rose from a stool behind the counter. 'Madam, we can do this neckline only.'

'What do you mean?'

'This is a decent neckline. You walk around in Delhi with anything lower, there will be trouble. You must also have sleeves.'

'Yes, trouble,' Jezmeen muttered to Shirina. 'Mass erections. A city-wide catastrophe.'

Shirina didn't think a decent neckline was such a bad idea though. Her own blouse buttoned up at the neck and hung loosely around her waist. She had given away a lot of her sleeveless clothes to the Salvation Army a few months after moving to Australia, when it became clear that Mother didn't approve of them. The four-seasons-in-a-day weather in Melbourne was so unpredictable anyway that Shirina didn't have much use for anything that revealed her arms.

The measuring tape dangled from the crook of the woman's elbow. 'You want the order, or you want to cancel?' she asked impatiently.

'If I told you I wasn't going to wear this blouse in India, would you make it the way I want it? I'm going back to London.'

The woman shook her head with certainty while her husband retreated behind a small cabinet. He produced a clear plastic folder. It bulged with pieces of paper sticking out. Shirina patted the numerology paper in her pocket, relieved it was still there. It seemed that in the chaos of this market, there was no designated place for anything, and her printout fortune could very easily disappear into

a stack of paper.

‘You see what I have done,’ the man said. His cheeks shone with pride as he presented the open folder to Jezmeen. Shirina wasn’t sure which he was prouder of – his work, or his cataloguing of it. On each left-hand page, there was a glossy picture cut out from a magazine, usually a Western woman. On each right-hand page, there was his corresponding version – a tailored copy of the dress or skirt or blouse, with adjustments made for ‘decency’. Necklines were raised from chest to throat. Skirt hems dropped below the knees. Waists were so generous that the dresses hung loose and forlorn like potato sacks.

‘Decent,’ the wife said, nodding her approval at the folder. ‘If we made these clothes exactly to the specifications on the models, people would complain.’

‘I won’t complain,’ Jezmeen said. ‘Honestly, I’d just like an exact copy of that blouse over there.’

The woman screwed her eyes at Jezmeen. ‘You’ll wear it with what? Jeans?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then the hemline needs to be longer. Needs to cover this area.’ She made a vague gesture at her lower half.

‘You know, I could go to any other stall around here. I chose you because you came highly recommended by my . . .’ Jezmeen’s voice trailed off. ‘By Mum,’ she said to Shirina. ‘She knew these people would try to make me a blouse with the fitting of a bed sheet.’

‘You think so?’ Shirina asked.

‘I’m sure of it,’ Jezmeen said. ‘It’s her final attempt.’ She had a rueful smile on her face but Shirina caught something else too – a brief shadow over her expression. ‘This is probably one of the ways she wanted me to “start taking more responsibility”.’ Jezmeen put air quotes around Mum’s words. Shirina didn’t know exactly what Mum had said, but it clearly bothered Jezmeen.

‘Can’t you just make it exactly the same?’ Jezmeen pleaded. ‘We won’t tell anybody, if that’s what you’re worried about.’

They shook their heads.

‘You can return my deposit then,’ Jezmeen said.

The man and his wife exchanged a quick look. ‘Deposit is non-refundable,’ they both said in unison.

Shirina stepped out of the stall just as the arguing began. She surveyed the shops once again, disappointed that she’d return to the hotel empty-handed. There was just nothing she wanted enough to fight for. Behind her, Jezmeen was accusing the shopkeepers of swindling her. Shirina wandered back to the first shop with the hideous shoes. She supposed she needed a pair of decoy sandals herself. ‘200 rupees?’ she asked, quoting Jezmeen’s final price from their earlier bargaining.

He shook his head and quoted a price that was triple the amount. After all, she was an entirely new customer.

She remembered her friend Lauren encouraging her to fight back. ‘You have to stand up for yourself,’ Lauren said. It was after the taxi driver incident, when it was decided that Shirina should not go out for after-work drinks any more. ‘*Beti*, it’s for your own good,’ Mother had said. After that weekend of silent treatment from Mother, Shirina gulped down the words like a tonic.

On Monday when she returned to work, Shirina had told Lauren the whole story. She just wanted to share her shame with somebody – *Oh my god, we were so drunk on Friday. Can you believe what I did?* But Lauren looked more worried than amused when Shirina got to the part about Mother ignoring her. ‘She’s talking to me now though,’ Shirina assured Lauren.

‘Did she admit she was overreacting?’ Lauren asked. ‘And did your husband grow a pair of balls and tell his mother to butt out of his life?’

Shirina was surprised. Lauren seemed to be the only person in the office who understood when another co-worker made a joke about Shirina and Sehaj still living with parents. ‘It’s cultural, isn’t it?’ Lauren had said, shooting the guy a dirty look.

‘Come out for drinks this week,’ Lauren continued. ‘She can’t stop you from having a good time.’

‘I have other plans,’ Shirina said apologetically. Then the following week, and the week after that, she came up with new excuses. One day, Lauren cornered her in the break room and asked in a low voice if everything was alright at home. ‘Everything’s fine,’ Shirina said but Lauren was not convinced.

‘Tell your mother-in-law that you’re an adult,’ Lauren said. ‘You’re missing out on opportunities to socialize, and that’s something we do at the pub. This is Australia, tell her that.’

But Shirina didn’t mind going home for the evening, sitting with Sehaj, who told her she just had to humour his mother. ‘She’s traditional, you’re not going to change her ways,’ he said. Shirina sensed that his conversation with Mother about minding her personal space hadn’t gone very far. She tried not to let it bother her, reminding herself that she liked being a wife and a daughter. While Jezmeen was busy fighting every battle, she was walking away with a pair of shoes – what did it matter that she paid three times more than she wanted?

Chapter Five

Evenings: Share your meals together. I cannot remember the last time I saw the three of you at the same table. Don't take for granted that there will always be time to do this in the future. Make conversation with each other. Don't turn everything into a disagreement.

The curries arrived first, brimming and still bubbling in small steel bowls. The waiter carefully arranged them around the table, announcing the name of each dish: fish kadai, lamb tikka, bhaigan baratha. Rajni tried to ignore the ring of oil orbiting around each dish. When Mum commanded them to have a meal together, she probably pictured a cosy table in some local eatery, not one of the restaurants shortlisted from the Zagat's guide. But Rajni was determined to avoid food poisoning on this journey, and the presence of online reviews from Western tourists assured her that this was the right choice.

'Do you think we ordered too much?' she asked as the waiter returned to the kitchen. There were still the pilaf rice and naan to come, and she was already eyeing some items on the dessert menu. *Make conversation with each other.* Shirina opened her mouth for a moment and then closed it. Seconds later, her face twisted to suppress a yawn. 'Excuse me,' she whispered. Jezmeen was glued to her phone again. She tapped furiously, squinting at the screen. Rajni felt too tired to reprimand her again. In the taxi on the way here, she had peered over Jezmeen's shoulder to try to see what was captivating her so much, but Jezmeen had noticed right away and hunched over the screen to block Rajni's view.

'I think it's enough food,' Shirina said. She picked up the serving spoon and scooped two generous servings of lamb kadai onto her plate. Rajni glanced at Jezmeen, careful to be discreet about it in case Shirina noticed. *Do you see how much she's eating?* Jezmeen carried on staring at her phone.

At the next table, a woman with long, manicured nails was being very particular about her order. 'I can't have any dairy. Not even a drop,' she announced. 'It's just a disaster we'd all rather avoid.'

‘Oh, me too. These things start to kick in with age, don’t they?’ her partner replied. ‘I used to eat all manner of street food as well, but last week, that kebab nearly ended my life.’

Rajni felt her appetite waning. Why did people have to talk so competitively about the different causes of their indigestion? In moments, the inevitable ‘paleo’ and ‘gluten-free’ would enter the conversation. ‘In my day, we just ate everything and didn’t have so many opinions about it,’ Mum had said to Rajni when she witnessed their neighbour whacking a cookie containing nuts out of her son’s hands. ‘I think he’s allergic to nuts, Mum,’ Rajni had said. ‘If he had grown up in my village in India, he’d be so grateful for a cookie, he’d forget about being allergic,’ Mum had retorted. Rajni had stayed silent, recognizing yet another version of Mum’s ‘England has spoiled you’ rhetoric. After the cancer diagnosis, she followed the same line of questioning: ‘Nobody used to have cancer, and now it’s everywhere,’ Mum said. Mum truly thought that living in England had changed the composition of her body.

Jezmeen sighed and chucked her phone into her purse. ‘It’s over,’ she said.

‘What’s over?’ Shirina asked. She speared a hunk of lamb with her fork and put it in her mouth. ‘Oh, this is delicious.’

‘My career. It’s done.’

‘Should we wait for the naan?’ Rajni asked.

‘Don’t you care?’ Jezmeen asked. She looked hurt. ‘I just said *my career is over*.’

Had it really started? No, that was not a nice question to ask, although Rajni could see it printed on Shirina’s face as well. Jezmeen had been whining about the shoddy state of her career since it began. ‘It’s a tough industry,’ Rajni said by way of consolation.

Jezmeen let out a heavy sigh. ‘I guess I might as well tell you,’ she said. ‘You’ll find out anyway.’

She took her phone out of her purse and tapped once on it. A black-and-white video appeared. It was surveillance footage from a restaurant, probably one of the videos that Jezmeen presented on her show. Rajni watched with little interest; the waiter was returning now with a platter of steaming

pilaf rice and a huge bowl of crispy golden naan. They had definitely ordered too much.

Shirina gasped. ‘Oh, that’s horrible,’ she said. ‘What’s wrong with people?’ She shook her head. Rajni turned her attention to the screen to find a woman kicking something – was that a large fish? It was difficult to tell.

Then she remembered the boys from the temple this afternoon. The boy who stuck out his tongue and pretended to choke. She leaned closer and squinted at the screen. ‘Goodness, Jezmeen, is that you?’

Jezmeen nodded miserably. ‘This was the first video that came out. Some animal rights activists managed to get some high-definition footage last night, and it’s everywhere now. I didn’t mean to knock on the glass. Obviously, I was upset. The video doesn’t show the whole situation.’

The whole situation probably involved more alcohol than Jezmeen would admit to having had. Rajni wondered if Anil was aware of the video. She peered at her own screen. No calls or messages from him. He probably hadn’t seen it then.

‘Do your producers know?’ Shirina asked.

Jezmeen nodded. ‘I was at the end of my contract with the show anyway – they’ve chosen not to renew me.’

At some point, you had to be realistic. This was what Mum had said to Rajni once, when Jezmeen came up in conversation: you had to accept that you weren’t going to be a famous star. ‘Don’t tell her that, please,’ Rajni said to Mum. She knew it would crush Jezmeen, even though she had to admit she didn’t think Jezmeen would ever become a star. Not that Jezmeen wasn’t talented, she just wasn’t wanted. Now Polly Mishra, there was an actress whom people wanted. Rajni, Kabir and Anil had binge-watched an entire season of *The Boathouse* one winter weekend while sleet gathered on their windowsill. They had intentions to pace themselves, but the cliff-hanger at the end of the first episode was so good that they allowed one more, and then another, and then it was dinner time and they ordered a pizza delivery so they could continue watching.

Rajni longed for the cosy and peaceful indulgence of that afternoon now. As the air became

chillier, they had huddled together, excitedly sharing their predictions about the following episodes. Rajni couldn't recall another time when she and Anil shared the same interests.

'They're saying it's because of this incident,' Jezmeen was telling Shirina. 'But I think they want to go with a more mainstream host.' She put 'mainstream' in air quotes. 'Somebody white would appeal to a wider audience.' Shirina nodded along sympathetically. Rajni didn't think that those *DisasterTube* clips of people injuring their crotches in various ways needed a wider audience.

'It was self-defence,' Jezmeen continued. 'He could have bitten me. What if he was poisonous?'

'I don't think Arowanas are poisonous,' Shirina said. 'They're just really sensitive. There was this article in *National Geographic* about animals which are capable of intense and complex emotions. Those fish actually experience distress.'

Jezmeen groaned. 'Now you make me feel even worse.'

'Sorry.'

'It's not just the issue of the video going viral either. I have to pay the restaurant back for the damage.'

'How much do you owe them?' Rajni asked.

'£25,000,' Jezmeen said.

'*What?*'

'They're pretty expensive,' Shirina said. 'One of Sehaj's clients has an Arowana. He bought it from a fish farm in Singapore for a quarter of a million US dollars.'

'Are they very exotic-looking?' Rajni asked, reaching for the basket of naan. 'Or do they bring good luck?'

'Evidently not,' Jezmeen retorted. 'They just flop about the house, feeling complex emotions and then when somebody knocks on the door, they commit suicide.'

Rajni hesitated. It was the wrong thing to say, and Jezmeen knew it – she was biting her lip now as if she wished she could take back the words. Their eyes met and they both glanced at Shirina. She had stopped chewing and was reaching slowly for a glass of water. They were all thinking about the

same thing. Rajni felt a rush of irritation with Mum for ordering them to converse with each other. *Now look at what you've done*, she thought.

In the middle of the night, Rajni woke to the sound of tentative scratching. Somebody was in her room. She bolted out of bed and hastily wrapped the bed sheet around her body. 'Excuse me?' she squeaked, not sure if this was an effective way to deter a sex pest. She glanced at her suitcase, quickly taking stock of what valuables she had. Her passport was in the safe, thankfully, but the canister of ashes was in plain view. Then she realized it was only valuable to herself – what would a thief want with an old woman's remains? Taking a small step towards the door, she thought she heard the scratching behind her, louder now. There was a ripping sound. She spun around in time to see the curtains come crashing down from the window.

'Fucking fuck fuck,' she said, jumping on the spot with her fists balled up tightly. The sheet fell away from her body and pooled around her ankles. It took a moment for the relief to seep in, and for her to process what had happened – the curtain, fastened to the rod at the top of the window by a Velcro strip, had slowly become unstuck throughout the night. Rajni picked it up and carried it to the desk in the corner of the room. How cheap were all these furnishings? She half expected the hotel to actually be made of paper – she'd lean on a wall and the whole place would crumple.

No chance of getting back to sleep now. Rajni picked up the phone from her dresser and sent Kabir a chat message – it was around nine o'clock in England and he'd be slumped in front of the TV after work.

'How are you?'

'Good,' he replied. 'How was first day of pilgrimage?'

Rajni shrugged at the phone. What was there to tell him? She didn't manage to get through the first day of honouring Mum without thinking of those final, ugly moments. She had been tempted to skip that dinner with her sisters because she knew how draining it would be to engage with them, and she was proven right. She should have chosen room service instead – probably delivered by young,

terrified Tarun from the café – but eating alone was no better. It would make her think of all the things that she and Mum had left unsaid. She wasn't sure she could get through the rest of the trip without unwelcome reminders of her last trip to India with Mum.

'Don't know how to describe,' she wrote. As soon as she sent the message, she realized that she sounded like a person in awe, as if all that carrot-chopping in the temple kitchen had filled her spiritual voids. She was about to clarify when Kabir sent another message.

'Managed to have a chat with Anil today.'

Rajni pressed the CALL symbol on her chat screen. Kabir's voice stretched into a million syllables.

'Heeeeeellllllooooooooooo?'

He sounded like a dying robot. 'Kabir,' Rajni said. 'Kabir?'

'HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELLLLLOOOOOOOOOO.'

She held the phone away from her ear and waited for the connection to adjust. She had called Shirina in Australia once using this service as well, and halfway through the call, the echo had been so strong that she became annoyed with her own voice for interrupting her.

There was silence on the line. 'Kabir,' Rajni said. 'Can you hear me?'

A static-filled pause and then his voice came through in one piece. 'Yes.'

'So what did Anil say?'

Kabir's sigh sounded like a roar. Long-distance phone calls were not for subtlety, Rajni realized when she called Shirina to tell her about Mum's diagnosis. You had to be quick and direct to avoid the message being jumbled by a poor connection.

'I didn't have much time to talk with him – he just came by to get more of his things. He's staying at Davina's flat until they find a more permanent place to move into together. I'm not sure what we're expecting him to say or do, Rajni.'

'You said you'd handle it,' Rajni pointed out.

'This situation though – it's irreversible.'

‘Kabir, you can’t tell me that you’re taking care of matters and then backtrack like this,’ Rajni said.

‘I meant that I would try to convince Anil to continue his education, not abandon his child.’

Rajni wasn’t sure if that was a catch in his voice or the connection dropping. Either way, the word ‘child’ made her want to retch. Anil *was* a child. He was not supposed to be having one.

‘How sure are we that this child is his?’

‘I asked him that,’ Kabir said. ‘He’s positive. He and Davina have been together for almost three months. She’s six weeks along now – it’s not like she got pregnant with another man and then hunted down some naïve young man with a small inheritance to support her.’

‘So she says,’ Rajni replied. ‘Why should we believe her?’

‘I suppose Anil really trusts her.’

‘Did you ask Anil? Did you ask him if he’s certain?’

‘I didn’t. I’m trying not to upset him.’

‘*Trying not to upset him?*’ The words burst out of Rajni’s mouth. She was aware that the walls were paper-thin and that she had probably woken her neighbours on both sides. ‘Our son’s about to ruin his life and you’re worried about sparing his feelings?’

‘I don’t think questioning the baby’s paternity is the right way to go,’ Kabir said. ‘Let’s assume it’s his.’

Rajni remained tight-lipped. Kabir continued, ‘I know it’s difficult to accept, Rajni, but he’ll need our support. He doesn’t know the first thing about raising the child. Remember what a steep learning curve it was for us? We were only a couple of years older than him, if you think about it.’

‘We were in our twenties and we had jobs. We were married and the same bloody age too,’ Rajni corrected Kabir. She felt light-headed. ‘But Kabir, you’re saying . . . you’re saying that this is it? They’re going through with this?’

‘It will be very hard,’ Kabir said. ‘But they’ve made the decision, and from the looks of things—’

‘There’s money,’ Rajni said. She shut her eyes as she said this. She couldn’t believe what she was resorting to.

‘Money for what?’

‘For – oh, don’t make me say it, Kabir.’

It was Kabir’s turn to go quiet. The background filled with a faint hum that made Rajni long for London – one long, peaceful note.

‘What is this really about, Rajni?’ Kabir asked. She hated it whenever he asked that question, usually at the peak of an argument, usually an argument about Anil. Because it always came to the answer that was sitting on the tip of Rajni’s tongue now. *What will people say?* She refused to say it. She had spent the whole day with Mum on her mind; she was not going to become her.

‘Forget it. Let’s just talk about something else,’ Rajni said with a sigh.

‘Good idea,’ Kabir said. ‘What’s going on with Jezmeen? I’ve heard there’s some video going viral of her torturing an endangered animal?’

‘Kicking a fish,’ Rajni corrected.

‘Is it for real? Or just a publicity stunt for that show she’s on?’

‘It’s real,’ Rajni said. ‘She has to pay the restaurant back for the fish.’ It occurred to her that Kabir hadn’t actually seen the video. ‘How did you find out?’

‘Anil told me it’s all over his social media. He called me the minute he saw it.’

‘That’s nice,’ Rajni said. She felt her heart catching in her throat. ‘Because he hasn’t been in touch with me.’

‘Can you blame him?’ Kabir asked.

‘That’s not fair,’ Rajni said. ‘I’m worried about him.’

‘Why do you say that as if I’m not worried about him too?’

‘Because you’re willing to let him ruin his future, Kabir. You’re too soft on him. You’ve always been too easy-going, and look what it’s led to.’

‘Rajni, Anil has made a decision. It is irreversible.’

‘It’s not necessarily,’ Rajni said. ‘Maybe if we paid her to get rid of the baby and just get out of Anil’s life, he could start over.’

‘You of all people should think about whether you want something like that on your conscience,’ Kabir said.

His words sucked the breath right out of her. She nearly dropped the phone. The internet connection was weakening again, and Kabir’s immediate apology sounded like it was coming from underwater. At the small, crackling sound of static that took his words apart again, Rajni decided they had a poor connection and cut off the phone.

Chapter Six

Day Three: Sunrise at India Gate

By this time, you girls are probably annoyed with me for making you get up early each day but a sunrise is something that you shouldn't take for granted. India Gate is the best place to view the sunrise in Delhi. Just once, for me, stand still and watch a new day beginning. Think of all the new days you have left, and reflect on how you will choose to spend them.

There was a folded note on the floor between the door and the bathroom. In her bleary still-waking-up state, Jezmeen spotted it but could not summon the energy to get out of bed to pick it up. 'What is it?' she mumbled into the empty room. Then she caught a whiff of her putrid breath.

'Ah, shit,' she said, sinking back to bed. She rolled to her side and patted around for her phone to check the time. Now she could guess what the note said and who had written it. She had foggy recollections (she thought they were dreams) of being woken by knocking this morning, answering the door, and fabricating a very believable food-poisoning story. The 'I can't keep anything down' portion of the story was based on real events anyway. 'I'll join you guys later. I know how to get there,' she'd said with what she assumed was a confident smile. She now realized that one whiff of hangover fire had probably been enough to send her sisters scuttling down the hallway. She could bet anything that the note contained some chastisement on how poorly she had managed to impersonate a sober person.

An empty bottle of wine had rolled across the television console and remained precariously on its edge. Jezmeen appreciated that her dwindling bank account stretched much further here than in London. It made last night's room-service orders seem sensible and almost thrifty. She had spotted a bottle shop on the way back from the market last night but it was dank and shadowy and when she approached, a line of men lifted their eyes to meet hers and she lost her nerve.

Years ago, she'd read a news article about an Indian politician encouraging beatings of women who drank in bars. In response, women all over the country sent pieces of pink underwear to the politician's office and flooded his email inbox with images of the same. To this day, the politician's name could not withstand an internet search without hundreds of pictures of lacy pink thongs popping up on the screen. Jezmeen had been thinking about this as she drank straight from the bottle and searched for images of herself last night, pleasure mixing with punishment. It probably explained why she had the oddest dreams of the Arowana fish wearing pink bikini bottoms.

Jezmeen sat up and let her head adjust. She didn't remember finishing the whole bottle but the fog of this hangover was evidence enough. It was a slow and arduous walk to the door, where she picked up and unfolded the note:

We're at India Gate. You can join us if you feel like it – Rajni and Shirina.

Not as bad as she expected, although she could practically hear Rajni's self-importance in the straight edges and sharp points of her print.

It was close to noon. So she had missed the sunrise. Surely she could make it up somehow. There were sunrises every day. She could even go to India Gate now and it would be almost the same, wouldn't it? There was no reason Mum's letter had to be followed so exactly.

Jezmeen took a long shower, letting the steam clear her blocked sinuses. She stepped out feeling instantly better – hangover turnaround was a skill that many people underestimated. It enabled her to have a few too many once in a while and still wake up (albeit a little late for worship) and go about the rest of her day. 'Some people call that functional alcoholism,' Mark had said to her once with a grin. That dimple-studded grin. He had gone from teasing her lightly to giving her a pointed look every time she poured another glass. She knew she had been drinking more since Mum's death but didn't everybody grieve in their own ways?

Jezmeen got dressed and stepped out of the hotel, descending into the mob of people, rickshaws, stray animals, shoe-shiners, students. A scooter honked behind her and as it passed, the driver leaned towards Jezmeen. 'So sexy,' he hissed, like it was meant to insult her. 'Fuck off,' she retorted, but

the blare of engines and the shouts of street vendors drowned out her voice anyway. She wove her way through Karol Bagh market, her head tipped up as if just keeping it above water. Her eyes were trained on the mammoth bridge at the end of this street, where the Metro ran above the city, unobstructed by the mayhem on the ground.

Where were the women? Jezmeen wondered. It wasn't her first time noticing that Delhi was a city of men, but walking alone made it all the more obvious. Men ran the textile shops, unspooling rivers of sari fabrics across the wide expanses of their counters. The jewellery vendors held out delicate earrings between their thick, calloused fingers. They clustered at the chai stand outside a small college building, clutching textbooks to their chests. They walked past and deliberately bumped shoulders or dipped their mouths to Jezmeen's ears, sometimes singing lines from Hindi songs, sometimes muttering filth. Whenever Jezmeen did spot a woman, her face reflected the hardness that Jezmeen realized was in her own expression.

She was already a bit worn by the time she elbowed her way up to the Metro station. Traffic hollered and screeched below her but the noises rose up and followed her towards the platform. From the bridge, she had the best view of Hanuman, the Monkey God, a gigantic statue that towered over the link road and made miniatures of the buildings and trees below it. His hands came together at his chest and his tail curled to the top of his head. Jezmeen couldn't stop staring but it was the sheer size of the statue rather than its spiritual meaning that captivated her. She wondered how long it took to build something of such scale, and if the builders had intended to make him loom over the city like this, the cars and bicycles skirting around below in a ring of disorder. She supposed it gave a reminder of how small she was, how insignificant, but walking along a crowded Delhi market street already gave her that message loud and clear.

Inside the station, the rush of people followed a slightly more ordered pace under the bright fluorescent lights. India Gate station was only a few stops away.

A sparkly pink arrow on the sleek tiled floor indicated where the female-only carriage would line up with the platform. Jezmeen followed the arrow and found herself in the presence of a large

group of women. It occurred to her that this was the first time since coming to India that she had seen so many women. A pair wearing kurti tops over stylish tight jeans were deep in conversation. Snippets of chatter filled the air.

'I mean, it's selfish, don't you think?'

'Not if she didn't agree first, but these companies do that kind of thing.'

'She didn't sign a contract or what?'

'They're saying it's void because she joined after the fact . . .'

Jezmeen's gaze wandered over the other women standing alone. Many were staring at their mobile phones, their lips curling into small smiles as their messages appeared. A middle-aged lady wearing a sari dragged a shopping trolley behind her. Plastic bags poked out of the grilles. When the train arrived, she hauled her goods into it, shooting a weary look at the others who piled past her.

Being in the carriage was such a relief after the short walk to the station. Her memory drifted back to their first day in India, when Rajni warned her about the effect her revealing clothing would have. But why did the women have to be sequestered like this just because the men couldn't control themselves?

The train glided into the next station and the doors slid open. Young ladies – students, Jezmeen thought – piled into the carriage and something changed in the atmosphere. Their voices trilled and they called out to each other. The other women looked up and shifted, some turning up the volumes on their phones. Many of these new passengers were wearing matching T-shirts. Jezmeen struggled to read the print across their chests in the crowded carriage, but from eavesdropping, it seemed they were headed to India Gate too, for some sort of event.

A girl in a tight purple T-shirt and ears studded in tiny rings stepped back as the train jostled, her foot landing on Jezmeen's. She tossed her head back and said 'Sorry,' and then her eyes lingered. There was a flash of recognition in them. She whispered to a friend standing next to her, who shot Jezmeen a glance as well. Jezmeen began to feel queasy – what if they knew her from the video? She could hear the snickers of those nasty boys from the temple. She pulled her sunglasses out of her bag

and popped them on. Behind these wide tinted lenses, she was a little less recognizable.

When the train arrived at this destination, the T-shirted women poured out and the others who weren't with them dispersed, hurrying along to their lives. This loosening of the crowd allowed Jezmeen to see what was written on their backs: 'WOMEN'S RIGHTS MARCH'.

She could see the writing on their placards as well now: 'NO BODY DESERVES THIS' and 'END RAPE CULTURE, SAVE OUR CULTURE'.

The woman in the purple T-shirt turned to look at Jezmeen again. The corners of her lips turned up in a small smile. 'Are you . . . Polly Mishra?'

Jezmeen nodded miserably before she realized that the girl had said the wrong name.

'I knew it!' The girl's face brightened and she thumped her friend on the arm. 'I told you it's really her. Polly Mishra!'

Her friend grinned. 'Oh shit,' she said. 'Who got you?'

'Hmm?' Jezmeen asked.

'Was it Sunayana? She's always pulling surprises like this. Last year, she got Priyanka Chopra to send a tweet about our Slut Shame Walk.'

Jezmeen shook her head. She wanted to tell them that they had the wrong person, that she was not Polly Mishra. But she hesitated for a moment, suspended in the fantasy of being somebody else for the day. (What was Polly Mishra doing right now? Whatever it was, she was certainly having an easier time than Jezmeen these days.) Then the girl in the purple T-shirt let out a hoot. 'Even better!' Her noise attracted the attention of the other marchers. 'Ladies, listen up,' she cried, linking arms with Jezmeen. 'Polly Mishra is here, and she's joining us for the march!'

A cheer went through the crowd. Jezmeen made sure to keep her sunglasses on. Bashfulness was the way to play this whole identity-stealing thing. There was too much attention on her otherwise, and somebody would out her. The tide of women carried her along to the station's exit. The girl in the purple T-shirt introduced herself as Sneha. 'I'm one of the organizers,' she explained. 'This is Anjuli,' she said, nodding at the girl who was next to her. 'She went to high school with the victim.'

‘The victim?’ Jezmeen asked.

Sneha looked at her. ‘Haven’t you been paying attention to the news?’

Sure, Jezmeen thought with shame. She’d been clicking obsessively on her own name and looking for any headlines, any blog posts or tweets that kept her relevant and afloat in the online world.

‘No,’ Jezmeen said. ‘But I’m almost afraid to ask.’ It had to be another gang rape, she realized, something horrific enough to inspire this sort of turnout.

‘A twenty-year-old was violently attacked by a man in a bazaar last week,’ Anjuli said. ‘She was trying on clothes in the fitting room when he barged his way in. His brother and another shopkeeper held her down—’ Anjuli had a delicate face and wide eyes that glistened with anger. Her voice choked on the last words.

Jezmeen’s own eyes became hot with tears. After the bus gang rape in Delhi that made international headlines, she had followed the protests, the wave of feminism that swept across India – students marching, lighting candles, staging sit-ins. *We’ve had enough,* was the message she sensed from these teeming masses of bodies showing their support for the victim and their anger for the injustice. But the reporting afterwards stoked her rage to a point where it burned out and she became disillusioned. The rapists’ lawyers had defended their clients by saying that the girl had enticed them by being out at night. A vocal counter-protest group insisted that not all men were rapists and that ‘rape culture’ was a gross generalization. And there were more rapes. Either they were reported more, or they were happening more – the difference didn’t matter much to Jezmeen because they were still happening.

Fear struck Jezmeen’s chest as she thought about her own trip to the market with Shirina yesterday. ‘I’m with you,’ Jezmeen said. ‘I’m here to give my support.’ Anjuli nodded and took her hand.

They descended the station’s steps and emerged into the grimy summer atmosphere. Jezmeen squinted against the sunlight and followed the women towards India Gate. Its grand arc was

triumphant against the blank, white canvas of cloudless sky. Visitors moved in small masses – the retiree Westerners with tall socks and bulky cameras hanging from their necks, the fresh-faced Indian couples grinning at their phones propped up on selfie sticks. Vendors wove between them, peddling balloons and cheap battery-operated helicopters and bubble wands.

'So I guess you're in India anyway for some kind of publicity event?' Anjuli asked as they pushed against the burning heat towards the gate.

'I'm here on a holiday of sorts,' Jezmeen said.

'Alone?' Anjuli asked.

'With family,' Jezmeen said.

'For how long?' Anjuli asked.

'I'm only in Delhi till tomorrow morning, then we're off to Amritsar,' Jezmeen said. 'We're visiting the Golden Temple.'

'It's divine,' Anjuli said with a smile. 'You go to a place like that and you wonder why the whole world can't be a sanctuary. We're obviously capable of peace, but only in designated sites.'

The women began to assemble as they arrived in the square's centre. It wasn't clear where or how the protest would start, but Jezmeen had a feeling she'd know when it began. The tourists and other people seemed aware that something was about to happen. They dispersed with some curiosity and perhaps a little bit of fear? Jezmeen intended to stay back and watch but Anjuli grabbed her hand and with surprising force, pulled her into the centre of the circle. A black duffle bag was resting at her feet. She pulled out a flat piece of wood that unfolded into a stand, giving her just enough height to be noticed. The stand gave her confidence. Jezmeen could see her shoulders squaring, her eyes shining. Sneha handed her a loudspeaker and it began.

'WHAT DID SHE DO?' Anjuli's voice burst across the air. 'SHE WAS JUST SHOPPING IN JANPATH MARKET FOR AN OUTFIT.'

Jezmeen surveyed the crowd – the other women were captivated. They nodded as Anjuli recited

statistics of sexual harassment claims and gang rape incidents. She went backwards in chronological order, from the present day to the 2012 bus gang rape that started these protests. ‘THESE ARE ONLY THE HIGHLIGHTED INCIDENTS,’ she shouted. ‘THESE ARE ONLY THE REPORTED INCIDENTS. WHO KNOWS WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING, WHO KNOWS WHEN IT WILL STOP?’

A chant began amongst the women: ‘When will it stop?’ Sneha led them, pumping her fist into the air. ‘When will it stop?’ Jezmeen found herself saying the words too, her shouts blending with the collective chants so she could no longer hear herself, only this powerful united voice. She looked past the crowd, expecting to see people watching them, joining in, but disappointingly, India continued around them. The traffic crawled, the vendors courted customers, the tourists skirted the edges of the protest, some taking pictures, others maintaining a safe distance.

It was Sneha’s turn now. She stood up on the stand and started reciting statistics – 875 women to 1,000 men in Haryana, she shouted. A girl waved a cardboard sign that said ‘NO MORE FEMALE FETICIDE’. Honour killings were still happening in rural parts of the country – two girls held a banner high: ‘THERE’S NO HONOUR IN KILLING’. The protest seemed to be for all manner of women’s rights in India, and there was so much to fight for. It felt a bit overwhelming, like India itself. Jezmeen felt queasy looking at a placard displaying the bruised and bloodied faces of two village women who had been sentenced to a beating by a tribal court, for adultery. Next to their faces were images of Hindu goddesses, their faces covered in bruises and cuts to make them look like battered women – ‘RESPECT ALL WOMEN THE SAME WAY’ was scrawled across the top. The tall girl carrying the sign held it high so it could be seen beyond the crowd.

‘And we have an international spokesperson here today. Polly Mishra, star of *The Boathouse* series in the UK, is here to tell us about how domestic violence must stop.’

All heads turned to Jezmeen. Sneha was beckoning her to the stand. The crowd parted slightly to let her through. Her heart quickened for some reason. She never got nervous before auditions or experienced stage fright – just a squeeze of anxiety, which she quelled with promises of a drink

afterwards. *Just behave yourself,* she told her gut, *and there will be rewards.* But she was nervous now. She realized that she hadn't spoken as herself in a very long time.

The crowd was silent as Jezmeen took the loudspeaker. What could she say? There was a sea of expectant faces but they seemed to know everything already – Sneha had given them the statistics and they lived it every day, didn't they? The teasing on the streets, the checking of their own outfits to see if they might be too arousing, the phone calls to their parents to let them know where they were, the clutching fear when they boarded a bus at night.

'Your experience is more valuable than my words would be,' Jezmeen began. 'You women do more battle just walking out your door in one day than I have to do in one year in London.' She shook her head. The words were not coming out the right way. It sounded a little bit like she was chastising them for not living in a place that was better for women.

The crowd seemed to shuffle with restlessness. Jezmeen could hear the car horns and vendors' shouts in the distance. 'When will it stop?' she asked. 'When do we decide it's enough? Do we keep shouting while the rest of India moves on? Do our words mean anything to all these people continuing their daily lives?' She made a great sweeping motion to include everyone. Now the crowd was interested. From where Jezmeen was standing, she noticed a ripple of excitement, as visible as an electric current, travelling through the crowd. The women holding signs straightened their arms to pitch them higher. Anjuli smiled and nodded.

'We're telling each other about the injustice, but we already know, don't we? We're living it,' Jezmeen said, her anger gathering momentum. 'Tell them!'

Heads began to turn. The women who started on the outer edges of the crowd were suddenly at its forefront – it was like those dreaded primary school games where everybody lined up and the one at the back was announced the leader. 'Tell them!' somebody shouted. 'Tell them!' This became the resounding chant of the protest, as the women turned their attention on the spectators. Tourists began to nervously put their cameras away and the clusters of people who had stopped in their tracks to watch the women were beginning to disperse. Only one group of onlookers remained rooted in place

– men, very much like the ones that Jezmeen encountered on her walk to the station earlier. Scattered on the periphery of the protest, they were suddenly more visible than the rest of the crowd because of their stillness. She had not even noticed them when she and the women arrived, but of course, they were not organized. There was no counter-protest planned, but now that the women were turning towards them, they were afraid, and they found each other somehow.

First it was just a pair of men, who pointed at the women. A few more men joined in, jeering and calling out. They walked towards the crowd, chests puffed out, but their movements were slow and hesitant. The women outnumbered the men, and they knew it.

'Tell them!' One woman shouted, pumping her fist into the air. Jezmeen nodded and joined the chorus. The gaining momentum of this protest was exhilarating – her voice grew hoarse and her skin was slick with sweat but she didn't want to stop fighting.

'Tell them!' The girl holding the bruised goddess sign threw her arms high into the air. The images caught the attention of the men. Suddenly, they were walking faster and shouting louder. Jezmeen wasn't afraid until she noticed more men coming in from other directions. One of them pointed right at the sign, his cheeks red with fury.

Jezmeen couldn't understand the men's words because there was no unity in their response – they hadn't had time to prepare, after all. But later, she realized she was wrong. Of course they had time to prepare. For years now, women's protests had been taking place at India Gate and on message boards online, at dinner tables and college campuses. The responses on these men's faces, now full of rage that topped the fiery glares of the women, had been building up for years.

'Hey everyone!' Jezmeen shouted. She wanted to call for the crowd to calm down but then it surged like a wave, carrying her along with it somehow. She tripped on another woman's leg and felt her blouse being grabbed, the fabric ripping loose. In the spaces between, she saw several men running up to the crowd, shouting – they were police officers. The angry mob of men didn't run away. They shouted and pointed to the women, who shouted back. To Jezmeen's shock, an officer raised his hand in a threat to hit one of the shouting girls. It was Anjuli, with bared teeth.

As the officers began working their way through the crowd, suddenly they were on top of Jezmeen, not as far from the soap box as she thought. 'Wait,' she said. 'I'm a British citiz—' It was too late. The cops swooped in and led her away.

Oh my god. Oh my god.

Somebody was whispering those words. Jezmeen's shoulder throbbed from the forceful way the policemen had pinned down her arms and clapped the handcuffs on, even though she hadn't resisted. Her knees were trembling, and as the van jerked and lurched through the slow-flowing traffic, she felt her stomach churning. The van seemed filled beyond its capacity. Jezmeen could feel the humidity of other breaths all around her. The windows of the van were caged and criss-crossed with wires so Jezmeen had no sense of where they were, or how far they had gone from India Gate. Outside, it had been such a blindingly bright day, but this gauzy view threw the city into muted, frightening shadows.

Oh my god, oh my god.

If Jezmeen knew who was saying that, she'd try to assure her. You were exercising your right to free speech, there's nothing wrong with that. The police came racing in because they wanted to keep the conflict from getting out of hand. The men who wanted to start a riot were probably arrested as well. She didn't know if any of this was true, but she was too scared to consider the alternative.

A girl let out a loud, ragged sob when the van came to a final stop. Everybody heard it – Jezmeen sensed the heads turning, instinctively searching for the noise. The fear was palpable; without being able to see or know where exactly they were, they were terrified. They waited for a long time in the darkness of that van before the door rolled open and an officer barked at them to come out. Jezmeen struggled to scoot her way to the door, then crouch and negotiate the step without being able to grasp anything for balance. Once her feet touched the ground, she could feel the tremor in her knees. An officer called out and moments later, the black gates leading to the station yawned open.

The women were made to line up and then file into Tilak Marg Police Station, a low white-brick building that sat behind concrete barricades. Police officers in khaki uniforms and berets milled

outside, their rifles slung casually across their waists. Jezmeen avoided eye contact with them, focusing instead on walking as steadily as possible.

Oh my god, oh my god.

Who was saying that? Jezmeen understood the sentiment: she felt as if somebody had pressed 'pause' on her day while she was addressing the crowd less than an hour ago, and hit 'play' on a nightmare instead. Had any of the women expected this?

In the station, things moved quickly. All the women lined up at the front desk and gave their names and details to an officer who recorded them by hand in a logbook. They were asked to surrender their possessions – purses, phones and jewellery – in large Ziploc bags which were passed down from the front of the line. Jezmeen got to the front of the line before she had to give up her phone. 'Am I able to call my consulate?' she asked. Even her voice sounded foreign to her here. 'I'm a British citizen.'

The officer looked up. He had thick eyebrows and a moustache that nearly covered his top lip. 'Name?' he asked.

'Jezmeen Shergill,' she said, her voice more level than she felt inside. She heard a ripple of murmurs from the women behind her as they realized she wasn't Polly Mishra.

'Quiet,' the officer called over Jezmeen's shoulder. 'Your passport?'

'I don't have it,' she said. 'It's back in my hotel. I've got a picture of it on my phone though.'

Static and muffled commands burst from the transistor radio on the officer's desk. He picked up his walkie-talkie and muttered something back. 'Could I just use my phone for a minute? I could get the picture from there.'

The officer nodded and returned to his call. Jezmeen took out her phone and went straight to her Contacts list. Rajni. She sent her a text in all caps:

'RAJ I'M IN JAIL NOT A JOKE SEND HELP PLEASE. TILAK MARG POLICE STATION. CALL CONSULATE.'

She pressed send and shot a look at the officer. He waved her over to one side and called up the

next woman in line. Jezmeen found her passport page in an email she had sent to herself when she was applying for her Indian visa. She showed it to the officer, who took a long time scrutinizing the page and recording all the details before asking for the rest of her possessions to be placed in the Ziploc bag. Then he called out to another officer, who said, 'Come with me.'

Entering the hallway, Jezmeen felt the tremor in her legs again. Only when the officer told her to hurry up did she realize she was walking in tiny steps, as if afraid of what might be around the corner. *Oh my god, oh my god.* The officer showed her to a small room with a flat wooden bench. There were six more women in this room – all of the girls who had been in line before Jezmeen, and more to come. How would they possibly fit them all in here?

'You want to go to the toilet, you have to call for one of the female officers to bring you,' he said, perhaps noticing the way that Jezmeen was shifting her feet. She didn't have to go to the toilet though; she was trying to keep her legs from going numb with fear. 'Do you know how long—' She didn't get to finish her question before the officer turned his back and walked away.

Oh my god, oh my god.

Jezmeen realized that the voice was hers.

Once Shirina entered the air-conditioned café, she never wanted to leave. She was slightly embarrassed at how poorly she had taken to the heat this morning, to the sun beating down on her face and the sweat making her hair stick in curlicues to the back of her neck. She had been the one to suggest heading to the nearest shopping mall after their morning of watching the sunrise at India Gate. They didn't even make it far enough to get to the mall, stopping the driver once they spotted this café in a strip of upscale boutiques and restaurants of Khan Market.

'I want the most iced drink they have,' Rajni said, staring at the menu. 'In fact, I'd pay just to have a tall cup of ice to rub on my forehead.'

Shirina ordered a crushed-ice fruit drink and found a pair of plush armchairs by the window. Again, as she sank into the seat, she was so relieved to be sitting that she thought she might never rise

again. She closed her eyes and saw patterns of light dancing around in the darkness.

At India Gate, she and Rajni had walked quietly among the early-bird tourists to find the best spot to catch the sun. They batted away the young boys who tried to sell them flimsy plastic toys and selfie sticks, and the ice-cream vendor who rattled off a list of flavours from a lopsided cart. Behind him stood the grand war memorial with the names of fallen soldiers inscribed into sandstone. There was an air of solemnity to the place, even as the city had already begun to stir. Mum had been right about the sunrise here being spectacular – the shifting hues of pink and orange, the wings of black kites swiftly crossing that canvas of changing light, the shimmering sun emerging triumphant despite the haze of the city. Shirina had thought of this item on the itinerary as Mum's simplest and easiest request but as she watched the day begin, she couldn't help thinking about Mum's last moments. Had she written this letter knowing that she would die before the sun came up the next day?

The coffee machine whirred behind the counter nearby. It was normal to feel depleted by the heat; in a way, the sun was a good thing – it gave Shirina an excuse to return to her air-conditioned hotel room, sink beneath the cool sheets, and do nothing for the rest of the day.

Rajni returned and set down her iced coffee on the table. Beads of condensation speckled the plastic cup and dripped onto the table's surface, forming a perfect ring. She took a sip from her straw and sighed, shutting her eyes. She looked the perfect picture of peace until she voiced her thoughts:

'I wonder what the hell Jezmeen is up to.'

Shirina had no doubt that Jezmeen had found her own way to occupy her time today. She didn't want to return to the subject of Jezmeen's truancy again. All the way in the taxi, Rajni had fumed. 'What is wrong with her?' she had asked, not looking for a response.

'Let's just forget about it,' Shirina said. For different reasons, she had been annoyed with Jezmeen as well. *She really should know better than to drink like that. It's disrespectful,* she'd said to Rajni, but she was over it now – the heat had compressed her anger into something small and manageable. This morning, Jezmeen's bloodshot eyes and the stench of stale wine on her breath had reminded Shirina of what her mother-in-law must have seen when she opened the door that night and

found her slouched against the taxi driver. She was angry at Jezmeen for making the same mistake over and over again. Surely one time was enough? It was for Shirina.

There was a tapping sound on the glass window. Shirina turned to see a man dressed in slacks which were frayed at the hems and a dress shirt missing buttons. His skin was caked in soot. She met his eyes, two grey, watery pools, and turned away. Within moments, a barista hurried out to the pavement to shoo him away. Shirina watched him slowly shuffle to another shop entrance where a security guard held his palm up in a stern rejection. If he kept on wandering like this, trying his luck, he'd surely reach a place of some charity – a Sikh temple perhaps.

'Do you think they eventually get shooed away from the gurdwara if they keep showing up, day after day?' Shirina asked.

'That's not how it's supposed to be,' Rajni replied, watching the man as well. 'But I haven't noticed many beggars at the temple, even though the city's teeming with them.'

Inside and outside. The boundary between the temple and the rest of the world – and what was permissible in both spaces – had become a bit clearer to Shirina today. Yesterday, still under the fog of jet lag and fatigue, she hadn't noticed so much that people were kinder and gentler within the temple walls, more considerate under God's supervision. They fell into line and waited patiently for their food. They greeted each other with respectful nods. It was at India Gate this morning that she noticed all of these structures dissolving into the chaos of Delhi. Men roamed in hungry packs and whispered 'hello' in a way that made it sound like a threat. She and Rajni had held their bags in front of them, aware of how vulnerable they were to being snatched.

Shirina sipped her cool drink and watched well-heeled customers lining up at the counter, repeating their orders over the hissing milk steamer. There was a young couple sitting at the next table. Shirina knew they were newlyweds because the woman's forearm was nearly completely covered in glittering red bangles. Shirina wondered how she navigated Delhi's wobbling paths in those spiked heels and then realized that she probably never walked anywhere in them. Outside the café, where the begging man had been standing before, now there was a clear view of the car park

and its rows of big, expensive cars.

The couple must have noticed Shirina staring – they stared back, and Shirina felt her face flushing with embarrassment. It wasn't her first time being caught looking at other couples; she often watched other men and women together and wondered if they were doing something that she and Sehaj should be doing. It was probably an arranged marriage thing, even though she and Sehaj had got to know each other online before setting the wedding date. There was some insecurity with wondering how to behave spontaneously. *Is this what couples do?* she wondered all the time, using other people as reference points. At one point, she became quite addicted to reruns of American sitcoms that featured meddling in-laws. She was relieved to make light of the petty arguments and the disparaging remarks about the daughter-in-law's cooking. In recent months, whenever Mother commented on her weight gain with a raised eyebrow, Shirina was able to smile along to the laugh track that played in her mind.

Shirina looked away and took another long sip of her drink. The shock of the ice made her head throb. 'New bride,' Rajni said, nodding at the woman. 'I never wore mine.'

'Why not?' Shirina asked.

'They don't really go with a blazer and a pencil skirt.'

The bangles were incongruous with the woman's slick denim jeans and tight black tank top, but people here would understand that she was announcing her status as a new bride, rather than over-accessorizing. *People here would understand.* Shirina felt relief at that thought. It would be nice, not explaining her culture. 'I wore mine,' she said. 'All twenty-one days.' Each time somebody on the train or in the supermarket gave her a curious look for wearing such ornate jewellery with her everyday clothes, she wished they knew she had a reason for doing so.

Rajni looked surprised. 'Really?' She didn't ask why, but Shirina heard it anyway. She could practically see the question mark hanging in the air. It was the same when she told her sisters that she'd arranged her own marriage through a matrimonial website. *Why?* They itched to ask. How would she have explained wanting a new beginning – a definition of 'family' that was wholesome

and content – without insulting them? She didn't really think she'd find what she was looking for so quickly, but once she registered and created her profile, she saw that there were abundant opportunities to become somebody new. From London to Bangkok to Nairobi to Wellington, there was the thrill of clicking on each potential husband, and the excitement of knowing that she was shaping her own fate. The thrill returned to her every time she saw her bangles.

'I was sad to take them off,' Shirina said. 'I could have worn them for much longer.'

'Mum was not pleased that I didn't wear mine,' Rajni said. 'She was also annoyed that my mehndi faded so quickly, because that's supposed to be bad luck.'

Shirina knew that superstition well from all the online discussions. If your mehndi faded quickly, you would have a cruel mother-in-law. Modern brides joked about it and posted pictures of their stained hands on the arranged marriage forum. *Very accurate – the woman can't stand my cooking,* one woman posted, with a picture of her faded hands. *Lemon, Sugar and Water!* was the title of that thread, inspired by the mixture that brides sprinkled on their hands to keep their mehndi colour strong.

'My mehndi stayed dark for a really long time,' Shirina said. She couldn't help feeling a bit proud. She didn't even have to use the lemon mixture.

'There are millions of these little sayings about your fate as a married woman,' Rajni said. 'I remember all this confusion over which foot I used to step into the house first, because it would determine the course of my relationship with my husband. First I stepped in with my right foot and half the room cried out that I was supposed to use my left. I switched to the left foot and the other half of the room said it was wrong.'

'What happens if you use the wrong foot?'

Rajni shrugged. 'Who knows? It's just one of those superstitions that doesn't mean anything. The happiness of a marriage isn't dictated by such arbitrary things. You would know. It's work.'

Since Shirina got engaged, she noticed that Rajni liked giving her marriage advice. It was one thing they finally had in common, and in Jezmeen's absence, they were free to discuss their husbands

without making her feel left out. Sometimes she opened her emails to find links to articles recommended by Rajni in her inbox: *10 Things That Married Couples Should Say to Each Other* and *Secrets to a Happy Marriage – Advice from Three Couples Married Over 50 years*. Shirina always waited an appropriate amount of time so it would seem like she read them, and then replied, 'This is great!' or 'Loved this – so true!'

'Believe me,' Rajni continued. 'When you've been married as long as I have, you'll understand. Do you remember that article I sent you about crazy things that couples can do to keep their marriage alive?'

'Yeah,' Shirina said. 'I think I stopped reading after wife-swapping came up.'

'That was one of the suggestions?' Rajni asked.

'Don't you read the articles you send me?'

'I read the first couple of tips. One of them was, "Don't talk to each other for forty-eight hours." A vow of silence, so you can appreciate each other without conversation.'

'How did that work for you?'

'I heard every other sound, and it drove me bananas. Kabir's breathing, his phone pinging with notifications. I think we were only four hours into the silence thing when I told him I'd had enough.'

Shirina forced a smile. She was all too familiar with the feeling of being encased in silence in her marriage. *Four hours? Try four days.*

'Well, I'm relieved that you weren't suggesting that Sehaj and I become swingers,' she said.

'Oh, don't be so quick to dismiss those wife-swapping parties,' Rajni said.

Shirina raised an eyebrow. Schoolteacher Rajni and accountant Kabir, a pair of swingers? She almost began to laugh at the thought, then she noticed Rajni peering over her drink, looking a bit offended. 'Sorry,' Shirina said. 'I knew there were parties like that in the Indian community in London, I just didn't really . . .'

'You didn't believe they were for real? Me neither,' Rajni said. 'Until I was invited to one.'

'Really? When? By whom?' Shirina couldn't contain her surprise. At the next table, the

foursome looked up sharply. She ducked out of their view.

'A friend,' Rajni said. 'Meenakshi – remember her from my wedding? Oh, you wouldn't, of course. You were so young. We're still good friends. Her younger daughter was born about two weeks after Anil. They used to have play dates together.' Rajni looked wistful. 'I thought Anil and Sahiba would make a fine couple one day.'

'There's still a chance,' Shirina said. Rajni cleared her throat. 'Hmm, yes,' she said, taking a sip of her drink. 'Anyway, Meenakshi was the one who told me about these holiday houses that Punjabi families book together over the summer. It all looks very innocent but in the evening, when the kids are all tucked away in bed, there's an agreement between the adults to exchange partners.'

It sounded very organized. Shirina wondered if there was a roster involved, or if everyone was just agreeable to moving from person to person like playing a game of musical chairs. 'Were you ever tempted?' Shirina asked. 'To see what it was like?'

Rajni shuddered. 'I couldn't imagine switching partners so casually and then going back to my husband after that. Surely the aftermath would be awkward? Not to mention seeing those other people in daylight again.'

'I would think so,' Shirina said.

'Meenakshi said it did wonders for her sex life though. I listened to her stories. They were pretty wild.' Rajni smiled. 'I'll admit, it made me a bit curious, because things had . . . stagnated a bit.'

'That's pretty normal though, isn't it?' Shirina asked. She was careful to sound casual.

'They say a sexless marriage is when you have it less than five times in a year,' Rajni said. 'We had it more times than that.'

Six? Ten? Rajni wasn't going to give an exact number of course, but Shirina could also picture her discovering the minimum number on a therapist's webpage and aiming to surpass it to break the threshold and be safe.

'Sexless marriage,' Shirina said. 'You're basically roommates then.' She measured the incredulity in her tone. *This is not something that would happen to me.*

‘It’s easy to go a while without it,’ Rajni said. ‘You’re young newlyweds now, so it seems impossible, but life does get in the way. Plus we’d been trying for another child for years and it seemed like all the fun had gone out of it.’

‘What did Kabir think of the suggestion?’

‘He wasn’t keen,’ Rajni said. ‘Neither was I. Meenakshi didn’t mention it again. I think she was a little embarrassed afterwards. I suppose she was quite convinced that I’d say yes. But then you wouldn’t believe who brought it up then.’

‘Who?’ Shirina asked.

‘Mum,’ Rajni said.

‘No,’ Shirina said firmly. ‘Now you’re just making things up.’

‘I wish that were so. I’m serious. Mum told me to look into it.’

‘How would Mum even know about these things?’

‘That was my first question too,’ Rajni said. ‘It turned out that she only had a vague idea of what went on, but somebody had told her that there were parties in East London that married couples credited for spicing up their love lives.’

‘She didn’t know what they actually did?’ Shirina asked.

‘Not really,’ Rajni said. ‘Sometimes I wonder if she thought it was a big prayer circle. All these couples just sitting around and wishing for the spark to reignite.’

Shirina laughed at the image. The smile on Rajni’s face was wistful. ‘We quarrelled over it,’ she recalled.

‘You and Kabir?’

‘Me and Mum. I was annoyed with her for suggesting that we needed help. I had told her that we weren’t having much sex any more because she wouldn’t stop pestering me about having another child. Another son, I should say. Mum had this recipe for some vile concoction of fenugreek tea mixed with soaked dates and herbs. She swore by it, and even said I was more likely to conceive a boy that way. Obviously it didn’t quite work for her.’

‘Really?’ Shirina asked. Rajni raised her eyes to hers, so she quickly followed up with, ‘How did the argument end then? Did Mum just give up talking about it?’

‘It took her a while. I decided to focus on my career to take my mind off it all, but when I told her I was going for a principal-track position, she said, “Your family isn’t complete yet. Don’t wait too long or there will be a big gap between Anil and his sibling,” like I wasn’t aware of how weird it was to be an adult and have a younger sister in primary school.’

Rajni’s face was flushed, as if she was still arguing with Mum. It was strange seeing her so worked up about Mum, when that was usually Jezmeen’s department. Shirina could only remember Jezmeen’s constant arguments with Mum – everything had to be challenged, from curfews to what subjects she took in school to how much she wanted to spend at the hair salon. Shirina always situated herself at the periphery of those memories because that was how it was – Shirina at the edge of the room, keeping her distance from conflict, Shirina finding something else to do so she wouldn’t get embroiled in a battle of wills between Jezmeen and Mum or Jezmeen and Rajni. The fact of her existence always made her guilty. Mum and Dad had wanted a boy. Shirina had been their last-ditch attempt at having a son. This, Shirina knew because Mum had told her. ‘We didn’t *need* another girl, but God decides these things.’ In Mum’s voice, the unmistakable sadness at God’s plans for her family.

‘So how did things get better then? With you and Kabir?’ Shirina asked.

‘Things just sort of picked back up again once we stopped trying so hard. The doctor told us there wouldn’t be any more children and it more or less lifted the pressure.’

‘Mum never really talked to me about sex,’ Shirina said. It seemed that by the time Shirina became a teenager, Mum had run out of things to say. It was as if she had loaded all her advice onto the eldest and hoped it would trickle down somehow. Some things worked in this way – Shirina didn’t have to question things like curfews and the proper ways to dress and talk; the examples were laid out for her in what Rajni did to please Mum and what Jezmeen did to rebel. The only time Mum alluded to sex was to tell Shirina that she should have children sooner rather than later. ‘Have sons,’

she'd said, perhaps knowing what Shirina's mother-in-law was like.

'It was the first time she was really open with me,' Rajni said. 'I was surprised but I also didn't want to continue the conversation much further. She started going into that whole yarn about "keeping your husband interested, otherwise you'll lose him," and it put me off the conversation totally. It's not all up to us, is it? I had a job and a son to raise and here's Mum telling me I have to be a sex goddess as well, or I'd risk my husband leaving me. It was so old-fashioned.'

Shirina felt a familiar urge to defend Mum's values. She had done the same whenever she and Lauren from work discussed their personal lives. 'My mother-in-law thinks I should grow my hair out a bit more,' Shirina once told her. The response was a raised eyebrow. 'Do *you* want to grow your hair out?' Lauren had asked. 'Of course *I* want to grow it out as well,' Shirina had replied. Lauren did not look convinced. There were many conversations like this, Lauren's tone growing more exasperated and patronizing. Shirina decided not to tell Lauren she was quitting until she handed in her notice and word got around. 'Is she making you quit?' Lauren asked, cornering Shirina in the break room. Her voice was full of concern but Shirina didn't want to hear it. She didn't need to be rescued. She had written the resignation letter herself, providing no explanations because the Laurens of the world would never understand.

'Do you think Mum would have had an easier time if she had sons?' Shirina asked. 'Do you think she would have been happier?'

The question seemed to pain Rajni. She looked out the window and didn't answer Shirina's question.

Silence fell between them and the roar of the coffee grinder filled the gap. Shirina wondered if she should offer up some detail of her own married life to complete the exchange, but what could she share? She and Sehaj hadn't touched each other in a while but their circumstances were complicated, not that there was any need to talk about her married life with anybody, even her sisters. Especially her sisters.

Rajni looked as if she was about to say something when she suddenly jolted a bit in her seat

and looked into her bag. She put her coffee down and picked up her phone. A moment passed and then she gasped and showed Shirina her screen. Before Shirina could read the message, Rajni said: ‘It’s Jezmeen. She’s been arrested.’

Chapter Seven

Please look out for each other in Delhi. It's a busy city, and female travellers have to be more careful. Keep your eye on your belongings all the time, and don't draw too much attention to yourselves.

The police station was humming with activity when Rajni and Shirina arrived. They were shuttled through various checkpoints and patted down by female officers behind curtains to protect their modesty, before being led to a waiting room. Fluorescent lamps flickered on the ceiling even though there was still plenty of daylight outside, but there were no windows here. The air was sticky and the floor felt grimy under Rajni's sandals.

She dialled the British consulate phone number again. At this point, she could practically recite the list of pre-recorded menu options. *For opening hours, press 1. For visa status, press 2. For travel advisories and warnings, press 3.* There was no specific option for bailing family members out of Indian jails. She tried again to press 4 for 'urgent assistance', but the phone rang for a minute before disconnecting.

'I'm going to kill her,' Rajni muttered, tossing her phone into her bag. Shirina gave her hand a squeeze. *No, you're not,* she was probably thinking, but the rage Rajni felt in her fingertips was stronger than anybody realized. She didn't know exactly what Jezmeen had done to get arrested, but Rajni was certain that it was avoidable. Deliberate. Of course Jezmeen would sabotage this trip. From the start, this had been her mission. She wasn't interested in the pilgrimage, in honouring Mum – why would she be? All she cared about was herself and settling scores. As these thoughts charged through Rajni's mind, she could see them hashing it out right there in the police station. *You think I want to be here?* Rajni wanted to scream. *You think I wouldn't rather be at home dealing with my own family's crisis instead of fighting with you on a tour across Northern India?*

A uniformed officer sat slouched at a desk near the entrance of the waiting room, the buttons

of his shirt about to pop from the strain of his burgeoning belly. He flipped through files listlessly and called a few names. When nobody responded, he shut his file, picked up an empty glass mug and disappeared into the back room.

'Lovely,' Rajni said to Shirina. 'We're going to have to wait till chai break is finished.'

'It could be a while,' Shirina said, nodding to the door. More people were pouring in and crowding their space. Was there any place in India that wasn't teeming with people? Rajni had a new appreciation for the spacious hall of the gurdwara yesterday, and the wide boulevard they had walked along this morning. She wondered what Jezmeen's jail cell was like, and she felt an acute pang of fear for her sister, packed with strangers in a cramped and dimly lit room. Rajni's only point of reference for the image was those news documentaries that aired on TV back home about naïve British holidaymakers trapped in some drug or human trafficking ring and jailed in unimaginable conditions in Cambodia or Nigeria. She did not think she'd have the stamina to be like their families, shuttling back and forth to visit their incarcerated children and attend their court hearings. With a renewed sense of urgency, Rajni took her phone out of her purse and tried the consulate again. As she sat through the menu options once more, the officer returned with a steaming cup of tea and a spring in his step. He picked up a fresh stack of folders, and called out a few names. There weren't many parents here, Rajni noticed. Only one silver-haired man wearing a pressed suit and expensive-looking leather shoes stepped up to the desk. He and the officer exchanged a few grave words and then he was given a stack of forms to complete. Rajni groaned. Forms, more forms. They would be doing endless paperwork until it was time to return to England. The phone continued to ring.

'Jezmeen Shergill?' the officer called.

'Yes,' Rajni said, leaping from her seat with surprise like she'd just won a bingo tournament. Shirina followed her. 'We're here for Jezmeen Shergill. Is she alright? Where is she?'

The officer was busy reading from his file. 'You are the closest relative?'

'I'm her sister. We're here on holiday – from England,' Rajni said. The phone had rung out again. If the consulate wasn't going to answer her calls, then maybe she should just start announcing

her citizenship and seeing if it had any clout. ‘We’re British citizens,’ Rajni said. The officer did not look impressed but he did make some notes in his file. Then he picked up his glass and took a long, deliberate sip.

‘Do you think . . .’ Rajni whispered to Shirina. ‘Do you think he wants some – you know?’

Shirina’s expression was blank. She clearly did not know what Rajni was hinting at.

‘How much do you think he’s after?’ Rajni tried again. ‘You know, like, money. A B.R.I.B.E.’

The officer cast them a sidelong glance.

‘He can spell, Rajni,’ Shirina said.

‘Right,’ Rajni said. ‘Shit.’

‘Also, I don’t think it works like that,’ Shirina whispered back. ‘I don’t think anybody asks for money in these situations. You just sort of . . . work it out.’

‘Sure, but there’s a ballpark figure, isn’t there?’

‘You mean like a market rate?’ Shirina asked. ‘How am I supposed to know what that would be?’

Clearly, they were already terrible at this. Rajni didn’t even have that much money in her purse. She’d have to negotiate slyly and then run out to an ATM machine. That wasn’t right, was it? In the movies, everybody just slickly slipped money into each other’s palms. Or was that just for valets so they didn’t ding up your car?

‘Can you tell me what she’s been charged with?’ Rajni asked the officer. ‘Please?’

The officer squinted at his files. It was unclear whether he’d heard her. Rajni was about to ask again, when she felt somebody tapping on her shoulder. She turned to see the silver-haired man. ‘It’s better not to ask too many questions. You’ll agitate them,’ he said gently.

‘It’s just – we have no information, and we’re here on holiday and . . .’ Rajni felt the tears building up in her chest. *Mum’s going to kill me,* she used to think every time Jezmeen got into trouble. She could picture Mum right now, arms crossed over her chest and shaking her head, asking, ‘Why weren’t you watching her?’

‘Let me ask,’ the man said. As he leaned towards the officer, Rajni wondered why it made any difference when he asked the same question, but the officer seemed to bend to his authority. It was either because he was a man or because he was the type of man who wore expensive leather shoes. They chatted in such low voices that Rajni wasn’t able to catch everything that they said but at one point, the officer nearly cracked a smile.

The man turned to Rajni. She noticed the crinkles at the corners of his eyes were like Kabir’s. ‘It seems that your sister was rounded up with the same group that my daughter was in. The protest at India Gate.’

‘A protest?’ Shirina asked. She and Rajni exchanged a look. It sounded like a mistake. ‘What kind of protest?’

‘A women’s rights march,’ the man said. ‘It got violent, and the police did a sweeping arrest of protestors that she got caught up in.’

‘How violent?’ Rajni asked.

‘I don’t know,’ the man said. Then he dropped his voice to a whisper. ‘I’m sure it was nothing serious, just a scuffle. The police use these scare tactics sometimes to deter the girls from protesting again.’

‘Do they work?’

‘You tell me,’ the man said. ‘It’s my third visit to a station to get Parvana out of trouble this year.’

‘Oh.’ Rajni didn’t know what to say. She was caught between extending her sympathies for having such a troublesome daughter and wanting to commend him for remaining so calm.

The officer handed over a clipboard of forms. ‘Have a seat,’ the man said, gesturing at an empty spot on the bench. ‘My name is Hari, by the way.’

They all shook hands and introduced themselves. ‘She’s going to be okay, right?’ Rajni asked. ‘She’s not going to stay here?’

‘What did she tell you over the phone?’ Hari asked.

‘It wasn’t a call but a text,’ Rajni said. ‘All it said was where she was being held.’

‘Unfortunately, there isn’t much they can tell us either. It’s a waiting game.’

Looking up from her forms, Rajni stared at the door, trying to imagine what was beyond it. A row of jail cells with iron bars, and Jezmeen crammed in with the other women she was rounded up with?

‘She’ll be fine,’ Shirina said, as if reading Rajni’s thoughts. ‘Of all three of us, Jezmeen’s the most likely to survive a situation like this.’

Shirina looked like she needed some comforting herself. She looked very tired and on the way here, she had asked the driver to pull over because she needed to throw up. The driver had pulled over and the nausea abated. ‘Probably something I ate,’ Shirina had said weakly. Now sweat plastered her hair to her forehead and her eyes were bloodshot. The lack of ventilation in this room wasn’t helping. The air here was stale and it smelled of sweat.

Rajni was sure she remembered this police station – the smells, the sounds, the fear. She remembered flickering lights, the beady-eyed officers, and the suffocating feeling of being in the wrong place. Of course, she knew it was unlikely that this was the same station she had walked into all those years ago. There were many other stations in Delhi. But the panic that was rising in her throat, that sense of feeling trapped and desperate to get home, of wanting but being unable to leave, made her feel like a teenager again.

To distract herself, Rajni concentrated on filling in the forms as quickly as possible. Next to her Hari took his glasses off. He pinched the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes. ‘Are you alright?’ she asked him, her pen still going rapidly.

‘I just don’t know when this will stop,’ he said. ‘My daughter – she’s a college student. She gets so fired up that she puts herself in all kinds of danger.’

‘My sister is like that too, except she’s old enough to know better,’ Rajni said.

‘How old is she?’

‘Thirty-two,’ Rajni said. She put her pen down and looked at Hari. ‘She’s well past the age

where I should be called upon to bail her out of trouble.'

'So it doesn't stop then?' Hari asked, a smile curling at the edges of his lips.

'You tell me,' Rajni said. 'I have a son entering university this year.' Yes, in some alternate reality, Anil was going to do exactly what she wanted. Rajni could only deal with one catastrophe at a time, so for the purposes of this conversation, she was not going to be a grandmother in a few months. 'I can't believe you've done this more than once,' she said to Hari.

'Last time, I vowed that I wouldn't. I told Parvana she'd have to find her own way out. But when she called to tell me where she was . . .' he sighed. 'There are all-women police stations, you know. I knew this wasn't one of them. I couldn't just leave her here, no matter how angry I was.'

Rajni looked around. The clicking of computer keys. The ringing of phones. The creaking fan mounted on the wall like a hunter's prize, slowly turning as if surveying the room and finding it very disappointing.

'No, I couldn't either,' she admitted. 'I could punch Jezmeen though.'

Shirina looked up sharply. Rajni immediately felt guilty for saying this. She had hit Jezmeen in the hospital that day, just before Mum died. She flexed her fingers and thought about how the feeling in her knuckles went numb after she'd hit Jezmeen, and she had wondered if it was a physical or emotional reaction.

'Have you tried calling your consulate?' Hari asked.

'Didn't get an answer,' Rajni said.

'Must be lots of Britons causing trouble in India today then,' he said.

'We're a rowdy lot,' Rajni quipped.

'Not my impression at all,' Hari said. 'Except when the football is on.'

'Thank you for doing this,' Rajni said. 'You really don't need to be comforting me when your daughter's in the same situation.'

Hari shrugged. 'It's not a situation that you share with many people. When Parvana was younger and got into trouble in school, my wife refused to talk to the other parents in the principal's

office. She insisted that we weren't like them.'

Rajni nodded. 'I know that feeling.' She remembered seeing the bruise on Jezmeen's cheek at Mum's funeral and thinking with outrage: Who did that to my little sister? Before remembering that it was her.

A fresh worry struck Rajni now. 'So if this isn't an all-women's station . . . ?'

'There aren't men in the cells,' Hari said.

'But the officers?' *Do you know what could have happened to you?* Mum had shouted at Rajni. How naïve she was, to think that she could walk into a police station in the middle of the night, a teenage girl with teased hair and heavy make-up, and assume she would be safe. Her other option was to keep walking on the street though, and that was far more dangerous. What hurt most was Mum's fury. Rajni was trembling when she finally came home, and Mum had no words of comfort for her, only anger. That was the only reason Rajni had shouted back. It happened in a blink, and everything changed.

'You can think about all the possibilities,' Hari said gently. 'But they'll just drive you mad with worry. As of now, we know she's getting out in a few hours and we can only hope they won't change their minds. Let's just focus on that.' Rajni stared at him, unable to stop worrying. 'Breathe,' he said. 'I'm stepping out for a cigarette break, and then I'll try to talk to the officers again.'

Rajni swallowed and nodded. She shut her eyes and tried to picture a soothing landscape. She had taken an anxiety seminar once, and found the mindfulness and meditation chants only useful for as long as it took her to start making lists of how many minutes she was going to be mindful every day, because it wasn't that difficult, and it could change her brain chemistry. Then she piled on a new exercise routine and general tips on being a better person, and soon, she was overwhelmed by all her self-improvement plans and not being mindful at all, which led to more anxiety.

She opened her eyes and noticed that Shirina's eyes were closed. She was taking in deep breaths, but it didn't seem meditative. 'Are you okay?' she asked.

Shirina kept her eyes shut and nodded. 'Just my stomach again,' she said. There was a sheen of

sweat on her face and her cheeks were flushed. Rajni looked up at the slow wall-mounted fan as it turned its head towards them. 'You might need some air,' she said. She felt bad for taking Shirina along with her now, but she had been afraid to go to the police station alone.

'I'll be fine,' Shirina said. She opened her eyes. The smile she gave Rajni was strained. Once again, Rajni found herself wondering what was going on with Shirina. Food poisoning and jet lag aside, she seemed troubled since she arrived in India. *I don't have to worry about you too, do I?* Rajni wondered. She didn't have the capacity to take on another sister's problems, not right now anyway. She told herself she'd get to it later.

Rajni looked around. Without Hari, she felt even more vulnerable. The station was full of men – visitors, officers. The few women among them were on the sidelines like Rajni and Shirina. The officer at the front desk had only listened when Hari spoke.

'Should I cancel our train tickets for tomorrow? The hotel booking in Amritsar?' Rajni asked. 'Should we just call off the whole thing and go back to England once Jezmeen's released? Why are we here? What the hell are we doing?'

She realized she sounded a bit hysterical. The police officer behind the desk shot her a look, and then began rummaging through his files. Shirina looked nervous. *Breathe* . . .

Rajni closed her eyes and immediately saw Mum. It was impossible not to think of her now, in this place. Mum was sitting on her hospital bed, her face screwed in concentration as another wave of pain coursed through her body. Rajni tried to shake away the image – she was supposed to focus on calming thoughts – but Mum stubbornly remained. Her face looked younger and she had fewer white hairs. Rajni tried to cast her mind's eye to the window – maybe there was a view of some soothing greenery – but Mum moved with her. Even when Rajni pictured an empty white room, there was the younger version of Mum. She was packing their suitcases for a trip to India, to bring some sense into her eldest daughter. No nightclubs, no cigarettes, no bad influences. Just three weeks of learning about her culture and spending time with family. Mum was determined that Rajni would return to London a good girl.

‘Raj,’ Shirina said, nudging her in the ribs.

Her eyes flew open. As if Rajni had conjured Jezmeen, there she was, framed by the doorway behind the officer’s desk. The officer who had looked up at Rajni was standing next to Jezmeen. She didn’t see them waving at her. She was led to the front desk and given some forms to sign. Rajni watched as Jezmeen gave them a quick glance before scrawling her signature. Her gaze roamed the room until it rested on Rajni, on her feet. Just before Jezmeen walked out to greet them, Rajni felt the numbness returning to her knuckles and she fought to press her arms to her sides. She could easily punch her sister again. *What the hell were you thinking?* Mum had shouted at Rajni all those years ago, and Rajni, still terrified, had said something she would never be able to take back.

Chapter Eight

Day Four: Delhi to Amritsar

This journey will take you from India's capital city to Punjab, our ancestral state. Look out the windows and take in the landscape. Listen to the conversations around you. Watch people rejoicing as they rush to meet their relatives on the platforms of those smaller stops along the way. There's no greater show of love and faith than travelling a long distance for somebody.

The journey from Delhi to Amritsar was supposed to start and end with food. This was how Mum had always described the train rides to the village, and although Jezmeen had never taken the trip herself, her memory had absorbed Mum's stories so they became her own foggy recollections. She had images of an endless supply of pakoras and samosas, the paper cups of steaming-hot tea and the flat squares of Indian sweets.

They were pulling out of the station now. She looked out the window as the train picked up pace. Beyond the tracks, the sun burned fiercely, its image wavering behind the train's fumes. Mothers ushered their children ahead of them on a slow walk along the tracks. Mountains of garbage glittered behind clusters of boxy houses that appeared like Lego structures, extensions jammed together, jutting out. The train's pace picked up as the landscape widened before them. Once they had moved beyond the outskirts of Delhi, the greenery became more consistent, the houses further apart. Jezmeen stared at one boxy home, painted bright orange and with a satellite dish sitting on the rooftop like a trophy, and she had a longing to be inert, lazing the day away instead of hurtling towards their history.

What a relief it was to be leaving Delhi. Just the movement of the train made Jezmeen grateful that she was out of that jail cell, even though her time spent there had been mercifully short. Last night, she had hardly slept. She kept replaying the moment of her arrest over in her mind, still shocked

at what had transpired. In the early hours of the morning, she went into the bathroom with the intention of taking a shower but the sight of the small space made her remember the cell crammed with bodies, and she returned to bed.

Her stomach growled. She hadn't eaten breakfast – they had had to check out of the hotel too early to make their way to the train station, and although she had been tempted to stop at a roadside stall to get some fresh pani puris, a death glare from Rajni had silenced her. Jezmeen sneaked a look at her now. She was staring straight ahead and hadn't said anything to her since her release. Not a word. *Don't you want to know if I'm okay?* Jezmeen was tempted to ask. She had felt very sorry for herself sitting in that jail cell, though she counted herself among the fortunate ones who hadn't been hauled off for questioning. The police eventually realized that the cell was overcrowded even with those women taken away, and they began releasing the ones who hadn't been directly involved in the organizing. Jezmeen was certain she would be there for ages but they let her go early. Her passport might have had something to do with it; also the fact that some of the women in the cell still thought she was Polly Mishra and kept referring to her as such, to the intrigue of passing officers. The women who learned Jezmeen's real identity simply ignored her, their thoughts probably too occupied with their current crisis.

Rajni's terse silence had followed them back to the hotel, where Jezmeen attempted to explain herself. 'I didn't—' She got that much out before Rajni raised her hand like a wall. 'I don't want to hear it,' she said. 'Let's just get the rest of this trip over with and then we can go back to our lives.' Her anger vibrated through her like an electric current and her fists were clenched at her sides.

The stretches of lush green land were becoming longer. Untamed stalks of grass rustled in the morning breeze, and on the dusty horizon, Jezmeen could see the sun hovering over a small hill of trees. The windows rattled as another train passed in the opposite direction. Cattle-class passengers clung to the railings in the open entrances. Jezmeen wondered what became of the other girls who had been arrested with her. Who could she ask? What could she do about it anyway? Her empty stomach made a mournful moan.

‘Do you know if she booked our tickets with a meal service?’ Jezmeen whispered to Shirina, careful that Rajni didn’t hear.

‘I expect so,’ Shirina said. ‘It’s an eight-hour journey.’

In the seat in front of Shirina, a toddler was standing and peering at them through sweeping black lashes. ‘What a cutie,’ Jezmeen said with a smile. The toddler grinned back. Jezmeen waved with both her hands. The toddler clapped and disappeared behind her seat only to pop up again, this time trying to get Shirina’s attention.

‘Hello darling,’ Rajni said from her seat near the window, but the toddler paid her no mind. ‘Didi,’ she said to Shirina, addressing her as ‘sister’. Outstretching her arms, she tried to touch Shirina. She appeared to be attracted to the bright-pink tunic which brought out a glow in Shirina’s cheeks. ‘She likes you,’ Jezmeen remarked.

Shirina looked up from her book only briefly before returning to it. Not a terrible strategy, Jezmeen decided. As cute as the little girl was, there was a limit to how much amusement she could reasonably provide for eight hours. She pulled a few funny faces and then ignored the little girl, who found another passenger to amuse her soon enough.

The smell of deep-fried pakoras drifted down the aisle and made Jezmeen’s mouth water. She craned her neck, expecting to see a food cart being pushed down the aisle, but the smell was coming from the seats ahead of them. Several generations of one family were travelling in the same carriage as them, and they had begun unpacking their snacks. A flask of tea was passed around. Somebody split open a samosa and the steam unfurled in the air, carrying the smell of spiced potatoes to Jezmeen’s nostrils.

She had a strong memory then, of being young and sitting on a kitchen stool while Mum bustled about. Mustard seeds popped and crackled in sizzling oil in the frying pan and the stove-top kettle whistled. Mum’s expression was far from the serene look of Indian housewives in the drama series – her eyes were pained and her skin taut with worry. Jezmeen had just asked her to take her and Shirina shopping. *We need new socks,* she’d said, snapping the loose elastic on her socks to prove her point.

Your socks are fine, Mum had said, refusing to look at them. Jezmeen took a closer look at the family occupying all those rows ahead of them. The men were loud and their presence most obvious, standing in the aisles and hollering out to each other. The women talked while juggling their children, their conversation often interrupted by the laughs and calls of their husbands and brothers.

The meal service, when it finally arrived, was a disappointing contrast to the abundant home-cooked fare of the extended family – two soggy potato fritters and a Tetra-pack of lassi – but Jezmeen devoured it. Yesterday, fear had cancelled her appetite. She believed that she might languish in an Indian jail cell forever.

Shirina hadn't touched her meal. She looked a bit repulsed by it. The toddler was slowly rising again, this time with a floppy-eared stuffed bunny as an offering.

'Are you going to eat yours?' Jezmeen asked. Shirina shook her head and pushed the tray to Jezmeen. She tore through the meal gratefully.

One of the men in the family was telling a joke. Jezmeen didn't catch the whole thing, but the punchline only elicited a few weak laughs. 'Oh, come on,' he thundered. 'Don't you all get it?'

'We get it. It's just a lame joke,' a woman replied. There was more laughter at this, and a few claps.

The man grinned. 'Darling, when we were engaged, you always laughed at my jokes.'

A few members of the family began to hoot. 'Calm down, we're in a public place,' shouted another man, who didn't seem to think that shouting in public was inappropriate.

'It's a different thing, *nah*, being engaged and being married?' countered another woman. 'After marriage, you hear the same jokes, over and over again. They stop being funny.'

'It's a good thing we're headed to the village then,' called the first man. 'I can always exchange you for another wife.'

The women's scoffing and eye-rolling responses showed their disapproval but they said nothing and returned to their circle for conversation.

'Didi?' the little girl pleaded. She waved her bunny. Shirina folded the page of her book into a

corner and shut it. With one hand, she tugged the bunny's ears. The toddler giggled and yanked back her toy.

Jezmeen looked over at Rajni, who was staring out the window. Open fields and paddies came into view. The train crossed over a lake that ran like a bright vein through the yellow-green grassland. Jezmeen wished she had had the chance to come to India during her childhood. Imagine summers spent journeying with extended family members, sharing histories over pakoras while the train brought them to their origins. The carriage shuddered against the steel surface of the bridge and the family's laughter exploded, amplifying the sisters' own silence. The little girl giggled as her mother pulled her back into her seat. 'You'll fall, darling,' she said. 'Don't bother other people.' Through the gap between the seats, she flashed an apologetic smile at Shirina.

Jezmeen couldn't take the quiet any more. This was not how they did things. Rajni's eyes were shut and she was taking deep, long breaths. As she let out a breath, it looked as if she was a deflating balloon. Jezmeen reached out and jabbed her hard in the arm.

'OUCH. What the hell, Jezmeen?'

'I have a few things to say to you.'

Shirina, sandwiched between them, pressed her back against her chair.

'I'm busy at the moment,' Rajni said.

'Doing what? You're sitting on a train, literally doing nothing. I can see you.'

'I'm practising mindful breathing,' Rajni said. 'Or I was, until you rudely interrupted me. Now I have to start again.'

'If you can't multitask breathing with conversation, you're doing something wrong,' Jezmeen informed Rajni.

'I'm not getting into another argument with you about mindfulness, the benefits of which are evidenced in multiple studies – OUCH. STOP PINCHING ME.'

'Shirina, exchange seats with me,' Jezmeen ordered. 'Rajni and I have some things to sort out.'

‘No, stay where you are,’ Rajni said, pinning Shirina’s wrist to the armrest as if she might fly off otherwise. ‘Jezmeen, if you want to talk, I’m sorry, I’m just not ready yet.’ She shut her eyes and went back to breathing in and out. Jezmeen could tell from the way her face was squeezed that her mind was certainly not clear of angry thoughts. She waited until Rajni let out a long exhalation.

‘It wasn’t my fault,’ Jezmeen said.

Rajni rolled her eyes. ‘Sure, it wasn’t.’

‘The protest just happened. I was walking around Karol Bagh and I got on the Metro to join you two at India Gate—’

‘You were supposed to be at India Gate with us from the beginning.’

‘Sure, but that’s a different argument altogether,’ Jezmeen said. And not one she was keen on having. Nobody needed to tell her that she overdid the drinking occasionally – she was aware of it and wasn’t that the first step? She was planning on taking more control over her impulses. Eventually, when she had the time, space and wherewithal. A trip across India involved too many variables without adding a sobriety challenge to the mix.

‘If we came here to find ourselves—’ Jezmeen began, not quite knowing where her argument would end up. She wanted Rajni to know that being arrested had frightened her. Although she was acting nonchalant about the whole thing now, she hadn’t been able to sleep last night, and the thought of that cell still made her stomach turn. But that didn’t mean she had been wrong to go to the women’s march in the first place.

‘We came here to remember Mum and to do service,’ Rajni said.

‘Isn’t protesting a service? Fighting for women’s rights? Did you know that there are women in the villages whose husbands share them with their brothers because female infanticide has resulted in an alarmingly low ratio of women to men?’

This got Shirina’s attention. She looked up at Jezmeen, alarmed. ‘It’s true,’ Jezmeen continued. ‘It’s something like six men to one woman in some of the poorer states here. It’s disgraceful.’

Annoyance twitched across Rajni’s features. ‘Trouble just seems to find you, doesn’t it? Since

the day we started this trip, you've been sabotaging it.'

'I have not.'

'You have. You've been contrary from the beginning. Even Shirina agrees with me.'

Jezmeen stared at Shirina. 'Is this true?' she demanded. Shirina squirmed in her seat. 'Is it?' Jezmeen asked.

'I think you could have avoided drinking that much if you knew it was going to make it difficult for you to wake up the next day, that's all. I made a passing remark to Rajni on our way to the temple. I didn't say "contrary",' Shirina said defensively.

'Well, nobody says "contrary" unless they're over seventy,' Jezmeen said. To Rajni's credit, she let the comment slide. 'But I don't understand why you think I'm sabotaging the trip. Shirina's the one who's not even coming along to the last half of it. Somehow that's acceptable? While we're making an arduous trek up a mountain and sleeping on straw mats, she's going to be eating sweets and receiving newlywed gifts from her in-laws' extended family in the village. She'll probably even have WiFi access. That's not very fair, Shirina.'

'I'm sorry you feel that way,' Shirina said.

Jezmeen groaned. For once, it would be nice if Shirina didn't defuse every argument. It was so unsatisfying. From the corner of her eye, she noticed the toddler's head popping up again. She grinned at Rajni and squealed.

'Yes, darling? Yes?' Rajni cooed, beaming. 'What's that you've got there? Hmm?' The girl was dangling something else over the seat. It was a bright-yellow Tupperware container plastered in Peppa Pig stickers. 'Can I have this?' Rajni asked. The girl smiled and trained her eyes on Shirina. She shook the container at her.

Shirina didn't acknowledge the girl. She looked down at her book, fiercely concentrating until the girl lost interest and disappeared into her seat again. It was strange – the sight of the girl seemed to really bother Shirina. Jezmeen sneaked a look and saw that Shirina hadn't gone past the first page of her book.

Then Shirina turned to Jezmeen. ‘I never said you were trying to sabotage the trip, but when we went to your hotel room yesterday and you were drunk, I was very disappointed.’ Her lips were a thin line. Jezmeen stared at Shirina, speechless. This voice coming from Shirina, it didn’t even sound like her. Even Rajni looked surprised. ‘What’s so difficult about stopping after a glass or two? Hmm? It’s what people do. Normal people have limits. They know how to behave.’

‘Shirina—’ Rajni began.

‘Don’t drag me into your arguments when you want somebody to take your side,’ Shirina continued. ‘I won’t be a part of that.’

‘Okay, okay,’ Rajni said.

‘And I won’t be lectured about family obligations,’ Shirina said. ‘Not by my two older sisters, who got into a fistfight at our mother’s deathbed. Does it ever occur to you that the last thing she witnessed before dying was the two of you bickering, as always? Maybe she died that night because she had nothing else to hang around for, if you couldn’t even put aside your differences for one day. Nothing changed, even after Mum died. That’s why I left so quickly after the funeral.’

Jezmeen was stunned. She looked at Rajni, whose expression matched hers. If this was what Shirina really thought, how long had she been holding onto her anger?

Had the train carriage gone quieter since their heated exchange began? It seemed that the family at the front had stopped talking. The air was taut with anticipation. Jezmeen shrank in her seat, worried that somebody might have had their mobile phone camera out. The last thing she needed was another YouTube upload: *Jezmeen Shergill in row with sisters on a train in India!*

The toddler popped up again but her mother quickly dragged her down, whispering urgently to her, ‘*Leave them alone.*’ Immediately, the little girl began to cry. ‘Didi,’ she sobbed. ‘Didi!’ Jezmeen was surprised by the tears that sprang into her own eyes.

When the train finally pulled into the station, Shirina was ready to get up and go. They had spent the remaining eight or so hours of the journey only exchanging cursory words, choosing to entertain

themselves. For Shirina, this meant reading her book, although her mind didn't absorb much and she ended up drifting off to sleep. She had fragmented dreams about Mum sitting up in her bed, alert to the scuffle between her two older daughters outside her room. In the dreams, Mum got out of bed and pleaded with them to stop. As a warning, she shook her jewellery case at them, but they ignored her. Shirina had never told anybody before that she blamed Rajni and Jezmeen for the way Mum's final moments played out. Even Sehaj didn't know what actually happened – he was just aware that Shirina was more eager than ever to start a family with him after she returned from London. When the test showed up negative a few weeks later, the disappointment felt unlike anything Shirina had experienced before – heavy and hollow at the same time. She was still grieving over Mum, so the hot tears that flooded down her cheeks didn't surprise Sehaj. He reminded her that it could take a few tries, that they were still young and had plenty of time. But Shirina felt let down, and wished she could talk to somebody who knew this feeling. Ironically, Rajni was the only person who would understand but Shirina was still too upset about what happened at the hospital to confide in her sister.

Rajni stood up now and counted all of their suitcases. 'We have six pieces in total,' she said. 'Do we have all six pieces?' Shirina took some delight in ignoring her. Rajni frowned and picked up her bags. They shuffled down the aisle, past the family who had gone sluggish and sleepy after their feast but were now on their feet with renewed energy.

Porters stepped into their path, offering to carry bags, asking where they were going. It occurred to Shirina that she had no idea where their hotel was; Rajni had that information on her itinerary. Shirina waved the porter away and kept her head down as she moved along with the crowd from the sun-soaked platform to the sheltered station. Beggars slept here – not on the edges, but in the middle of the floor so she had to step around them. Shirina met the pleading gaze of one woman sitting up on a folded piece of cardboard, a threadbare sari wrapped around her bony frame. Shirina took care not to tread on her fingers, which extended from her open palm, a silent request for money. Like the other passengers leaving the station, Shirina quickly learned the art of stepping gingerly around a person while also not looking at them.

They engaged the first rickshaw driver who called out to them. He took their bags and piled them in the back, turning and wedging them like pieces in a puzzle. Shirina hurried to get in first; she was conscious again of how awkward she looked when she had to hoist herself up (getting up the steep stairs into the train carriage had been more challenging than she'd anticipated). She didn't want Rajni and Jezmeen seeing her struggling. Rajni was more concerned about the bags anyway; she kept frowning and counting them. 'Six pieces,' she said again, nodding.

The auto-rickshaw's engine rumbled beneath them and the smell of burning rubber filled Shirina's nostrils. Jezmeen began to cough. Rajni grabbed the railing at the side of the car but the driver turned back and told her not to. She withdrew her hand just in time for a truck to clip past, narrowly missing the rickshaw.

The air was supposed to be fresher up north, but from the rickshaw, Amritsar and Delhi felt one and the same. The sweltering heat had already hit its peak for the day but the residual humidity clung to Shirina's skin. On the road, the only difference Shirina noticed between the two cities was the spaces between the squat buildings here, where the green fields behind the main road were visible. They merged onto a major road, the rickshaw flanked on either side by large trucks and buses. All the clamour of the city overwhelmed Shirina's senses. She shielded her eyes from the dust and grit that flew into the open space and peppered her hair and skin. At one traffic light, she pulled her hand away momentarily to see a man teetering on top of a tall ladder, fixing a telephone wire. The ladder, made of bamboo, bent like a weak sapling against the wind. Shirina covered her eyes again.

The roads became narrower and turned into small lanes. Every time the rickshaw turned, Shirina feared a dangerous teetering and tipping and she wondered what would happen if they got into an accident here. If their bags popped free from the ropes that constrained them, their belongings mixing with the grime and dog droppings on the ground. Would anybody help them? It was unlikely. Traffic wouldn't stop for them – it would continue running, flattening everything they had. Shirina thought briefly about the contents of her bag and realized she wouldn't miss anything. Let it all tumble away, it would make her travels easier.

Her passport case was in her pocket, of course. She patted it frequently, made sure it didn't fall out from all the jostling of the ride. More important than the passport at the moment was the card inside the case that Sehaj had given her at the airport.

They veered into a lane clogged with vehicles and shops jammed together. A young man on a rusty bicycle shot in front of them, making the rickshaw driver curse loudly. Their hotel, The Holy City Palace, was at the end of this lane; its sign stuck out like a friendly waving hand. They pulled up and got out, a frowning Rajni counting the bags for the third time.

Two gilded mirrors on either wall of the hotel lobby made endless multiples of Shirina, Rajni and Jezmeen. Behind the reception desk, there was a magnificent backlit portrait of the Golden Temple at night, its reflection melting across the calm holy waters. An elderly turbaned man stood behind the computer, nodding as they entered. Rajni handed him the booking sheet. He asked them to take a seat.

Shirina couldn't believe she was willing to sit again after having spent the whole day sitting down, but she was relieved to rest once more. Rajni picked up a newspaper and became absorbed in an article. Jezmeen came and sat next to her, picking up a magazine from the table. 'Ooh, that's a nice dress,' she said, pointing to a lime-coloured gown that clung to the model's hips. 'Imagine asking to get one of those tailored.'

'Especially around here,' Shirina said. Most of the women she'd seen so far were dressed in salwar-kameez out of respect for the holy city.

'Madam,' said the front-desk man. He gazed at all three of them, not sure who was in charge. Rajni responded to his summons. If they had husbands with them, it would be easier, Shirina thought. On the train, the conductors had come around asking all the sirs for their families' tickets. She felt a pinch of longing for Sehaj. At the airport, he had carried her bags out of the car and placed his hand gently on the small of her back. The gesture made her feel protected.

'They want our passports,' Rajni called from the reception desk.

'Open up to the stamp page, please,' said the man.

‘The stamp page?’ Jezmeen asked.

‘The place where your entry into India was stamped,’ he replied. ‘We need to see it.’

‘Oh,’ Jezmeen said. She flipped open her passport. ‘Honestly, I can’t even remember them stamping it.’

‘They must have,’ Shirina said. She had already located hers, an inked box announcing her entry date.

‘If no entry stamp, we have a problem,’ the man said. ‘National security.’ His gaze shifted from Rajni to Shirina to Jezmeen. ‘Amritsar is very close to Pakistan. We don’t want people coming in illegally from that side, causing trouble here.’

Shirina thought his eyes were lingering on hers for a second too long. She wanted to tell him she wasn’t here to cause trouble; if anything, she had made this trip to eliminate more trouble for herself. But she wondered if she looked jittery, or suspicious.

‘Found it,’ Jezmeen said, springing up from the sofa. ‘It’s very faded,’ she explained to the man at the desk, who turned his look of suspicion onto her. Relief washed over Shirina. The heat of his stare was gone. She realized how tense she was, that any question, any suspicion or doubts about her intentions here made her feel as if she was being interrogated. In truth, it was nobody’s business. Sehaj had said the same thing to her when she told him she didn’t think she could maintain this lie while spending so much time with her sisters, in such close quarters. ‘They’re nosy,’ she had told him. ‘They’ll know something’s up.’ To her relief and disappointment, they hadn’t noticed what was going on with her.

The desk manager typed furiously into his computer. ‘This could take some time,’ he said. ‘We’ll show you to your rooms and return your passports later.’

Rajni frowned. ‘We can probably wait,’ she said.

‘It could take an hour,’ the desk manager said.

‘An hour?’ she asked. ‘Why do you need so much time?’

He sighed. ‘Madam, do I have to explain India’s security issues with Pakistan? Do I need to tell

you about Partition? Amritsar has been a border city ever since Punjab was split into India and Pakistan,' he said with pride, as if he had overseen the splitting himself.

'You don't need to give us a history lesson, our parents told us all about Partition when we were growing up,' Rajni said.

Did they? They must have been Dad's stories and Shirina must have been too young to understand them. Everything she knew about Partition, she had seen on Hindi films that featured a lover on each side of the border, separated by cruel politics, their families unsympathetic to their plight as violence ravaged their communities. Those movies always made her cry.

'Then you'll understand why I need to scrutinize these documents very carefully,' said the desk manager. 'This is our policy for all guests. We can't take any chances.'

'But we've got British passports. We clearly didn't scramble across the border.'

'Let it go,' Jezmeen said, leaning over the back of her chair. 'What's the big deal if they hold onto our passports for a bit? We'll get them back.'

Rajni looked uneasy. She eyed the man. His expression did not change. 'India's national security first, Madam. We are on the front lines here.' The way he talked, it was as if it was 1947 and the war was raging at his doorstep.

'Fine,' Rajni said.

A porter loaded their bags into a trolley and pushed it towards the service elevator, pointing Shirina, Rajni and Jezmeen to a smaller lift. An instrumental Kenny G ballad floated over the speakers, completely incongruous to the lush palatial décor in the lobby and the reception staff's militancy. The sisters' rooms were next to each other, and almost as if the hotel was aware of their birth order – 301: Rajni, 302: Jezmeen, 303: Shirina.

As soon as she entered her room, Shirina collapsed into her bed. This fatigue was a nightmare – and even worse that she had to dismiss it as a side effect of travelling. She took her phone and checked the time. Sehaj would be finishing dinner now, maybe watching some television. They hadn't actually

spoken to each other since she arrived in India; just messages, the banal, perfunctory types to let each other know they were still alive. Today she needed to hear his voice. She entered the WiFi password and found Sehaj's number on her overseas calling app. He picked up on the third ring.

'Shirina?' he asked. The concern in his voice nearly melted her. 'Are you okay?'

Of course he loves you. It was a thought that surprised Shirina. She didn't realize that she'd doubted him until she heard him speak.

'I'm fine.' All of a sudden, her voice was thick with tears.

'I can't hear you, sweetheart,' he said tenderly. 'Speak up.'

'I'm fine,' she said loudly. It sounded more convincing with more volume. 'We just got to Amritsar.'

'How is it?'

'I haven't seen much yet. We were just on a hair-raising rickshaw ride and then checked into our rooms.' She smiled, remembering the taxi driver picking them up from Istanbul airport and chattering away in Turkish, pointing to various landmarks as he wove through traffic and entered the Old City, where their hotel was. The sun had glinted off the Bosphorus river and everything seemed possible; she was giddy with the mysterious romance of the city and she even thought she understood the driver after a while, the cadences of his language and the odd Hindi word – *subah*, *kitap* – catching in her mind.

The memory softened Shirina and she could sense Sehaj was thinking about their honeymoon too. She wanted to tell him how she was really feeling. 'I'm scared,' she said.

His voice overlapped with hers. 'Work's been really crazy.'

'Oh,' she said. The tears came up again. She listened as he told her about an unreasonable client, and the late hours he was spending at the office going through some contracts with a fine-toothed comb. The business was expanding to Europe, where tax regulations in certain countries were a nightmare to deal with from overseas. Her mind wandered as Sehaj spoke. Notes from the Kenny G elevator tune drifted in the back of her mind.

'. . . And I'm having to fix everybody's mistakes for them. Not that I want to wish my days away, but I'm really looking forward to the next long weekend.'

'That's months away,' Shirina murmured.

'Yeah, I know,' Sehaj said with a sigh, and then he said nothing. *Ask me again if I'm okay,* Shirina thought. *Ask about the train journey.* She wanted to tell him about the little girl on the train and how purposefully she had ignored her, even when she cried out and called Shirina 'sister'.

'Sehaj, I'm scared,' she finally said again.

This time, he heard. The distinct silence on the other end wasn't caused by a delay. His voice had been crystal clear.

'Shirina . . .' he began.

'Don't,' she said. 'Don't say it.'

'I'm not saying you *have* to do it.'

She wanted to throw the phone across the room. It was so unfair, being told the decision was hers to make, when it wasn't, not completely. She wouldn't be allowed to have regrets or doubts if she was the one who had come up with the plan.

'What if I don't go through with it?' Shirina asked. 'I really can't come back?'

Another pause. 'It's something we need to discuss then,' Sehaj said finally.

'We – you and me? Just the two of us?'

'And my mother.'

Shirina groaned. 'How does she factor into this decision, Sehaj?'

'You married my family,' Sehaj said. 'We talked about this. We make our decisions together, we sacrifice things for each other. This is what families do.'

Shirina couldn't fault Sehaj for reminding her how families were supposed to behave – in the early days of getting to know each other, she had been so impressed with Sehaj's family. They had big gatherings, and took holidays together. They did what families did.

'But she doesn't have to be involved in *every* decision we make,' she insisted.

‘She’s my mother.’

‘I’m your wife,’ Shirina reminded him.

‘Shirina—’ With his lips too close to the receiver, Sehaj’s sigh sounded like a roar. ‘You’re making this more complicated than it needs to be.’

‘I’m allowed to say no, then?’ she asked, emboldened by Sehaj’s softened tone. He didn’t want to fight; he just wanted the problem to go away. They had hardly the space to argue in his house, with his mother always in the shadows, but this long-distance phone call was allowing more privacy. ‘This isn’t a trivial thing like choosing curtains or—’ She paused at the sound of shuffling in the background.

‘Hang on,’ Sehaj said. His voice became distant and then muffled because – of course, as if they conjured her just by speaking about her – his mother was now in the room. How did she manage to always do that?

Moments later, Sehaj came back to the phone. ‘Sorry about that,’ he said, but his voice was already different. Shirina felt the shift. There was something business-like in his tone; all the tenderness was gone.

The distance gave Shirina courage. In the silence and the emptiness of her hotel room, she shut her eyes. ‘Is she still there?’

Either Sehaj registered her steely tone and was taken aback, or the slight delay meant that it took him a second or two to hear her. Either way, Shirina felt emboldened. She opened her eyes.

‘She just came up to get something,’ Sehaj said.

‘She came up, did she? All by herself? She must be well then,’ Shirina said. She heard a warning voice – *Stop, stop it, you’re going too far* – but she ignored it.

Again, the delay seemed to stretch. Shirina thought about the day she had handed in her resignation, saying that she had to stay at home to take care of her mother-in-law who needed help climbing the stairs at home after her hip surgery. ‘There’s nobody else there,’ Shirina explained. ‘It could be a long recovery.’ The reluctance must have been apparent in her voice because her supervisor

took her out for coffee that afternoon. ‘You have such potential,’ she said. ‘Can’t you take some time off? Can’t you and husband work out an arrangement? There are chair lifts if she can’t move.’

Chair lifts became the single image in Shirina’s mind every time she thought about the difference between Eastern and Western values. Indian daughters-in-law took care of their families. They made necessary sacrifices. They knew what it took to preserve the peace in their home. Westerners installed chair lifts.

‘Shirina,’ Sehaj said. And then he said nothing. There was more shuffling, more movement and voices. She recognized the sound of the door opening and shutting. He was leaving the room. ‘Sweetheart,’ he said. The tenderness was restored in his voice. He had left his mother and found some privacy. ‘I know you’re upset, baby,’ he said soothingly. ‘I know.’

It was all she wanted, or at least this was what she thought. An offer of understanding. She thought about the little girl on the train, holding her hand out to play. She hadn’t stopped thinking about her and she could still hear the girl calling her ‘sister’, so disappointed when Shirina refused to play along. Throughout the journey, during all the bickering between Rajni and Jezmeen, nobody noticed that Shirina hadn’t flipped the page of her novel once. She had read the same line over and over again until the words lost their meaning.

Rajni needed the newspaper. She had left it in the lobby because the man at the reception desk was watching their every move, but an advertisement had caught her eye and the porter had whisked them away to their rooms before she could take down the information – discreetly of course, she didn’t need Jezmeen and Shirina knowing that she was considering hiring a private investigator. How would she explain that to them?

She stepped out of the room and entered the lift with the stealth of a thief, looking left and right. The lobby was empty. The desk manager caught her eye and nodded. ‘Just another few minutes,’ he said, thinking she had come for the passport. She was pleased for the excuse. ‘I’ll just wait here if you don’t mind,’ she said haughtily. Once his gaze returned to the screen, she took a seat on the plush

lounge chair and pulled up the newspaper. There it was, the ad in the corner:

PRE-MATRIMONIAL INVESTIGATIONS

'Better pre-nup than post-nup'

Getting married? Want to know your future spouse's history? We can do a thorough financial and moral check-up. Our experienced and highly skilled investigators are discreet and detail-oriented. They will not let you down! With a network of dedicated pre-matrimonial specialists spanning across India and the diaspora, we are now specializing in inter-state and overseas marriages* and offering competitive rates. Call us now for a free consultation!

Next to the asterisk, there was a list in tiny print of territories where their detectives could reach. London, UK was third after Toronto, Canada and California, USA. Rajni glanced at the reception desk and pressed the newspaper to the table with her palm. Then she slowly ripped the ad out, careful not to make a sound. She had a feeling that even a small transgression like this could make the hotel owner revoke their right to stay in this holiest of cities.

Stuffing the torn piece of paper in her pocket, Rajni headed back to the lift. 'Ma'am,' the man called as she passed him. She felt her heart leap in her throat and then realized how silly she was being. Ripping a newspaper was hardly vandalism, although after the visit to the police station yesterday, she didn't want to take any chances. Just the thought of getting into trouble made her break out in a sweat.

'Yes?' she replied, trying to sound casual.

'Your passport,' he said.

'I can take the others if you want,' Rajni said, feeling overly generous because now she felt bad about defacing his newspaper.

The man paused to consider this and then handed all three to Rajni.

She returned to her room and read the ad again, considering what the detectives might do. What did she want them to uncover? She wasn't certain, but she knew that it was worth having a look around. Judging from the way she and Kabir left their last conversation, she was certain that he wasn't thinking the worst of Davina – that she could be a con artist. It would be ideal, Rajni thought as she dialled the number, her confidence building, if Davina was already married. Rajni didn't want to devastate Anil. She certainly didn't want the investigators to uncover something dangerous that might have an adverse effect on her son – like a serious STI or a violent criminal history (worse yet, if Davina's husband was in jail for violent criminal behaviour and was out on bail and could come after Anil). But she also welcomed the thought of handing over a dossier to her foolish, naïve son and saying, 'HAH!'

'WELCOME TO BHARAT INVESIGATORS,' blared a pre-recorded message that gave Rajni a jolt. She held the phone half an arm's-length away from her ear to listen to the menu options. 'PRESS ZERO TO SPEAK TO ONE OF OUR QUALIFIED PROFESSIONALS.' She pressed zero and waited again, this time through a staticky old Hindi song that she vaguely recognized – it was a classic about love.

It was only when the song came to the chorus that she realized where it was from, and there was that familiar squeezing in her stomach, that guilt. She remembered hearing it again at her wedding while greeting guests, her hand clasped in Kabir's, and immediately making eye contact with Mum from across the room. They had both recognized it. Mum was standing near the deejay; she approached him calmly, whispered a few words, and the track was switched to something more up-to-date.

'Hello, welcome to Bharat Investigators, how may I help you?'

The young male voice was a pleasant surprise. For some reason, she had pictured a matronly aunty type sitting at a cluttered desk serviced by a single fan that blew dust around the room. The detective's worldwide networks would be no more sophisticated than a community of wives and

sisters-in-law who were migrants in other Indian enclaves in multicultural cities, and the work would be a side-hobby, no different from anything they were already doing, but now it earned them a bit of pocket money.

'Hello,' Rajni said. 'I'm considering engaging an investigator to do a background check on a woman.'

'No problem, ma'am. Can I know how to address you, please?'

'My name is . . .' Here she hesitated. If the investigator had networks in London, how likely was he to blab to a friend who might tell another friend about her family secrets? There was no harm in giving a false name. 'Meera,' she said.

'Ma'am, your real name, please,' the man responded.

'How did you—'

'Almost every woman who calls uses the name Meera,' he said.

She knew she should have picked a less common Indian name, or at least one that sounded authentic, like . . . . Rajni. It was like telling the detective that her name was Jane Doe and expecting not to raise any suspicions.

'I'm Rajni,' she said a bit sheepishly. 'Sorry.'

'No problem,' the man was breezy. 'We just need to be honest with each other in order to do this right, okay?'

'And your name?' she asked.

'Nikhil Ahuja,' he said. 'We're a pair of brothers running this company.' He prattled on for a while about the company's history – started in 2003 when a new generation of young Indians abroad began demanding pre-matrimonial checks after hearing horror stories of friends being deceived. (Those marriages were the result of a boom in Indian matrimonial websites, which made Rajni think of Shirina. Did she ever consider getting somebody to look into Sehaj's background?, she wondered. But of course, why would she? There was nothing suspicious about Sehaj – it was as if Shirina had typed 'perfect Indian male companion' into a machine and 3D printed the ideal husband.)

‘And we recently expanded to territories in Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand,’ Nikhil said.

‘Alright,’ Rajni said. She was feeling a bit overwhelmed by Nikhil’s enthusiasm. ‘And you handle, uh, cases where people want to just check somebody out because they have suspicions?’ In Rajni’s private opinion, a thirty-six-year-old woman getting pregnant by a young man half her age deserved a stronger description than ‘suspicious’ but for brevity’s sake, she felt it was important to downplay it.

‘Certainly,’ Nikhil declared. There was that enthusiasm again. It made Rajni just the slightest bit queasy. ‘I’ll give you an example of a case we worked on recently – very successful, in fact it was even publicized. A young doctor in Singapore agreed to an arranged marriage to a woman in the Sikh community. Both boy and girl liked each other, decided to get engaged. However, the girl’s mother had some suspicions about the boy. Not really any evidence, but he was a doctor – you know, high income and handsome. Why was he still available? Her family told her not to be silly; she was being overly cautious, they said. Then the unthinkable happened!’

Nikhil had a flair for the dramatic, Rajni noted.

‘It turned out that the mother was trying to draw everybody’s attention away from the daughter, who had a boyfriend in New Zealand, where she studied. Some pictures were beginning to surface. The boyfriend felt betrayed that after five years together, she was just leaving him for an arranged marriage. He had called the house several times to speak to the parents during the engagement. The doctor’s parents were aware of it – the New Zealander had managed to contact them somehow as well, Facebook, I think – and the mother-in-law was already considering rescinding the marriage offer.’

‘So the marriage wasn’t going to go through, and the girl’s mother was pre-emptively spreading the rumour that it was the boy’s fault?’ Rajni asked.

‘Yes,’ Nikhil said. ‘Turns out the girl was the one doing shameful things.’

Shameful things. But really, all she did was have a boyfriend outside the community, didn’t

she? Rajni was uncomfortable with Nikhil's moralizing. When he posed his next question, she found herself stumbling and considered hanging up because surely he knew what she was hiding:

'So can you let me know the nature of your case?' he asked.

'Uh . . . yes. See, my son – he's going out with, he's about to marry this woman,' Rajni said. It was not strictly the truth, but if she told Nikhil that Anil had got Davina pregnant, he might not be very sympathetic. Worse yet, he would wonder what kind of mother she was – a question that had been turning in her mind ever since she awoke from her fainting spell back in London.

'Okay,' Nikhil said. 'And you have doubts? Some feelings that it is not right?'

'Yes,' Rajni said. That was putting it mildly. 'She's a bit older than him.'

'Okay,' Nikhil said. 'How much older?'

Rajni had done the maths as soon as Anil told her, but she couldn't bring herself to say it aloud. 'She's in her thirties. My son is . . . he's in his twenties.' Did it make a difference if she added a few years to his age? She decided not.

'How did they meet?' Nikhil asked.

'I'm not sure,' Rajni said.

'Hmm,' Nikhil said. 'It never came up, or he refused to tell you?'

She wasn't sure if it ever came up. 'Look, the thing I'm suspicious about is that he seems very . . . influenced by her. He had career plans that he's suddenly putting on hold because of this woman.'

'Could she be pregnant?' Nikhil asked.

Dammit. 'Yes,' Rajni said. 'She could be.'

'Could be, or she is?'

'She . . . she is,' Rajni said. 'They're getting together in a bit of a rush because of this whole thing, but I'm wondering if she's roped him into it.'

'It's a bit difficult for us to determine the circumstances around a woman's pregnancy,' Nikhil said after a pause. 'He's certain it's his baby?'

Anil still had that annoying teenager habit of filling every minor pause with 'uh' and 'like'.

Rajni could not imagine him being certain of anything.

'He is,' Rajni said. 'But I think he's being fooled.'

There was a pause again. Rajni heard Nikhil repeating the facts under his breath, and a keyboard clicking away.

'I'd like to know . . . other things about her as well,' Rajni said. 'Her background. Any skeletons in the closet.'

'Of course,' Nikhil said. 'A woman like that, she's bound to have a few stories, or people who can tell us a few things.'

Once again, Rajni felt uneasy but she suppressed it. *That's not fair.* She tried not to think of Mum and the family who abandoned her after rumours started circulating about Rajni.

Nikhil gave her a basic game plan: he would discuss the case with his partners in the UK and do a comprehensive background check on Davina. These things were perfectly legal, he assured Rajni with a nervous laugh that indicated there were less legal methods to follow. 'If nothing comes up in the background check – no major debt, no current spouse, etc. – then I will assign somebody to follow her for a week. Details often emerge from this part of the investigation.'

'Alright,' Rajni said.

'Mrs Rajni, I have one more question,' Nikhil asked.

Here was where he was going to ask if she had been one hundred per cent honest with him. *Is there anything else I should know?*

'Yes?' she squeaked.

'Will you pay your deposit by Visa, Bank Transfer or PayPal?' Nikhil asked, his voice smooth as honey.

The tone in Cameron's email sounded genuinely excited. 'Have some roles that are perfect for you.' The word 'perfect' had a line through it because Cameron had been so excited, he forgot how to underline.

‘Jezmeen!’ he answered the phone. ‘How are things? How’s India?’

How was India? She could not sum up her experience in an easy sentence. ‘It’s incredible,’ she said. ‘Just like the advertisements.’ *And the consular guidelines, which I’ll take more seriously from now on,* she thought.

‘I backpacked through Uttar Pradesh myself, you know,’ Cameron said with a hint of pride. ‘Twenty years ago.’

‘Did you?’ Jezmeen asked, not because it was her first time hearing it (it wasn’t) but because Cameron seemed to think that this was part of their connection somehow. He understood the Indian experience because he had stayed in a filthy flea motel on a mountain and got a parasite from a dodgy paneer tikka.

‘Oh yes,’ Cameron said. ‘Really went off the beaten path. Incredible country. Such lovely people. So warm and welcoming to travellers.’

Men who backpacked or did cycling tours around India often said this of their experience. Such a great place to travel. They had made their way around solo, reliant on the kindness of strangers who invited them into their homes to share a meal. Travelling as a woman in India was an entirely different thing. Even with her sisters at her side, Jezmeen felt vulnerable.

‘So tell me about these roles,’ she said.

Cameron drew in a breath. ‘Two possibilities, very strong ones – the first is for a new television series called *The Disgraced*.’

‘I like the title,’ Jezmeen said. She had an instant image in her mind of a strong female character, not unlike the one Polly played in *The Boathouse*, her backlit profile against the dark and mysterious waters of the Thames. ‘What’s the premise?’

Cameron cleared his throat. ‘A promising young British-Asian woman looking for a match online becomes slowly radicalized by her lover, who is a fundamentalist and a skilled recruiter for a global terror network.’

‘Very interesting,’ Jezmeen said. There was some promise there. She didn’t want to get too

excited, and she hoped that the script would portray the woman as a universal, identifiable sort of character, not one of those 'my fundamentalism has always been in me like some kind of genetic mutation which has now been activated!' people.

'I thought you'd be intrigued by that. I have to tell you, before we go any further; you won't be considered for the main role.'

'Oh,' Jezmeen said, feeling a flutter of disappointment. 'What's the role then?'

'It's a smaller role,' Cameron said.

'Like a sister?' In a moment of sheer horror, Jezmeen thought he might offer her the role of this woman's mother.

'Like a wife,' Cameron said.

'Oh,' Jezmeen said. 'That's not so bad. The wife of another character then.'

'Yes,' Cameron said.

'Go on then, tell me about her,' Jezmeen said.

Somebody was knocking on the door. As Jezmeen walked over and pressed the phone between her tipped head and a raised shoulder, she heard Cameron's response but did not think she heard it correctly.

'Wife of Terrorist Number Seven,' Cameron said as Jezmeen threw open the door.

'WHAT?' she shrieked. The porter was at the door, holding a large silver tray.

'Ma'am, you ordered room service,' he protested.

'You want me to be the WIFE OF A TERRORIST?'

The porter looked very alarmed.

'Sorry,' Jezmeen said to him, opening the door wider to let him bring the food inside. It was a more elaborate meal that she thought she had paid for, and her mouth watered at the smell of the paneer masala and steamed rice. Still, she was not done with Cameron yet. *Focus.*

'Let me take a wild guess, Cameron. This character doesn't have any lines, does she?'

'No,' Cameron admitted.

The porter was setting her meal very carefully on the table and laying out the cutlery.

'And she probably wears a hijab the whole time? A burqa? She's basically a pair of simpering brown eyes?'

'I think you'll need to discuss costumes later, but . . .'

'Oh, come on Cameron,' Jezmeen said with exasperation. 'I know what Terrorist Number Five's role is – an angry brown man screaming things in incomprehensible Arabic and waving a giant rifle around, threatening the Western world when what he's actually saying is closer to "Can I have fries with that?"'

'Seven,' Cameron corrected her. 'He's Terrorist Number Seven.'

'So he's that low in the rankings. I can't even be Terrorist Number One's wife?' Once again, the porter looked dismayed. He glanced nervously at the door as if he might be taken hostage. Jezmeen tried to give him a reassuring smile and held her hand up to say, *I'll get your tip*, as she crossed the room, but he backed away and – she was certain she wasn't imagining this – edged closer to the butter knife.

'Would you consider that? A higher-ranking terrorist?'

'Is it a speaking role?' Jezmeen wasn't sure if this was a serious conversation any more.

'She might have a few lines, I suppose,' Cameron said. Jezmeen could picture him sitting at his desk in London, wiping the sweat off his brow and using one hand to type an email to the producers.

The porter was lingering at the door. 'Hang on,' Jezmeen said to Cameron, reaching for her purse. She gave the porter a few rupee notes which he touched to his forehead in a gesture of gratitude before backing out the door.

'So it's a no then?' Cameron asked when Jezmeen returned to the conversation. 'You realize that your options are narrowing, right?'

'I don't think Terrorist Number Six's wife is going to be my big comeback role, Cameron,' Jezmeen retorted. 'I'm sorry, but we're just going to have to work harder on this.'

'Seven,' Cameron corrected her. Jezmeen wanted to reach through the phone and club him on

the head.

'You mentioned a couple of roles,' Jezmeen said. 'What are my other options?'

Cameron hesitated. With a sinking feeling, Jezmeen realized that Mrs Bin Laden was the good news.

'There's a movie which is being shot in India,' Cameron said. 'A sort of . . . train journey story.'

'Really?' Jezmeen asked, her interest piqued. Maybe Cameron had been trying to warm her up. 'Tell me more.'

'A family goes on a trip across Northern India to reconnect with their missing son,' Cameron said. 'It's a road-trip story with a bit of a twist.'

Jezmeen smiled. She could imagine the press junkets now: *I was on a similar journey – both spiritual and physical – with my sisters, and I can tell you, there were lots of unexpected twists and turns, haha.*

'. . . it's a cross-genre sort of thing,' Cameron said. 'Quite unusual. Fitting for a niche audience but maybe not limited to them, if done right.'

'What's the role?'

'Shruti,' Cameron said. 'The family's eldest daughter. Unmarried, a bit of a concern for the parents. Unbeknownst to her, they're taking her to the village to meet a suitable man.'

'Right,' Jezmeen said. She could work with that. 'Sounds like a good role then.'

'She's not in the story for very long,' Cameron said. That hesitation had returned to his voice. 'But her character makes a real impact, you know? We think about the consequences of everybody's actions long after.'

'What happens to her?' Jezmeen asked, already slightly involved and therefore grieving for Shruti.

'She catches a . . . uh, virus.'

'Okay,' Jezmeen said. 'A tragic heroine?'

Cameron cleared his throat. 'I suppose you could say that.'

‘Cameron . . .’ Jezmeen began.

‘It’s a very physical role,’ Cameron said.

‘What, she’s leaping off buildings and rooftops in her condition?’

‘She’s undead.’

‘WHAT?’

‘She has a virus which makes her . . . you know, dead but not quite—’

‘She’s a zombie? You’re offering me a role in a Punjabi zombie film?’

‘Yes,’ Cameron said miserably.

‘How far into the film does she die?’ Jezmeen asked.

‘About ten minutes.’

‘What the hell, Cameron!’

‘It’s a very physical death,’ Cameron said brightly. ‘You know how zombies are – lots of spasms and buckling. You’d get to display a range of emotions, which could come in handy for something else.’

‘For another bloody Hindustani monster road-trip film?’

‘I’m not the one who writes these scripts,’ Cameron protested. ‘Don’t shoot the messenger.’

‘Who can I shoot then?’ Jezmeen asked. ‘Who wrote this movie?’

Cameron gave her a name that she hadn’t heard of. Jezmeen sighed. ‘It’s disappointing, Cameron,’ she said.

‘We’ve talked about this, Jezmeen. The lack of roles and your current reputation.’

‘I know, I know,’ she replied. ‘I’m disappointed in the scripting as well. The unmarried daughter is disposed of within ten minutes in what is – I’m guessing – a three-hour Bollywood spectacle with zombies, like some extended version of the “Thriller” video. They can’t even keep Shruti alive to dance a little bit?’

Cameron clearly had no words. ‘Hmm,’ he said, as if he was considering sexism and all its complexities when it was just as likely that he was using one hand to type into the Google search

engine: ‘how to calm down angry brown actress’.

‘Those are my two options then?’ Jezmeen asked.

‘For the moment,’ Cameron said. ‘I’m sorry, Jezmeen. You know that I’m advocating for you in every way that I can, but—’

‘I know,’ Jezmeen said. The pleading tone in Cameron’s voice made her feel guilty. She thought of Rajni sitting in the police station, surrounded by men and wringing her hands, and she felt a pang of regret for putting her through all of that. ‘Listen, I’ll think about it, alright?’

‘You will?’ Cameron asked brightly.

‘Give me a day or two?’ Jezmeen asked. ‘Send me the info.’ Ever since the Arowana incident, she was aware that she couldn’t afford to be choosy, but these choices truly depressed her. Her thoughts flashed back to the make-up counter. Was it worth doing that gig until another breakthrough happened? She was going to go into arrears in her rent; the only thing that would tide her over for a little while was the bit of money Mum had left them from the sale of the house.

After hanging up, Jezmeen ate her dinner of paneer masala and basmati rice, scraping her spoon across the bottom of the bowl, and then using her fingers to wipe up the last traces. She hadn’t noticed how hungry she was until she started eating, but when she was done, she realized how quickly she had eaten. Immediately, the sensation of fullness turned into queasiness. The room was filled with the smell of spices now; she called room service to ask them to take her tray. ‘Right away, Madam,’ the porter said, probably terrified that she’d orchestrate a militant ambush on his family if he didn’t obey her. The thought made her realize that she didn’t have her passport back yet. After the police station yesterday, she felt naked without her identification – she’d been uneasy when the man behind the reception desk took her passport as well. *I’ll need that back,* she had to refrain from saying because it sounded too much like something her haughty older sister would say.

‘Could I come down to get my passport back please?’ she asked.

‘Madam, we just returned all three of them to Mrs Chadha,’ the desk manager said.

‘Thank you.’

She sighed and hung up. She supposed she'd better go over to Rajni's room to talk to her anyway, try to clear the air. She wanted to be better at this pilgrimage thing – she di – but it was also occurring to her that she was going to need a lot more strength and patience to get through this leg of the journey. Amritsar was a holy city; alcohol was difficult to find here and she wasn't keen to wander the outer edges of the city in search of a cold bottle of beer.

She knocked on Rajni's door. 'It's me,' she called. 'Just wanted to get my passport back.'

The door opened. 'Can I come in?' Jezmeen asked.

Rajni left the door ajar and turned her back to Jezmeen, busying herself with unpacking. Her suitcases were neatly lined along the wall and open, her clothes categorized in those packing cells that she had bought for Jezmeen and Shirina years ago after seeing them in a sale. 'Your bras don't go missing,' she'd said with amazement, as if this was the worst possible consequence of travelling. Because of all her meticulous organizing and contingency plans, it probably was.

The passports were sitting on the bedside table. 'Raj, I'm really sorry,' Jezmeen said as she entered the room and shut the door behind her.

Rajni dismissed her apology with a wave, as if to say, 'Too little, too late.'

'Listen, I feel terrible. I know I made a joke of it on the train, but I was actually really scared. I didn't know what they might do to me in there.' She hesitated, because it was hard to talk about what could have happened. 'Rajni, I've never felt fear like that before – my skin crawled with it. Every time a guard walked by the cell, I held my breath until he passed because I was terrified he'd come in and do something to me. I realized I had no idea what the law permits police officers to do here, and they'd already decided we were rioters. The men at India Gate, they looked like they were ready to pounce on us and rip us to shreds – then the police had us in little cages and could do the same.' Jezmeen stopped when she realized her voice was shaking.

'Think about how worried I was,' Rajni said, extracting her toiletries kit from a tight space between two neatly pressed pairs of trousers. 'Me and Shirina. Why can't you think about other people before you plunge yourself into stupid things?'

‘Rajni, we’ve been over this. I wasn’t courting trouble out there. It just happened.’

‘You and Anil,’ Rajni said, shaking her head. ‘You don’t think about other people.’

‘What does Anil have to do with this?’ Jezmeen asked.

Rajni pursed her lips. ‘Nothing,’ she said quickly. Her gaze flitted away from Jezmeen’s. ‘He’s just selfish sometimes, that’s all.’

‘He’s just a teenager,’ Jezmeen said. ‘He’s going to grow out of it.’

‘What’s your excuse then?’ Rajni countered.

‘I’m not self—’ Jezmeen began, but she noticed the muscles tensing in Rajni’s jaw. There was no point arguing. This tennis match of name-calling was how their problems at the hospital escalated. Rajni had said Jezmeen was selfish then as well. ‘I was really, really glad to see you,’ Jezmeen tried again. ‘And more grateful than you’ll ever know.’

Rajni’s gaze softened. ‘Good,’ she said quietly. She paused her unpacking and rose to her feet. Her knees snapped and she winced.

‘Ouch,’ Jezmeen said.

‘It didn’t hurt,’ Rajni said. ‘I just hate that sound.’

‘I get it too sometimes, especially if I’ve been sitting all day.’

‘It gets worse. More frequent. I spend all this time trying to outsmart these little signs of my body wearing down – stretch, eat more flax seeds, get eight hours of sleep. But what can you really do?’

She sounded like Mum, lamenting that her years of balanced eating and recommended daily walks had taken her nowhere. ‘After Mum’s diagnosis, she started saying: “At least prayer is helpful,”’ Jezmeen recalled.

‘I don’t know where she got that idea from,’ Rajni said.

‘Have you ever tried it?’ Jezmeen asked.

‘What – praying?’

Jezmeen nodded.

‘No,’ Rajni said.

‘Not even after – you know, when Mum told us about the jewellery pouch? You didn’t . . . I don’t know . . .’ She struggled to find the words. ‘Check with God?’

‘Did you?’

‘No,’ Jezmeen said quickly. She felt silly admitting now that after storming out of Mum’s room and thinking *I need a drink,* she had found the hospital chapel instead and decided it was as good as any place to get some answers. Tears sprang into her eyes as she remembered sitting in that quiet room, shivering as an icy wind blew through a crack in the stained-glass window.

‘God, I can’t believe how much I wish she were here,’ she whispered to Rajni.

Rajni took Jezmeen by the shoulders and guided her to sit down on the bed. ‘I know,’ she said.

‘I just feel so untethered now that she’s gone. Both our parents are dead. We’re orphans, did you realize that?’

‘I know,’ Rajni said again.

‘And we’re next.’

‘What?’

‘I mean, we were children, we were that generation that was supposed to outlive the adults. Now that they’ve died, another entire group is going to outlive us. We’re the next to die.’

‘That won’t happen for a long time,’ Rajni said, stroking Jezmeen’s back. ‘It’s decades away.’

‘It’s easy for you to say because you’ve got a legacy. You have a life established – your career, your home, your family. I’m still stuck where I was ten years ago. Virtually nothing’s changed.’ A sob escaped Jezmeen’s throat. She saw her future in an endless list of insignificant roles, that woman who flashed across the screen in a rabid frenzy and perished from a zombie virus before the audience even knew her name.

‘Shh,’ Rajni said, holding her. ‘It’s okay.’

‘It’s not okay,’ Jezmeen said. ‘Even Mum thought my life wasn’t headed anywhere.’

‘She was just concerned about you,’ Rajni said.

Jezmeen shook her head. ‘After the doctors told her the cancer was terminal, and she only had a few months, she said, “How can I die knowing that you’re not settled?” I thought she was referring to marriage, but it was other things too. She said I had no commitments. “You need to *settle*, Jezmeen,” she kept saying. It just made me feel worse about my career and everything.’

‘When was that?’

‘A couple of weeks before she wrote that letter.’ Jezmeen shut her eyes, remembering the way her voice and Mum’s had escalated. She had dropped in at the hospital to see Mum on her way home from an audition for a small speaking role on a two-part BBC drama series. ‘It went pretty well,’ Jezmeen said hopefully. ‘I’ll know in the next couple of days.’

‘How many of these things are you going to do, Jezmeen?’ Mum asked impatiently, surprising her. Although Mum had never been an enthusiastic encourager of Jezmeen’s fledgling acting career, this outburst gave her the impression that Mum had been waiting a long time to tell her off. The ensuing lecture about settling down and being more responsible made Jezmeen feel even worse, and when the producers didn’t call her back by the end of the week, she cheered herself up by polishing off a bottle of wine on her own before Mark came over for dinner that Saturday.

A few weeks later, when Mum talked to all three of them about the pilgrimage, Jezmeen had been the first to grasp her hand. *Don’t leave,* she was saying, even though she had known for a while that the end was near. Mum’s fingers were icy; her blood circulation had already become poorer but the shock of those familiar hands feeling so foreign had made Jezmeen recoil. It took her a while to grasp Mum’s request, because she was still frightened by the thought of Mum’s body rapidly deteriorating.

‘We need to call a truce then,’ Rajni sighed. ‘You and me. No more of this. You saw how upset Shirina was on the train. We need to stop arguing.’

Jezmeen gulped back a sob and nodded gratefully. She had known from the start of the trip that a conversation with her sisters about Mum’s death was inevitable. For the first time, the thought of it didn’t seem so awful.

Chapter Nine

Day Five: The Golden Temple, Amritsar

At this stage of the journey, I trust that the three of you are feeling closer and more connected to each other. Visiting the Golden Temple is about recognizing the oneness of humanity. You should enter the temple's grounds with an open heart, and think about leaving the past behind. You must also take a bath in the sarovar to cleanse yourself of all burdens. As you do this, remember that purification is not just about water washing away grit. It is also about your thoughts and actions becoming simpler and more purposeful.

This part of the journey was about purification, Mum had said in her letter, and so in the morning, Shirina considered calling Sehaj and telling him that she was sorry. She felt a bit foolish for making such a fuss during their phone conversation last night. In the shower, she shut her eyes and let the water pour over her body, rivulets running down the curves of her breasts and thighs, the roundness of her abdomen. The light floral fragrance of the hotel body wash filled the small cubicle. She felt cleaner as the water pooled at the spaces between her feet and the foam circled down the drain.

As the days crept closer to her 'visit to the ancestral village' – the cover that Shirina was still sticking to, even though her sisters might wonder who these relatives were and why they'd never heard of them – Shirina felt a combination of dread and relief. She wished there were a different course of action that would make everybody happy, but she had gone through all the ideas and scenarios in her mind. Everything pointed back to Shirina. This wasn't easy for Sehaj either. Mother was adamant, and Shirina of all people knew what she was like when she dug her heels in. If she could come to terms with doing this one thing for the family, the tension in their home would melt away.

So every time the panic seized Shirina, she reminded herself of the future: returning to

Melbourne, seeing Sehaj, starting over. She'd even lose this excess weight right away, beginning a mid-year new year's resolution. The future unrolled like a carpet before Shirina, and she saw an entirely new life where she and her mother-in-law had the kind of closeness that she had always craved from Mum. *Soon, soon,* she reminded herself as she stepped out of the shower. The creamy white body lotion smelled like lilacs, springtime. Soon, the obstacle that stood between her and her new family would be gone.

According to Google Maps, the Golden Temple was a straight line from their hotel. In practice, the sisters had to edge their way in single file along the narrow road, dodging rickshaws, potholes and stray dogs. The rattling aluminium doors of shops were just being raised for the day as Shirina, Rajni and Jezmeen made their way to the temple. Shirina had never seen so much Sikh paraphernalia in her life: T-shirts with glittery 'SIKH WARRIOR' slogans embossed on them and screen-printed images of the gurus, as if they were rock stars. One roadside stand was dedicated to selling karras, the silver bangles that Sikhs wore. A mother of two young boys made them hold out their wrists so the vendor could gauge their size. The older boy was reluctant. He shrugged when the vendor asked which karra he liked. 'No opinion?' the vendor asked, laughing. He picked through the bangles displayed on a crate draped with velvet cloth. 'Don't you want everybody to know you're a Sikh boy?' He held out a chunky karra, the kind Shirina had only seen on men, and the boy's eyes widened a bit with interest.

Shirina felt the coolness of her thin bangle against her wrist. She had worn the same karra since she was a teenager. Mum had helped to remove her previous karra from childhood, which had grown so tight that soap and hand lotion were required to ease the removal. It hurt, Shirina remembered, especially at the point where her wrist bone jutted out and then widened to become her hand. 'Make a fist,' Mum kept saying, tugging the bangle. 'Good girl, good girl.' Praise worked on her and reduced the pain to an irritation. Shirina made a fist so tight that her fingernails dug into the soft flesh of her palms and drew blood. She was doing it now, clenching her fist just at the memory.

'Cool,' Jezmeen said as they passed a shopfront window with a gleaming display of knives and swords of different sizes. Mum had had a medium-sized kirpan with an intricately carved handle and

a blade that curved at the tip. It was purely decorative, the symbolism more important than the function, but Shirina still remembered feeling protected by it.

Jezmeen pointed at the largest kirpan, which stretched across the table in the shop window. 'Imagine bringing that back to Britain and trying to explain it to Customs.'

'Mum's was about that size, wasn't it?'

Jezmeen shook her head. 'I think she had one of those necklaces,' she said, nodding at the small sword-shaped pendants that hung from long silver chains. Noticing their sudden attention on the pendants, the vendor plucked a few from the display case and came out of the shop to offer them to Shirina. She shook her head. 'Mum had one just like that,' she insisted, pointing at a dagger with a glinting tip. It looked like a prop from a play.

'You're probably thinking about Aunty Roopi's house,' Jezmeen said. 'She had lots of decorative stuff from trips abroad.'

In her memories, Shirina saw the kirpan sitting next to a carved vase on a mantel and realized that Jezmeen must be right. Their own house had been sparsely decorated – a commemorative glass ornament here, a few picture frames there. She remembered the plastic lilies that Mum had brought home from the supermarket once, cloudy blobs of glue attempting a dewy freshness in the dead of winter. The curtains were always drawn anyway, so the lilies did nothing to brighten up the shadowy room. Since Jezmeen mentioned Aunty Roopi at the market in Delhi, Shirina found herself confusing memories of both places. That cat wasn't theirs, but if she recalled her childhood now, she saw it creeping between the furniture of their house and stretching lazily at the foot of her bed. Aunty Roopi's house had been more welcoming than her own – the kitchen pantry bursting with packets of biscuits, the countertops clear of those bills with angry red letters at the top that sometimes made Mum cry.

The sisters ambled down two more lanes, politely declining offers of chai and roti from the vendors, and emerged into the main square, where the skies were open and the vehicles were barred from entering. Rickshaws crowded at the edges of the square, their drivers calling out prices to

passengers. ‘Wow, this has changed,’ Rajni said as they stepped into the square. ‘It’s so civilized now.’

Shirina hadn’t been here before but even she was impressed. The town square was neatly paved in reddish brick. The surrounding buildings all had a uniform exterior and they stood in tidy rows, unlike the jutting houses and shops everywhere else in the city. The blaring of horns and sputtering motors already seemed a world away. Two sculptures side-by-side caught Shirina’s attention: a wedding dancing scene. One sculpture depicted the men, their legs raised high and their arms framing the sky above them. The women on the other platform were huddled closer together. Their dupattas were caught in the wind of their movements, trailing behind them as if they were softer than the iron and concrete materials that composed them.

‘Looks like your wedding, Shirina,’ Jezmeen said, nodding at the statues. ‘I think our outfits were a little more up-to-date though.’

The women looked young, like sisters and cousins of the bride. Shirina remembered Rajni and Jezmeen dancing with her, and the photographer circling like a vulture, freezing the moment just like these statues did. In the pictures, the unbridled joy in their smiles gave them the strongest resemblance Shirina had ever seen. They looked like three sisters that had spent their whole lives laughing together like this.

‘Do you remember all those old women who wanted to sing those dreary songs about brides leaving their home?’ Jezmeen asked. ‘And I kept turning up the music?’

‘Those songs are horrible,’ Rajni said. ‘They did them at my wedding and Mum didn’t let me stop the women. They sounded like cats dying.’

The songs were designed to stir up the bride’s emotions and deepen her great sadness at leaving her family for the unknown. Shirina had been dreading them as well, and was glad that the festive mood continued despite the elders’ insistence that traditions needed to be respected. Those women didn’t have much say anyway; they were part of that hodgepodge of guests that Mum invited from her temple crowd to make up for their distinct lack of relatives compared to Sehaj’s voluminous

family. The mournful songs just weren't relevant to Shirina, and she was afraid she wouldn't be able to feign the appropriate bridal sadness. Once she found Sehaj and her new, perfect family, she was so prepared to jump ship that she would have done away with the goodbyes altogether.

Jezmeen and Rajni were recalling the words of those songs now, as they walked along the square, passing more souvenir shops, dhabas, tour booking agencies and a double-storey McDonalds. 'There was one verse which went, "Make sure you do all the cooking and cleaning to the utmost standards, you don't want to anger your mother-in-law",' Rajni said.

Jezmeen pulled a face. 'They need an update,' she said. 'Make sure your husband does his share of the work and tell your mother-in-law to bugger off if she interferes.'

Shirina had an image of her mother-in-law hovering around the background yesterday while Sehaj spoke to her on the phone. It was easy to say, wasn't it? Before getting married, young women always went on about how they wouldn't put up with this or that. The arranged marriage message boards had been full of such threads. *HELP!! MIL wants to move in with us!* and Any advice on how to say no to MIL without upsetting hubby? The women who posted these frantic messages irked Shirina because by posting their private problems to a group of strangers, they were indulging in drama that they could have foreseen by marrying traditional men. *You should have known,* Shirina was tempted to say. It wasn't just to chide the women – it was a useful reminder to herself as well that she had wanted a traditional marriage. Although she hadn't exactly gone searching for a live-in mother-in-law, she welcomed the idea once she noted the size of the house, with enough rooms between them. Compromises were necessary. It was easy as well to declare, 'I would never quit my job' or 'I'd tell my husband that my needs came first.' But what women really did, the ways in which they bent and adjusted their values – that was reality. The women on those message boards should know better than to complain about a simple fact of life like overbearing mothers-in-law.

Across the square, a massive flat screen imposed on one of the heritage buildings showed the inside of the Golden Temple. The prayers boomed across a public address system. On the screen, a bearded granthi sang the hymns dutifully, the camera so close to his face that Shirina could see the

creases lining his skin. She felt small, in that way that Mum probably intended for them on this leg of the pilgrimage – insignificant. The weight of Sehaj's request for Shirina faded away. It was just a moment, a speck in her history. There was so much to look forward to. She would tell Sehaj this when she had the next chance, echoing what he had said all along. 'I just have to get through these next couple of days and then I'll be home,' she would say.

At the stairs that led to the entrance of the grounds of the Golden Temple, a tour guide held court for a group of tourists who wore backpacks and used their hands to shield their eyes from the bright sunlight amplified by the pure-white stone of the walls and buildings that made up the surrounding complex. 'We go down these stairs and descend into the grounds,' he explained. 'This is intentional. The motion of going down rather than up instils humbleness and eliminates arrogance from our minds.' Two turbaned warrior guards wearing regal-blue garments stood on either side of the entrance. Shirina dipped her feet in the trough of water and climbed the stairs, leaving wet footprints on the marble surface. She listened to the tour guide as if she was part of the group. He went on about the Golden Temple's history – its significance as the most sacred place of worship for Sikhs, the entrances which could be seen from every angle, inviting people from all faiths. 'The fifth Sikh guru, Guru Ram Das, excavated a tank, which is this large pool of water. It became known as Amritsar, the Pool of the Nectar of Immortality. The holy city grew around it and took on the same name. The shrine was built in the centre of the pool and became the centre of Sikhism in the world.' The tourists nodded and uttered small acknowledgements of wonder – 'Ahh!', 'Oh!' Their phones captured snapshots of the unsmiling guards holding their tall spears and staring straight ahead.

Then the tour guide stopped talking. Shirina understood why – the sight of the golden shrine literally took his breath away. She wondered if this was a performance. Surely after visiting every day, it would grow old? But that blissful smile on his face seemed to reflect the stunning vision of that majestic golden jewel which seemed to float on the calm water. White marble floors and a complex of low-pillared buildings ran across the edges of the palatial grounds which surrounded it on all sides. The temple's intricately carved gilded domes glinted in the sun. Here, the sky seemed

wider and bluer than anywhere Shirina had been, and it seemed like some divine trick that the temple was both immense and welcoming.

Shirina had only ever seen the Golden Temple in pictures, but they couldn't do justice to this view. In their home, Mum had a framed poster of the temple on the living-room wall – the only thing that hung on the wall besides a portrait of Guru Nanak surrounded by garlands and votive candles. Shirina was only about five years old when she had asked Mum, 'Whose house is that?' Mum had laughed. 'That's God's house,' she'd said. 'God lives there.' And then she looked at it with such yearning, that Shirina saw what she probably saw. Compared to their old couches and cracked windows, God's house was much better. Shirina had always understood Mum's longing for another home – it was a powerful sentiment that they shared but never spoke about. When Shirina announced to her family that she had met somebody and was going to marry him, she sensed the questions brewing in her sisters' minds. *Why didn't you say anything? Why are you going so far away?* Mum was the only one who didn't seem surprised.

Rajni led the way, barefoot, along the edges of the water. A long strip of carpet ran along the path to the temple. If she stepped off the carpet, her feet would make contact with the heat-soaked tiles. Ahead of her there were two children playing, nudging each other off the carpet as they tried to maintain their balance. From their play, Rajni understood that the marble floor took on the heat of lava in their imaginations. They stepped in and out, giggling and squealing. She felt an ache in her chest, thinking of Anil, and how much she had wanted him to have a sibling. How strangely incomplete her family always felt, as if there was a ghostly presence of something that never existed. Was that why he was so eager to start a family of his own? Had he always been lonely? She couldn't ask him those questions now. This morning, she trawled through her social media pages and found that they had been scrubbed clean of any traces of Anil. He had deleted and blocked her. It was strange how visceral and effective the pain of an online snub could be. Any small amount of guilt or doubt that Rajni felt over hiring that private investigator was gone now.

They continued their slow walk towards the temple, passing the men's bathing area of the

sarovar. A screen blocked off the view but when the men emerged from the pool and stood up to put their clothes back on, their heads and feet were visible behind the screen. There was an air of celebration to the whole ritual – they patted each other on the back and called out.

'We're not going in there, are we?' Jezmeen asked.

'There's a separate bathing area for women,' Rajni said. 'I think it's over there.' She pointed at a bath-house ahead under the shade of a tree with outstretched branches, where women were lining up with their belongings neatly tucked under their arms. Another stream of women exited the bath-house, their actions not quite as congratulatory as the men's. Rajni wondered if this was because their bath was private whereas the men – save for the screen – were out in the open. Their purification was on display for the whole world to see.

As they got closer to the temple, the line of people thickened and the spaces became narrower. From what Rajni could see, there were two or three rows for lining up. One line seemed to move much faster than the others but it was the slow line that most people wanted to be in. 'I don't get what's going on,' she muttered.

'Feels like we're at a nightclub,' Jezmeen said.

A grey-haired woman in front of them turned around and explained: 'This line is for tourists. The people who just want to come inside, see the temple, and go. You move right through. The other line is for devotees to sit down. It takes longer to get through.'

'So . . . the express line then?' Jezmeen asked. 'We don't have to sit in there, do we? We just want to pay respects.'

'I guess so,' Rajni said, although she bristled slightly at being called a tourist. Tourists enjoyed themselves and brought home useless plastic souvenirs. They were here for spiritual purification – nothing about this trip felt like a holiday to her. She was beginning to feel the weight of returning to the past. Fragments of memories of her last trip with Mum here were surfacing and becoming more difficult to ignore now they were in Punjab, where it all started.

They moved into the quicker line. It was managed by a man at the front who counted bodies,

let them in quickly, and then suddenly snapped the bar back in place. The people moved like floodwater rushing into every little space. The sudden crush of bodies alarmed Rajni; instinctively, she reached out for Jezmeen and Shirina, grabbing their hands.

'Can everybody just relax?' Jezmeen said irritably. Nobody appeared to hear her. Rajni felt the pressure of the crowd behind her and the barrier ahead. It was getting hotter; sweat broke across her upper lip but her arms were pinned to her sides by the other pressing bodies. She tipped her head up and took a gulp of air.

When they were eventually allowed into the temple, the procession was calmer. The desperation that Rajni felt from the crowd seemed to dissipate once they were let through. She checked over her shoulders to make sure Jezmeen and Shirina were following behind. Jezmeen was looking out over the water, its calm and glassy surface. Shirina's mouth was set into a deep frown.

It's not supposed to be this way, Rajni thought. She had known better than to come into this pilgrimage with too many expectations, but she thought Amritsar would be different. It was beautiful, certainly; the temple was nothing short of breath-taking. But now she and her sisters were being shuttled into the prayer hall, a room dripping with ornate gold trimmings, the sounds of hymns reverberating against the high ceilings. And all she could think was: *How long do we have here?*

It was like a theme-park ride where the wait was infinite but the ride itself only lasted under a minute and left everybody wondering why on earth they had anticipated it so much, and they were ejected from the room almost as soon as they entered. 'Can't we sit?' Rajni asked. The current of the crowd carried her and her request out of the hall. Shirina and Jezmeen looked just as dazed when they emerged.

'Is that it?' Rajni asked.

'I suppose so,' Jezmeen said. 'Unless you want to go back and line up again.'

Rajni barely heard her. She was remembering saying those same words to the doctors when they told her that there was nothing left to do in Mum's case. 'So that's it?' she'd asked, over and over again until they could give her a different answer. She wasn't just talking about the cancer; she

was shocked that Mum's life would just . . . end. After all those arguments, all those conflicts, she would cease to exist.

Jezmeen and Shirina stepped in front of Rajni and led the way back to the women's bath-house. Rajni was still deep in thought, this time recalling a visit to the hospital and seeing the anguish on Mum's face. 'Rajni, please press play on the iPad,' Mum had whispered when the pain passed and she could speak again. Anil had helped her to stream the daily prayers from the Golden Temple and their messages rang across the room from the tinny iPad speakers. 'I've got the Bluetooth speakers at home,' he'd said anxiously to Rajni. 'I can go get them and then she'll have, like, surround-sound and it'll be more relaxing or whatever.' Rajni had told him to go ahead, what a lovely idea. She needed time alone with Mum that day.

The line of women outside the bath-house hummed with excitement. In front of Rajni was a teenage girl with a long rope of hair that hung to the base of her spine. Handing her belongings over to the girl next to her, she pulled her hair into a bulging bun and pinned it in place. Rajni touched her own short hair, which ended at the nape of her neck. The line inched forward at a much more peaceful pace than the line back at the temple.

'I'll be glad to have a dip in the water,' Jezmeen commented, fanning herself.

'We don't have to take all our clothes off, right?' Shirina asked as they made it through the threshold. There were several bare bottoms here and Rajni felt just as alarmed as her little sister sounded.

'I don't think so,' Rajni said. An attendant was sitting on a low wooden stool next to the pool's edge and ushering women in. Some were stripped down to their underwear and others were wearing light cotton tunics that reached their knees.

'Screw it, I'm getting naked,' Jezmeen declared. She set her belongings down on a bench and peeled her clothes off. Instinctively, Rajni looked away but she noticed how other women were drawn to Jezmeen's body art and her long limbs as she hopped into the pool and strode through the water. Two large orange carps shot off like fireworks as they saw her approaching.

Shirina kept her clothes on and found herself a corner and lowered herself down the stairs into the water. Rajni took in a deep breath and did the same. The water lapped at her feet and rose up as she descended, making her tunic billow about her like a tent. She pressed it down and waited for the weight to render it limp against her thighs.

The water was still, despite the women wading through it. Some would call this a miracle, Rajni thought, recalling everything she'd read and heard about these restorative baths in the lead-up to this trip. Mum had told her all kinds of stories that day as well, repeating that she wanted to go to the Golden Temple. A bath in the sarovar would take all her pain away, she insisted. 'Mum, Anil's going to bring his speakers later,' Rajni had said stupidly, knowing the futility of her response. Here her mother was, asking for a spiritual experience, and all Rajni could offer up was better sound quality on her electronic prayer program. All her life, Mum had told her stories of men and women who bathed in the water and had their health restored – eyesight miraculously regained, tumours dissolved, wombs suddenly fertile and hospitable to new life. But it was just water, Rajni would argue, the pragmatist in her unable to see anything beyond this argument.

'Rajni, listen to me,' Mum had said urgently, her features contorted with pain. *Here we go,* Rajni thought, knowing that she was in for another lecture about miracles, about things that happened without rhyme or reason. But what Mum said instead surprised her.

'You'll help me, right?' Mum asked. 'You'll make sure I don't suffer?'

'Of course,' Rajni said. Mum's expression was wide with trust. Her skinny fingers dug into Rajni's palms and brought tears to her eyes. She couldn't bear the thought of watching Mum whittle way, pain and suffering slowly dissolving her dignity. Rajni didn't realize what a heavy responsibility she had accepted though, until she began helping Mum research options over the next few days. *We can't do this,* she thought, looking at those websites. *Not like this.*

What a relief it was then, to arrive at the hospital one day to find that Mum had a letter written. She had this pilgrimage planned. She had a jewellery pouch tucked in her drawer and as she unzipped it to show her daughters the pills she had stashed away inside, Rajni was still nodding, still promising

to do anything.

Chapter Ten

Our fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev Ji, said that bathing in the sacred waters of the sarovar washes away all of our sins. Water rids people of diseases, nourishes our bodies and brings clarity to our thoughts and actions. Your body's immersion in the nectar of immortality will bring eternal strength and fulfilment to your spirit.

Jezmeen cupped the water into her hands and raised them over her head. The water poured down her face, pooling at the shelf of her collarbone. It smelled like rainwater; earthy and fresh. She really felt as if she could stay here all day – if not for the spiritual release, then the refreshment of being out of the heat. With her eyes closed and the echoing women's voices fading into a singular din in the background, she thought there was something quite peaceful and otherworldly about this bath.

Next to her, a woman had rolled the cuffs of her white salwar up to her knees and was wading through the water with a toddler's legs anchored around her hips. She chanted into the little girl's ears and crouched to scoop up some water to toss on her small feet. 'This is God's water,' the woman said, loose strands of her fringe falling over her eyes. 'Its holiness will protect you.' The toddler kicked and squealed with delight.

Jezmeen had read those tales of lepers' wounds disappearing upon contact with this miracle water. Of course, some measure of exaggeration had gone into creating those stories. Wasn't it more convenient for the story that the lepers were cured instantaneously rather than a gradual process over weeks and months? When children were told those stories, could they really be trusted to listen patiently while the leper noticed tiny improvements in his scarring or strength gaining in his muscles? No. She bent at the waist and took another handful of water. As it cascaded over her shoulders, she became certain that the point of the spiritual bath was to start a slow progression of healing.

When she opened her eyes and blinked away the water, she noticed a large orange carp near her feet. It was impossible to know if this was the same one that she saw when she entered the water, but

it seemed to be aware of her. It hovered at her feet, still and watching. Jezmeen stared back at it, wondering if some divine intervention had brought this fish to her. She recalled the Arowana's glossy eyes, its mouth moving as if speaking a secret language.

'Go tell your friends I'm working on being better,' Jezmeen said to the carp. A middle-aged woman nearby looked at her in confusion and then also nodded at the fish. Jezmeen swayed her foot gently to create ripples so the fish would swim away. Watching it glide away, Jezmeen felt sorry, more sorry than she had been when the Arowana had died, and she didn't know why. The pressure of tears built in her throat. Being in this pool for purification made her think about Mum sitting in her hospital, holding the edges of that letter in her frail hands as she read it out. *Cleanse yourself of all burdens,* she had said, holding her daughters' attention. Did the room tense up then? Jezmeen remembered thinking that she was the only one of her two sisters who really had burdens – every rejection and every passing year slimming her chances of a breakthrough.

Once Mum had got through her explanation of the itinerary, she paused and began to whisper. Rajni, Jezmeen and Shirina huddled closer to Mum. There was something else she wanted her daughters to help her with. Her voice was so full of hope that she didn't seem to even notice how horrified Jezmeen was when she explained the pills.

'I've been storing them for a while now,' she said, her eyes shining. 'I'll take them all at once tomorrow morning. I'm telling you because I think you should know, but also because I need you to keep a lookout for nurses. I don't know their schedules well enough to know when somebody will pop in to do a test or bring a meal. If somebody is coming, you need to distract them.'

'What you're asking us to do is illegal,' Jezmeen said, looking to Rajni and Shirina. 'Right?' Shirina nodded in agreement. 'There must be another way,' she said, but Jezmeen heard the uncertainty in her voice. Rajni, probably knowing that Shirina would give in to Mum's requests eventually, took them both out of the room to discuss it.

Back in the present, a commotion erupted behind Jezmeen and shook her out of her thoughts. She

heard a sharp gasp and turned to see Shirina sitting on the edge of the pool with her legs splayed before her. A stout elderly woman with rosy cheeks crouched next to her. ‘Shirina,’ Jezmeen said, wading through the water. ‘Are you okay?’

The woman’s expression was etched with concern. She took Shirina by the elbow and gently helped her up. Then she said something to Shirina – it looked like a question or a comment, but it seemed to startle her. Shirina shook her head and turned her back to the woman.

‘I’m fine,’ Shirina said. ‘I just – I slipped.’

Jezmeen glanced at the rosy-cheeked woman. Now she appeared confused. She stared at Jezmeen for a few moments and then returned to her family, two little girls wearing matching swimsuits and long tracksuit leggings.

‘What did that lady say to you?’ Jezmeen asked.

‘Oh, you know,’ Shirina said. ‘Just to be careful. I’m fine though. A fall on your bum hurts a lot more when you’re an adult, doesn’t it?’

That rush of words and the forced smile didn’t hide Shirina’s embarrassment. Jezmeen wondered for a moment what it would be like to be her little sister, so prim and perfect that a fall in a bath-house would be the humiliation of a lifetime. *Have you read my Wikipedia entry?* she wondered. ‘Don’t worry about it,’ Jezmeen said. ‘Nobody saw.’ They gathered their belongings and stepped out of the bath-house gingerly together. But as they passed the woman and her two daughters, her stare lingered on Shirina. It was more curious than unfriendly, but Shirina seemed to make it a point not to look back.

The hot tiled floor stung Jezmeen’s feet. She spotted Rajni sitting on a bench, squinting against the glare of the sun. ‘What happened?’ Jezmeen asked. ‘You were in there for all of five minutes.’

Rajni shrugged. ‘I didn’t feel like staying.’

‘Why not?’ Jezmeen asked.

‘I couldn’t stop thinking about Mum.’

A trickle of water made its way down Jezmeen’s forehead. She wiped it away with the back of

her hand. ‘I thought the bath would make me feel better,’ she said. ‘That was the whole point.’

‘Do you feel better?’

Jezmeen nodded. ‘I feel like something changed in there. I don’t think I believe the water has miraculous healing properties, but . . . I don’t know. Haven’t you ever taken a bath to forget a stressful day? That’s how it was for me.’

‘Jezmeen, this isn’t as simple as forgetting a bad night out.’

Jezmeen felt a flash of anger at Mum for putting them in this situation. They wouldn’t be in India if not for her – they’d have nothing on their consciences. Jezmeen wouldn’t be having those recurring dreams. The sequence of events in Jezmeen’s life played out in reverse, as if a tape was swallowing them back. If Mum hadn’t written that letter, none of this would have happened.

They sat together in silence for a while, watching the worshippers fall into line and emerge from the dark bath-house into the bright white temple grounds. ‘Where did Shirina go?’ Jezmeen asked.

‘She’s around. She went looking for her in-laws’ tribute,’ Rajni said. ‘They made a donation to the temple recently and there’s an engraved dedication to them. She said she promised Sehaj she’d take a picture.’

‘How big a donation?’ Jezmeen asked. On their way in, they had passed all manner of tributes, names of prominent families engraved into the grand marble walls.

Rajni raised an eyebrow. ‘A *big* one.’

So Shirina wouldn’t have trouble finding her in-laws’ plaque then. The significant donations took up more wall space and attracted their own followers. Earlier, Jezmeen had seen a murmuring crowd standing around a towering tribute from a prominent Sikh hedge-fund manager from New York.

‘They’ve got lots of money to spend, haven’t they?’ Jezmeen asked.

‘They certainly didn’t spare any expense on those wedding celebrations.’

Jezmeen remembered feeling overwhelmed by all of Shirina’s in-laws and their glittery outfits,

and by how many of them had taken the not-small decision to fly all the way from Australia for the wedding. They wore their success in brand-name shoes and designer suits. The only person who stood out was Shirina's mother-in-law. Her clothes, though tasteful, were simple to reflect her widow's status. Sehaj's father had died when he was a teenager. Jezmeen imagined this was something they had in common when they first began chatting online.

Is it the money? Jezmeen had wondered when Shirina announced she was engaged to Sehaj. She had never known her sister to be a gold-digger but who wouldn't be impressed with all that Sehaj's family had to offer, especially after growing up in that old semi-detached house with taps that sputtered and a hole in the fence big enough for the neighbours' incontinent German Shepherd to visit their yard to relieve himself? Jezmeen too had spent her childhood imagining a glamorous life, but her fantasies were of stardom. *The whole world will know my name,* she promised herself, shaking away her fears of insignificance.

Rajni was fiddling with her phone. 'I really wish this thing would work,' she grumbled, shaking the phone as if this would make it function properly. 'The FindMe app keeps showing Shirina in the same spot as we are.'

'Maybe her phone is off,' Jezmeen suggested.

'I really don't want to lose one of my sisters in Punjab,' Rajni said, frowning at her phone.

'Relax,' Jezmeen said. 'It's the Golden Temple. Only good things happen here.'

'Right,' Rajni said with a sigh. She stared at her phone as if she was willing it to start ringing.

'Do you use the FindMe app to track Anil's movements as well?' Jezmeen asked. 'He's off at a pub somewhere and you know exactly when he's leaving?'

Rajni looked insulted. 'I don't keep track of my son's movements,' she informed Jezmeen haughtily.

'I was joking. Did I tell you I saw him recently?' Jezmeen asked. 'In the mall?'

Rajni's face seized. Jezmeen could tell from the pinched look on her face that she was hiding something. 'I think he was buying you a birthday gift. I thought it was quite sweet.' *Quite unlike Anil,*

she thought, but she kept that observation to herself.

'Oh yes,' Rajni said with a forced laugh. 'Bless him. Such a thoughtful one, isn't he?' She held up her phone and shook it once again. 'Would you believe this useless thing?' she cried. 'Now it's saying that Shirina's on some back street. Honestly.' She chucked the phone into her bag with more force than necessary, suggesting to Jezmeen that she did not want to discuss Anil's thoughtfulness any further.

Shirina alternated between cursing to herself and gulping in breaths of air as she power-walked towards the hotel. This narrow lane connected the two major streets and she needed all the shortcuts she could find. There was a dull ache in her belly, followed by a cramp, and in her panic, she couldn't remember if it started before or after she had fallen. She was furious with herself for not recording the relevant numbers in her phone, choosing instead to keep them in that card that Sehaj had given her.

Back in the hotel room, Shirina took a moment to sit on the edge of her bed and catch her breath. Room service had already come through and replaced her sheets – soaked in sweat, she was ashamed to think of it, but last night had been hot even with the air-conditioning on at full blast – and there wasn't a single wrinkle to be seen on the flat, white sheets. The bed was vast like the Golden Temple grounds, and there was that same sense of freshness, of starting over.

She picked up the phone and pressed 0. 'Yes, how can I help you?' asked the young man that she had seen manning the reception desk.

'Madam Shirina, is it?' the man asked. 'Room 303?'

'Yes – uh—' She cleared her throat. 'I was wondering if you could give me the number of a nearby hospital?'

'Are you unwell, Madam?'

'Not – no, I think I might be injured. I'd just like to know where the nearest hospital is, just in case.'

‘Just one moment, Madam.’

Why didn’t she watch where she was going? Then she wouldn’t be in this situation now, this panic. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath and waited for the pain to return. There it was, a cramp that spread like fingers across her sides and radiated across her belly. She’d felt something like that before after a conversation with her mother-in-law and later, she realized that it was the beginning of a panic attack. Could that be it? Just a panic attack? No need to see a doctor then, just take a few deep breaths and return to the temple as if nothing had happened.

The young man’s voice returned to the phone. He recited a list of hospitals and their addresses. Shirina murmured the names back but she didn’t write anything down. A doctor who didn’t know her situation would ask too many questions and she couldn’t have that.

Then again, it was better to be on the safe side. If the pain intensified and she was back at the temple, how would she explain herself to anyone? It was bad enough, what that woman said to her when she was helping her up, and the way she looked at her – suspicious, Shirina thought, although she knew that it could just as well have been concern. She wrote down the name of the last hospital the bellboy mentioned.

‘Madam, if it’s an emergency, we can arrange for transport to take you there right away,’ he said.

Tears stung her eyes. ‘I’ll be fine. Thank you,’ she said, and then she hung up. She wanted to talk to Sehaj again but she couldn’t imagine what she’d say or what he could do to make her feel better. She got to her feet and paused, waiting for the pain, but it was absent. Maybe it was just a panic attack. Then she went to the safe where she’d kept her passport locked away after Rajni returned it this morning.

She opened the passport case and realized with a jolt that the card was not in the little pocket where she’d kept it neatly folded in half. This was strange. She bent the cover of her passport to ease it out of the case and flipped the case over, shaking it over her lap. Nothing. Fishing through the slit pockets, she found a faded fast-food receipt stubbornly wedged into the leather, the Turkish writing

with all its additional accents itemizing a bistro meal they had at the airport at the end of their honeymoon. She felt the pain again, this time tightening in her chest. It was definitely panic.

A huge extended family was checking in at the reception desk when Shirina came down the stairs. ‘Excuse me,’ she said, elbowing past their overflowing suitcases and two grandparents in wheelchairs. ‘I’m very sorry, but I need to talk to you,’ she said to the desk manager.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Yes?’

‘My passport,’ she said. ‘There was a card with very important information on it. Did it slip out, by any chance? Maybe you threw it away?’

‘I don’t remember it, Madam,’ he said, returning to his typing.

‘It just had a name and a number on it but it’s very important,’ Shirina repeated. The man probably caught the hint of urgency in her voice. He stopped what he was doing.

‘I really can’t recall seeing a card in your passport case,’ he said. ‘If it fell on the floor, it was swept up long before you got your passport back.’ He pointed at the framed certificate on the wall congratulating them for steadfast cleaning service. ‘We don’t like litter on our floors.’

‘Okay, thanks,’ Shirina mumbled, returning to the room. It wasn’t a huge problem, she told herself. She could call Sehaj and ask him for the info again, and he’d tell her and it would be fine. It was late afternoon in Australia now. Although the pain from her fall was gone, she didn’t want to take any chances.

Back in the room, she paced the tiny length of floor between the bed and the bathroom door and took in a few deep breaths. As she picked up her phone from the dresser, she noticed that her ring finger was still bulging around her wedding band and engagement ring. The heat made her feet swell as well; she could feel the beginnings of a blister forming on the side of her big toe where it rubbed against the strap of her sandals. She pressed Sehaj’s name in her contacts list and wriggled the ring off. The call connected just as she placed it on the dresser.

‘Hello? Sehaj?’ she asked.

‘Who is this?’ replied a croaky woman’s voice.

Mother. What was she doing answering Sehaj's phone?

'Hello, Mother,' Shirina said. Her manner was oddly formal with her mother-in-law, even at this distance. She sat up a little bit straighter. Her heart began to patter in her chest. What was going on?

'Hello, *beti*,' Mother replied. There was little affection in the way she greeted Shirina, even using a term of endearment. 'Everything is going smoothly?'

'Yes,' Shirina said. 'I just need to talk to Sehaj.'

'He's not around. He went for a run.'

Sehaj usually left his phone in their bedside table when he went running along the creek near their home. One of Shirina's earlier memories of their marriage – the honeymoon period – was standing on the newly-built deck and watching him pass, his limbs cutting through the air like machinery. Now she shuddered to think of what else she had left in that dresser drawer that her mother-in-law felt so free to rummage through: a half-empty tube of lubricant, an illustrated pocket copy of the *Kama Sutra* that a co-worker of his had given as a cheeky engagement present.

'Can you ask him to call me back when he returns?' Shirina asked.

'I don't think that's such a good idea,' Mother replied.

Her response felt like a punch in Shirina's stomach. 'What do you mean?'

'You heard me, *beti*,' Mother said. If it was possible, the word felt even colder this time, devoid of affection. 'It's not such a good idea.'

'Why not?' Shirina demanded. 'He's my husband.'

There was a long sigh on the other end of the phone that sounded just as familiar as when Shirina was standing head to head with Mother in their home in Melbourne. It was strange what the long-distance lines picked up. Shirina knew what Mother was going to say next; it was as if she read from a script, yet Shirina fell for it every time. 'You don't have to get so emotional.'

'Emotional' was like a first warning. 'Rude' was the second warning. No matter how politely Shirina said something, no matter how many pleases and thank-yous and with-all-due-respects she

used, as long as she said no, she was being rude. The final strike wasn't clear. Shirina hadn't gone that far yet.

'You called him yesterday, didn't you?' Mother continued.

'Yes,' Shirina said, already knowing where this was going. 'I thought he should know that we were in Punjab already.'

'But was it necessary to make such a fuss? To create such hysterics? He was beside himself after that phone call.'

'What do you mean?' Shirina asked.

'I found him in tears in his bedroom, babbling about how sorry he felt for you.'

Sehaj was upset on her behalf? He hadn't sounded that way over the phone, but maybe he was putting up a tough façade. This information buoyed Shirina. She could still go through with what the family wanted her to do, but she just needed to know that Sehaj understood how hard it was to hide and lie and pretend that it wasn't happening.

'I didn't mean to make him upset,' Shirina said. 'I was having some doubts and I was scared. Surely you'd understand that, Mother.' *Remember when we used to understand each other?* Shirina wanted to ask. In the first few weeks, when she was still adjusting to her new life, she and Mother would walk to the shops together and they'd both pull shawls around their shoulders, shocked by the sudden biting Melbourne wind when it had been sunny only moments before. 'It's so nice having a girl around the house,' Mother said so approvingly whenever she saw Shirina wiping down the kitchen counters or rearranging the shoes in the doorway that Sehaj carelessly kicked off.

Then Shirina found a job and she had less time for housework during the week, so it piled up for Saturdays and Sundays. Mother's comments changed focus to what needed doing – the dust-coated windowsills, the loads of washed and dried laundry waiting to be folded and put away. 'I didn't think having a daughter would be as messy as having a son,' Mother would say with a laugh that told Shirina she didn't actually find it funny at all.

Mother let out a laugh now as well. 'My goodness, so much *drama*,' she said. Shirina could

picture her shaking her head. ‘Since you came into our lives, it’s been up and down, a rollercoaster. Sehaj kept going on about how it wasn’t your fault. Nobody said it was your fault. Did I? Did I say that?’ She chuckled again, how ridiculous!

‘No,’ Shirina said through gritted teeth.

‘That’s right,’ Mother said triumphantly. ‘In fact, I was very hurt by what Sehaj told me after that. You made a comment about how I was able to make it up the stairs.’

‘I was simply wondering where you got the strength from all of a sudden,’ Shirina said. ‘A week ago, you needed a wheelchair and you needed my assistance to go anywhere.’

‘Well, with the help of God’s blessings, my hip is healing very well, dear. It must be all that service you’ve been putting into the temples in India. It is very kind of you. You’re doing a good thing there, Shirina, and I’m very grateful.’

This was said with no malice and Shirina felt herself softening. Beneath her tough exterior, Mother loved her. Sehaj had told her this many times: ‘She loves you, Shirina. Sure, she can be a bit overbearing but it’s how she shows her love.’ You couldn’t have closeness with family members without aggravating each other once in a while. She had to remind herself that Mum’s distant parenting had left her feeling like an afterthought, especially in the chaos after Dad’s death. Even when Mum read out that letter, Shirina could sense that it was addressed to her older sisters, because her response didn’t matter.

In her new family though, it was different. There was a chance to have a close relationship with Mother, if she just did this one thing. Shirina realized that up until this moment, she had been undecided. There was clarity and immediate relief in having her feet firmly planted on one side, rather than tiptoeing around the border, afraid to commit.

‘Can you please ask Sehaj to call me? I just need the number of the place – I lost the information for the driver and the address and everything.’

‘Oh,’ Mother said. ‘Then why didn’t you say so? I have all of that information written down. Just give me a minute, *beti*.’

There it was, that word again, this time infused with tenderness. Shirina felt the tension in her chest melting away as she sank back into the clean, cool sheets tautly stretched across her bed. She'd allow herself some time to lie down here and then she'd wash all of that water out from her hair. The sarovar did not do much to cleanse her, and the fall felt like a terrible omen. She had to start all over again.

The main square in the centre of the holy city was brimming with tourists now that it was afternoon. A group of men and women in backpacks huddled around a statue commemorating the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Rajni only had a rudimentary knowledge of the massacre; it wasn't covered in her school textbooks and it happened so long ago that it wasn't relevant to her. But the statue was captivating and could represent any horrific incident: the faces of men and women rising from a viscous smoke, their faces forlorn and some mouths twisted in anguish. She was a little girl when another massacre took place in the Golden Temple, and she remembered Mum watching the news non-stop, her hand hovering over her heart. Rajni was too young to know the details at the time but years later, the story became woven into her own history: Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had ordered her soldiers to storm the Golden Temple to remove a militant leader. There were more raids on the Punjabi countryside to round up suspects, and there were protests and violent fights between Sikhs and Hindus in the cities.

She glanced at Jezmeen and Shirina, who were looking at the statue with a different sense of curiosity – more removed, more as spectators of the events than Rajni. So much had happened before Jezmeen and Shirina were even born. Rajni remembered watching the news with Dad and seeing him nervously patting his beard, his eyes full of worry for the first time. Sikhs were being hunted down in India, their beards and long tresses cut to humiliate them. 'It could start happening here,' Dad had warned Mum, looking out the window as if the thugs had spilled out from a holding cell somewhere and were clamouring at their door. 'Keep a low profile around your Hindu friends,' he'd told Rajni. But at school, brown was brown, and everybody was too busy worrying about being bullied for being

Indian to start turning on each other.

A small group of tourists began to wedge their way into the crowd to take pictures near the statue. Shirina stepped closer to Rajni. Rajni caught a whiff of the hotel's floral-scented body wash and noticed that Shirina's hair was nicely fluffed. Had she left the Golden Temple to return to the hotel for a shower? Something about this irked Rajni. They had waited for over an hour for her to come back, during which time the lunch service was almost finished and all that was left to eat were the charred pieces of roti from the bottom of the stack, and some dal which had gone cold.

Just thinking about it made Rajni's stomach rumble. She placed a palm on her belly, embarrassed at the noise, but Jezmeen clearly heard it.

'I could go for a snack too,' Jezmeen said. 'Was it just me, or was the temple food a little light?'

'It was,' Rajni agreed. The problem was, she was a little bit sick of Indian food. She should have eaten more variety in Delhi, where there was Chinese and Western.

'There are a couple of dhabas over there,' Shirina said, pointing at a strip of restaurants that led back out to the main road. 'I saw a Trip Advisor sticker on one of them.'

'It's going to be more of the same though, isn't it?' Jezmeen said. 'I don't know about you guys, but I'm getting tired of Indian food.'

'Me too,' Shirina admitted.

'Well, if that's how you two feel,' Rajni said with a shrug. She didn't want to seem too obvious but she could kill for a burger. Ever since they arrived, she'd been eyeing the two-storey McDonald's and the new McFlurry advertisement that took up an entire window.

Jezmeen and Shirina led the way. Rajni tossed a glance over her shoulder at the statue. Some people had their eyes shut and they were praying to it. A middle-aged woman wearing jeans and a loose cotton top dipped her head, kissed the tips of her fingers and touched the foot of the statue. Rajni wondered if she should do the same – it seemed wrong to turn her back on this tribute to pursue an ice-cream sundae – but her sisters were marching ahead, already having forgotten about the dead and suffering. Another pang of hunger struck Rajni. She noticed the soft bounce of Shirina's hair and

felt another tickle of irritation.

Right outside the restaurant's entrance, men were circulating and holding boards with photographs of nearby tourist destinations. 'Himalayas,' a man called. 'Very pretty drive.' He waved his board featuring snow-capped mountains against wide blue skies. 'Wagah Border,' another man called. 'Wagah Border Wagah Border Wagah Border,' he continued frenetically as he saw the three sisters approaching.

'No,' Rajni said right away but Jezmeen took a brochure from him before they entered the restaurant.

'I've heard it's quite a show,' Jezmeen said, flipping through the brochure as they stepped into line at the counter.

'The India–Pakistan border?' Shirina asked. 'There's a show there?'

'The changing of the guards. That's what these guys are advertising. You go there at the specific time that the guards switch duties. It's a bit of a spectacle. I've seen it on YouTube.'

Rajni had seen it in real life, during her last trip to India with Mum. Some relatives had suggested the day trip and they had all gone together in a noisy, crowded car. Rajni remembered the dusty road on the drive there and the stern military guards at each checkpoint. She remembered how frighteningly passionate everybody on the India side of the border became during the pre-show. 'Why aren't you cheering?' an uncle had asked her. She'd been shocked to silence by the booming music and the feverish wave that swept over the crowd, bringing her to her feet and dropping her back down again. The uncle nodded and smiled knowingly. 'Ah, you're an English girl, that's why.' It wasn't said kindly. By then, Rajni was already aware that her relatives viewed her as a foreigner, and it was with a mix of amusement and distaste that they pointed it out to Mum, who responded with stern words to Rajni. 'Didn't I bring you here to learn about your culture?' she asked loudly for everybody's benefit, while Rajni seethed with rage.

Shirina didn't look too keen to go either. 'How far away is it?'

'About two hours by car,' Jezmeen said.

Shirina shook her head. ‘I really don’t want to do any more travelling than we have to,’ she said.

Jezmeen turned to Rajni. ‘Raj? Come on.’

Rajni looked at Shirina, already ordering her ice cream. *She* didn’t want to do any more travelling? It was Rajni and Jezmeen who were going to be completing the most difficult part of the pilgrimage. Shirina just had to visit relatives – her husband’s *rich* relatives. They were sending a chauffeured car for her. Who was she to complain about travelling?

‘You know what, maybe I will go,’ Rajni said. ‘It’s a very comfortable drive and it’s something we can do together.’

‘Oh good!’ Jezmeen said. ‘I’ll go book in with the guy now.’

Four McFlurries arrived on a tray. ‘We only ordered three,’ Rajni informed the woman at the counter, who presented the receipt to her. Four McFlurries.

‘Two for me,’ Shirina said.

This irked Rajni as well, although she couldn’t quite explain why. It was greedy to have more than one ice cream but Shirina didn’t seem to notice. She let Rajni take the tray and they made their way up the stairs, finding a quiet table by the window. Below them, the street was busy with touts and tourists. Rajni watched Jezmeen negotiating the trip with a man wearing a sandwich board. His arms waved about enthusiastically. When Rajni turned back to face Shirina, she was taking a huge mouthful of ice cream. Rajni noticed that her wedding ring was gone.

‘Did you take your ring off?’ Rajni asked, nodding at Shirina’s hand.

‘Yeah,’ Shirina said. ‘In the interest of being humble and everything.’

Was she being smug? It came across that way to Rajni now. That ostentatious diamond ring had always bothered her but the absence of it, and Shirina’s reason for taking it off – *I don’t want to flaunt what I have in front of all the poor people* – bothered her even more.

‘This hits the spot,’ Shirina said, scooping her spoon into the ice cream.

Rajni said nothing, edging her spoon into her ice cream to take a tiny portion, just out of spite.

‘I’ve never seen you indulge so much in sweets before,’ she said.

She expected Shirina to look a bit self-conscious about her two ice creams, apologetic even. Instead, she nodded and took another scoop. ‘When on holiday, I suppose.’

The words burst from Rajni’s lips: ‘You are not on holiday.’

Shirina’s spoon hung between the cup and her open mouth. She looked like she was posing for a commercial, except the expression on her face was puzzled. ‘I know, Rajni.’

‘I don’t think you do know,’ Rajni said. ‘We came here with a purpose. It’s not some holiday where we meander from one thing to another.’

‘And eating in McDonald’s was part of Mum’s spiritual plan, was it?’ Shirina shot back. Rajni was taken aback by Shirina’s retort. It was like arguing with Jezmeen all of a sudden.

‘You’re not taking this trip seriously,’ Rajni said. ‘Right from the start, you’ve made it clear that you’ll be dodging the difficult stuff.’

‘I told you, this was all arranged at the last minute. I’ve got obligations. You know how hard it is to say no to the in-laws.’

Rajni ignored Shirina’s appeal to her experience with Indian in-laws. Kabir’s mother had sewn her the most hideous cushion covers – turquoise beading on sunny yellow fabric – and expected her to have them on display every time she visited. Rajni remembered stuffing her cushions into those covers with such rage that one of the beads popped off and hit her in the eye, momentarily blinding her. ‘It’s literally an eyesore,’ she complained to Kabir, who shrugged and said, ‘Is it really such a big deal, Rajni? What’s wrong with just giving in once in a while?’

Rajni understood obligations, but Shirina’s lack of remorse felt inexcusable. Look at how she was wolfing down that ice cream. ‘And what happened today? Jezmeen and I had a lovely time reflecting on Mum’s life by the water after the bath, but you went off on your own.’

‘I told you, I was finding Sehaj’s family’s—’

‘I know you were, but that’s the point. Since when did your husband’s family’s needs come before ours?’

Shirina stared at her. The ice cream was beginning to melt from her spoon. Rajni wanted to hear her say it: Sehaj's family was better. They were richer, they were more sophisticated, they showed up to the wedding and whisked her away into a life of comfort that she never had, and she was loyal only to them. But Shirina said nothing, and this was even more infuriating because it made Rajni feel petty.

Jezmeen came bounding up the stairs, waving a pamphlet at them. 'We get picked up in an hour,' she said breathlessly. 'The journey's about two hours, and he'll stop at a good dinner place on the way back.' She looked at Shirina and then Rajni, whose gazes were locked in a staring contest.

'I hope you didn't pay for me, because I'll be spending the evening in the hotel,' Shirina said. She stood up and left, taking both her ice creams with her.

Chapter Eleven

I also want you to experience the familiarity of our ancestral state. You girls are British, yes, but all the generations of our family before you lived in India. It is in your blood – the language, the food, the way things are, these things are not erased just because you grew up elsewhere.

'It's about making time for your family, isn't it? How often do we get to see each other? Never,' Rajni said.

They had been on the road for nearly an hour and it was Rajni's third rant about Shirina's poor participation in the pilgrimage. Jezmeen still didn't know what to say. She was used to Rajni railing against her; Shirina never got into trouble. It was clear that Rajni's feelings had been festering for a while.

'It's those in-laws of hers,' Rajni said. 'She's like their puppet.'

'Isn't that how it always is?' Jezmeen asked. 'Especially in the first few years of marriage. She's got all these people to pay respects to. Surely you had to do the same thing.'

'I travelled with Kabir. Where's Sehaj? Why are his family visits encroaching on our time together? It's bad enough that she left so quickly after Mum's funeral. She went running back to Sehaj as if spending any more time with us was that unbearable.'

Maybe it was, Jezmeen thought, remembering Shirina's outburst on the train yesterday. Although Jezmeen and Rajni had managed to put aside their differences about the funeral arrangements, the resentment over their fight had still hovered over their interactions.

Rajni wasn't through with venting. 'And you should have seen how she said that thing about being humble when I asked her about her wedding ring. It was a backhanded brag.'

Jezmeen looked out the window. It wasn't as enjoyable as she'd thought, being on Rajni's side. Her mouth was twisted in that expression of distaste like she'd just sucked on a lemon. Fragments of

a dream Jezmeen recently had about Shirina floated in her mind. They were talking, but the distance between them became wider as the conversation continued and eventually, one of them hung up.

They passed a wide expanse of fields dotted with farmhouses and livestock. The highway was coated in golden dust. On the side of the road, there was the occasional canteen or restaurant with plastic outdoor furniture. Away from the city of Amritsar, the sky did seem bluer and less smoggy. Jezmeen could feel the warmth of the afternoon sun on the window, which made her grateful to be in this air-conditioned car. Their driver had given them his card earlier: Tom Hanks, he said his name was. 'What's your real name?' Jezmeen had asked. He shook his head solemnly and told them he wanted to be known as Tom Hanks.

'Uh, excuse me,' Jezmeen said now in Punjabi, leaning towards the driver's seat. 'Could you pull over at a rest stop in the next ten minutes?' She looked out the window at a filling station with a rusted and gutted car propped up on breeze-blocks. A dark and blurry cloud of flies hovered over something in the hollow where a wheel had been. 'Maybe a restaurant?'

The driver nodded. 'Tom Hanks will bring you to the cleanest rest stop,' he said.

'Thank you,' Jezmeen said. 'You know, you could really tell us your Punjabi name. We're not complete foreigners. We can pronounce it.'

'Tom Hanks,' he said.

'Tom? Thomas? That's what your parents named you at birth?' Jezmeen asked.

'Tom *Hanks*.'

'Okay,' Jezmeen said, defeated. She sank back in her seat and glanced at Rajni, who was still fuming. 'Raj, maybe Shirina's just not feeling so well. Travel does different things to people. She might just want to be on her own.'

'She's been on her own this whole time,' Rajni pointed out. 'Hasn't she had enough time to rest?'

The car switched lanes and slowed down as it approached a restaurant: Ravi's Punjabi Dhaba. 'One of the best,' Tom Hanks said with a flourish as he yanked back the hand-brake.

‘Good food?’ Jezmeen asked. The restaurant was set back behind a fountain and two tents for outdoor seating. Children chased each other between tall potted plants in the front garden.

‘Food is not bad. Seven-out-of-ten rating, if you ask me. Toilets, however, are excellent,’ Tom Hanks said.

‘That’s alright with us,’ Jezmeen said.

Tom Hanks was not exaggerating about the bathrooms. They were spotless, with hand-soap dispensers and gleaming sinks. The lock on the door clicked right into place, a luxury that Jezmeen had already started to think she could do without, considering the times she had used toilets with flimsy or non-existent locks in the temple and on the train from Delhi. ‘Our driver sure knows how to keep his customers happy,’ Jezmeen remarked to Rajni at the sinks as they both washed their hands.

‘He probably carts around people like us all the time,’ Rajni said.

‘I wonder what that’s like,’ Jezmeen said. ‘He’s aware that we have different standards but somewhere inside he must be thinking that we’re a bunch of prats.’

‘We haven’t been so bad,’ Rajni protested. ‘I only gasped that one time when he overtook that bullock because I thought we were going to run the poor animal off the road.’

‘Not that,’ Jezmeen said. ‘Don’t you think about it sometimes? About how different our lives would be if we had grown up here? We wouldn’t be tourists. We’d be . . . I don’t know. I’d be married off to some eligible guy in the village by now. If you find a husband with lots of land, he’s a catch, isn’t he? I’d like to think I would have been matched with a man with a few acres to his name.’ She fluffed her hair in the mirror and fluttered her eyes at her own reflection.

Rajni didn’t play along with the joke. Her expression hardened, a look Jezmeen recognized from earlier when they were at the Golden Temple. Something was upsetting her about this trip and it was more than Mum’s death, more than Shirina’s attitude. ‘Raj, are you alright?’

‘Hmm? Yeah, fine,’ Rajni said. She became busy all of a sudden with drying her hands. The automatic dryer roared and drowned out all of Jezmeen’s thoughts.

As they left the restaurant, a busboy dressed smartly in a white and gold-trimmed kurta came

running up to them. ‘Madam, please, your bill.’

‘Bill?’ Jezmeen asked. ‘You’re charging us for using the toilets?’

The busboy shook the bill at Jezmeen and she had a look. One aloo paratha, one small cup of chai. Tom Hanks was sitting at a table near the fountain, taking a luxurious sip. ‘That’s fine,’ Jezmeen said. She paid the bill and they returned to wait in the car while he finished his meal. The air-conditioning was left on at full blast and a bhangra beat pulsed from the stereo speakers. When the driver returned, he thanked Jezmeen and Rajni for the meal.

‘Not at all,’ Jezmeen said.

‘It would have been nice if he’d asked though,’ Rajni pointed out in a whisper.

‘It’s not a big deal,’ Jezmeen whispered back. She could feel herself bristling again at Rajni’s constant suspicion of Indian people. How did she live her life, thinking that everybody was out to rip her off?

‘Is he going to do that at every rest stop then?’ Rajni asked. ‘Order himself a meal and charge it to us?’

‘So what if he does?’ Jezmeen asked. ‘He probably had to anyway, because the restaurant wouldn’t let us use their toilets if we weren’t customers.’

Rajni was dissatisfied with this response, but she dropped the subject, leaving Jezmeen to focus on the landscape. Along the edges of the dual carriageway, large patches of farmland were fronted by sprawling gated properties, the types of homes that she’d mostly seen in photographs that aunties and uncles would pass around at family functions. ‘This is the house we built, cost a fraction of a flat here in London,’ they’d say with a bit of pride and a bit of scorn, as if the Indian economy should really know better. The houses were furnished with Italian leather sofas that ran along the living room’s edges, and the kitchens were taken straight from the catalogues, down to the crockery sets and the ‘Home Sweet Home’ embroidered onto tea towels. They were English homes in India, unlike their distinctly Indian homes in England. Everywhere people went, they had to remind themselves that they were somebody else. The houses sat empty all year until the summer visits, when some

servants could be hired to grease the hinges and dust off the counters, and the families would live in the luxury that they had left this country to afford.

'We still have family in Punjab, don't we?' Jezmeen asked. 'On Dad's land?' She only had a vague understanding of where Dad's ancestral village was. Mum had brushed off her questions when she tried to ask about it for a history project for school. 'Choose a different topic,' Mum replied. 'So many things have happened in the history of the world, and you want to talk about some farm in India.' Jezmeen was disappointed. From the way Mum dismissed her question, it was clear that Dad never owned sprawling acres of land in India like the patriarch of a Hindi drama that Jezmeen had been following at the time.

'Did you ever get to see Dad's village?' she asked Rajni. There it was again, Rajni clenching her jaw. It seemed that nothing Jezmeen said was right.

'Not sure where it is,' Rajni said.

It wouldn't be too difficult to find it, Jezmeen thought. They just needed to contact one of those aunties or uncles in England – they weren't blood relatives, but they would be able to provide a village name or a phone number. 'We probably won't get another chance to see it again,' Jezmeen said.

'It's really not something Mum would want us to do,' Rajni reminded her.

'Why not?'

Rajni turned to face her. 'Mum expressly didn't mention any of Dad's relatives in her letter. Why would we go and seek them out then?'

'I don't understand that,' Jezmeen said. 'Did they fall out?' Jezmeen remembered that brother of Dad's being unpleasant when he visited them all those years ago. Sensing the tension in the house, she had asked Rajni when her uncle would leave, but she didn't know what happened. It was all between the adults and Rajni, who was a teenager then and understood more than she did.

'I guess so,' Rajni said.

'What falling out could be so terrible that Mum wouldn't want us speaking to Dad's family?'

'Only Mum knows the answer to that question,' Rajni said, but Jezmeen didn't buy it. Rajni

knew something, even though she acted as if she didn't. The trip that Rajni got to take here as a teenager while Jezmeen and Shirina were left in Auntie Roopi's care – she had known Dad's family, dined with them, seen them.

'They're the only family we have left,' Jezmeen pressed. 'Wouldn't they welcome us? Let bygones be bygones and all that?'

'It's probably not that simple,' Rajni said.

Jezmeen pictured herself venturing through the villages with a crumpled piece of paper bearing a pencilled map and a scribbled address. She'd knock on doors and eventually come upon her ancestral home. They'd embrace her; they'd have to, after she came all this way and seemingly travelled across time. While she sat and exchanged stories over tea with her long-lost aunts and uncles, a withered old woman would appear, bearing Jezmeen's very features beneath layers of wrinkles. 'You take after her,' the others would say. And Jezmeen would have a reference point, a prototype of sorts. 'I take after my paternal great-aunt,' she would tell people. 'I have her eyes. People say she had a sense of theatrics as well, but the dementia has taken that away now.' It was a story that gave Jezmeen roots; it would be harder to keep criticizing her as shallow and callous if she had an ancestral connection.

Jezmeen was rudely jolted from her reverie as the car swerved to avoid grazing another car that had wandered into its lane. She grabbed the sides of the passenger seat in front of her. The other car, a gleaming black mini-van, was racing ahead now.

'Mother fucker,' Tom Hanks muttered. He glanced at Jezmeen and Rajni in the rear-view mirror and gave them an apologetic smile. Then his foot hit the accelerator so hard, Jezmeen and Rajni were thrown back against their seats.

'What are you doing?' Rajni asked, panicking.

'Madam, that driver needs to learn a lesson,' Tom Hanks said.

'No, he doesn't,' Jezmeen said firmly. 'We don't want to get in an accident – just ignore him, please.'

‘You don’t understand, Madam,’ Tom Hanks said, still focused on the car. ‘He did it on purpose.’

‘I know we all take these road incidents personally, but—’ Before Jezmeen could finish placating Tom Hanks, he made a sharp and sudden swing into the black van’s lane. Rajni let out a long, operatic shriek.

‘STOP IT! STOP IT NOW!’ Rajni shouted. Jezmeen’s words were frozen in her throat. ‘TOM HANKS, YOU ARE GOING TO GET US ALL KILLED!’

The car slowed down. Jezmeen looked behind her and saw that the black van was meekly following behind now, having learned its lesson. ‘Why did you have to do that?’ she asked. ‘It was very dangerous.’

Tom Hanks did not reply. His lips were set in a grim line and his eyes stared straight ahead. ‘These people think they own the roads,’ he finally said.

‘Which people?’ Jezmeen asked.

He didn’t answer her question. *People like us?* she wondered. People who came back to India from abroad and pulled up to their empty mansions in their fancy cars and treated everybody like they were servants? People who could afford drivers to transport them to be entertained by a show of power between two countries that had actually cost lives and spilled blood? Jezmeen looked over at Rajni. Worry lines had appeared on her forehead. She could tell they were thinking the same thing.

Nothing had changed. Rajni drew this conclusion as she stepped out of the van and her feet hit the dusty ground beneath her. Unpaved and rocky, bits of gravel flicked her ankles and rolled into her sandals as she and Jezmeen walked away from this dirt-road car park.

‘Take my card,’ Tom Hanks told them. ‘In case you can’t find me on the way back.’

‘You’ll be in this same spot though, right?’ Rajni asked. She heard the sternness in her own voice and she didn’t care. He had nearly killed them just now, so she felt justified in making everything sound like a pre-emptive reprimand.

‘I’ll be here, Madam,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry. But there are lots of cars and it gets confusing when everybody is wandering around afterwards. You don’t want to get into the wrong car.’

No, she certainly didn’t. All around her, drivers leaned against their vehicles, their eyes following the tourists. Rajni took the card and tucked it into her purse. It was suddenly the most important thing she owned.

She felt a flash of cold on her hand and looked down to see a boy with a palette of paints and a brush. In one quick stroke, he had given her a streak of orange, one third of the colours needed to create an Indian flag. ‘I don’t want this,’ she informed him. ‘No, thank you.’

‘Oh, come on, Raj,’ Jezmeen said. ‘It’s less than fifty pence and it’s fun.’ She was squatting next to another boy and tucking her hair behind her ear, letting him paint the flag on her cheek.

‘You look like you’re at a carnival,’ Rajni said when Jezmeen’s face-painting was finished.

‘It feels like a carnival,’ Jezmeen remarked. Popcorn vendors and drinks carts were scattered along the crooked boundary between the car park and the wide main road. The little boy with the paintbrush persisted, following Rajni and Jezmeen and repeating his prices. When he started humming the Indian national anthem Rajni decided to give up.

‘Just a small one,’ she said, putting out her hand. ‘It’ll wash off right away, yes?’ Of course it would. She knew this; when she was younger she had had her face painted and envied the girls with orange, green and white ribbons woven into their pigtails. It was the only part of the celebration she had enjoyed.

‘Of course,’ the boy said. With a flourish, he swept the brush across her hand in three confident strokes: orange, white, green. They were wavy, as if the flag were caught in the wind.

She paid him and they continued, following the crowds towards the main security entrance. Here, they were separated by gender – ‘Men here, women there,’ a guard called out, waving his arms to indicate each designated line. Everybody was patted down but the women were allowed to have it done in a curtained booth, by a female guard. When Rajni’s turn came, she watched the guard poke her torch in her purse and raised her arms to let her feel for weapons. She remembered the story of an

elderly relative who came to London from Punjab, her first ever visit on an aeroplane. During the routine airport security pat-down, she thought they were hugging her farewell.

The cheering and chanting started as Jezmeen and Rajni advanced towards the stands. It was like a football game, and it was exactly as Rajni remembered. She could feel Jezmeen's excitement radiating off her. 'Look at all these people,' she gushed. She nudged Rajni. 'I know you've seen it before, but don't you think it's exciting?'

'It's fine if you like a spectacle,' Rajni said. She didn't even enjoy school assemblies – those skits the senior students created, always with some vague innuendo and inside-jokey reference to the teachers they didn't like. She hated the raucous applause, the way everything felt like it was going out of control, and when she saw the faces of the other teachers – especially the young ones who didn't mind, who joined in sometimes – she thought: *You're not in charge, that's why.* Moving towards the towering stands with Jezmeen, Rajni realized that this was the motto of her entire life as the eldest sister. She was in charge. Nobody else had that responsibility, and – at least according to Mum – nobody else had managed to screw it up as much as she. Jezmeen and Shirina had no idea what Rajni had sacrificed.

Jezmeen led the way up the concrete steps. An usher pointed out a spot and urged people to move in. Rajni and Jezmeen scooted along the row and ended up on the far end of the bleachers, overlooking the Pakistan side. The boundary had puzzled Rajni the first time she saw it – she had expected a river, or a deep, cavernous valley separating both countries but it was a track of dirt, only a few metres wide. Along the border, tall iron fences and storm clouds of barbed wire sent a clear message.

The music on the India side was a deafening boom, so loud that the speakers' static drowned out the lyrics. The show of patriotism began shortly after Rajni and Jezmeen sat down, schoolchildren racing along the bleachers and to the stage area with Indian flags. When they reached the stage, they danced and clapped in a circle, waving to the audience who cheered them on. People began to leave the stands to join them and soon the stage was crowded with spectators cheering for their country. A

woman who was sitting one row ahead turned to her husband and said, ‘Come on then, we’re only here once.’ She had a crisp British accent but she pumped her fist in the air and chanted slogans along with the crowd.

On the Pakistan side, no dancing. There was some faint music, subdued and drowned out by the bass on the Indian side. The bleachers were only half full. Rajni remembered the uncles so smugly commenting on Pakistan’s lacklustre turnout back then too. ‘Look at them. No pride,’ he said. ‘And they have all these restrictions against women. They can’t even dance in front of the men like our women can.’ And then he nodded appreciatively at the women half his age who were shaking their hips for the love of India.

Rajni turned to say something to Jezmeen and noticed the space next to her was empty. She spotted her sister running down the steps to join the dancers. ‘Raj!’ she called, tossing a look over her shoulder. ‘Take a picture.’

Rajni waited for Jezmeen to reach the stage area and then she pointed the phone and shot. All the pictures were slightly blurry because Jezmeen was in motion. She tried for a video. Jezmeen sashayed across the screen in miniature, pumping her hands into the air. Two little girls took her hands and she fell in step with them, laughing and mouthing the chorus that she had only just heard moments ago.

A similar video existed in their family’s history. It was long gone now, tossed out with all the other VHS tapes that had more or less disintegrated. Nobody had been organized enough to salvage the tapes and convert them to DVDs when some electronics shops were offering this service, and so they gathered dust and mould and became obsolete. Rajni had only seen it once after that childhood trip. Mum was the star of the video. She was dancing just like Jezmeen. There was that same abandon in her moves – hips shaking, palms open as if she was trying to grasp a piece of the sky. Years later, in the lead-up to her wedding, Rajni anticipated seeing Mum dancing like that again but she didn’t. She stayed in the background during Rajni’s wedding, still hurting from the fact that Dad’s older brother chose not to come. Rajni hadn’t wanted to invite him, but Mum felt that it was the proper

custom for him to stand in for Dad. It was an important gesture too, to show people that all had been forgiven.

Rajni pressed the stop button on the phone and put it back into her purse. Once the changing of the guards ceremony started, she knew she'd take it out again and record the whole thing – the marching, the high kicks, the theatrics of guards flinging open the gates to protect their land.

Jezmeen's cheeks glistened with sweat when she returned. 'You looked great,' Rajni said. 'Just like Mum. She danced here too.'

'She did?'

Rajni nodded. 'She was sitting right next to me, and when the music started, she started bobbing her shoulders like this.' Rajni did an impression of Mum, shutting her eyes and letting the music course through her.

Jezmeen laughed. 'Mum couldn't resist a good song. Remember how she kept on going at Shirina's wedding? The women on Sehaj's side couldn't keep up.'

Rajni remembered how pleased she had been to see Mum celebrating, but also the twinge of envy she felt towards Shirina. Shirina got to have Mum dancing at her wedding because so much time had passed since that falling out with Dad's family, and Mum had moved on.

'Like one of those battery-operated bunnies in the advertisements,' Rajni agreed. 'That's how she was here too, except twenty-five years younger and in the best health. Dad had died and she hadn't danced or celebrated anything in ages.' Rajni felt a lump growing in her throat. She could feel the warmth of Jezmeen's attention on her face and she swallowed hard, pushed the memory down into her chest and the pit of her stomach, where all of these old fears resided. 'She danced exactly like a woman at her peak,' Rajni said. 'It was one of those moments where you're sitting in a crowd and so much is going on around you – the drinks sellers are calling, the music is throbbing, everybody's cheering and chattering, and it feels like it all stops because there's this woman dancing her heart out and just rejoicing.'

'I can picture it,' Jezmeen said with a wistful smile.

Rajni smiled back. It was a nice memory to leave her sister with, and one that she didn't have to embellish, unlike so many others. She knew Jezmeen was becoming curious about their roots – her mention of Aunty Roopi had startled Rajni yesterday because until now, Rajni wasn't aware that her sisters even remembered being sent to live there while she and Mum took that last trip to India. There was no reason to tell Jezmeen about the fight that happened, and all the events that led up to it. There was no need to tell anybody about the guilt Rajni couldn't help feeling, even though it had been so many years since they came back from that trip. 'I can never go back there again,' Mum had said to Rajni. 'You realize that? You understand what you've done? Because of you, I can never return to India again.'

EXEGESIS

Chapter One

Women and Success Narratives in South Asian Diaspora Fiction

In novels about the South Asian diaspora experience in Britain, the notion of success is a source of conflict between parents and children, and between members of the diaspora and their wider communities. Expectations of success accompany the migrants' journey to their new homelands but the pursuit and very definition of success can lead to the characters' unraveling, creating a narrative which questions the ideals of migrant success versus the realities. The pressures to succeed have some quantifiable goals – the attainment of academic degrees and high salaries are commonly regarded as benchmarks of high achievement – but also some illusory qualities when parents perceive their children's burgeoning independence as betrayal. In the British novels *Gifted* (2007) and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999), patriarchal expectations of success shape the identities of the girls and women in their families. Both novels examine the dichotomous oppressive cultural beliefs of honour and shame, described in a study of British Asian youths as a "double edged sword" for their dual capacity to "include and ostracise" (Bhardwaj 56). In these novels, the daughters' fight for autonomy becomes a major tension in the narrative as they struggle against two layers of oppression: race and gender. Portraits of non-conforming women emerge from this dual exile, contributing to more complex discussions of what it means to be a woman in the South Asian diaspora. In examining the protagonists' journeys towards individuality, I will explore the impact of South Asian migrant families' ideals of success on the identities of their daughters.

At the conclusion of Nikita Lalwani's novel *Gifted*, the teenaged protagonist Rumika Vasi (referred to as Rumi) has let down her family in a very public way. A child Mathematics prodigy and Oxford's youngest enrollee, she has run away from college. If pride was the family's previous identity as they celebrated their immigrant success story in Britain, now it has turned into "visible" disgrace

(Lalwani 268). The novel brings to mind the true story of child prodigy Sufiah Yusof, who made international headlines for being accepted in Oxford at the age of twelve but ran away and denounced her family in the media (Tweedie). In *Gifted*, the public shame is further compounded by the fact that this family used reclusiveness as a method of coping with the hostilities of migrant life in Britain. "They had been so private all these years, so alone, self-segregated through Mahesh's fear of outside influences, unable to trust people, and they were now totally public. Everyone knew their business" (Lalwani 269). Although the novel centres on Rumi's coming-of-age experience, Lalwani provides significant narrative perspective to her father Mahesh, further reducing her agency. Rumi is first introduced as a conundrum to Mahesh, who is baffled by her willingness to define herself as "coloured" because it suggests her acceptance of the prejudice that her white classmates use to exclude her. Contemplating Rumi's social standing, Mahesh thinks: "But you are not going to be a victim. That I will not allow" (Lalwani 4). Lalwani portrays a father's desire to control a society adverse to South Asian migrants by focusing on controlling his daughters' identity.

Rumi's subsequent formation of an identity around her father's expectations reflects Simone De Beauvoir's feminist theories about the positioning of females as Others to men. Introducing *The Second Sex*, she writes: "Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity" (De Beauvoir 5). De Beauvoir observes a societal paradigm where woman is a measure of man, aiding his accomplishments at the cost of her individuality. While a man enjoys the autonomy to transcend gender and participate in the world, as is the existential right of all humans, a woman is defined by her immanence, and she "…must renounce all personal transcendence and settle for that of nourishing her male" (De Beauvoir 262). The father-daughter relationship in *Gifted* reflects this paradigm, where Rumi follows a strict study regime to excel in her exams to validate her father's existence, at the cost of her individuality. Mahesh's controlling behaviour posits Rumi as inherently incapable, yet responsible for his success, reducing her to a person whose "wings are cut but then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly" (De Beauvoir 645). Having built an identity around her subjugated position, Rumi even views her father's physical

violence towards her as a personal failing – when he hits her, she blames herself for forcing him to resort to it: "She couldn't explain this…why the guilt in his eyes at having been driven to this made her feel disgusting" (Lalwani 90). As "…the source of all man's reflection on his existence and all expression he can give of it" (De Beauvoir 213), Rumi holds herself responsible for failing in this role. As the Other, Rumi's existence is inessential even to herself, which leads her to a humiliating performance of her femininity to restore her father's existence. De Beauvoir states: "To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive and docile" (De Beauvoir 348), which is evident in Rumi's response just before the beating: "[She] had been given time to plead and ask for forgiveness before it happened… she had thrown herself on to the floor, trying to grab his feet like a reformed villain in a Hindi film" (Lalwani 89). Rumi's docility in the moment is invoked for her survival but her father's violent overpowering of her body also seals her subjugation. Lalwani's references to an Indian film archetype further suggest the element of performance and reinforce Rumi's condition by making narrative links to a cultural context where women are so commonly defined by their immanence. Mahesh considers any resistance or questioning from Rumi to be indicators of feminine weakness – he tells her not to be a "silly girl" for wanting to socialise with friends and repeats this label when she confesses her loneliness (Lalwani 118-121). As their relationship grows more strained and the pressure to succeed intensifies, Rumi contemplates her identity as her father's "negative": "Am I transparent to him? she wondered. Does he know everything? Everything he despises?" (Lalwani 110). Rumi's questions reflect the "double and deceptive image" that men use to characterize women to form their own existence: "He projects onto her what he desires and fears, what he loves and hates" (De Beauvoir 213).

Patriarchal dominance reduces Rumi's agency, but racial oppression adds to the obstacles that stand in the way of her autonomy. Mahesh calls upon his situation as a migrant to explain that he pressures Rumi to succeed because race gives her a disadvantage: "I am merely helping Rumi to fulfil her potential. And if she wants to be taken seriously in this country she will have to a lot more than just fulfil it, you can be sure of that" (Lalwani 126). Mahesh's desire to control Rumi's identity

reflects his own fears of failing to succeed in a racist society. In order to overcome victimisation brought on by colonialism, he resorts to a colonial power dynamic as described by Albert Memmi: "He (the coloniser) never forgets to make a public show of his own virtues, and will argue with vehemence to appear heroic and great. At the same time his privileges arise just as much from his glory as from degrading the colonised" (Memmi 54-55). If being Indian in Britain is an oppressive situation for Mahesh, he imposes similar structures of oppression onto Rumi, in order to elevate his own sense of migrant success. Early in the novel, these insecurities about Mahesh's identity as a migrant surface in his thoughts when conversing with Rumi's teacher: "What preconceptions did she bring with her? He'd tell her he'd got into all their universities – all the bloody jewels they treasured so exclusively in this country" (Lalwani 8). When they arrive late to the entrance exam and see "the sea of white faces" (Lalwani 13), Mahesh's sense of racial alienation is so amplified that he decides to leave and train Rumi on his own. Mahesh's distrust of external structures is the first step in a series of efforts to control Rumi's path towards success, and reflective of the way South Asian families have created insular communities to avoid racial conflict with British society (Bhardwaj 56). As postcolonial theorist Nandi Bhatia says in "Women, Homelands and the Indian Diaspora": "But (diaspora) women must not only prove their moral worth in the domestic sphere; they must also equal or surpass their western counterparts in capability and education—a premise that stems from the need to be accepted by a racist society" (Bhatia 517). Experiencing a constant sense of displacement from their identities, these characters develop a double consciousness, which is a hallmark of the South Asian diaspora woman's experience (Brah 613).

Rumi's excellence in Mathematics is not necessarily the pinnacle, or the only indicator of Mahesh's success in Britain. As an honourable Indian daughter, Rumi must also dress modestly and avoid socialising. Newspapers reported that Sufiah Khan's father imposed similar rules on the family with regards to Western music. Bhatia explains how migrant families believe the path to success is paved by maintaining cultural purity:

Seeking zealously to protect the interests of cultural groups from the incursion of western ideas,

> diasporic communities tend to view the family, and especially women, as a source of cultural influence and moral corruptibility. The home then acquires a spiritual character, something sacrosanct that needs protection against 'contaminative' western influences, and reproduces this conception of a rediscovered 'Indian' identity in the family. (Bhatia 515)

The migrant experience also changes the concept of "home" into a state of mind that migrants are perpetually trying to grasp, much like the elusive pursuit of success. According to Jasbir Jain: "The word 'home' no longer signifies a 'given', it does not necessarily connote a sense of belonging, instead it increasingly foregrounds a personal choice which the individual has exercised, and 'home' and 'homeland' are for all practical purposes separable units" (Jain 80). Mahesh's fears of alienation from his migrant home are fully realised at the end of the novel after Rumi runs away, when a newspaper publishes an inflammatory depiction of him as "an aspiring terrorist, using his fiercely trained child as a weapon to subvert the free-thinking traditions of the West" (Lalwani 269). The media's portrayal of Mahesh as Other reflects the way colonisers diminish the colonised and take away their agency. To quote Memmi:

> Almost always, the colonialist also devotes himself to a systematic devaluation of the colonised. He is fed up with his subject, who tortures his conscience and his life. He tries to dismiss him from his mind, to imagine the colony without the colonised. … But the colonialist realises that without the colonised, the colony would no longer have any meaning. (Memmi 66-67)

As an Indian father who is grappling with his migrant identity in Britain, Mahesh's worst fears are realized in Rumi's actions: a disobedient daughter, and a society that essentially rejects him.

Unable to earn social currency among her peers in school, Rumi chooses to focus instead on developing her talents in Math, thus earning power and status in another path. Numbers define Rumi's identity: she finds it soothing to calculate her exact age down to the day, and she calculates the probability of being liked by a boy in class. Mathematical sums and certain numbers are personified as "warm", "familiar", "wholesome" and "friendly" (Lalwani 17). When Math cannot substitute friendship in her "lonely" life in Cardiff (Lalwani 16), Rumi seeks refuge in her transnational identity.

She imagines herself announcing to her classmates: "I'm moving to a country where people laugh and have fun and aren't cruel and rude and don't make a joke of you, and where they are more intelligent than people here, especially at Maths like me. And I'm never coming back" (Lalwani 24). Rumi's fantasies of departure echo the historical separation of India from British leadership and signify that her search for an ideal cultural identity is rooted deeply in her search for autonomy. She reclaims power in this fantasy by invoking the ills of colonialism: "And also, by the way, my mum and dad say that British people stole all these stones from people in India, the rubies and diamonds in the precious buildings, before they stopped ruling it, and that represents how they stole the sparkle out of Indian people's lives… I'm going back to where I came from" (Lalwani 24). Later on in the narrative, when Rumi becomes a teenager and begins negotiating romantic relationships, she romanticises India once more. She imagines herself as "a moving dot graduating through the comforting structures and hierarchies…" (Lalwani 113) because she believes that expectations are clearer in a culture where boundaries are explicit. Rumi wants to escape into a different reality and identity by way of her "diasporic consciousness," a term which originated in William Safran's 1991 article "Diasporas Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" that postcolonial theorist Rey Chow expounds on as follows:

> Accordingly, if, as William Safran writes, 'diasporic consciousness is an intellectualisation of [the] existential condition' of dispersal from the homeland, then diasporic consciousness is perhaps not so much a historical accident as it is an intellectual reality – the reality of being intellectual. (Chow 201)

Diasporic consciousness is a necessary factor in seeding Rumi's sense of autonomy as a child because it provides a means of intellectual escape. Rumi consciously calls upon this expanded transnational identity for a sense of acceptance and autonomy as external pressures build to define her selfhood only by test scores and family reputation.

Mahesh's strict parenting over Rumi continues in adolescence, but Lalwani also implicates

her mother Shreene in reinforcing patriarchal notions of migrant success. Shreene pressures Rumi to be an obedient traditional daughter in the way that she has been an obedient traditional wife, going along with Mahesh's "police-camp procedures" to improve her English and make her appear educated (Lalwani 10). In a rare scene of mother-daughter bonding, Shreene gives Rumi insight into who she and Mahesh were as individuals before becoming migrants and parents. Rumi's questions escalate the conversation, bringing Shreene from one memory of courtship to the next, and illuminating the past in a way suggests the building of a sound mother-daughter relationship. However, the mood shifts abruptly when Rumi asks, "And did you have sexual intercourse so that I would be born?" (Lalwani 80). Lalwani pauses the action of the scene to reflect Shreene's shock and anger at the mention of sex, suggesting that the open channels of communication between mother and daughter were an illusion. Eventually, Shreene says, "That is not how our babies are born. Only white people have sex…Forget science. That is their science, for white people. We do not do that" (80). Shreene's response to Rumi's curiosities about sex demarcates the line between her two cultural identities. The clash between the Western and Indian parts of Rumi's identity only intensifies as she hits puberty. Her traditional parents' definition of "success" broadens to include obedience, asexuality, and not assimilating to any aspects of Western lifestyle. Shreene once again polices Rumi's sexuality when she asks for a bra, this time referring to her own past role as a daughter: "When I was your age I would not have asked my mother for something like this. We were so shy of speaking about these things. When my mother took me aside and explained to me that I would need one, I was so embarrassed" (Lalwani 136). Shreene fears Rumi's forthrightness, a behaviour that strikes her as improper because she wants to address her body directly instead of waiting for others to make decisions about it. De Beauvoir identifies adolescence as the threshold at which girls must abandon their subjectivity and freedom under social pressure to become objects. "She spontaneously grasps herself as the essential: How will she decide to be inessential? If I can only accomplish myself as the *Other*, how will I renounce my *Self*?" (De Beauvoir 348). Shreene is wary of her daughter's assertions

without realizing that this is a final attempt at autonomy and selfhood before she gives in to Otherness. Shreene adds more labels to the growing vocabulary that describes Rumi's faults and failings here: "shameless" and "stripped of any sense of decency" are the new descriptors to accompany Rumi's coming of age (Lalwani 136 -137), direct attacks on her sexuality and autonomy.

Rumi finds herself at a crossroads between failure and success at the end of the novel, during her probationary exam at Oxford. These scenes showcase Lalwani's most deliberate imagery of Rumi's imprisonment in an identity, and her subsequent liberation from it. Rumi's body becomes the terrain for the logistics of cheating on the exam and maintaining her family's image of success. "Geometry went into the left leg of her tights, crammed in along the front of her thigh, ending at the knee. Probability and stats went into the right leg in the same way, thankfully with much fewer pieces" (Lalwani 258). Rumi's concealment of formulas in various parts of her body is symbolic of how Mathematics has been forced onto her as an identity. While much of the novel has shown her in the shadow of her father's regimented schedule, and kept her confined in spaces, Rumi's escape from Oxford is rendered in a very literal way: she decides to run out of the exam. The act of liberation continues with Rumi reaching into her bra and tossing fistfuls of her cheat sheets into the wind, ridding herself of the burden of her identity as a Mathematics prodigy. In an open and public space, the setting of her escape is a distinct contrast from her confined life. Lalwani evokes confinement once again to enable Rumi's escape as she arrives at the foyer of a train station. After repeating the question, "What to do now?" (Lalwani 266), she shows Rumi in a state of momentary paralysis:

> She waited, hoped for a secret sign, a portal that would open up like the false panel on the back of that famous wardrobe, in the books she'd loved as a child, and lead her through to the rest of her life…She needed to know what would happen next. After all the plans, the fantasies, the utterly complex dream scenarios she had created over the past few months, she was here… (Lalwani 266)

Rumi returns to confinement – if only as a means to facilitate her escape – by becoming a stowaway

in a train lavatory. In so doing, Lalwani reclaims the notion of confinement that has damaged Rumi's autonomy, and uses it as a means for her to escape from the life that has stifled her.

The idealism of Lalwani's ending is one way that this fictional narrative is used to explore and restore agency in her protagonist's narrative in a way that her real-life counterpart never really had. (The last reports of Sufiah Yusof are from 2008. They present her as stable but still running away from the tormentors of her past, who now include the British tabloid press). Sufiah Yusof remains confined in the largely sensationalist reports that preserve her narrative. It is tempting to continue making comparisons between Sufiah Yusof and Rumika Vasi, but to treat Lalwani's complex novel as an extended "write the story behind the headlines" activity is ultimately reductive. In fact, the inspiration behind it is merely the conjecture of reviewers – Lalwani herself has never claimed to write a fictional answer to Yusof's plight. To do so would be to relegate yet another South Asian female writer to the role of cultural tour guide and interpreter of cultural values, simplifying what the story is really exploring: how patriarchal ideas of South Asian migrant success are built on the policing and controlling of women and girls.

On the other hand, author Meera Syal credits media reports about South Asian women in Britain for inspiring her novel *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*. Syal felt compelled to respond to dichotomous public representations of South Asian women.

> One day, I opened *Eastern Eye* and I saw two headlines side by side. One read, 'Asian women top the graduate league', and the other read, 'Asian women top the suicide and self-harm league'. I thought, 'What's going on here? Why are we capable of creating so much and at the same time of destroying ourselves?' (Rampton)

Syal's novel about three British-Indian women navigating families, careers and community expectations highlights the gulf between public appearances of success and private anguish stemming from cultural pressures. Unlike *Gifted*, which focuses on a direct father-daughter relationship, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* approaches the struggle for women's independence with broader

commentaries about the patriarchy in South Asian culture. The public image of South Asian women in Britain that portrays them as dichotomous also correlates to a crucial misunderstanding of Indian women as being either traditional or modern, without recognising that traditionalism and modernity belong on a spectrum containing multitudes and contradictions. The three protagonists of Syal's novel represent different identities and values from their Eastern and Western cultural experiences.

Success is also a multifarious theme in Syal's portrayal of British Indian women, but the definition of success for them is finding the right balance between their Indian and British identities. In an early description of her three protagonists, Syal details the ways in which each character has reconciled their values. For Tania, her good looks were "…her passport out of East London and into the cosmopolitan circles where she was now termed merely exotic" (Syal 18). From her friends' perspectives, Tania's departure from their working-class Punjabi community into upper middle-class Britain signified success that they were wary of: "Sunita and Chila had feared they might lose her, when Tania broke loose from her traditional moorings and drifted into an uncharted ocean with her English man and snappy Soho job" (Syal 18). Upon returning to visit, Tania proved she never lost her roots: "Tania still sat like one of them, crossed legs, shoes off, unknotting herself in a way that suggested, despite her protestations, that part of her still responded to them like Home" (Syal 19). Syal suggests that Tania's affinity to her community background, despite leaving for opportunities to assimilate to Britain's wider culture, is the true measure of Tania's success because she is able to adapt to both worlds. On the other hand, predictions of Sunita's achievements are pegged to education and professional qualifications: "Sunita, they had all three decided, was always the one Most Likely to Succeed. She'd sailed through school and college with straight As and was halfway through a law degree when she'd met Akash" (Syal 19). Her subsequent marriage to Akash signifies a diminishing of her career prospects, as motherhood eclipses her academic achievements. "Akash was canny enough to clip her wings before she'd realized her potential" (Syal 147), Tania narrates, observing Sunita's husband's role in maintaining his wife's identity by De Beauvoir's notion of woman as

"limitation, without reciprocity" (De Beauvoir 5). De Beauvoir elucidates further on this imbalance of power by describing the woman's all-encompassing responsibilities: "There is a world of significations that exist only through woman; she is the substance of men's actions and feelings, the embodiment of all the values that seek their freedom" (De Beauvoir 213). As a wife and mother, Sunita's limited role enables her husband's freedom to transcend gender and be wholly himself. In Syal's portrayal of Chila's character, we see both these limitations and significations in her parents' frantic desire to improve her intellect only to save their standing in the community. From childhood, she is labeled "Poor Chila" and described in a progression of terms that equate to failure: "slow" "thick" and ultimately "unmarriageable, for didn't the boys nowadays expect smart yet domesticated women with both culinary skills and a Ph.D.?" (Syal 20). Syal highlights the impossible double standards placed on modern South Asian women, and casts some cynicism over the real reason the community is so concerned about Chila's perceived lack of intellect. Marriage being the ultimate goal, she must have academic qualifications that bring honour and prestige to her husband and in-laws.

In *Identity/alterity*, narratologist Monica Fludernik posits that "identity becomes notable only where set into relief against one or more others, others that can be non-human (landscape, nature, the city, society) or human subjects (the mother or father, one's partner, one's friend, one's master, one's son or daughter, a stranger and so forth)" (Fludernik 271). But in "Jasmine Reconsidered: Narrative Structure and Multicultural Subjectivity," critic Robyn Warhol makes a case for the effects of internal cultural conflicts on women's identities:

> Just as gender and sexual identities are performative – constituted by individuals' continually repeated enactments of sets of gestures, styles, habits, phrases, and looks – so are cultural, racial and national identities performance rather than foundational or fixed. (Warhol 43)

Each of the characters performs her role as counterparts to men in the patriarchal South Asian diaspora community. The fluidity of the women's identities shows them in a permanent state of existing between worlds. A study of British Asians in the diaspora, and where they position themselves

culturally, highlights the state of in-betweenness that Syal's novel explores, and its residual impact which results in women being either successful by community and wider society standards, or unhappily succumbing to the patriarchy's attempts to diminish them.

> Whether moving from South Asia to the West, or vice versa, or having been born and bred in the West, the one clear message from diasporic South Asian women writers is that they are different, very different, from their Western and South Asian counterparts. They are people who are as multi-cultural as they are multi-lingual. They do not regard themselves as fully belonging in either culture, and have practically evolved a sub-culture peculiar to themselves. They try to take the best from both worlds, but suffer the sense of hybridity and cultural entanglement. (Lau 241)

Lau's notion of hybridity suggests cultural diversity within these women's identities, and it also suggests a certain level of autonomy and comfort with their choices. This is an optimistic reading of the double tension present in the lives of South Asian women in Britain. Another reading sees the women having much less autonomy in selecting which values they want from each world – consider Rumi's lack of choice in her identity and her life, and the restriction of her movement, while still having to maintain the family's public reputation. The problem that South Asian women in Britain face might be a combination of having power entrusted in them, but very little choice in what they do with that power (Bhardwaj 58). Tania's sentiments echo this idea:

> We meet the world head up, head on, we meet our men and we bow down gratefully, cling to compromise like a lover who promises all will be well if we don't make trouble. We hear our mothers' voices and we heed them, to make up for all the other imagined transgressions in our lives. Everything else I can pick up or discard when I choose; my culture is a moveable feast. (Syal 147-148)

Tania observes that the Punjabi community only grants visibility to women who play their role as subsidiaries to men. "She suddenly remembered why she had stopped attending community events… she could not take the proximity of everything any more. The endless questions of who what why she

was, to whom she belonged (father/husband/workplace)...” (Syal 15). Syal further describes Tania’s character as a contradiction that Asian men could not cope with: “[They] didn’t know whether to seduce or slap her. Oh, she had played the game when she was younger, learned how to tread that fine line between tramp and tease…” (Syal 40). Women can only be respected or scorned by men in this community, which is how the patriarchy controls their agency. Of the three women, Tania is the only one whose identity has been shaped by her father’s notions of migrant success, echoing some of Rumi’s struggles to define herself and also shoulder the responsibility of maintaining her father’s dreams of migrant success. “God knows, my father had high ambitions: “Only the best!” he would blare at us; “You be the best. You will get the best.” Brave words from a man … whose every effort to better himself just succeeded in making us ashamed of who we were” (Syal 144). Tania describes her mother enabling her father’s grandiose ideas of migrant success, and bearing the brunt of his failures as her wifely duty:

> This was not a small woman. But she shriveled to the size of a wrinkled pea around her husband. Every bad idea he came up with (and there were many), was always hers. She stalked them, pounced on them and claimed them as soon as they went wrong, allowing him to shake his head and bellow, ‘Your mother has bungled matters again!’ (Syal 145)

Tania also comments on the irony of modern South Asian women being leaders and professionals, when their home training has been in obedience: “Strange that so many of us become doctors and business people; the women are so much more suited to the service industries. We aim to please” (Syal 146).

This experience with desiring to obey the men of their families in order to ensure their success and societal standing is a common trait across all three characters in *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, despite their varying degrees of independence. Chila, the most traditional of the women, relegates her life to the domestic sphere and is unquestioning of her husband’s desires for her to be a stay-at-home wife despite having found independence in a supermarket job. She describes being content in her job

and position after years of being regarded as "thick" (Syal 34): "I knew I'd found my place"; but when her husband says, "[No] wife of his was going to work if she didn't want to", Chila forgives that he didn't actually give her a choice (Syal 35). As a wife, Chila is viewed as an accessory to Deepak's success – a contemporary iteration of the dynamic between Tania's parents. Deepak's attitude towards Chila is dominant but he makes her believe she has power, like when he keeps expressing gratitude towards her after they get married, saying: "You saved me" (Syal 38). Marriage relegates Chila to the role of an accessory necessary for her husband's success and social standing in the community. Her marriage to an eligible man also saves her parents' reputations. "If Chila's mother had owned a tiara, she would have been wearing it now. The crown of success felt good, having spent years in the balaclava of shame that she donned every time she was asked about her youngest daughter's prospects" (Syal 194). As the cracks in her marriage begin to surface, Chila's character undergoes a gradual transformation from a passive and seemingly naïve Indian wife to an individual who becomes increasingly aware of her own subjugation. Chila's most powerful moment of epiphany arrives when she is pregnant and faces community pressures to have a baby boy. She angrily retorts to her mother that she is either pregnant with a "little prince" or a "waste-of-space little girl" (Syal 200), a dichotomy that shaped her parents' perception of her existence as a burden.

Although Sunita is more aware than Chila of the ways in which her husband subjugates her, her observations are portrayed as interior monologues that question patriarchal traditions. Early in the novel, she ruminates on the Hindu legend of Rama and Sita, where Sita walked through fire to prove her purity to her husband (Syal 48-49). Reflecting on her own role, Sunita sarcastically describes herself as a "good Hindu girl" and traces the roots of this notion to a calendar that her mother kept at home called "Migration of the Soul", which depicted cycles of reincarnation. An uncle explains the hierarchy, which places men and priests (who can only be men) above women (Syal 78). Sunita's recollections of this early lesson in inequality precedes another childhood memory that sheds light on archetypes of women in the community, and how they view a woman's worth according to standards

of propriety and chastity, if not by her status as somebody's wife. Describing her childhood encounters with an enigmatic woman from the community that she dubs, "Modern Auntie," Sunita describes the "sharp aquiline features" and "sleek, subtle saris" that set her apart from the other women (Syal 79-80). To Sunita, Modern Auntie is an updated archetype of the tragic Indian woman who has failed at marriage. She confides to young Sunita that the other women refer to her as Divorced Auntie, which stuns Sunita, as she considers the portrayals of divorced women in Hindi films: "[They] would have names like Kitten or Junglee, and enter scenes on a motorbike in black leather catsuits, chain smoking...Usually, they would try and steal the hero away from the heroine…And naturally, Divorced Woman never got her man. Who would want shop-soiled goods?" (Syal 81) In the present, Sunita considers these different impressions of "good" women and reflects on her own complicated identity as a feminist who has compromised many of her values to fit her role as an Indian wife. The question of success looms over Sunita, who epitomises the ideal of a woman trying to "have it all" but falls short of that ideal.

Both the real life inspiration and the intertextual elements of Syal's novel suggest that while the novel is a work of fiction, she is documenting cultural discourse about the multiple contradictions and layers of oppression experienced by South Asian women living in Western society. "By writing her own life story or incorporating elements of it into her fiction, the woman writer takes charge of her subjectivity and is able to resist imposed subject positions… The feminist strand of the narrative is enmeshed with her accounts of reconfiguration of self and adaptation to her diasporic community" (Naidu 371). The characters in this novel draw from established texts or create artistic responses to understand their place in their community. In a scene in which Sunita recalls her encounters with Indian men in university, she declares: "Angela Davis has got you lot sussed. It says in her latest book that the reason men of colour want white women is revenge. It makes you feel powerful, shagging the women of your oppressors" (Syal 86-87). The inclusion of real academic theory about double colonisation underscores the personal experiences of Syal's characters, and grounds them in a reality that reflects the issues of being Indian women in Britain. A documentary film about South Asian

women in Britain, directed by Tania and focusing intensely on the lives of Sunita and Chila, is also a pivotal narrative device in the story. Tania takes pride in avoiding stereotypical depictions of South Asian communities, but ultimately her on-camera storytelling positions her friends as subjugated wives, showing that Syal is questioning whether South Asian women can ever escape scrutiny, or if their stories can be authentically told. Syal is also questioning whether certain archetypes are ultimately unavoidable. Watching herself onscreen, Chila thinks: "It was her face all right, but there was something about it, her expression, that she didn't recognise as part of herself" (Syal 176). Sunita notices where Tania edited a sentence to make her appear helpless in a marital conflict, when the full sentence would have revealed more autonomy on her part (Syal 179). The documentary, which exposes the fractures in Chila's and Sunita's marriages, also features a "happy section" featuring "young men talking about their ideal woman being strong, independent and a true friend" (Syal 178). Syal's portrayal of a placated audience's reaction suggests that as an artist, it is easier to present this ideal of attainable success for South Asian women: "The audience cooed and sighed and felt reassured. It wasn't impossible, you could have it all" (Syal 178).

In her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, feminist critic Helene Cixous calls for women writers to assert their narratives: "Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (875). As we see from the real-life examples behind *Gifted* and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, the South Asian diaspora woman must overcome multiple barriers while claiming her stake to a nuanced narrative. Fiction might be the most suitable realm for exploring these realities. Characters and their behaviours are framed in contexts of colonialism, migration and gender imbalances, giving readers a complex understanding of the conditions that create the dual oppression of South Asian diaspora women, and their effects on those women's identities. The characters come of age in the context of frameworks designed to keep them subjugated, but as they fight for autonomy over their narratives, they become reborn as women who are wholly themselves despite the archetypes and expectations of success that loom over them. Cixous's call to women to create space for themselves in narratives is especially significant when the fictional stories bring nuance and context

to those real-life stories that are often reduced to headlines or sensational news bites. While expectations of success continue to dominate, South Asian woman writers and readers who know these experiences can find an ideal, triumphant resolution in the imagined narratives of women in Syal's and Lalwani's novels. The questioning and exploring, and the desire to find alternative paths for these women to tread independently, is one that I will explore in the upcoming chapters about publishing and the writing process of my novel *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*.

Chapter Two

Minority Representations in Contemporary Western Literature

When my novel *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* was published in 2019, I experienced the common sense of disassociation that many authors feel as their narratives are packaged as consumer products. As a South Asian woman writer, I had particular concerns about authenticity and representation: now that the story was out of my hands, would the publishers accurately reflect the experiences of Indian women in their marketing materials? While some authors seek to create nuanced narratives about minority experiences, some publishers and audiences are more interested in portrayals of differences that distinctly set minority stories apart from so-called "mainstream" narratives. Although minority representations have diversified since South Asian diaspora literature first started emerging in the market in the late twentieth century, continuing the narrative of "otherness" is still an expectation of minority writing. Ashish Gupta makes this observation in a critique of a 2007 *New Yorker* issue, which highlighted writing from the Indian subcontinent:

> The fact that *The New Yorker* was billed as a 'fiction issue' seemed no excuse for parading the standard line-up of beggars, charlatans, greedy medical graduates, defecators on the riverbank, etc….What gets published remains a function of neo-colonial instincts… and who gets published is a verdict, not on artistic integrity, but on how well one's sensibilities have been sharpened by colonial benchmarks of education and perception. (Ashish Gupta 44-45)

The "commodification of ethnic difference," says critic Tamara Bhalla, is particularly problematic for women writing about this subject matter (Bhalla 81). Tropes that emphasise South Asians' cultural differences, such as arranged marriages or the taboos around interracial dating, are gendered because of how those stories are classified in the literary market. Book covers are a clear indicator. "In this arena, male authors' work tends to be coded as serious, literary, intellectual and historical, while that of female authors is sexualised, exoticised and stereotyped" (Bhalla 81). The devaluing of South Asian women's narratives can be attributed to the legacies of two crucial historical movements:

British colonialism and Indian nationalism. Justifying their mission in the name of civilisation, British colonists highlighted the oppression of women under Indian tradition. The self-preserving reaction from Indian nationalists was to emphasise and maintain the spiritual qualities of Indian women that could not be conquered by the West (Chatterjee 119-121). Dually oppressed under white imperialism and Indian patriarchy, the South Asian woman writing for a Western audience is burdened with the responsibility of maintaining authenticity, but her narrative is often only accepted if "oppression and victimisation of the Diaspora" are dominant themes (Parameswaran 33).

While it's unfair to hold publishers or readers completely responsible for a legacy of colonialism, they must do better as producers and consumers. Major publishing companies hold geographical and cultural advantages: as international publishers of English-language books are based in the United States and England, they have the gatekeeping power to simplify our varied narratives into stories that are defined by "limiting and limited ideas about ethnic groups" (Ween 91). The sheer diversity of the South Asian diaspora, with its multitudes of cultures, traditions and languages, defies such stereotyping in literature. Yet simplified narratives about Indian immigrants are often sought as a form of touristic escapism through which readers can experience a reality that is distinctly removed from their own. In the interests of packaging narratives as sellable products, publishers peddle the convenient idea of a monolithic Indian identity, one that writer Namrata Poddar describes as "moot" because it doesn't exist, just as one American reality doesn't exist (Poddar 94). In "The Language of Power and the Power of Language," critic Lisa Lau holds writers somewhat responsible by suggesting that Indian writers writing in English are limited by the Western audience's perception of this monolithic identity. They avoid creating nuances that represent regional identities, instead choosing to highlight themes that are associated with a broader "Indianness" (Lau 32-33). Whatever the reasons for the formation of this monolithic Indian identity presented in fiction, the results are especially problematic for South Asian women writers, who must carve out space in a context where they are marginalised by both race and gender. Feminist scholar Uma Narayan describes these women's roles as "eemissaries", "mirrors" or "the authentic insiders" (Narayan 127)

– all roles that inevitably result in tokenism because these writers are given the unfair and impossible challenge of compressing the Indian identity into a single narrative. Writers are pigeonholed and less willing to take artistic risks out of fear of being "condemned as being inaccurate authors" (Lau 39).

There is also a further danger of confusing exoticness with multiculturalism. In his essay, "The Postcolonial Exotic," literary critic Graham Huggan observes that the continued peddling of exotic tropes in publishing is a bottom-line decision – exoticism sells. The sense of wonder and opportunity for escapism invoked by such narratives comes with another dangerous assumption, that reading such narratives is an act of appreciation of cultural diversity. "Exoticism relieves its practitioners, however, from the burdensome task of actually learning about 'other' cultures" (Huggan 26). Robyn Warhol further delineates the distinction between difference and otherness in our consideration of multiculturalism. "No one but the imperialist can pretend to operate outside any cultural location... As a factor in the geographics of identity, multiculturalism depends on a model of subjectivity that acknowledges difference while repudiating otherness" (Warhol 44). Yet, authors and readers might both be unaware that their relationship is built on distancing in the name of understanding. Lau holds Orientalism responsible for exoticising narratives, but she also points to natural human perception of difference: "[What] is commonplace in India, for example, may be to a reader ignorant of Indian ways, a piece of writing which is particularly perceptive or extraordinarily insightful. It may be that novelty and difference is the charm of the literature to a western readership" (Lau 40).

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which contemporary novels by minority and diaspora writers are represented in the West, and how the preference for certain types of stories has created false narratives that perpetuate otherness. Although my exegesis focuses primarily on South Asian diaspora literature, this chapter will expand beyond that group to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this issue for women in contemporary publishing, which reflects a continuing imperialist desire to marginalise minority stories. I will also reflect on my experiences as an author of fiction chronicling the lives of women in the Indian diaspora, to explore the chasm between authentic narratives and the wider readership's desire to keep minority groups at a distance by reinforcing set narratives about

them.

The collection *Arranged Marriage* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prime example of a narrative that relies on distancing. Bound by the traditional expectations of their fathers and husbands, Divakaruni's subjugated and suffering female characters heavily enunciate the differences that make them so foreign to American readers. In the short story. "Clothes," a woman named Sumita travels from India to America for an arranged marriage. Divakaruni demonstrates Sumita's naivety in a scene where her father shows her the United States of America on a globe (Divakaruni 18). The act of the father teaching the daughter about the world beyond their village in India establishes a paternalistic cultural context, one that contrasts the norms of the relatively egalitarian Western societies familiar to many English-speaking readers. Portrayed as completely ignorant about the world, Sumita's wide-eyed innocence and acceptance of her father's teachings confirms the notion that Indian women need to be taught about the world by men. Divakaruni's language choices also position Sumita's character as the naïve Eastern female archetype – she describes her husband's 7-11 store as "strange, exotic, risky", the everyday American products sold in the store as "amazing" (Divakaruni 21). Sumita's husband explains what an amusement park is, and tells her about roller coasters, reinforcing the dominant paternalistic role already established by her father. Sumita directly narrates to the reader her reaction to learning about amusement parks, "I think it a wonderful concept, novel" (Divakaruni 25).

The imbalanced dynamic between women and men in Divakaruni's stories has parallels to Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic. According to Hegel, "self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (Hegel 630). In "Clothes", the women exist to be acknowledged by men – the only modicum of independence that Sumita earns is from going from her father's home to her husband's home. Once again, Divakaruni is highlighting a genuine problem faced by women brought up in patriarchal cultures, but her approach indulges American readers' ideas of the hopelessly idealistic Indian woman as a subordinate to the men in her family. The audience sees Sumita as a character to be pitied. Divakaruni's choice of first-

person narrative voice adds to the problem. Sumita is given a platform to address readers directly, establishing a mirroring dynamic between character and audience. She speaks of her idealism in ways that make her subordinate role seem like the only choice. In the same way that Sumita lives for her husband, she also lives for the audience because her existence is proving their cultural dominance. According to Hegel, one of the two self-consciousnesses "is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman" (Hegel 633). Likewise, Sumita is dependent on her husband and father, and as she accepts this role and describes to the audience her desire to remain in this role, she also becomes dependent on the audience.

In her comparison of British and American South Asian diaspora narratives, Ruth Maxey, author of *South Asian Atlantic Literature 1970-2010*, states:

> South Asian American writers veer from optimism at the brightness of American modernity, reinscribing the nation's popular status as a 'land of opportunity', to a sense of greater ambivalence at the potential for loneliness and for cultural and political alienation embodied by this vast country. (Maxey 34)

Divakaruni's protagonists present such romanticised and naïve perspectives of the Western world. When Sumita's husband tells her that he wants her to get a college degree, she narrates: "I picture myself in front of a classroom of girls with blond pigtails and blue uniforms, like a scene out of an English movie I saw long ago in Calcutta" (Divakaruni 27). Her real desire, however, is to assist her husband in the 7-11 store. Here, Divakaruni describes the "register drawer gliding open" and the "gleaming copper pennies" (Divakaruni 27), Sumita's infantile fantasies turning her into an object of pity for readers. This type of characterisation is consistent in the collection: Jayanti, the protagonist of "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs", has unrealistic expectations of America, believing that it is only a land of wealth and opportunity. In this story, there is an exuberantly positive belief in the United States, which is "defined positively […] by what it is not in relation to South Asian countries" (Maxey 34). Both women's idealised version of America becomes shattered by violence in the stories'

climaxes – Sumita's husband is killed in the store (Divakaruni 32) and Jayanti witnesses a racist attack on her aunt as they are taking a walk in their neighbourhood (Divakaruni 51). While this outcome might be seen as Divakaruni's attempt to challenge the idealism of her characters and therefore subvert the typical narrative of naïve Indian women, these incidents are shocking to them exactly because of their initial idealism. Jayanti is painfully unaware that the boys attacking her aunt are speaking poorly of her at first. Her character is positioned as a woman with little awareness of the complexities of race and class, and therefore as somebody who must be dependent on Western society to teach her hard lessons about reality. Hegel explains that the outcome of the Master/Slave dialectic is an unequal and one-sided relationship. By presenting her female characters as trusting and childlike, Divakaruni confirms stereotypes about the submissiveness of Indian women and helps to affirm Western identity as the opposite – strong, aware and autonomous.

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism explores the relationship "of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" between East and West (Said 1994). Said makes a distinction between the Orient's intrinsic Oriental characteristics and its being "made Oriental" by European writers such as Flaubert, who speaks on behalf of (and therefore represents) an Egyptian courtesan in his 1862 novel *Salammbo* (Said 1994). In "Clothes," Divakaruni speaks on behalf of Indian women by not including any strong female archetypes to offset the submissiveness of her main character. Sumita's mother is absent from the narrative and her female cousin is also awaiting an arranged marriage but is not sure of her prospects with any eligible men because her skin is too dark. In "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs," Jayanti has more independence because she is traveling to America as a student, but again, the other main female character is her aunt who is submissive to her husband. Both protagonists are "made Oriental" by Divakaruni's portrayals, which confirm any preconceived notions about the subservience of Indian women. Compare these portrayals to an observation of contemporary South Asian women's writing by Yasmin Hussain, who says that female characters are depicted as "sexually transgressive, politically astute and determined to claim educational and employment rights" (Hussain 54). The difference is that Hussain is referring to

writing by women in the Indian subcontinent, for an audience from the Indian subcontinent. In *Feminism and Modern Indian Literature*, RK Gupta praises women writers for portraying female characters who assert themselves and bravely fight their oppression (RK Gupta 187). These too are observations of novels written in Indian languages such as Hindi, Tamil and Telugu. Pointing to the lingering influence of colonialism, Lisa Lau explains that English "does not lend itself to any particular regional identity" in India: "A South Asian writing in English cannot assume the understanding of his/her readers, or expect too much by the way of common assumptions" (Lau 31). Readers find exotic portrayals of Indians in books written in English about the Indian experience, which explains why these tropes recur in diaspora fiction, which caters to a larger English-speaking audience than fiction written and published in India.

Although Said's Orientalist is not necessarily a Westerner, he makes it clear that the Orientalist trades in inauthentic representation because he is disengaged with its complexities and realities, only seeking to portray the Orient as a subsidiary culture to the Occident. "He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says. What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and moral fact" (Said 2006). Said's broad definition of the Orientalist as an outsider suggests that Eastern writers are also culpable of promoting Orientalist narratives if their work continues the Orientalist tradition of portraying a superficial image of the East for the benefit of Western readers. Take for example the novels of Amy Tan. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan's novel about intercultural strife between Chinese migrant mothers and their first-generation American daughters, the dichotomy between both generations is illustrated by allusions to Chinese mythology. These myths offset the modern and Western lives of the daughters, who have more autonomy and less connection to the past because of their American identities. One example is the story of the Moon Lady, narrated by one of the mothers, Ying-Ying St. Clair. She recalls a performance of the Moon Lady myth that she watched as a child: "And now a fairy – the Queen Mother of the Western Skies! – was flying toward the Master Archer. She opened a box and held up a glowing ball – no, not a baby sun but a magic peach, the

peach of everlasting life" (Tan 42). Tan's language choices here emphasise the exotic, for example her use of imagery with the "glowing ball" and the metaphorical "peach of everlasting life", tropes that serve an Orientalist function to cater to a stereotypical notion of Eastern women being guided by superstition, tradition and ancient mythology. In the context of an immigrant novel set in modern America, mythological elements are seen as exotic and misplaced, further alienating the Chinese characters. The American daughters' narrative voices are positioned for the benefit of Western readers, supporting Said's notion that "strategic location" determines the Orientalist's role and position in a text (Said 2006). Tan's use of mythology and her language choices create a traditional representation of China which American readers may find interesting but also disparate and inferior to their way of life.

Tan's fiction is rife with Asian immigrant tropes, "the figuring of Asian American women as sentimental heroines, brave immigrant foremothers, devoted daughters" (Chu 19) as noted by critic Patricia Chu. In novels centred on the Asian diaspora experience, mother-daughter relationships have parallels to the relationship between East and West. While the East represents outdated traditions and norms, the West is portrayed as advanced and modern, giving Western readers a sense of superiority. If we apply Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic here, equality between both cultures cannot be achieved. One culture has to dominate the other and the Eastern writer positions herself as the bondsman in order to satisfy the needs of the Western lord. "The latter's essential nature is to exist, only for himself; he is the sheer negative power for whom the thing is nothing" (Hegel 634). Said suggests as well that a power dynamic between two cultures creates space for Orientalism to exist: "[It] is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world… [it] is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power" (Said 1999). Although the inclusion of more culturally diverse works of fiction in the Western world is perceived by some readers as a decolonisation of literature, one entity exists in servitude of another, which continues to establish the dominance of a majority Western readership over Eastern narratives.

The featuring of magical realism in Eastern narratives also demonstrates an expectation that writers representing the Orient must create a world that is "manifestly different" (Said 1999) in order to engage Western readers 'interests. In Turkish author Elif Shafak's novels, magical realism and the concept of parallel narratives are commonly used to represent a version of Turkey that is simultaneously different and familiar. In her novel *Honour*, a story about an honour killing set in present-day London is presented in parallel to a more fantastical narrative in which women can only yield their power through premonitions and potions. Jamila, the twin sister of a woman named Pembe who has migrated to London, stays behind in a village near the River Euphrates and works as a traditional healer. While Pembe's story features the gritty and modern realities of immigrant life in England, Jamila gains a reputation as the "Virgin Midwife who spoke the language of birds, reptiles and insects" (Shafak 172). The locals view Jamila with equal measures of admiration and fear because while she serves the community with her potions and cures, there are also rumours that she has dealings with *djinns* and "she had sneaked into the Kaf Mountain… the abode of fairies, nymphs and sprites" (Shafak 174). The novel's emphasis on magical realism brings to mind the notions of uncertainty and displacement that Freud discusses in his theory of the uncanny.

The uncanny – an instance in which both the familiar and unfamiliar are experienced at the same time – creates discomfort and fear in the subject experiencing it. Their response to the uncanny image or idea is both attraction and repulsion. Readers of contemporary novels that straddle both Western modernity and Eastern mysticism experience incongruity between both worlds, and by extension, between their world and the exotic "other" world that they encounter in the narrative. The uncanny elements of magical realism in Shafak's novel make the reader feel disoriented, providing an escape from their familiar reality, but not forcing them to venture too far outside of what they know. The notion of the mystic Easterner is also reinforced and perpetuated in these stories as a reality. An agreement is formed between the writer and the reader by which "we (the readers) adapt our judgment to the imaginary reality imposed on us by the writer, and regard souls, spirits and ghosts as though their existence had the same validity as our own has in material reality" (Freud 951).

Shafak's parallel narrative between protagonists who are twins creates a dichotomy between East and West which is similar to the mother-daughter dynamic seen in Tan's novel. In her novel *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak presents another parallel narrative between Ella, a woman in London, and Aziz, the author in Turkey whose novel she has discovered. Similar to the contemporary London depicted in *Honour*, Ella's world is familiar to Western readers, so when she ventures into Aziz's novel, which is set in Baghdad in the 1200s, she experiences the uncanny in a fictional context. The world of this novel within the novel, entitled "Sweet Blasphemy," is alive with dervishes and Sufi mystics. When Ella puts the novel aside, she is so influenced by the world Aziz has created that she sees it as the present, creating a sense of incongruity that the Western reader must also feel when shifting between a narrative framework of reality and magic realism. Shafak describes a nightmare that Ella has after reading the book, in which Ella is in a crowded foreign city and unable to speak (Shafak 40). The vividness of the dream suggests an uncanny experience, which Freud explains is "often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (Freud 946). The reader is taught that delving into the exotic world of the East can be perilous and frightening for the Westerner. While it may seem as if Shafak has power over the reader here, the story still trades in the idea that the East is dangerous, and that its unknowns are not a source of fascination and aspiration in the same way that the trappings of the West are so alluring to Eastern characters like Sumita in Divakaruni's "Clothes." The idea that readers must fear the East is another way in which the Western readership holds power over the narratives that emerge from any place that is distant or foreign from the familiar.

When considering the challenges of depicting the minority experience authentically in my own writing, I turn to the works of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In her short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie portrays the lives of middle class people in Nigeria whose lives – although bearing some distinct differences to those of Western readers – are also similar to middle class people everywhere. She also explores the power dynamic of being an African writing for a Western context in her short story, "Jumping Monkey Hill." Set in South Africa, the story

follows a Nigerian writer named Ujunwa who notices and becomes uncomfortable with the deliberate emphasis on exoticism of an African writers' retreat run by a British man. From the start of the story, Ujunwa observes how the resort has been curated to fit an inauthentic and touristic ideal of Africa: "The resort had the complacence of the well fed about it… she imagined affluent foreign tourists would dart around taking pictures of lizards and then return home still unaware that there were more black people than red-capped lizards in South Africa" (Adichie 95). The owner's wife comments on Ujunwa's "exquisite bone structure" and asks if she came from royal stock in Nigeria, tempting Ujunwa to ask (although she doesn't) if she "ever needed royal blood to explain the good looks of friends back in London" (Adichie 99). In this exchange, Adichie demonstrates a power imbalance in assumptions of beauty between Western and African women. Instead of allowing Ujunwa to fully accept the assumption, she shows her working towards an equalising parallel.

However, the imbalance persists between Ujunwa and the Western patrons of the writing retreat. When she is writing her short story, she considers a "common" name for her character versus an "exotic" one (Adichie 100). At dinner, Edward, the British leader of the retreat, tells her that ostrich is a staple of African cuisine even though it is not representative of the cuisine that Ujunwa is familiar with. The writing workshops run by Edward highlight the Western policing of African narratives. In response to a Sengalese woman's story about a lesbian daughter coming out to her parents, "Edward chewed at his pipe thoughtfully before he said that homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really" (Adichie 107-108). Ujunwa blurts out, "Which Africa (Adichie 108)?" Later, Edward praises another participant's story, which contains familiar tropes of the expected African narrative – militiamen and violence in the Congo (Adichie 109). Ujunwa's observation is that the story reads like something from *The Economist*, with stock characters (Adichie 109). In this manner, Adichie subverts power structures by creating a character who questions and challenges the traditional narratives. Ujunwa's resistance against a certain kind of African story perpetuated by Western readers mirrors Adichie's own journey to diversify narratives from that continent.

In her TED Talk, "The Danger of the Single Story", Adichie explains that certain power

structures in the media that disseminate information from West to East enable the West to have multiple narratives, while the East is perceived in very one-dimensional ways. She uses an anecdote to make this comparison clear: “I recently spoke at a university where a student told me it was such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in my novel. I told him that I had recently read a novel called *American Psycho*, and that it was a shame that young Americans were serial murderers” (Adichie). I make it a priority to avoid stereotypes about South Asian women in my fiction, but once the novel is in the hands of a publisher’s marketing team, the single narrative is a convenient basis for decisions about book covers and marketing taglines. Gender also heavily informs design preferences and reveals which aspects of the Indian woman’s narrative must be highlighted in order to sell the book. In a survey of book covers by Indian authors, author Mary-Anne Mohanraj found a distinct difference between cover images according to the author’s gender. Books by women featured women’s bodies, red saris (or the colour red as a general motif) and women in sexualised poses, while books by men featured cover art with large landscapes, abstract art and the colour blue (Mohanraj). Mohanraj also made this observation:

> Interestingly, some women started out with the typical women's covers described above, but over the course of their career, as they won awards and gained critical acclaim, their later covers developed to look more like men’s covers. This would seem to indicate that the type of cover that S. Asian male authors receive by default are designed to signal ‘this is a serious, literary work’. Whereas women authors’ covers are designed to signal something else entirely (that the books are sexy, accessible, popular, easy reading, etc.), and if they want their work to be read and taken seriously, they have to earn that right before they’re allowed covers that reflect that assumption. (Mohanraj)

Mohanraj presented her survey findings at a North American conference in 2008, over a decade after the publication of Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* (whose cover image ticks nearly every box in Mohanraj’s checklist). By the time my first novel *Inheritance* was released in 2013, cover design aesthetics had changed to reflect broader interests. The first edition of *Inheritance,* published in

Australia, featured an image of a public housing apartment block in Singapore, where the novel takes place. Despite the story being about an Indian family from the Punjabi-Sikh minority in Singapore, Sleepers Publishing opted to promote the story's wider appeal with this description: "*Inheritance* is a universal story of family, identity and belonging" (VitalSource). This notion of universality was a welcome relief from the alternative of exotic single-story marketing, but it also began emerging as a buzzword in praise quotes for other novels by minority writers. Some recent examples: the 2019 debut novel *A Woman is No Man,* about the lives of Palestinian women in Brooklyn, is "a universal tale about family" according to the jacket blurb (HarperCollins); two advance review quotes merit Korean-American author Frances Cha's 2020 novel *If I Had Your Face* with having "universal" themes (Amazon). Being granted with universality could signify that a work transcends "otherness," but it also signals to readers that the story's foreign qualities will not get in the way of their reading experience. Rushdie's observations about authenticity come to mind: "Authenticity is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogenous and unbroken tradition" (Rushdie 67). Is "universal" a signifier of authenticity or is it a blanket solution to the problems of exoticism? I found myself pondering this question as early review quotes for *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* started coming in. *USA Today* made the clearest distinction between otherness and universality: "What may seem to be a singular story about first-generation, London-bred Punjabi women evolves into a story universal to us all" (Cadden). HarperCollins have used this quote on their website, alongside a cover that depicts the three Shergill sisters against a backdrop of the Taj Mahal (see Fig. 1):

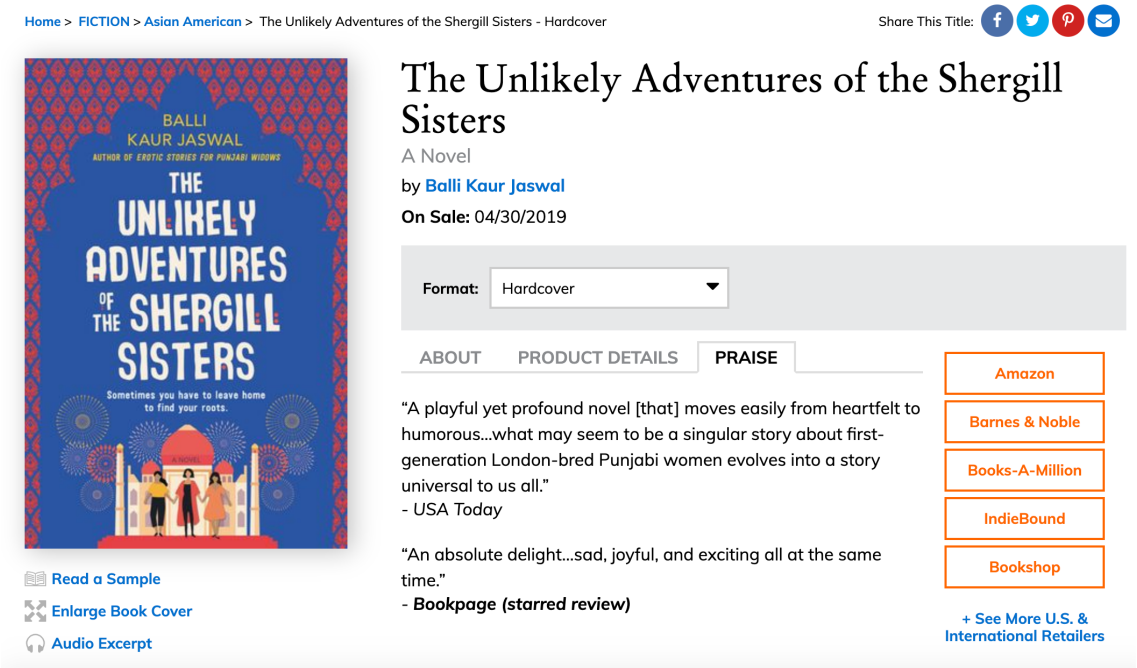

Fig. 1. Screenshot of HarperCollins website marketing and selling *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*. Created by HarperCollins Publishers [c2020]. From harpercollins.com. [https://www.harpercollins.com/9780062645142/the-unlikely-adventures-of-the-shergill-sisters/]

Although the sisters never visit this landmark in the story, the overall image conveys a story about women traveling in India. This sort of visual dilution of narrative details, while an improvement over Mohanraj's findings, shows that Western publishers are still relying on familiar images that represent India to non-Indian audiences.

The struggle against an expected narrative is not exclusive to the East-West relationship. In my experience, egregious stereotypes also exist in Singapore publishing. Like the East-West imbalance with representing diverse and authentic narratives, ethnic Indian and Malay narratives in Singapore are often shaped by the expectations of Chinese publishers and readers. In my experience as a Punjabi author in Singapore, this problem has manifested in two incidents – the cover design for the re-issued edition of *Inheritance* and a radio play adaptation of my second novel *Sugarbread*. In 2016, when Epigram Books in Singapore published a local edition of *Inheritance*, they redesigned the cover to reflect what they deemed the story's Indian identity (Edmund Wee, e-mail to author, March 29, 2016).

The Epigram cover showed a picture of a black hand intertwined with a purple hand against a red background, with a Sikh religious bangle rested on the black wrist (see Fig. 2):

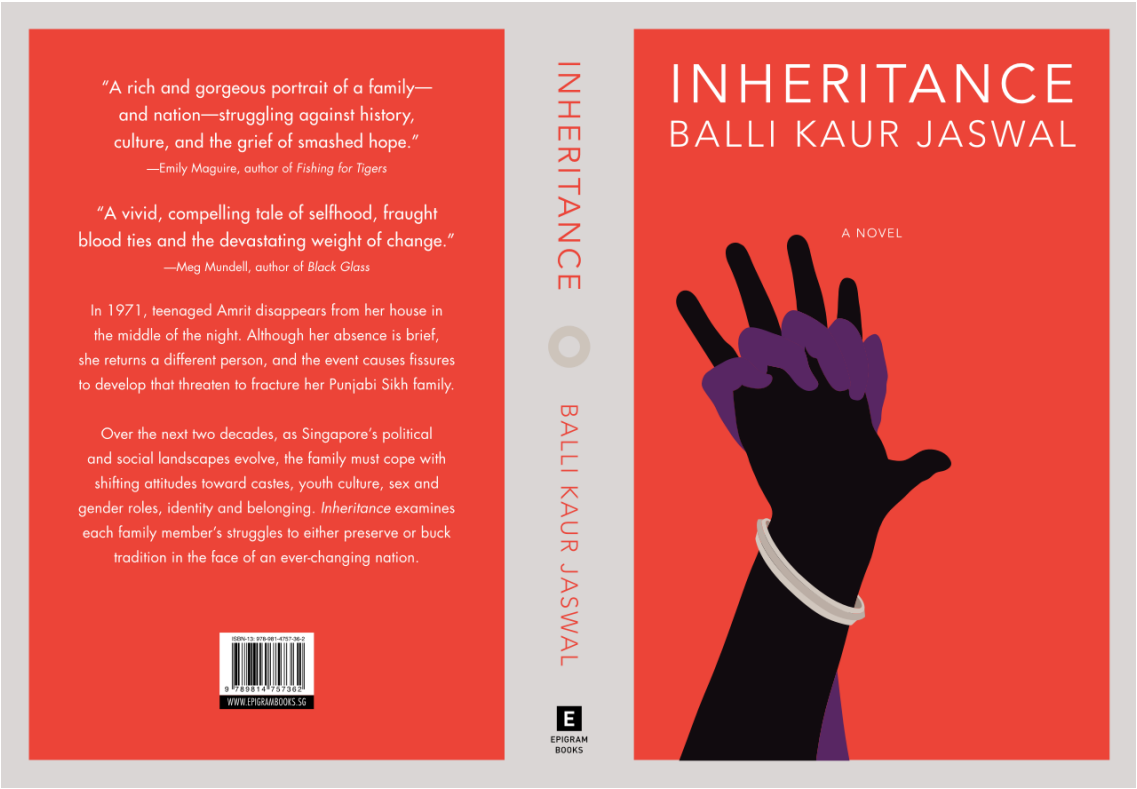

Fig. 2. Original proposed book cover for *Inheritance*. Created by Epigram Books [c2016]. From Epigram Books. Edmund Wee, e-mail to author, March 29, 2016.

In a conversation with me, the publisher said, "Red, purple and black do work very well together in an 'Indian' way" (Edmund Wee, e-mail to author, March 29, 2016). The notion that there are colours associated with a particular ethnic group demonstrated the publisher's limited and deeply flawed perception of the Indian community in Singapore. The publisher also didn't consider that the colour black is used in a pejorative way to diminish Indians in Singapore. It was only after I threatened to withdraw the novel that the publisher decided to change the cover design (Edmund Wee, e-mail to author, April 27, 2016). The conversation continued about how the "Indian" element of the story would be represented, and eventually, we agreed on an image of an Indian woman wearing bridal make-up, peering out from behind a wall (Edmund Wee, e-mail to author, April 29, 2016). Although there were issues with this image as well (given that there was no bride or wedding in the book, although the main character was almost married), it was a major improvement over the original. I

also had to consider Singapore's readership and what images they would be drawn to; unfortunately, the story's ethnic appeal was a marketing priority.

The incident made me reflect on the racial power structures that exist in Singapore society, and how they are reinforced in the way narratives are disseminated here. Minority stories are often given token status, allowed limited space in the wider scheme of Chinese-dominated national narratives. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism remains relevant, even though the tension is not about Eastern stories being shaped for Western mindsets. Said suggests that Orientalism can have wider implications beyond the Occidental-Oriental power dynamic with his question: "How does Orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another?" (Said 2002). In the Singapore context, the problem is about minority race stories being selected and promoted for a majority Chinese readership.

If we want to situate the ideas of Orientalism within the context of Singapore's literary scene, we should consider Said's ideas of strategic location and strategic formation. He discusses preconceived ideas of places and people when representing a region or culture: "Every writer on the Orient assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself" (Said 2006). If we substitute "Orient" for "Indian community" in Singapore's cultural context, Said's suggestions of existing precedence and previous knowledge can explain why publishers and audiences perceive the stories of this minority group as being distinctly separate from the universal Singaporean story.

The issue of representation of minority stories goes beyond book covers. In 2017, the National Arts Council commissioned a radio play based on an excerpt from my novel *Sugarbread*, a coming-of-age story of a Punjabi girl in Singapore who grapples with racism and other forms of prejudice that challenge her sense of identity. A marketing manager from Epigram Books was in charge of executing the project, which included adapting a script from a scene and auditioning and directing the actors during the recording. In the radio adaptation (previously online, now deleted), the dialogue

between Pin and her mother was presented in very thick, almost undecipherable Indian accents (Soundcloud). They sounded like caricatures of Indian characters, and they certainly weren't an accurate representation of Singaporean-Indian characters. One only had to consider the cultural context of first- and second-generation Indians in Singapore and the fact that Pin attended a local convent school (Jaswal 39) to know that her character was intended to speak in a generic Singaporean accent. In a face-to-face conversation, the marketing manager justified this choice by saying it was the only way the characters' Indian ethnicity would come across to the audience. Once again, there was a chasm between my intentions as an author to portray the lives of Indians in Singapore with sensitivity and nuance, and the publishers' perception of the work and how it should be promoted. The representation of characters in this translation to another media necessitated an emphasis on otherness, and on distinguishing a community by obvious and superficial aspects of their identity (such as accents) instead of focusing on the nuances of the text, which would have given listeners a clearer understanding of the story's cultural context – for example, the scene contained references to Punjabi food and celebrating Diwali (Jaswal 146), which were clues about their ethnicity if listeners needed this information.

In our debate over the use of accents in the radio play, the power dynamic between the publisher and the author reminded me of Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic once again. The publishers insisted on a representation for the majority of readers who were accustomed to stereotypical and highly exaggerated Indian accents, and could not recognise a story with Indian characters as being Singaporean. As the author of a story about racial minorities finding acceptance in Singapore, I wanted the accents to be accurate. My identity as an author, however, was only acknowledged in terms of the publisher's recognition of me. This tension between one party being the recognisers and the other party being the recognised (Hegel 631) resulted in a limited and deeply flawed interpretation of the story, because the publishers recognised *Sugarbread* as solely a minority story.

The power imbalance continues between majority readerships and minority voices in writing, a matter of concern for writers who strive to capture the multilayered experiences of women in the

South Asian diaspora in a publishing climate that is inclined to simplify narratives for saleability. A demand still exists for stories that confirm familiar ideas of the "otherness" of minorities – and the emphasis on the work's universal qualities might only be a superficial solution. My experiences with publishing have shown that this issue goes beyond the East-West dynamic, and that it likely affects minority writers in many other cultural contexts. If stories play a significant role in the way we perceive and value individuals, publishers and the wider readership need to broaden their expectations of minority stories, and accept multi-dimensional narratives. Minority writers must also do their part to resist exotic tropes, taking on the native informant role to educate readers. In doing so, literature about other places and people can reflect inherent complexities about our world, and we can do away with the distancing narratives that erode the nuance in stories about South Asian women.

Chapter Three

Women In Between Worlds: Situating *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters in South Asian Diaspora Writing*

"How are we to live in the world?" asks Salman Rushdie in his essay "Imaginary Homelands" (Rushdie 18). It is a question posed to and about South Asian diaspora writers, speaking to the complexity of our "plural and partial" identities and how we bring history, exile, and a legacy of migrant aspirations onto the page (Rushdie 15). Rushdie suggests that physical alienation from India inspires fantasies of India within the minds of migrants, to help them cope with this sense of loss (Rushdie 10). This notion of "imaginary homelands" or "Indias of the mind" is partially responsible for the genesis of my novel *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*, where diaspora is a location of its own, and the tensions between tradition and modernity are mirrored by the relationship between past and present. However, like many feminist South Asian writers, I find Rushdie's concept of imaginary homelands incomplete because it does not take into account the experiences of women in the diaspora. In "Women, Homelands and the Indian Diaspora," Nandi Bhatia argues that "Imaginary Homelands" contains little consideration for how India's cultural values continue to define and control gender roles. In constructing the imaginary homeland as a way of coping with the trauma of exile, the (male) migrant's search for identity is rooted in patriarchal cultural systems, says Bhatia, who describes these idealised narratives about the homeland as "regressive mechanisms that seek to structure women's lives" (Bhatia 512). Critic Judith Shuval also highlights the potential blind spots of creating an identity based on nostalgia. She describes "a combination of yearning and distancing" for a homeland that might no longer exist in the form that the migrants left behind (Shuval 29). These mythic homelands in the diasporic imagination are only utopian for men because of the defined gender roles born from an archaic patriarchal system.

Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s, South Asian migration to Western countries was considered a "male phenomenon" (Jayaram 23); after the 1990s, more women with professional skills and higher

degrees migrated independently (Sheth 128). The emergence of women's voices in South Asian diaspora fiction revealed a gendered experience of the migrant narrative. Lata Rengachari explains that literary forms that include the "quest novel" are vehicles for "establishing autonomous selfhood" (Rengachari 35-36); for women in the diaspora, writing is an act of liberation from traditional cultural systems. If men create imaginary homelands that romanticise the patriarchal system that they left behind, then female writers also create an idealised world through fiction where they seek to control their narratives and develop autonomous identities. Further distinguishing the difference between female and male narratives in South Asian diaspora fiction, Somdatta Mandal observes that the women are "in a state of permanent migrancy and they transform the pain of dislocation into a celebration where exile helps them to discover new territories of experience" (Mandal 88). Women's writing is celebratory not necessarily because women always triumph in these narratives, but because the migrant journey is redefined through a female lens. Readers recognise the struggles of women migrants to define themselves as individuals within multiple systems that oppress them. While male novelists of the diaspora connect exile with dislocation, alienation and a sense of removal from their true selves, women writers see exile as an opportunity for liberation and transformation.

I write fiction about South Asian diaspora women to create narratives that show women succeeding at challenging multiple hierarchies. In an analysis of South Asian image and identity, critic Lisa Lau describes the writing process for South Asian women writers as "a negotiation of a space… to write, rewrite, re-define, re-name, and re-invent, in a traditionally and proudly patriarchal society and culture" (Lau 38). Novels by Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Amulya Malladi, Kiran Desai and Sunetra Gupta are prime examples of such narratives. Jhumpa Lahiri's collection *Interpreter of Maladies* explores the immigrant experience and all of its ensuing challenges – alienation, intergenerational conflicts, racism – and situates them in the varied experiences of women who strive for independence and equality. Works of South Asian immigrant fiction set in the United Kingdom, namely *Gifted* by Nikita Lalwani, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* by Meera Syal and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, also explore women's familial and societal roles. The struggle against double

colonisation is a significant theme in these narratives (Hedge 89). They highlight the plight of fighting two layers of oppression: misogyny of South Asian cultural norms that value men over women, and racism of postcolonial societies where Western values are perceivably threatened by an influx of immigrants.

I consider *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* an attempt to join my fellow South Asian female authors in claiming a space for women's narratives in a culture that dismisses our voices. Following three British-Indian sisters on a pilgrimage to India to fulfil their mother's last wishes, the novel portrays the contemporary Indian woman's existence in the world, and investigates how the lingering effects of postcolonialism and Indian nationalism factor into her ethnic and gender identity. The sisters struggle in different ways with their identities as daughters, wives and mothers – roles that replace their individuality with patriarchal ownership. Previous conflicts and rivalries have fractured their relationships with each other, creating narrative opportunities to illuminate the complexities of family ties, which Lau identifies as a common theme in South Asian diaspora fiction (247). Although the sisters are on the journey together, each must endure a "rite of passage" in the tradition of South Asian women novelists like Anita Desai and Nayantara Sehgal, who use their female protagonists' conflicts with oppressive cultural values as a way to mark their "transformations from weakness to strength and from restriction to freedom" (Hussain 56). The sisters' journey also highlights the impact of migration on women and the power of the homeland to both attract and repel first-generation immigrants. Like many immigrants in Britain who travel to their parents' homeland, the Shergill sisters feel "the conflicting tug of loyalties" and "seek a sense of belonging when in South Asia" (Lau 246).

When I began writing this novel, I wanted to explore how the tension between tradition and modernity influences the identities of South Asian diaspora women. My initial character sketches and notes were an early attempt to create characters that each represented a respective archetype of the traditional, modern and moderate woman. However, as the storyline developed, the characters revealed multiplicities and contradictions that became the more pertinent and intriguing source of

tension for the narrative. I took inspiration from the nuances in Meera Syal's characterisation of the three protagonists in *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*: rather than presenting the British-Indian identity as a problem that the characters would resolve by the end of the novel, Syal used their experiences to unearth more complex (and sometimes unanswerable) questions about identity. As descriptors of cultural values in narratives about Indian women, "traditional" and "modern" tend to be simplified and pitted against each other as diametric opposites. Lau warns against ascribing judgement to these values: "In a search for cultural purity, too many fall into the unrealistic assumption that tradition is at polar opposites from modernity, seeking to designate one as desirable and the other as undesirable" (253). In order to create characters who would withstand the challenges of the pilgrimage and contribute to a satisfying and authentic narrative arc, I needed to explore "the selectivity of the culture which diasporic South Asians live and practice" because it reminds readers of the inherent complexities and contradictions within this identity in a "reinvented culture" (Lau 255). The tension between tradition and modernity had to exist within each woman rather than as an external metric of cultural identity.

Eldest sister Rajni is encumbered with family pressures and expectations that stifle her autonomy. Early in her journey, Rajni reveals her desire to be free of her multiple roles serving others: "Being a wife and mother was complicated enough. She didn't want to be a daughter and a sister as well" (Jaswal 33). Her teenage son Anil's announcement that he is moving in with his much older, pregnant girlfriend makes Rajni question her successes as a parent. "They had spent all of Anil's life trying to steer him toward a steady future, giving him every opportunity at success …[but] she never expected his path to diverge this far from her expectations" (Jaswal 31). She takes on the burden of blame for Anil's actions, even contacting a private investigator in India to find out information about his girlfriend. The fear of judgement is so pervasive that Rajni even withholds information about Anil's relationship because she fears judgement from the private investigator: "Worse yet, he would wonder what kind of mother she was – a question that had been turning in her mind ever since she awoke from her fainting spell back in London" (Jaswal 137). The journey to India sees Rajni's roles

as mother, sister and daughter converging into one major responsibility to keep her family intact. I emphasised Rajni's role as a mother to examine the flaws in the nurturing mother trope in Indian communities, described by historian Partha Chatterjee as "the adulation of woman as goddess or mother" (Chatterjee 627). In arguments and conversations with her sisters, Rajni models her own mother's actions, despite her resistance to her mother's strictness during her teenage years. In response to a conflict with Jezmeen, Rajni thinks: "Oh you want to argue. This was what Mum would say… Rajni had to bite her tongue to keep from saying the same thing to Anil whenever he questioned her" (Jaswal 27). She also recalls a teenaged Jezmeen shouting at her, "I don't need another mother on my bloody case" (Jaswal 30). In a conversation over coffee with Shirina, Rajni tries to give her marriage advice, even though she recalls the frustrations of being pressured by their own mother to rekindle her sexual relationship with her husband so she could have another child (Jaswal 105). Rajni's interactions with her sisters helped me to eventually develop her history with the past because she had insight and experiences of India that shaped her identity in a way that Jezmeen and Shirina didn't have. While Jezmeen and Shirina are shown to romanticise the homeland for different reasons, Rajni's uneasiness with India gave me an opportunity to explore the fraught ties that some diaspora women have with the past.

Lisa Lau observes that for women of the South Asian diaspora, identity is developed in response to their experience of their culture, "either in conformity with it or in rebellion against it" (Lau 253). From the time of her arrival, India gives Rajni symptoms of physical ailments: "[Her] body rebelled against the country: an itch from the soot-filled air was beginning in her throat, the bumpy car rides made her stomach turn, and a bout of indigestion was inevitable" (Jaswal 54-55). Rajni's resistance to India alienates her further from her sisters during the trip, who are more interested in their history than she appears to be. When Jezmeen wonders aloud why they haven't gone to India as a family before, Rajni silently recalls a memory of being sixteen, and her mother crying, "I can never go back there" (Jaswal 55). Eventually, Rajni reveals the events that led to her

mother's banishment from her homeland – one night while staying with a relative in Delhi, Rajni got lost while sneaking out to meet a friend and was escorted home by the police. The resulting shame led to a family banishment that affected her family financially, as her mother was cut off from accessing her late husband's inheritance (Jaswal 248-250). Rajni blames herself for the financially strained conditions that Jezmeen and Shirina grew up in, and for their mother's deepened suspicion of her daughters as burdensome offspring who would eventually betray or disappoint her at worst, and leave the family to get married at best. Through these layers in Rajni's narrative which wove her past and present, I wanted to explore the sense of cultural "hybridity and entanglement" that Lisa Lau describes as a hallmark of South Asian diaspora women in literature (Lau 241). Rajni desires a life of modernity and freedom but previous experience with rebellion makes her fearful of straying from her mother's parenting methods. She, like so many women in the South Asian diaspora, is "caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. On the one hand, there is the burden of the past chasing her like a shadow and on the other she has certain aspirations of the future to look forward to" (Surendran 79). These early discoveries about Rajni impacted how I viewed the other sisters 'traits and identities. Their identities as individuals were inseparable from their relationship to their cultural context as South Asian diaspora women. If I saw the diaspora as the conceptual homeland, and each woman's affinity to it shifting as she delved further into this pilgrimage in India, I was creating two journeys: a physical quest and an internal quest, the latter being a search for an identity that reconciled each sister's values, experiences and relationships.

While Rajni spends the journey wishing to forget the past, middle sister Jezmeen is more anxious about the future. Impulsive, attention-seeking and irresponsible, Jezmeen is the antithesis to practical Rajni. The journey brings to the surface Jezmeen's questions about her identity and her desire to gain visibility and purpose through her role as an actress. Searching for meaning through her work, but also rejecting roles that relegate her to stereotypical Indian female characters, Jezmeen sees the trip to India as a chance to rebuild her image after a disastrous online shaming. But recognition and representation do not come easily to doubly colonised South Asian women. During

a phone call with her British agent while she's in India, among the roles offered to Jezmeen are "wife of a terrorist" and a bride-to-be who appears only ten minutes into the film before succumbing to a zombie virus (Jaswal 140-143). Her agent repeatedly brings up the "lack of roles" for South Asian women in British film and television (Jaswal 21, 149) and he reminds her that a viral video capturing her disgrace has made her even less desirable. Her experiences in the novel highlight the challenges of image for South Asian women in the diaspora, who carry the burdens of their migrant community's expectations of success. Jezmeen is one of many South Asian diaspora women who are pressured to "equal or surpass their Western counterparts in capability and education – a premise that stems from the need to be accepted by a racist society" (Bhatia 517). Jezmeen doesn't only face these pressures from her community – she is also expected to excel in the film industry, where the few available acting roles serve to diminish ethnic minorities and disregard the "highly complex identities" (Bhachu 109) that are the result of living multifarious lives as South Asian British women.

While Jezmeen's character was initially created to be antithetical to Rajni's, I saw their characters following parallel paths as their journey continued, without any chance of developing as individuals unless they shared some commonalities. When I considered the pressures that Jezmeen was facing, I realised that they came from the same sources of Rajni's struggles – the expectations of maintaining an image of success as a daughter of the South Asian diaspora community. Jezmeen's vulnerability as a character came from the discovery that she craves acceptance from the very society that rejects her. Drawing from Simone Weil's notion that a sense of rootedness is "the most important and least recognised need of the human soul" (Weil 40), Jezmeen's yearning for a sense of belonging becomes a more conscious choice as she recognises it during the journey. Weil also emphasises the importance of establishing roots by participating in a community "which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future" (Weil 40). This idea of finding an identity in the interstices between past and future resonates as much for Jezmeen as it does for Rajni.

As I was writing Jezmeen's character, I noticed that relying on her impulsiveness to develop

the events of her narrative came with its own creative risks. I wanted to surprise the reader with moments of introspection and depth from a character who could be too easily dismissed as vain or one-dimensional. The complexity in Jezmeen's character lies in her mix of flippancy and integrity. In some moments, her aims seem superficial. She recalls fantasising about fame as a child: "The whole world will know my name, she promised herself, shaking away her fears of insignificance" (Jaswal 165). But Jezmeen also has the courage to reject roles that stereotype or demonise Indian women even though they offer the stability of employment. Where Rajni describes India as "a big, unpredictable country" where "it's easy to get lost," Jezmeen counters by saying, "Isn't that the point of coming to India? To get lost? And then find ourselves again?" (Jaswal 27) Although Jezmeen says this simply to contradict Rajni, the statement also foreshadows certain events, like when she joins a women's rights protest in Delhi that gets her arrested. The protest separates her from her sisters and lands her in a police station, creating an unpleasant detour from the pilgrimage for all the sisters, and a terrifying situation that makes Jezmeen realise that her impulsive actions have consequences for other people. It also acts as a catalyst for the healing of her strained relationship with Rajni. In a heart-to-heart conversation, Jezmeen reveals her doubts about her place in the world, voiced very bluntly by their mother before she died: "She said, 'How can I die knowing that you're not settled?' I thought she was referring to marriage, but it was other things too. She said I had no commitments" (Jaswal 147). For Jezmeen, the experience of their mother's death also brings up the pressures to find a purpose in life: "I just feel so untethered now that she's gone. We're orphans… We're the next to die… you've got a legacy. I'm still stuck where I was ten years ago" (Jaswal 147).

Jezmeen's fear of irrelevance is a symptom of her deeper fear of mortality, which leads her to fantasise about finding her roots in India so that she can learn more about her identity. In a car on their way through the Punjab countryside, Jezmeen speculates on the life she might have lived if her parents hadn't migrated and settled in England: "Don't you think about it sometimes? About how different our lives would be if we had grown up here? We wouldn't be tourists" (Jaswal 180).

Daydreaming about finding an estranged aunt, she contemplates how such a discovery would add to her public profile: "It was a story that gave Jezmeen roots; it would be harder to keep criticising her as shallow and callous if she had an ancestral connection" (Jaswal 183). Jezmeen's moments of yearning for true belonging during this journey emphasise the theme of nostalgia, which Lisa Lau identifies as another common trait of Indian diaspora writers to "discuss the confusion of identity they are experiencing" (Lau 241). Through Jezmeen's storyline of rootlessness, I wanted to explore my own search for an authentic and fulfilling identity as a South Asian diaspora woman and artist, who is critical of the structures that water down our authentic narratives to meet the status quo. (Lau's choice of the word "confusion" is one I dispute however, because it simplifies the experience of diaspora women, whose complexities rather than "confusion" gives them agency and awareness in narratives.)

Youngest sister Shirina's character portrays this complexity as her narrative poses one of the major questions of the novel: is it possible to be both a traditional and modern Indian woman? On the surface, this is exactly what Shirina appears to be doing, with her career in public relations and her modern arranged marriage to a Sikh man in Australia. But Shirina arrives in India for the pilgrimage with a secret – she is pregnant with a baby girl and her in-laws want her to get an abortion, as they will only accept a male as their first-born child. As the sisters make their way across India, flashbacks reveal the abuse in Shirina's marriage, and the extent to which she must continually compromise her autonomy to maintain the family image. One example is the flashback showing Shirina returning home drunk from a party, and the consequent silent treatment punishment from her husband and mother-in-law (Jaswal 51). In another scene, Shirina calls her husband from India only for her mother-in-law to pick up the phone and admonish her for creating trouble from abroad (Jaswal 169). Shirina observes "a long sigh on the other end of the phone that sounded just as familiar as when Shirina was standing head to head with Mother in their home in Melbourne" (Jaswal 170). In the past, Shirina idealised the fixed roles and familial support of a traditional Indian marriage, but now she is experiencing the shortcomings of a traditional marriage where as the "upholder of family values" she

is "more central to the community grapevine than men, and hence much more vulnerable and sensitive to public disapproval (Bains 226).

Shirina viewed marriage as an escape from her conflict-ridden family. Through her narrative perspective, I had the opportunity to view the Shergill family's conflicts with a bit more distance and neutrality than Rajni's and Jezmeen's constant arguments offered. By removing Shirina from her mother and sisters, I could juxtapose expectations against realities of the search for belonging and acceptance. Shirina's search for a peaceful family mirrors the mythic ideal of the Indian diaspora woman who is able to achieve a balance between tradition and modernity – both are attractive but ultimately mythical ideals. When she encountered her in-laws for the first time, Shirina "couldn't help comparing them to her own threadbare family – a smattering of distant relatives, her widowed mother, two sisters, always bickering, never just listening to one another" (Jaswal 44). During the journey, Shirina avoids getting drawn into the many conflicts between her sisters – as Rajni notices, "Shirina had a talent for taking herself out of these arguments" (Jaswal 30). However, Shirina's internal strife surfaces when she gets upset with Jezmeen for drinking too much and missing their pilgrimage duties. "She was angry at Jezmeen for making the same mistake over and over again. Surely one time was enough? It was for Shirina" (Jaswal 98). She resents Jezmeen for being so casual about drinking, when her own night of drinking ended up damaging her relationship with her mother-in-law. During one of their final pilgrimage duties together, Shirina has a rare outburst that reflects her inner turmoil over her identity. Jezmeen is pointing out the gender inequalities in a ceremonial ritual when Shirina says, "Those are the rules though…Maybe it's just how it's always been done" (Jaswal 205). When Rajni asks her if she would accept the exclusion of women from final rites, Shirina insists, "Some things just are what they are… We respect traditions, don't we? Or do we just pick and choose the ones we like?" (Jaswal 205) She also asks Jezmeen: "Do you want to start looking for inequalities in every little thing? Because it's a very long list and you'll never get through it" (Jaswal 205). This moment is pivotal for Shirina's character development because it manifests her deep doubts about

her ability to construct an authentic identity that balances tradition and modernity. Fully feeling the pressures of terminating her pregnancy and sacrificing her autonomy in this decision over her body for the sake of maintaining peace with her family, Shirina's argument with her sisters suggests that the ideal balance of tradition and modernity is unattainable in her marriage.

The biggest factor in developing the complexities in Shirina's character was to avoid the traditional Indian archetype. If she was going to be a character who, over the course of the narrative, began to voice her doubts about her role as a wife and daughter, there had to be some indications of agency and self-reflection within her character that would eventually motivate her to leave her abusive relationship. In a phone conversation with her husband Sehaj, Shirina asserts herself and demonstrates this resistance to his family's conservative values: "But she (her mother-in-law) doesn't have to be involved in *every* decision we make,' she insisted" (Jaswal 150). Later in the conversation she challenges Sehaj: "I'm not allowed to say no then?" (Jaswal 151). Rather than portray Shirina as a purist or rank her as the most traditional sister, I developed her character from a mix of some traditional views with a modern context. I deliberately did not make her religious or particularly knowledgeable about Sikh traditions, maintaining instead that Shirina was selective about some aspects of traditionalism that benefited her desire for a better life. I discovered that traditionalism could be a convenient escape route for Shirina, much like how Rumi, in *Gifted,* calls upon her transnational identity and fantasises about India as a homeland that accepts her. Shirina's transnational experience as a first-generation migrant who moves within the diaspora from Britain to Australia, suggests an easy cosmopolitanism and melding of cultures. To better fit into her expected role as a wife and daughter-in-law, Shirina accesses online arranged message boards to seek advice on superstitious wedding traditions like the "Lemon, Sugar and Water!" (Jaswal 101) discussion thread, named for the concoction that brides must spread on their skin to maintain the colour of their wedding mehndi after the ceremony. She also reads about the challenges that other new brides face with their mothers-in-law, but judges them for resisting, because she is tempted to accept her new reality and she doesn't want to admit that her new family is not the haven she had envisioned:

"Compromises would be necessary. It was easy as well to declare, "I would never quit my job' or 'I'd never tell my husband that my needs came first.' But what women really did, the ways in which they bent and adjusted their values – that was reality" (Jaswal 154). Cultural contradiction haunts Shirina and makes autonomy harder to achieve. She recalls conversations with an Australian colleague encouraging her to stand up to her mother-in-law, a piece of advice that doesn't take into consideration the cultural weight of disrespecting one's elders in an Indian home (Jaswal 73). One positive aspect of the pilgrimage to India is that Shirina can just be Indian in India: "People here would understand. Shirina felt relief at that thought. It would be nice, not explaining her culture" (Jaswal 100). But as a wife and daughter-in-law in a culturally traditional Indian marital home, Shirina is expected to be much more submissive than she bargained for. Caught between cultures like so many South Asian diaspora women, marriage was Shirina's imagined homeland for the support structures which were lacking in her own family, but as Bhatia observes, "the homeland, whose longing leads to the comfort of 'belonging', may not always be a haven of pleasure for women" (Bhatia 512).

In "Close Encounters with Ancestral Space: Travel and Return in Transatlantic South Asian Writing," Ruth Maxey observes an "unsentimental, sometimes even comical" treatment of India as a "deferred home" for South Asian artists in the diaspora (Maxey 77-78). *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* approaches situations and characters with humour and realism to subvert a number of tropes about traveling in India. Common contemporary travel narratives set in India are spiritual quests that position the country to gratify and serve Western tourists. Novels and films like *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011)*, Shantaram* (2003) and *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) tend to romanticise India as an antithesis of the west. "India is more spiritual and America is more materialistic," says Amanda J. Lucia, quoting Indian philosopher Swami Vivekananda's address to audiences in Chicago in 1893. "But the romantic notion of India as the guru to the world is, as with all orientalism, a Western projection, an imagined reality that has little to do with modern India" (Lucia 217). In "Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination," Amartya Sen views these portrayals

as colonial remnants where "distancing" Indian culture from the so-called "mainstream of Western traditions" maintain a classification system that presents India as exotic, otherworldly and wondrous (Sen 2).

One purpose of this novel was to challenge the idealised journey to India as a salve for afflictions of the soul. The opening of the novel – a mother making her final wishes on her deathbed – is prone to romanticism, following a literary tradition that goes as far back as the nineteenth century novels where "the deathbed scene …. was a familiar literary convention not only in prose fiction but also in narrative poetry and biography" (Wheeler 28). In these novels, according to Margo Masur's research into the aesthetics of deathbed narratives, "the dying body was exploited as a spectacle in terms of fictional sentimentality" (Masur 13). Masur explains that while sentimentalism has its role in protecting readers from the uncomfortable realities of death, "these examples also threaten to turn any dead person's legacy into a wish-fulfilling commodity" (Masur 20). If I wanted to subvert the Indian quest journey, I needed to avoid this sort of wish-fulfilling narrative, which would ultimately pander to the idealisation of India as a salve for afflictions of the soul. To reframe the deathbed moment realistically, the novel begins with a prologue that comically juxtaposes sentimental and realistic approaches to death. I begin the novel with a heartfelt letter describing the narrator's deep gratitude and love to her children: "I am blessed to have been witness to your triumphs and challenges, your heartaches and your successes" (Jaswal 1). The narrative perspective then pans out to show that the letter-writer is actually another patient sharing a hospital room with Sita, who is eavesdropping. Sita's initial approach in her own deathbed letter is to be brutally honest about the suffering and the ultimate meaninglessness of life: "I've had enough of this ghastly life – all this working and suffering and trying to take care of myself for no bloody reason" (Jaswal 3). The letter Sita ends up writing to her daughters finds some middle ground between expressing her love for her daughters and also the pragmatics of creating an itinerary so her daughters can carry out her final rites: "It will be a way of completing my journey in this world and continuing yours" (Jaswal 5). But the letter is also a precursor to a darker request Sita will make later – that her daughters assist her suicide so she can die

with dignity. Sita is aware that this request will divide her daughters, which is another motive behind her orchestrating the pilgrimage to bring them together after a devastating event. These contrivances on Sita's part disrupt the tidy expectations of death bringing immediate relief and reconciliation between family members. In setting up her method of death and asking that her daughters continue some unfinished business on her part, Sita is leaving her daughters with more questions than answers, which creates room for questioning and exploration in the narrative.

Sita's identity is also significant to my attempts at subverting the Indian quest narrative. In the Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana*, Sita is the exiled wife who is known by her roles as wife and mother. Her husband Ram's journey to rescue her is framed as the heroic act of the story, while Sita's eventual suicide by fire (to prove her chastity) is regarded as a woman's expected sacrifice. Sita Shergill, a contemporary iteration of this dutiful wife archetype, is the author of her daughter's itinerary, which gives her a legacy of leadership and autonomy in her family. Although she is also a traditional wife and mother in many ways, I wanted her identity as an individual to surface in this pilgrimage, an effort that reflects contemporary feminist readings of the *Ramayana:*

> The Sita who clung to the dharma of worshiping her husband and bowing to his will, even when he repeatedly and cruelly rejected her, is still embraced as the ideal woman by many Hindus of both sexes. But others, increasingly, are describing that ideal as concocted by and serving the interests of dominant males from ancient times to the present. (Hess, 27-28)

Sita Shergill's agency subverts the maleness of traditional quest narratives as she compels three women to go on a journey to India to save each other and themselves, re-examining their roles as subsidiaries to men and the patriarchy. To further emphasise her individuality, Sita's pilgrimage itinerary is not strictly linked to religious sites and rituals. Initially, it was my intention to show the daughters going along with a strictly religious Sikh pilgrimage that Sita had outlined for them. I researched traditional pilgrimage sites and their histories, and plotted the sisters' journey to various locations of significance to Sikhs, but the narrative became constrained by these restrictions of location because they represented a wider cultural tradition rather than Sita's personal wishes. I

decided for the sites to be significant to Sita's memories of India to give the characters a chance to know their mother fully as an individual. Pilgrimages are not required for spiritual salvation in the Sikh religion, which was another attempt on my part to subvert the narratives around a spiritual India. In "The Evolution of the Golden Temple of Amritsar into a Major Sikh Pilgrimage Centre," author Rajinder S. Jutla explains:

> The Gurus discouraged the ritualistic journey to a sacred place for salvation and explained that the only true pilgrimage is an inner journey. In Sikhism, the emphasis is on truthful living, kindness, sharing, and selfless service within one's family and community while remembering, reflecting and meditating on the Absolute. (Jutla 265)

But people participate in them anyway, a suggestion of humanity's desire to create experiences to make meaning of spirituality and make it relevant to their earthly lives.

Jutla's research into Sikh pilgrimages shows a trend of Sikhs taking pilgrimages and deeming "certain places as more sacred than others" despite Sikh scripture deeming all spaces as universally sacred (Jutla 264). The way the sisters grapple with the requirements of the pilgrimage and the experiences of India reveals their desire to make meaning of a place and reveals some expectations of enlightenment from sacred spaces. Upon arriving in India, Rajni presents copies of her printed itinerary to share with her sisters, which she highlights into categories title "Spiritual, Tourism and Sentimental" (Jaswal 22). This itinerary is very much a checklist for Rajni, who views the pilgrimage as a series of tasks to complete. At the Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, Rajni wonders how to quantify the experience of *seva* to make it meaningful: "How many hours of service did one need to contribute in order to feel closer to God?" (Jaswal 52). The sisters also experienced India's multiplicities and contradictions to represent the inevitability of modern influences in India, dispelling the idea of a dichotomous spiritual East versus a commercialist West. In a market stall, Shirina is offered a numerology reading only to have the shopkeeper do a Google search on the significance of her birth date and sell her a printout of her results (Jaswal 69-70). After a morning of pilgrimage duties at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the sisters prefer McDonald's over another temple meal, described as

"charred pieces of roti from the bottom of the stack, and some dal which had gone cold" (Jaswal 173). Visiting the prayer hall in the Golden Temple is also not the serene experience the sisters anticipated. Separate lines distinguish the tourists from true worshippers and Rajni observes it to be "like a theme park ride"; after being "ejected from the room almost as soon as they entered," Rajni asks, "Is that it?", emphasising the triviality of a spiritual practice that her mother had considered so significant (Jaswal 158). Ironically, Jezmeen is the only sister who develops an affinity to spiritual practices. Taking a ritual bath that their mother's letter suggests "will bring eternal strength and fulfilment", Jezmeen becomes open to the idea of "a slow progression of healing" (Jaswal 161-162). I never portray her as being fully convinced of the spiritual properties of the water, which their mother's letter describes as "the nectar of immortality" (Jaswal 209). Instead I focus on how the rituals relax her and give her the clarity to approach her fears of mortality with more curiosity than fear. She tells Rajni to have more "faith" and admits, "It's nice to have something to believe in" (Jaswal 209). The rituals allow her to slow down and consider her purpose in life: "Our existence. What's the meaning of it all? Aren't you curious at all about what happens after all of this? Don't you do things and wonder why you're doing them at all?" (Jaswal 209). Jezmeen's transformation suggests that spiritual healing is possible in this narrative, but in a modern way that involves introspection and a commitment to personal growth.

In the end, the pilgrimage does not go according to plan. The sisters miss out on the most significant ritual, the scattering of their mother Sita's ashes, but they forge a deeper sense of trust than a ritual would have provided. It was always my intention for the sisters to conclude the journey with the shared understanding that the rituals were guidelines to put them on a path to reconciliation, and that meaningful personal transformations must come from our own relationships and intentions. However, creating the situations to bring them to this realisation was a challenge, because I wanted to avoid contriving a collective epiphany that resonated similarly with these three very different individuals. I focused on developing a contrast between what Sita's expectations of the journey and the reality. Physical contrasts were important here, to establish the differences in physical space that

delineated Sita's wishes for the pilgrimage versus the journey that the sisters ended up taking. Instead of the serene waters of the sacred Lokpal Lake as per their mother's wishes, the sisters scatter her ashes into a polluted branch of the Yamuna River that travels through Delhi. Rather than taking "a trek to heaven" to "the most elevated Sikh gurdwara in the world" to scatter their mother's ashes in the "glacial lake where our tenth guru meditated and achieved spiritual unification" (Jaswal 278), the sisters take a train in metropolitan Delhi. They arrive at a river "clogged at the banks with rubbish" and search for a place where the water is clear: "It wasn't Lokpal Lake, but there was beauty in searching for a space like this for Mum too" (Jaswal 296). This comparison shows how the sisters finally take charge of the pilgrimage itinerary and turn it into something meaningful for themselves, despite its challenges and imperfections. Their individual transformations and the healing of their relationships with each other are more profound than anything their mother could have contrived or orchestrated by ordering them to do a pilgrimage.

In unearthing India's paradoxes throughout the narrative, I was able to explore the Shergill sisters' sense of identity and belonging by presenting India as both foreign and familiar. In *Letters from India*, travel writer Quentin Crewe describes India as "a state of mind rather than a place. No two bits are the same, so it's no good saying India is hot or India is cold, or India is violent or India is peaceful, because any statement will be true about India at any given moment" (Crewe 4). Crewe resists a homogeneous definition of India because it is a place made up of multitudes, as the Shergill sisters discover. Researcher Uma Parameswaran says, "Given India's diversity, anything one says of India is both false and true" (Parameswaran 175). In this novel, diaspora is its own world of multiplicities and contradictions that become amplified by the sisters' experience of their mother's homeland. I wanted to demonstrate how the diaspora experience influences these women and adds to their complicated relationship to a country that is, for migrants, "an anchor for identity formation, however mythical and uncomfortable" (Bhattacharyya 237). Historian James Clifford describes diaspora women as being "caught between patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways. The lived experiences of diasporic

women thus involve painful difficulty in mediating discrepant worlds" (Clifford 1997). The discomfort of the return is something I wanted to amplify in my narrative, particularly since the women are travelling without men, and having to navigate a place that is both culturally familiar and foreign. Maxey writes that South Asian Atlantic writers are more inclined to explore "troubling, temporary return-of-the-native moments, perhaps because this trope offers more room for conflict between characters as well as a legitimate means of critiquing the originary homeland" (Maxey 83). Maxey also underscores the importance of gender and sexuality in return journey narratives, emphasising the challenges for diaspora women who find these visits to India more restrictive than their usual lives in Britain: "[Returning] women have less room than men for social manoeuvre in South Asia and less sexual freedom than in the West" (Maxey 90).

A humorous scene early in the book opens up more serious implications about the in-between spaces that diaspora women occupy. Rajni and Jezmeen are ordering drinks from the hotel menu but the waiter apologetically informs them that each item is not available. When Rajni scolds him, Jezmeen chides her for being unreasonable: "You can't throw your weight around like some colonial returnee" (Jaswal 30). Rajni retorts that Jezmeen has her own adjusting to do: "You think you can just blend in with everyone here? I'd like to see you walk outside wearing that outfit and all that makeup and showing off that tattoo" (Jaswal 30). Both women accuse each other of being too obvious as outsiders, and not embracing their Indian identities enough for this trip. As Maxey observes, "[Tropes] of return allow artists to investigate, in a particularly urgent fashion, ideas about transnational mobility… by testing the limits of their protagonists' South Asian or British identities" (Maxey 109). These tests continue throughout the novel for all three characters, and they are further complicated by gender issues that make the women conspicuous yet powerless in India. On their way to the temple to carry out their first pilgrimage duties, the sisters encounter a taxi driver who is sneaking glances at their chests in the rear-view mirror. Jezmeen's response is to display herself more fully in the mirror to make the driver uncomfortable with her boldness, while Rajni tells Shirina that the way to combat sexism in India is to evoke a man's female relatives: "You know what you're

supposed to say to put them in their place, right?" Rajni said to Shirina. "Don't you have a sister? Don't you have a mother?" (Jaswal 42) Jezmeen argues that this response still places the burden on women to summon other women that the men own; Shirina silently considers Jezmeen's argument but also acknowledges "that this type of argument belonged in a different place… She adjusted her dupatta so it concealed her chest. An easy solution. Nothing needed to be said" (Jaswal 42).

I continued exploring the discomfort of return by creating a cultural landscape that presented the pervasiveness of India's patriarchal society and its widespread hostility towards women. The most overt example is the scene depicting Jezmeen's involvement in a women's rights protest, where activists call out statistics about the gender imbalance due to female feticide and hold up signs like the one depicting "images of Hindu goddesses, their faces covered in bruises and cuts to make them look like battered women. 'RESPECT ALL WOMEN THE SAME WAY,' was scrawled across the top" (Jaswal 92). Prior to accidentally joining the protest, Jezmeen noticed sexism at every turn in Delhi. "It wasn't her first time noticing that Delhi was a city of men, but walking alone made it all the more obvious" (Jaswal 86). Jezmeen finally finds the women of Delhi, segregated from the men for their own protection, in a separate train carriage designated for females. She feels "relief" at being separated from chances of harassment, but also ponders: "But why did the women have to be sequestered like this just because the men couldn't control themselves?" (Jaswal 87) In another part of the city, Shirina reflects on a similar experience: "Men roamed in hungry packs and whispered 'hello' in a way that made it sound like a threat" (Jaswal 99). Direct harassment isn't the only way that sexism is presented in the landscape of the novel. On the train from Delhi to Amritsar, the sisters overhear a conversation between members of a traveling family, where a husband jokes to his wife, "I can always exchange you for another wife" (Jaswal 120). The gender inequality enters spiritual practices when the sisters attend the awakening of the guru ceremony at the Golden Temple. When Jezmeen observes that the baptised Sikhs who can participate in the ceremony are mostly men, Rajni says, "There's either a rule about it, or the men just pushed their way in" (Jaswal 205). Misogynistic

values are so strong in India's society that Shirina's in-laws are easily able to arrange for her to terminate her female baby in a doctor's office in Chandigarh, despite the fact that gender-selective abortions are technically illegal. In the waiting room, Shirina reflects on the irony of this situation, where cultural beliefs supersede the law.

For first-generation migrants in Britain, going to India is not exactly a homecoming or a return, because they have never physically lived in India. They have however, under the frameworks of a migrant community that preserves Indian cultural values. In a flashback to Rajni's teenage years, I describe the Punjabi community in West London as having "one foot in each country," a positioning that adds to Rajni's sense of dislocation as a teenager: "Sometimes it seemed that a huge tornado had uprooted her parents' home from Punjab and plunked them down in London – the smoky scent of spices in the kitchen and the morning prayer broadcast from Amritsar serving as constant reminders of where home really was" (Jaswal 238). I also created the diaspora landscape with mentions of global Sikhs throughout the novel and their strong ties to the motherland. There are the engraved dedications to wealthy families who have donated money to the Golden Temple. Jezmeen observes "a murmuring crowd standing around a towering tribute from a prominent Sikh hedge-fund manager from New York" (Jaswal 165). In the baths later, Rajni notices a group of girls from an international Sikh youth summer camp. "Rajni caught the accents then – some Americans, some Australians and a few that she could not distinguish, probably from Southeast Asia and Africa" (Jaswal 216). The global network of the diaspora has always been in the context of Rajni's life as an oppressive force, but she finds herself uneasily calling upon it to hire a private investigator in India who specialises in pre-matrimonial background checks. The investigator boasts a network spanning from the US and the UK to Southeast Asia, another example of the global presence of the Sikh community and their interconnectedness.

The wide reach of the global diaspora is also evident in Shirina's transnational marriage, which was arranged through a Sikh matrimonial website. Shirina is an example of a person for whom "the migratory experience can lead to more embracing identifications on the margin of the host

society. Those who do not think of themselves as Indians before migration become Indians in the diaspora" (Van der Veer 7). Reflecting on her modern sisters' reaction to her choice to have an arranged marriage, Shirina thinks:

> How would she have explained wanting a new beginning – a definition of 'family 'that was wholesome and content – without insulting them? She didn't really think she'd find what she was looking for so quickly, but once she registered and created her profile, she saw that there were abundant opportunities to become somebody new. From London to Bangkok to Nairobi to Wellington, there was the thrill of clicking on each potential husband, and the excitement of knowing that she was shaping her own fate. (Jaswal 100).

At the end, when Shirina finally tells her husband that she wants to leave him, she says, "I just want to go home" (Jaswal 302), suggesting that practising her autonomy is what gives her the ultimate sense of belonging. Describing diasporas as "places of long-term, if not permanent, community formations, even if some households or members move on elsewhere," Avtar Brah recognises the alienation of exile associated with the notion of diaspora, but also adds: "But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure" (Brah 193). For all three sisters, this reconfiguring could only truly happen because of their position as migrants, visiting a homeland that is both familiar and unfamiliar, which prompted them to view the relationship between their past and present differently.

Lisa Lau suggests that a resolution for diaspora women caught between cultures happens when they "learn to balance dual-identities or double consciousness, and combine these to a certain equilibrium" (Lau 253). Creating a resolution for this story was a challenge because I had to resolve the events in such a way that brought each woman a sense of equilibrium in her own identity. The end of the novel sees Rajni and Jezmeen discovering Shirina's secret and taking a detour from the pilgrimage to save her. Rajni's confession to Jezmeen about her past is an unburdening that helps to mend her relationship with her memories of her mother. "Although it wasn't written anywhere in the

letter, Rajni believed now that Mum wanted her to remember India differently from that place where bad memories were buried" (Jaswal 274). Rajni also accepts that as a mother, she cannot control her son's life, just as her mother could not control the outcome of this journey. Jezmeen's personal transformation occurs when she forgoes an important audition to rescue Shirina. At the end of the novel, Jezmeen finds an opportunity to meet with the director and when she is offered the role on the condition that she stays in India, some of her earlier fears about her dependencies surface: "What if trouble found her again and she didn't have anybody to bail her out?" (Jaswal 297) However, Jezmeen finds reconciliation in resolving to be more responsible, and imagining making their mother proud by telling her about her new opportunity: "In the fantasy, Jezmeen heard herself telling Mum that she had worked very hard for a long time, and it was time she had a break. *I need you to have a little faith in me*, she said" (Jaswal 297). Jezmeen also vows to take more control of her actions and in this way, she gains equilibrium: "Unlike her sisters, Jezmeen had no parting words for Mum. What she resolved to do then was more powerful than anything she could say" (Jaswal 298). For Shirina, independence and recognition of her victimisation in an abusive marriage helps her to speak up for herself for once. She reclaims power from Sehaj: "Shirina supposed she had once mistaken Sehaj for a person with more power over her as well" (Jaswal 280). She also takes the first steps towards acknowledging her pregnancy as "my daughter" (Jaswal 284) and vows to finish the pilgrimage as their mother intended, with her daughter present. A year later, when her daughter is born, we see Shirina's transformation as a single mother who has filed for divorce from Sehaj: "Now Shirina only had one thing to say and it didn't matter if Sehaj knew it or not. *I named her Anaya. It means freedom*" (Jaswal 308).

In "Identity Crisis of Indian Immigrants: A Study in Three Novels", Shyam Asnani describes diaspora writers as "folk historians, mythmakers and custodians of the collective history of their peoples" (Asnani 75). Female diaspora writers create narratives from the migrant experience to ensure that our collective histories are not limited to the imaginary homelands that idealise patriarchal ideals. Diasporas by their very nature are spaces of diverse identities, complex hierarchies and shifting loyalties, and these narratives remind readers of the individual experiences that challenge the

monolithic perception of South Asian immigrants. *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* came from my desire to add to this collective history and to continue creating nuance in our stories of return, belonging and acceptance. Critic Savita Goel says, "The endeavour to write a novel about one's native country on the basis of memory has been an irresistible challenge and a compelling necessity for a number of exiled or immigrant writers who have been cut off from their ethnic roots" (Goel 189). My endeavour was to heal this sense of being removed from the homeland, and to create a link between the past and present through an exploration of the lives of fictional women whose values and experiences were familiar to mine. The "compelling necessity" led this book from its early roots as a response to male-dominated narratives of India, to a process of discovery about the multifarious identities of women of the South Asian diaspora.

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