

'Vibrant, vital,
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Three best friends are born on the same day under miraculous circumstances. But by their twelfth birthday, Jahan, Ravi and Lakshmi's lives are about to change for ever. The British announce Indian independence and draw lines of Partition that tear apart the country, and the friends. One of them flees, one of them disappears, and the other is left wondering, could another miracle bring them back together?



From the author of
Safiyyah's War, winner of the:
JHALAK PRIZE
INDIE BOOK AWARD
WEEK JUNIOR BOOK AWARD

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THE LINE THEY DREW
THROUGH US

HIBA NOOR KHAN

ANDERSEN
PRESS

THE LINE THEY DREW THROUGH US

'A POWERFUL, MOVING, BEAUTIFUL BOOK.
EVERYONE SHOULD READ IT'
NIZRANA FAROOK

'A HEART-WRENCHING
AND HOPEFUL STORY'
RASHMI
SIRDESHPANDE

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FROM THE MULTI-AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *SAFIYYAH'S WAR*

PRAISE FOR *THE LINE THEY DREW THROUGH US*

‘Hiba Noor Khan is a phenomenal writer. *The Line They Drew Through Us* is nothing short of a masterpiece! I adored the wonderful characters and lyrical storytelling – this is a special book that will stay with readers long after they’ve turned the last page’

RADIYA HAFIZA

‘*The Line They Drew Through Us* is a heart-wrenching account of Partition – of the lives and dreams torn apart through this important period in history. There is plenty to learn and discuss, both at home and in the classroom, but mostly this is a story that’ll stay with you for its warm human relationships and interfamilial bonds. A powerful, moving, beautiful book. Everyone should read it’

NIZRANA FAROOK

‘Hiba has woven something truly exceptional, bringing to life a past we should all know and remember. *The Line They Drew Through Us* is historical fiction at its finest – vibrant, vital, deeply moving, and brimming with wisdom for the future’

SOPHIE ANDERSON

‘A richly told and immensely moving Partition story that spotlights a moment in history of colonial empire that changed the lives of millions’

A M DASSU

‘An exciting and vital new voice’

PHIL EARLE

‘Absolutely brilliant – maybe the most moving and meaningful book I’ve read all year. It’s so rare to read a book that handles a topic as serious as Partition with such deft, light, lyrical writing. I think Hiba is a superb talent, and this book is a real, astonishing accomplishment’

ZOHRA NABI

‘Beautifully evocative writing and a heart-wrenching and hopeful story told with great sensitivity. One that reminds us, in a world that seeks to divide us, there is so much that connects us’

RASHMI SIRDESHPANDE

PRAISE FOR SAFIYYAH'S WAR

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'So beautifully written it will be hard for any reader of 9+ to forget'

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'A beautiful and sensitively written story which will stay with me for a very long time'

A M HOWELL

'I adored this book in all its intricacies. I cheered for and cried with Safiyyah – a testament to Khan's talent for storytelling – and enjoyed every word.'

Safiyyah's War has the makings of a classic'

AISHA BUSHBY

**THE
LINE
THEY
DREW
THROUGH
US**



HIBA NOOR KHAN



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For Nani and Nana.



For everyone who lost a piece of themselves
when India was wrenched apart.

KAZAKHSTAN



AFGHANISTAN

CHINA

PAKISTAN

NEPAL

BHUTAN

INDIA

BANGLADESH

MAP OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Key

••• The lines of Partition

MALDIVAS

Author's Note

Indian history is British history. British history is Indian history.

The British forcibly established their rule over India in 1858, after many years of preparing for this takeover. Because of her thriving economy, wealth of resources and immense natural richness – including gold, rubies, emeralds, pearls, spices, and iron – India was known as the 'jewel in the crown' of the British Empire, which stretched its authority across more than one quarter of the entire population of planet earth.

Before India was colonised by the British, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Parsis and Jains, lived together across the subcontinent in regions known as Princely States. The British used 'divide and conquer' tactics, completely changing how people lived in India. They sowed seeds of mistrust between religious groups, and only allowed Indians to vote for politicians of their own faith.

When the British finally agreed to Indian independence in 1947, there was great unrest as each of the major religious groups wanted their interests to be protected and

to have some authority. In a feeble attempt to address this, the British drew two lines on a map, and the Indian subcontinent was torn into three new countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This is known as the Partition of India.

My own ethnic heritage trails historically back to both India and Afghanistan. After Partition, each of my ancestral regions became part of Pakistan. The very reason that I find myself in England right now, traces back to the British colonisation of India.

The quiet scratching of a pen on a map may as well have shifted tectonic plates, for the lines drawn uprooted eighteen million Indians, leaving between one and two million dead. The reverberations of Partition are still audible now and will continue to be, for a very, very long time.

Each one of those millions had a name, loved ones, and a heart full of dreams. The only way a people can begin to heal is by witnessing their pain. We cannot understand ourselves without understanding our shared histories. We must sit with them, until something of them sinks in.

This book is a love letter of sorts, to the vast subcontinent that is my motherland. A mother from whom I have felt disconnected from and conflicted about for much of my life. Yet her vibrant colours and rich soils and unheard stories run deeply within me.

Hiba Noor Khan 2024

Kismet

India, 1935

Three children were born into the world on the same day. They would later become best friends, and argue about whose birth was the most miraculous.

Jahan's parents had longed for a baby for ten years. When the birth of their child finally drew near, things took an unexpected turn for the worst. The doctor who had rushed to the house told Jahan's father, Amir, 'I'm sorry, but there's nothing at all that can be done for them. Your wife and child will soon pass.'

Amir clenched his jaw and shook his head, and refused to give up. Ignoring the doctor, he took them to hospital in Lahore with the stubborn flame of hope in his heart.

After three long days and nights spent with his forehead pressed to the cold hospital floor in desperate prayer to Allah, a nurse came to Amir with a surprised smile and glorious news. By some miracle, both mother and child had survived against all odds. Baby Jahan was carried around the hospital by the doctor like a trophy.

*

Ravi's parents, Nisha and Rahul, were on their way to the midwife, their baby due any moment, when the route was blocked by an angry mob marching with flames. Tensions between small groups of Hindus and Muslims had bubbled over angrily, and their peaceful neighbourhood in Mumbai had been swallowed by the fires and smoke of riots. The Hindu temple that they frequently prayed at was surrounded by angry men and the local mosque had almost gone up in flames. Fear enveloped the pair.

A tiny old lady, who looked to be two hundred years old, appeared from an alley and beckoned to them urgently. She ushered them into her shack, its ceiling covered in bundles of dried flowers and herbs, and safely delivered baby Ravi into the world.

In the quiet that followed, the wizened, mysterious woman reassured them in her lilting voice, she spoke with them about their kismet, fate, and what they wanted for their new-born son. Nisha believed deeply in kismet, as her own mother had always advised her to find and follow her path. With a knowing smile, the old woman told the family of a small unnamed village near Lahore, where they would find their new home. She scribbled directions onto a scrap of parchment, and warned them that they would never find the place marked on any map.

Moments before Aisha was born, her uncle's body was about to be buried in the village graveyard. The cotton

cloth he was shrouded in glowed as white as the egret who stood watching silently from the river. As Aisha's first new-born cry broke the sombre silence from her family's nearby hut, her uncle stirred and opened his eyes.

Her father fell to the ground in shock and gratitude to Allah, the mouths and eyes of the funeral procession opened wide in wonder.

Aisha was declared a miracle baby and given the affectionate nickname of Lakshmi by one of the village elders, after the Hindu goddess of good fortune.

By their twelfth birthday, one of the children had disappeared, one of them had fled, and the last was left only with their memories and a belief in miracles.

Chapter 1

Lahore, October 1946

Jahan felt inside the crumpled paper bag for another puri. There was only one crispy shell left. Pulling it out slowly, he gave his best friend a serious look. This was *not* a snack that could be shared. Ravi immediately shifted his position on the pink sandstone step and Jahan mirrored his movements. The boys both bent forward, leaning their elbows on the ground and locking their hands and gazes.

'Aik . . . do . . . TEEN!'

They remained almost stationary for half a minute, each boy pushing with equal force. But then Ravi, whose cheeks were turning slightly pink, began to gain the upper hand. When it came to physical abilities, though Ravi was thinner and a little lanky compared to Jahan's heavier build, they were usually neck and neck. Now, Jahan realised he was close to losing the last bite of pani-puri. He focused all his energy into his bicep and forearm and roared. He slammed Ravi's hand down, and was about to roar again, this time in triumph, when he realised his friend was laughing hysterically.

‘I thought your eyes were going to pop out of your head!’ Ravi managed, before collapsing into another fit of giggles. Whenever he laughed hard, he went completely silent and tears would roll down his cheeks. ‘Your face was too funny, you only won because I couldn’t help but laugh!’

Jahan cracked a hole in the top of the flaky puri with his thumb, before tipping some of the dark pani mix into its shell until it nearly overflowed. ‘Lame excuse, my friend. You sound like a sore loser to me . . .’

‘I swear!’ chuckled Ravi. ‘I’d have beaten you if you hadn’t looked like a strangled monkey!’

Unfazed, Jahan popped the whole puri into his mouth, crunching open the crispy shell and savouring the explosion of tastes on his tongue. Tangy tamarind sauce, creamy potatoes and buttery chickpeas: it was like a flavour party inside his mouth. Sweet, sour and spicy all at once. ‘Sorry, I can’t hear you over the deliciousness of my prize, Ravi!’ Jahan thought happily about how he would add this to his recipe book when he got home. One day he planned to open his own restaurant with his uncle, Chacha.

Three graceful white doves landed close to where the boys sat on the steps overlooking the vast courtyard of the Badshahi Mosque. Ravi tipped the paper bag upside down, and the cooing doves congregated quickly, pecking at the puri flakes now scattered on the ground. The boys watched the birds in companionable silence,

tired after racing each other under the blazing sun. They had come up with their own circuit system around the mosque years ago, making it longer and more complicated as they'd got older.

They had first met in the village, nine years ago. The pair were just about able to waddle around on their chubby legs, and little Jahan had offered Ravi one of the potato patties he'd been munching on. Everyone who witnessed this knew that a very special bond was about to unfold between the boys; Jahan *bated* sharing his food. To the delight of the boys, Ravi's family relocated to Jahan's neighbourhood in Lahore just a year later.

Now they were in the largest mosque on the entire planet. To the boys, it felt more like a majestic palace than anything else. The first challenge was always the many steps up to the entrance. Ravi usually took the lead here: thanks to his long legs, he'd leap up three steps at a time. They'd zip under the enormous sandstone archways that seemed to glow a colour somewhere between ruby and flame.

Then came the magnificent open courtyard, so huge you could barely make out someone standing on the opposite side. This was a real test of endurance, and by the time they reached the grand prayer hall under the three imposing domes, they'd both be sweaty and out of breath. Jahan and Ravi would collapse in the cool shade, often arguing over who had crossed the finish line first.

Over the years they'd imagined themselves running from hungry tigers, or a deadly avalanche hurtling towards them. Other times they were racing for long-lost treasure chests or to claim the last remaining magical bird on earth. Whatever the mission was, it was *always* followed by a search to find their favourite lassi vendor nearby. This was usually at the insistence of Jahan, whose stomach was somehow always rumbling. The cool thick yoghurt drink was the perfect thirst-quencher. There was nothing quite like the smooth lassi that Lakshmi's mother made in the village, but this was the next best thing. Ravi's choice was sweet with mango, while Jahan liked his salty.

The boys would sip from their terracotta clay cups, laughing at each other's milky moustaches. The lassi vendor would roll his eyes at them and, with a smile, call them the troublesome twins. Despite Ravi's paler skin and extra inches of height, the pair were often mistaken for brothers, which made both boys feel warm inside, though they'd never admit it!

Jahan's uncle and auntie, Chacha and Chachi, were visiting as they would all be going to their family friend Kavita's wedding in the village the next day. Chacha and Chachi had just arrived from their latest travels in the mountainous northern Kashmir. They lived in Mumbai with their son, but were always exploring different regions. Chacha was much older than Jahan's abu, but

still got called 'Chacha', meaning 'Father's younger brother', because of his unending energy and thirst for life.

They were his favourite uncle and aunt, and as always, they came bearing gifts. Intricately embroidered shawls that were as light as gossamer, but warm like a thick blanket when draped around your shoulders, baskets of sweet dried apricots and cherries, and papier-mâché animals and figures for Jahan. That morning, Jahan's chachi had given him a shiny silver rupee, and so today lassi had been replaced with the special treat of pani-puri.

'Thank your chachi for me, Jahan.' The end of Ravi's last word was lost to a loud burp.

Jahan thumped Ravi's arm. 'Well, I'm glad you're not thanking her yourself, or she'd tell you to mind your manners!' he teased. 'And besides, what even was that? If you're going to burp, do it properly.' Jahan let out a long fake belch and both of them cracked up.

Ravi pulled out a shiny new cricket ball from his pocket – his gift from Jahan and his family for Diwali last week – and bounced it to Jahan. As Jahan caught the ball he remembered the excitement of the celebrations; the old city had been strung with Diwali decorations, temples softly glowed with the candle light of thousands of diyas, and firecrackers illuminated the night sky. Jahan reckoned he had only just finished digesting the feasts he'd

managed across the five-day festival. He rubbed his belly contentedly and bowled the ball back to Ravi.

Before Ravi could reach for it, the ball was intercepted. A man in a pristine red turban and starched white kameez charged past the boys, grabbing the ball before shushing them rudely. The man thumped the cricket ball into Ravi's outstretched palm, to the relief of the boys, before gesturing at them to leave quickly. He wore the unmistakable attire of servants of the British Raj, and sure enough, within a minute, a small crowd appeared in his wake from around the corner. Three more turbaned men held parasols above the heads of a group of British officers and a couple of British women as they walked.

Jahan and Ravi had ignored the man and stayed where they were, both irritated at the intrusion. One of the women lifted the skirts of her dress and turned up her nose in a look of disgust as she stepped past the boys. Jahan felt horribly self-conscious all of a sudden, the intensity of her glare made him want to be as small as the ant beside his shoe. One of the Englishmen's elbows knocked Ravi's shoulder as he passed, and Ravi dropped the cricket ball by accident. It bounced and then rolled through the legs of the British entourage.

The entire group turned to stare in outrage, and before Jahan even understood what was going on, he felt a hard *thwack* around his head. He steadied himself, his ear thumping, shock pulsing through his body. From the

mortified expression on Ravi's face, it appeared he too had been violently shoved aside. Jahan grabbed Ravi's arm and led him quickly away, their heads lowered in a combination of humiliation and fear. Angry voices followed them.

'Clumsy boys!'

'Idiots!'

'No respect at all!'

The cricket ball had rolled behind one of the great marble pillars. Jahan grabbed it, and stopped to lean against the cool stone. The boys were just out of sight of the horrid group now, but could still hear them in the background. Ravi whispered, 'I only dropped the ball because one of the men jogged my arm . . .'

Jahan felt a swell of rage, his ear was still hot. 'And it didn't even touch them! They acted like you dropped a grenade not a cricket ball!'

Ravi looked a little reassured by Jahan's words. '*They're* the ones with "no respect at all"!

The pair leaned around the pillar to sneak a look. Now another Englishman stood in front of the officers, pointing up at the intricate architecture and explaining it to them. One of the women ordered a servant to fan her immediately. As the turbaned man bowed and rushed to begin waving a colourfully embellished fan to cool her, Jahan looked sideways at Ravi, rolling his eyes.

'So DRAMATIC . . .'

 Ravi mouthed back at him. Both

boys hated how rudely most British people treated Indians, as if they were less human than them.

The guide wiped sweat from his temple and continued his tour. The boys strained to pay attention to what he was saying, as he spoke in English. 'It was originally built by Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in the seventeenth century, using pink sandstone brought all the way from the "pink city" of Jaipur. You can see the white designs carved from marble and laid into the stone over there.'

Jahan looked up at the ornate ceiling above them: it was rather exquisite. Not a single patch was left plain, every piece of plasterwork was filled with motifs and patterns. Despite having visited more than once a week for his whole life, he'd never really taken it all in before. To the side was a grand series of carved archways stretching into the distance, interrupted only by chandeliers. Just as he began to wonder how many people it must have taken to build such a magnificent place, his thoughts were interrupted by a voice.

One of the women asked in a clipped accent, 'Was the Koh-i-Noor diamond found around here?'

The guide hesitated uncertainly. 'No, madam, I believe the diamond was discovered somewhere in the south-east of the subcontinent. It was of course gifted to Queen Victoria in the year eighteen-fifty.'

Ravi grimaced. 'GIFTED?! It wasn't *gifted*, it was

practically stolen! How can they say that?!' he hissed to Jahan.

'Shhhhhh! They'll hear you!'

'They should!' Ravi was furious, and Jahan knew he needed to calm him down. Ravi's mother was a historian, his father an archaeologist. They'd first met while working at Mohenjo-daro, the ancient ruins of one of the world's oldest cities. Both now worked at the University of the Punjab, in Lahore, and had done ever since moving to the city, from the remote village where they had gone after Ravi's birth. His bedtime stories were real-life accounts of emperors and bygone kingdoms. He learned about classical legends over breakfast, and former civilisations at dinner. And right now, he was outraged.

Jahan scrambled for words that might calm his friend down. Ravi was usually the quieter, mellower one of the pair, Jahan tended to get into trouble for being boisterous and silly. But when it came to incorrect histories, it was as if a lion came to life within Ravi. 'The British are rewriting Indian history to suit themselves,' Ravi raged. He loved history and lost himself in Indian history books at the library at the university when his parents were working there.

'Ravi, Ravi – you told me the truth: Maharaja Duleep Singh was only eleven, the same age as us, when he was *forced* to surrender the Koh-i-Noor, as well as this very country, to the British. It's hardly surprising that these

people don't tell the true version of events, is it? You've heard from my amma that the Urdu word *loot* was one of the first ones to enter the English language!

Ravi muttered '*Plunder*' under his breath, glaring at the group as they walked away.

Jahan continued, smirking now: 'We all know there's only one reason that the pyramids are still in Egypt . . .'

'Why?'

'Because they're too heavy for the British to steal them away!'

Ravi couldn't help but laugh a little, and Jahan was grateful to see it. He teased again: 'I didn't realise when I got the pani-puri that its chilli would light such a fire in your belly! Come, let's walk, my chachi and amma will be back from the bazaar soon. Remember, we're going to the village for Kavita's wedding tomorrow! We'll need to help with the preparations.'

The pair got to their feet, stretching their arms and legs.

Jahan added, 'It's a good thing Lakshmi wasn't here, she'd have thrown her shoe at that guide!'

'You're the one who always says "Speak the truth, even if it is bitter!"' Ravi said.

Jahan raised his eyebrows, impressed that Ravi remembered the Islamic saying.

Ravi was Hindu, but instead of calling his father Pita, as their other Hindu friends called their fathers, Ravi used

Abu, the same name as Jahan, who was Muslim. They had grown up closer than brothers; the differences in their religions felt normal and natural, a cause for celebration. Marking both Diwali *and* Eid meant double the parties, gifts, and delicious food, and both mosques and temples across the city felt familiar and safe.

‘Anyway, did you know that the Koh-i-Noor diamond is cursed? Any man who owns it will own the world, but also know all of its misfortunes . . .’ Ravi was definitely back to his lively self now, and had started on his favourite topic. And so, as the boys headed towards their neighbourhood, dodging colourful rickshaws and donkeys pulling carts laden high with juicy guavas and bright mangoes, their minds were filled with tales of precious jewels carried on the backs of elephants and camels, bloody battles, and ancient kings.

Chapter 2

The Village

Jahan felt excitement bubble in his belly as the tanga rattled down the dirt road, huge plumes of red dust billowing up behind its clattering wheels. They'd passed through endless fields of lush green sugarcane swaying in the breezes, groves of mango trees and mulberry orchards, and now were getting close to the village, the home of Jahan's father's family for more generations than they could count.

It was also the place that Ravi's family had found refuge and healing, and had been Ravi's home for the first few years of his life. It was just over an hour's journey from Lahore in a tanga, and they visited often for special occasions and holidays.

Jahan's heart swelled whenever he thought about the time ahead of them. For as long as they each could remember, he and Ravi spent their school holidays in the village that had no name, and there was nothing else quite like it. They would stay with the elders, as the boys' parents all had to return to the city for work. The air was fresh and sweet after the monsoon season, and Jahan drank it in greedily. Their friend Lakshmi lived in the

village, and she looked forward to Jahan and Ravi's arrival as much as they did, although she'd sooner eat cowpat than admit it.

Lakshmi was like a sister to Ravi and Jahan, and it was a point of wonder to all of them that they shared a birthday. Sometimes they would argue about whose birth story was the most miraculous, though both boys secretly admitted that it was Lakshmi's. Her real name was Aisha. She and her family were all observant Muslims, but the nickname she'd been affectionately given at birth by a Hindu elder had stuck through the years.

Jahan, Chachi, Chacha, and his parents had been joined by Ravi and his own parents, who had squished onto the tanga at the last minute. Despite the dead leg that Jahan was suffering from thanks to the squeeze, he was glad. Another tanga followed behind theirs, laden with suitcases and gifts wrapped tightly in newspapers.

Once the city chaos gave way to the vast rolling plains of the countryside, Ravi's parents always became emotional. Ravi and Jahan had both taken guesses as to how much time would pass before the adults got sentimental and teary-eyed. They'd reserved a small piece of creamy barfi for the winner. Now Ravi's dad squeezed his wife's hand tightly, her eyes glimmering with tears, and so Jahan reluctantly handed over the sweet prize in brown paper to Ravi. Ravi grinned triumphantly and took a bite as his mother, Nisha, started to speak.

‘How quickly the years pass! It seems like just yesterday that we were trudging along this ground with tiny Ravi swaddled in my arms. Rahul, remember your sandals had all but broken, and the ground was so hot from baking in the sun all day!’

Ravi’s abu shook his head wistfully. ‘I was starting to hallucinate by that point. To tell you the truth, I never had much faith in the directions scribbled down by the old woman in Mumbai. I went along with it because Nisha seemed so certain, and after everything that had happened with the riots, I couldn’t bear to say no to her. After days on trains and miles and miles on foot, I was despairing.’

Ravi’s amma dabbed a tear from her eye. ‘When the banyan tree first came into sight, Rahul was convinced it was a mirage! Thirst and hunger can do all sorts to a person. He’d almost given up. There were moments for me too, when the dream of the mysterious Punjabi village with no name started to seem no more than a fairytale . . . I feared listening to an old woman like that had been foolish, that I’d ruined everything for my son, but something deep within me just knew, it was kismet.’

Now Jahan’s amma’s voice wobbled as she spoke to her friend through her smile. ‘All the while, the village was drawing you to it. Pulling you home. And as for the baby, well, just look at him now!’

All the adults smiled at Ravi, who cringed and gave a

sidelong look at Jahan. The boys shook their heads in exasperation; they'd heard these stories a hundred times before. As much as Jahan giggled with Ravi about it though, in his own heart he couldn't help but feel there *was* something very special about the village. His dad's dad, who he called Dada, always told him that there was magic in the village, that the banyan tree at its centre was as old as time itself. Jahan felt it sometimes too. The fact that the village had no name, and could not be found on any map, made it seem like it truly belonged to the land, rather than to any people.

Their cart lurched a little as it went over a bump on the path, and Jahan's notoriously dramatic chachi exclaimed to the driver, 'Hai! Slow down, you'll kill us all like that!'

Jahan took his pocket watch out and studied its shiny face for a moment. 'Chachi, by my calculations, we are doing a speed of no more than five miles per hour. I think we're safe.'

Jahan's abu chuckled quietly, which spurred Chachi on further, 'Nonsense, my hips have truly taken a battering, and I can feel my blood pressure is through the roof! In fact, my ear feels a bit funny too, now . . . I wouldn't be surprised if I die before we even arrive! How I long to be back in the deep ocean studying marine life, not on land in this speeding death trap.'

She glared angrily at the driver, who appeared to be

entirely lost in his own thoughts as he twirled the end of his moustache. Chacha smirked at his wife. 'My dear, if my memory hasn't failed me, you actually died last Thursday. And the Tuesday before that! I believe it was your elbow that time.'

A snort of laughter escaped Jahan's abu, who pretended he was coughing ferociously. Jahan loved how Chacha could make his normally serious abu laugh. The others tried to mask their smirks from scowling Chachi: they all knew better than to laugh at her. The only time she seemed to let her guard down was when she was swimming, for her work as a marine researcher. Now, she sighed loudly in exasperation at her husband, flicked her sparkly dupatta dramatically over her shoulder, and from the pile on her lap, threw a salted pistachio at his head.

Chacha skilfully dodged the nut, catching it and popping it into his mouth, before whispering to Jahan: 'Masha'Allah, this auntie of yours has more lives than a cat!'

'I see it! We're here!' Jahan couldn't contain his excitement at the sight of the magnificent banyan tree in the distance. Its huge network of bulky branches spread further than any of the buildings in sight, its aerial roots hanging down in dense tangles. The banyan stood at the centre of the village, which had been built around it.

To Jahan, it felt like a wise old person, silently but carefully watching over the creatures around it, from the humans, to the beetles and doves, and everything in between. Even Lakshmi agreed that there was something otherworldly about the great tree. A quiet calm descended upon anyone who stood close, and the air around it seemed to shimmer.

Beside it, Jahan could make out three figures putting up a big white tent for their friend Kavita's wedding celebrations that were to take place over the coming days.

As the tanga drew into the edge of the village, a small boy Jahan didn't recognise spotted them and began shouting and waving excitedly. He ran as fast as his little legs would carry him, towards the heart of the village, announcing their arrival breathlessly.

Jahan and his amma exchanged a smile, each remembering that not so long ago, Ravi, Jahan, and Lakshmi loved being the village lookouts. Jahan could still recall the adrenalin that pumped through him as they raced each other back to the village, screeching the announcement at the top of their lungs.

He gulped in the fresh air, free from the smoke and smells of the city. His amma remarked, 'Does it not feel so different, lighter almost, to travel away from the British presence?'

Jahan's amma was a dressmaker, one of the finest in Lahore. News of her talent had spread far and wide, and

she was drafted in to design garments not only for ladies of the Indian royalty and upper classes, but also occasionally for wives of British officers. Jahan noticed that her shoulders looked less tense now than they usually did, her brow was smoother too. She seemed freer, happier.

Ravi's abu nodded in fervent agreement. 'Absolutely! It's exhausting being a second-class citizen . . . Stifling and oppressive, you can never be your true self. This is what it means to breathe! Perhaps we will truly fill our lungs soon, with independence on the horizon.'

Jahan felt the bump on his head from when he'd been whacked yesterday, and thought about how he immediately stiffened up and avoided eye contact if he came into the presence of a British person in Lahore. He felt very sorry for his and Ravi's parents, whose jobs meant that they were constantly feeling that tension.

His abu's gaze had been distant, wistful almost, when Uncle Rahul mentioned independence from the British, but then a cloud of worry darkened his face. Jahan felt a little kernel of that worry pass to him. He knew from Ravi all the things the British had taken from India, but what would it really be like for them all if the British left? What did Abu know?

The tanga slowed and stopped. Jahan leaped off first, stretching his leg that had been squashed. As Abu and the driver fetched the suitcases piled onto the cart, a little

entourage appeared and began casting rose petals of the brightest pink over Jahan, Ravi and their families.

Jahan shook the petals from his curly hair, just as Lakshmi dived through the gathered crowd dramatically, like a ball scattering bowling pins. She narrowly avoided concussing Ravi, before greeting them with enthusiastic slaps on the back and a luminous grin. The trio hadn't been together since their eleventh birthday a month ago . . . They always celebrated their shared birthdays together in the village.

He worked his way around the adults like a carousel, each one pinching his cheeks and patting his head before squeezing him in an almost rib-crushing hug. There were exclamations of 'It's only been a few weeks, but look at how you've grown!' and 'Amir, he's becoming more like you every day!' and 'You must visit our house immediately!'

The three friends walked slowly up to the house belonging to Jahan's grandparents, Dada and Dadi. They were so different to Jahan's parents. It seemed that everyone in the village, many of whom had very little, was more at ease than those who lived elsewhere. For one thing, the British never came here. They spoke loudly, laughed even louder, and of course, ate more heartily. Chacha seemed like an exception to this, some of the glowing village spirit seemed to pulse through his veins too. Dadi and Dada didn't get involved in political debates, and neither of them had attended school past second grade, but they were in

touch with their hearts, and could somehow express themselves more eloquently than the finest poet.

Dada's thirst for life glimmered vibrantly in his eyes and smile. He could find the poetry in everything, from a pomegranate to a rusty wheel. Dadi, on the other hand, was as sweet and welcoming as the sugar she pressed into her parathas. She was in her element caring for others, and was known lovingly as the grandmother of the village. Just like her husband, Dadi was a deep-thinker and a day-dreamer. Sometimes, she would float so far away on her thoughts, that she wouldn't notice she'd eaten all the parathas she'd cooked for the family! It seemed bizarre to Jahan that his own serious abu could be the son of these two people.

Dada and Dadi's house was one of the few buildings in the village constructed from bricks rather than earth, and stood between two vibrant peepal trees. The trees stretched out over the house towards each other, casting shade across the low roof where their branches touched. They looked as if they were old friends continuing a conversation despite the intrusion of the house between them.

Dadi came out to greet them beaming brightly, her gold bangles glinting in the afternoon sun. Her long braid was streaked with silver, and smile lines creased at the corners of her dark brown eyes.

‘Welcome home! *Aaja, aaja*, come into the house and settle in, all of you.’

Jahan’s family was staying with his grandparents, while Ravi’s family would stay next door to Nana Arjun, Dada’s oldest friend and Ravi’s great-uncle. The boys called him *Nana*, another word meaning grandfather in Punjabi out of respect and love.

Dadi continued, ‘You must be so hungry, come sit, and we will bring food! Jahan, I made you a special sweet paratha, with the freshest ghee and sugar. Go and greet your grandfather while I fetch it.’

Ravi smirked. ‘As usual . . . everything is just for Prince Jahan here, no paratha for anyone else, I see!’

‘Well, I would expect no less, I am extremely special, you know,’ Jahan joked back smugly.

‘If paratha allowance is related to specialness, then I should have a ten-foot stack of them!’ Lakshmi informed them with raised eyebrows.

‘All right, all right, I’m sorry I said anything.’ Ravi raised his hands, feigning surrender. ‘Let’s not start this so soon!’ A favourite topic in the village was the miraculous births of the trio, and Lakshmi would always ferociously proclaim herself as the winner.

Jahan gave Ravi a sideways nod, once Lakshmi got going on this, she would never stop . . . She was like the village princess, her status as miracle child at birth had

never worn off, and she wore her invisible crown high and proud.

Lakshmi led Jahan and Ravi out to the back courtyard, where two old men sat crouched on the dry earth, surrounded by an array of plates, trays, jugs and cups. As soon as the men glimpsed the three children, they heaved themselves from the ground. Their movements were accompanied by a mini orchestra of clicks, creaks, and cracks, their bodies announcing their seventy-odd years on earth.

'Wab bey wab! You've come!' Dada grinned, squeezing Jahan tightly, before allowing Nana Arjun his turn. Jahan kissed the wrinkled hands and foreheads of the old men.

'My boys! Jahan and Ravi!' Nana Arjun laughed loudly from joy, greeting them both heartily. His affectionate gaze lingered on Ravi, drinking him in, as if he were seeing him for the first time. Though he was Ravi's great-uncle, he had not known Ravi's mother until she had arrived unexpectedly in the village.

One of his favourite stories to tell was the way that his long-lost niece had mysteriously found her way to him eleven years ago. Nana Arjun had been separated as a toddler from his family as they boarded a train east from Punjab. All he remembered, other than his own name, was the name of his elder sister (Ravi's grandmother) and of his own mother, and how he had wailed as the train chugged away from the platform without him on it. He

could barely remember how he had found his way to the village.

He was finally reunited with family over sixty years later when Nisha, Rahul and baby Ravi arrived in the village, dusty, dishevelled and almost giving up hope of finding anyone. Nisha was wearing the distinctive emerald-studded gold necklace and earrings that had been her mother's. Nisha had also inherited her mother's hazel eyes, and Nana Arjun had recognised her, and was stunned into awed silence and tears.

He always claimed that he'd called her back by playing his flute, while Ravi's mother told of an old woman who sent them from Mumbai to Punjab, on what had seemed like a whim. Dada said both stories were true. That *kismet*, or fate, is made from a thousand threads that weave together into a beautiful design.

Now Dada and Nana Arjun turned to the boys almost at the same time, and enthusiastically asked, 'What's new?!

Lakshmi's eyes twinkled in excitement at the prospect of hearing their updates from the city. '*Haan*, tell us! Is that brute Manesh from school still being a bully? Did you get that aeroplane engine you found to work? Oh, please tell me you brought a good cricket ball with you, ours is in pieces!'

'Woah, woah!' Jahan gestured to slow down. 'We'll tell you everything, promise! But first, what are you doing here with all this stuff?!

Dada gestured proudly to the assortment of vessels and endless cups, 'I am preparing mohabbat ka sharbat, the sharbat of love! It's for tonight's dinner, the first of the wedding gatherings. Our darling Kavita deserves only the best. Like this.'

He poured a wooden spoonful of creamy milk from a metal pitcher into a big bowl, and then scooped up a handful of brown sugar and threw that in too. Next he glugged in some of the famous pink Rooh Afza rose syrup, and a cup of fresh watermelon juice. He stirred until the liquid became a beautiful blush colour, and then dropped in tiny watermelon cubes and bright rose petals, before pouring some into the small glass cups for the children to try.

'Mmmmmm!' Jahan forgot all about the promised paratha on his first sip. It tasted like a sweet breeze.

'It's good, *baan?*' said Dada. 'The recipe was dreamed up on the streets of Old Delhi, as sweet as the first birdsong of the morning. It is special. I swear, the moment it cools your tastebuds in the summer heat, you start remembering things you didn't even know you'd forgotten . . .'

Dada gazed into the distance dreamily. Jahan tried to do the same but no mysterious memories came to him. Shrugging, he knocked the pink liquid back, hoping he might be offered some more in a moment. Ravi smacked his lips together in satisfaction. 'Nana Arjun, what about you?'

‘Aghhh, I’ve been given the laborious task of samosa folding. I have a rather efficient production line going on here: rolling, filling, folding, sealing, and so on. Any help would be more than welcomed, Dadi has me on a tight schedule!’

Jahan figured that helping fold samosas wouldn’t be much of a chore if he got to taste Dadi’s delicious filling every now and again too . . . He shuffled to sit beside Nana Arjun.

Nana Arjun and Dada had been inseparable for as long as they could remember. Tiny Arjun had wandered into the village after losing his family. For months the villagers had tried to locate them, but without success. So they raised him as a son, and when Dada was born, they had become the best of friends.

Nana Arjun winked at the kids, beckoning them to taste the mushy spiced potato and pea filling, before saying loudly, ‘Delicious, but I’m glad samosa filling isn’t all that I *can* eat!’

Dada rolled his eyes, Lakshmi giggled behind her hand.

Nana Arjun continued, realising the boys had no idea what he meant. ‘Your dada has had a habit of copying everything I do, since we were around your age, actually. A couple of weeks ago, because many of my teeth had fallen out, I got an entire set of dentures from the dentist in the town.’ He grinned in a silly way, showing off a

strong set of white teeth. ‘Your dada here, despite having a full mouth of healthy teeth, decided to copy me as usual, and for no good reason went to a dodgy “dentist” and asked to have them replaced!’

Dada retorted, ‘The idiot “dentist” said he was properly trained!’

‘A bricklayer would have done a better job in your mouth than your “dentist”!’ Arjun couldn’t help but laugh. ‘It’s because you’re always trying to save your pennies.’

‘My pennies are being saved for my Medina fund, and that’s more important than my teeth, I’ll have you know!’

Jahan looked lovingly at his grandfather, who had been saving money for as long as he could remember to travel to Medina to visit the resting place of the Prophet Mohammed, and perform the holy pilgrimage. The late afternoon golden light had set Dada’s henna-dyed beard ablaze, as if a sunset had been spun into wispy hair and hung from his face. Jahan quietly decided to put some of his Eid money from this year into the savings tin Dada kept beside his bed.

Nana Arjun remembered something and laughed again: ‘A few days ago I caught your dada with an old metal file, trying to shave down one of his wonky bricks – I mean, teeth!’

Lakshmi stole another mouthful of samosa mix and said wisely, ‘The moral of the story, Ravi and Jahan, is *not* to copy your best friend blindly!’

Everyone laughed, and Jahan's heart felt full. A light haze had descended as the shadows grew longer, and a regal-looking peacock strutted by, curiously eyeing the food. Bulbuls sang in the trees around them, and Jahan could just about make out the comforting tumble and gurgle of the river in the distance. Despite being born and raised mostly in bustling Lahore, somehow the village felt deeply like home.

The moment was interrupted by Lakshmi's mother's voice, calling, 'AISHA! You had one job!'

Lakshmi jumped up in an instant, eyes wide. Her parents only ever called her by her actual name when she was in trouble. 'Oops! I forgot to mix the atta! Got to run!'