

UNDER FIRE

FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM IN WARTIME INDIA

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Chapter five

After two nights on the train, shortly after eight o'clock in the morning, we reach Calcutta at last.

Grandpa is waiting for us on the platform. I spot him in his white suit and white hat, towering over everybody else. Our eyes meet and we both break into a run until he sweeps me up into his arms. For an old man, he is still very strong, and I hug him back tightly. I didn't want to come to India, but I'm glad to see my only grandparent. Baba's parents are no longer alive. They died a few years ago and he has no brothers and sisters, which means there is no immediate family on his side for us to visit.

'As salaam alaikum.' I use the Islamic greeting of 'peace be unto you', even though Grandpa isn't a Muslim.

‘Wa alaikum salaam, Hasan,’ Grandpa responds, wishing me peace in return. He sets me down on my feet and holds me at arm’s length. ‘Let me look at you. Ah, I see you have grown.’

‘Mama says I am tall for my age,’ I say proudly.

‘That you are,’ Grandpa agrees, pulling me into his side and turning towards ayah-Sapna, who has finally reached us. ‘Vincent Clifford, very pleased to meet you.’

‘Sapna,’ she replies, revealing only her first name.

‘Thank you for your service to my family,’ Grandpa says warmly.

‘It was an absolute pleasure,’ ayah-Sapna replies, smiling politely.

‘Would you join us for some refreshment at my house?’ Grandpa asks. ‘You have had a very long journey.’

Ayah-Sapna shakes her head. ‘Thank you, but I am catching the next train back to Bombay.’

‘So soon?’ Grandpa says.

‘I have another ward I must accompany,’ ayah-Sapna explains, and turns to me. ‘Master Hasan, you be a good boy now.’

I suddenly feel a little emotional saying goodbye to the person I have been with for nearly a month. ‘Thank you,’ I say.

Ayah-Sapna's face softens, and she steps forward to hug me. 'Goodbye, Master Hasan.'

I watch her disappear into the crowd and wonder if I will ever see her again. Perhaps she will be employed by Baba and Mama to take me and Hana back to England when the war is over. I wish she had agreed to come with us to Grandpa's house to freshen up. That train journey was so long; I can feel the soreness in my muscles from being cooped up in that carriage. Thanks to Rupert, ayah-Sapna and I had been able to remain in the first-class carriage and be as comfortable as possible on such a journey. But I know ayah-Sapna won't be travelling in the same manner on her return. She will be in the third-class carriage with hard wooden benches and as many people as can fit in.

If it was allowed, I'd definitely ask Grandpa to buy her a first-class ticket, but I know now that such a ticket would be worthless in ayah-Sapna's hand if she wasn't travelling with an English person, even though it's her own country.

'Ready, son?' Grandpa says.

I don't share my thoughts with Grandpa. I might do so a bit later on, but this is not the time. Instead, I nod and we walk out of the station.

‘It looks very busy and crowded here,’ I say. ‘Much more so than London.’

‘Calcutta is a city of ports, factories, trams and railway stations,’ Grandpa says. ‘It’s an industrial hub where goods are made for the entire Empire.’

I glance up at him. All the times I’ve met him in Coventry, he has always looked a little uncomfortable. He would sniff the air and pull a face, making it clear it was not to his liking. Grandpa has lived more years in India than he has in England and considers it to be his home.

Grandpa’s chauffeur-driven car with an open top takes us to his house on the west side of the Chowringhee Road, a very long street filled with huge mansions. Directly opposite the mansions is a big green field called the Maidan, which I suppose you could call a park. Mama told me that the Chowringhee Road is one of the most exclusive streets in Calcutta. When they were young, she and Baba used to meet in the Maidan by the statue of Queen Victoria.

Grandpa’s house is even bigger inside than it looks from the outside and is filled with wooden furniture. White fans spin high up on the ceiling of the living room, adding a much-needed coolness. My eyes are

drawn to a large framed family picture, hanging on the wall.

It isn't a close-up shot – it seems the photographer had been keen to capture the background too. The picture is of Woking Mosque with me, Hana, Baba and Mama standing outside.

Baba always takes us to that mosque on Eid. It's based in Surrey, where many of his Muslim friends live, and Baba likes to be with them for the festivities. I go inside for prayers with Baba, because he says that sons follow the path of the fathers. Mama and Hana wait for us at the hotel and then we go for a big lunch with Baba's Muslim friends. Mama isn't a Muslim but she dresses up in a new dress that Baba buys for her every year and wishes everyone Eid Mubarak.

That means Happy Eid. It's a bit like saying Happy Christmas.

'We always go to Woking for Eid,' I say. 'And Christmas is celebrated in Coventry. That's the only day in the year we go to church with Mama.'

Grandpa gazes at the photo. 'Those two only ever wanted to please each other,' he says.

'Why did they leave India?' I ask suddenly, as Grandpa shows me into his library.

Grandpa avoids my eyes, and I can tell he doesn't want to answer.

'Please tell me,' I persist.

Grandpa sighs heavily. 'After he got married, some thugs beat your baba up badly, and had him locked in a jail cell.'

The words take their time registering in my mind. My baba was beaten up? 'But why?'

'Because they didn't approve of your mama having an Indian husband,' Grandpa says. 'They believed that Indians and whites should not mix.'

'Is that why there are Whites Only boards everywhere?'

Grandpa gives me a sharp look. 'You've noticed that already?'

I nod. 'There was one on the ship and then a train inspector tried to us to move from our first-class compartment because Mama wasn't with us.'

'A train inspector, eh?'

'Yes, we only managed to keep our seats because a nice white man lied and said we were travelling with him.'

'That was mighty decent of him,' Grandpa says.

'I don't get it,' I say. 'Normally lying is wrong, but in this case you're saying that it was the right thing to do.'

‘The inspector was following a rule made by people who should not be making the rules.’

‘You mean, the colonial British?’

Grandpa gives me another sharp look. ‘Where did you hear that label?’

‘Ayah-Sapna mentioned it,’ I say, shrugging.

Grandpa looks uncomfortable. ‘We shouldn’t generalise and think everybody is the same... I mean, look at me; I’m colonial British but I’m also against the Whites Only policy.’

I sit back on a wooden rocking chair and sway back and forth. ‘I hope I meet more people like you,’ I say.

Grandpa frowns and sits down on a twin rocking chair opposite me. ‘I’m sorry you experienced that, Hasan,’ he says. ‘The Raj, which is what the British rule in India is called, does nothing to help itself. When laws are harsh without reason, people will rebel. You know it was a similar train inspector who enraged Mahatma Gandhi into fighting for a free India. Have you heard of him?’

I nod. I know all about Gandhi. He’s an old Indian man who goes around wearing nothing but a white sheet wrapped around his waist. My baba says it’s called a dhoti and is one of the national garments of India. In appearance, Gandhi may dress simply but he is a very

intelligent man who trained as a lawyer in London and has now made it his life's work to end the British Raj in India. Millions of Indian people follow him.

I once overheard Mama and Baba discussing Gandhi when they thought I was asleep. They were both very concerned that he'd been arrested in India by British officers and sent to prison. When I'd walked into the room to ask why he'd been locked up, they made me promise never to repeat their words to anyone. It was treason against King and Country to support Gandhi and his freedom movement, Baba explained.

'Tell me about Gandhi and the train inspector,' I say to Grandpa now.

'Well, years ago,' he begins, 'Gandhi returned from Britain, newly qualified as a lawyer. He had caught a train and was sitting there, suited and booted in gentleman's clothes, enjoying the comforts of first class.'

'What happened?'

'A train inspector walked into the carriage and kicked him out for being in a Whites Only area, despite having a first-class ticket,' Grandpa says. 'The humiliation made Gandhi determined to bring an end to British rule in India.'

'Is he still in prison?' I ask.

Grandpa nods. ‘Churchill has made sure of it.’

‘Winston Churchill, Britain’s prime minister?’ I say, shocked.

‘The very one,’ Grandpa says and then frowns again. ‘I’m so sorry you had to experience what you did.’

Why does Grandpa feel so responsible? ‘It’s all right,’ I say. ‘Anyway, that nice man made the journey fun. He even showed me how to use a Caesar cipher.’

‘Good chap,’ Grandpa says approvingly. ‘How about I teach you a little codebreaking too?’

‘Really?’ I say. ‘I’d love that.’

‘Of course. I’m your grandfather and I should teach you these things,’ Grandpa says firmly. ‘Can’t leave it to strangers to pass on the skills. Do you know about Morse code?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Well, Morse code is a system that some spies communicate with, using dots and dashes. I haven’t done it in a while, so I can’t quite remember the sequence...’

‘It’s all right, Grandpa,’ I say. ‘We don’t have to do it now.’

‘No, no, let me find the piece of paper with it written on.’ Grandpa walks over to the bookshelf and spends a few minutes pulling out books and waving them in the

air. Loose papers fall from a few and he bends down to read them before placing them back between the pages and returning the books to the shelf.

Finally, a sheet of yellow parchment falls out of a dusty old hardback, and he gives a little whoop of joy. ‘Found it! I should have remembered I hid it in my favourite book of poems. This is the Gitanjali.’

I don’t pay much attention to the book Grandpa is holding up. My eyes are focused instead on the ancient sheet of parchment. Letters and numbers are listed on one side of the page, and different sequences of dots and dashes are written next to them.

Morse Code

A	• —	N	— •	1	• — — —
B	— • • •	O	— — —	2	• • — — —
C	— • • — •	P	• — — •	3	• • • — —
D	— • • •	Q	— — • —	4	• • • • —
E	•	R	• — •	5	• • • • •
F	• • — • •	S	• • •	6	— • • • •
G	— — • •	T	—	7	— — • • •
H	• • • •	U	• • —	8	— — — • •
I	• •	V	• • • —	9	— — — — •
J	• — — —	W	• — —	0	— — — — —
K	— • • —	X	— • • —		
L	• — • • •	Y	— • — —		
M	— —	Z	— — • •		

‘Read out A,’ Grandpa says.

‘A is a dot and a dash.’

‘Good. Now, you must learn all the letters and numbers when you have time. I’ll put the list back in the book for safekeeping,’ he says, replacing the Gitanjali on the top shelf.

I nod vaguely, suddenly feeling tired from the long journey.

‘So, that’s Morse code,’ Grandpa says. ‘Now, let me show you the Polybius square.’

	1	2	3	4	5
1	A	B	C	D	E
2	F	G	H	I/J	K
3	L	M	N	O	P
4	Q	R	S	T	U
5	V	W	X	Y	Z

I stifle a yawn, not wanting to be appear rude.

‘The Polybius square is made up of twenty-five “boxes”,’ Grandpa says eagerly. ‘You write out numbers one to five across the page, and then one to five down the page, and then the letters of the alphabet in five rows of five, with I and J sharing a place.’

‘Shall we code a word?’ Grandpa asks, and then without waiting for an answer, writes down the numbers.

13, 11, 31, 13, 45, 44, 44, 11

‘Decipher these,’ Grandpa says. ‘The first digit in each pair stands for the column down, and the second one for the row across.’

I take the pen and start working it out. After number 45, I know what it will spell out.

‘Calcutta,’ I say triumphantly.

‘Very good!’ Grandpa applauds, but he isn’t finished with his lesson yet. ‘If you are ever in trouble and need help, you can use the Morse code SOS distress signal. Three dots, followed by three dashes and then three dots. Ships and aircraft use it to say they require immediate assistance.’

‘That’s useful to know,’ I nod.

‘We have other codes too in this war,’ Grandpa says, but before he gets the chance to tell me what

they are, a woman's voice rings out, interrupting our lesson.

‘Let me look at him!’ she demands.

I turn to see an older lady shuffling towards me. Her hair is streaked with grey and scraped back off her face, and a black scarf is draped over her shoulders and chest. I know who she is immediately. It's Mama's ayah, Meena, who still lives in Grandpa's house and is now his housekeeper. I met her once years ago when Grandpa brought her to England on a visit. I remember her as a smiling jolly woman, who was always very kind.

‘He's right here, Meena,’ Grandpa says, laughing.

Ayah-Meena sweeps me up into a big hug. ‘My, haven't you grown! Let me see those dimples.’

I smile and she grabs my cheeks in both hands and squeezes. ‘Such a beautiful boy. Now, tell me, what would you like for lunch?’

‘Anything you make would be lovely,’ I say politely.

‘I see your mama has taught you good manners,’ ayah-Meena says. ‘But tell me, what is your favourite dish? I will make it to welcome you here.’

‘Fish curry,’ I answer.

‘Fish curry it will be,’ ayah-Meena says.

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Grandpa stands up from the table. ‘That was a delicious fish curry,’ he says to ayah-Meena. ‘I think you used a secret ingredient in Hasan’s honour, because it has never tasted that good before.’

Ayah-Meena’s face beams but she doesn’t say anything.

‘It was very good,’ I agree, scraping my plate clean.

‘Right, Hasan, now let me take you to your room,’ Grandpa says.

I follow Grandpa to the room at the end of the corridor on the first floor.

‘It used to be your mama’s room, but I had it changed into a guest room after she married and left,’ Grandpa says.

I glance around. It doesn’t look like Mama lived here at all. There’s no fussy tablecloth, or pictures on the wall. It all looks very sparse. There’s a wardrobe, desk and chair. The most impressive item is the bed. It has four posts, with white muslin cloth draped over them.

‘This is a mosquito net,’ Grandpa explains, clutching the muslin in one hand. ‘Keeps the little blighters off you at night.’

‘Does Hana have one too?’ I ask.

The muslin slips from Grandpa’s fingers, and I see him sway on the spot. Luckily, he reaches for the

nearest bed post to steady himself. I realise then that old age is starting to affect him.

‘Are you feeling ill, Grandpa?’ I ask, reaching his side.

He pushes the muslin to one side and sits down on the bed, closing his eyes.

‘Grandpa...’ I whisper, taking his hand in my own.

Grandpa squeezes my fingers and opens his eyes.

‘I’m fine, Hasan, just a little...’ His voice is strained. ‘I think it might be time for my afternoon nap now. I will see you again for dinner.’

I watch him leave with his head and shoulders stooped. He really did look he was going to faint. I hope it was just a one-off episode and he’s not sick.



Chapter six

I spend the next two days inside the house. Grandpa spends time with me by playing chess. After a while, I start to suspect that he is letting me win by deliberately playing badly. I don't know why he feels he has to mollycoddle me, but I pretend I haven't noticed. Grandpa likes to read a lot, and he encourages me to choose from the books that belonged to Mama when she was a child. I tell him that Hana will enjoy them more and select stories for her to read at bedtime.

Ayah-Meena makes it her mission to feed me as much as my stomach can take. I think it's her way of showing affection. Mama always says that in India, feeding people is an expression of love. I don't mind this at all and eagerly gobble down the dishes she places in front of me.

‘It’s a long time since I’ve eaten food as good as this,’ I say, munching on a fish fritter. These pieces of white fish fried in batter are my second-favourite food. Each mouthful is a delicious crunch of crispy batter before the soft flesh of the seasoned fish melts in my mouth. I could eat fish fritters all day, every day.

Ayah-Meena frowns at me. ‘Did your mama not make these for you?’

I dip my fritter in the mint chutney she has prepared as a condiment. ‘No, we were living on rations.’

Ayah-Meena looks confused. ‘But your mama and baba are rich,’ she says. ‘Why would there be rations for the rich? What’s the point of being rich if you have to eat like everyone else?’

‘Britain is at war,’ I say. ‘The whole country is on rations.’

‘Are you telling me that the King of England, the Queen and the Princesses are living on rations?’

I shrug, swallowing my last mouthful. ‘I don’t know about them, but all the people like us are on limited supplies. It’s a sacrifice for the war that everyone must make.’

Ayah-Meena places the last fritter on my plate and stands to leave for the kitchen.

‘Well, I think you’ll find not *all* British people are making that sacrifice. Just look around Calcutta. There are no rations for the colonial British living here.’

I think about how unfair that sounds as I swallow my last bite.

On the third day, Grandpa informs me that he is off to his club. When I ask him if I can go too, he shakes his head.

‘Not yet, Hasan,’ he replies. ‘You’re still new to India’s sun and I fear you might get heat stroke. We have to acclimatise your body to the change in temperature. This was a specific instruction in your mama’s letter to me.’

Why is Grandpa listening to Mama? She worries way too much about me.

‘I’m half-Indian, you know,’ I remind him.

That makes Grandpa laugh. ‘Indeed you are, but you’re still a born and bred Coventry lad.’

At the doorway, he kisses me on my forehead, puts his sun hat on and climbs into the back seat of his chauffeur-driven car to be transported away. The image of the car Baba bought before the war pops into my head. We had a lot of fun in that car as a family. Hana and I would shout with our heads out of the windows as Baba sped down open country roads. That smooth,

black car was another of our belongings that the Nazis blew up.

Pushing the memory away, I turn back inside the house. Ayah-Meena's singing voice drifts out of the kitchen, much louder than usual now that Grandpa is not here. I think about exploring the house further; the one part I haven't really seen is the rooftop. The grand wooden staircase only leads to the first floor with the bedrooms. The steps to the roof must be located somewhere else. I soon find them, hidden behind a door down the far corridor. The stone steps lead me to another door that emerges out into bright sunshine. There is no shade and I decide not to spend too long in this empty space. I just want to see the view of the road from this high up.

Standing behind the waist-height wall at the front end of the house, I shade my eyes with my palm and squint below. It is quite an ordinary sight. There are women in English dresses walking with sun umbrellas and men in beige suits and sun hats. It looks like England on a July day, except when I look more closely, I also notice a sea of Indian faces marching down the road in a determined way. Their voices drift upwards and I frown in concentration. What are they yelling?

As they grow closer, I can hear them more clearly.

‘Bharot!’ a strong male voice shouts.

‘Charo!’ a chorus of voices follows.

‘Bharot!’

‘Charo!’

They are only a short distance from the house now and, intrigued, I rush down the stone steps and then the grand staircase. Outside, as I rush past the gate watchman, he calls out to me in a panic.

‘Master Hasan! Master Hasan!’

I ignore him and wade into the sea of white that has now reached the house. Who are these people? The men are in white tunics and trousers, or dhotis, and the women are wearing white saris. There must be at least fifty of them, with clenched fists waving in the air, marching down the east side of Chowringhee Road.

The chanting gets louder.

‘Bharot!’

‘Charo!’

My baba told me that the Indians have another name for India. In the Hindi and Urdu language, they call it ‘Bharat’ and in the Bengali language, it is pronounced ‘Bharot’ with an O. The second part, ‘charo’, means ‘leave’. These people must be India’s freedom fighters and followers of Gandhi, who are demanding that the British leave India and Britain ends its rule.

‘Bharot!’

‘Zindabad!’

That means ‘long live’.

Their shouting is so loud and passionate that I want to join in.

‘Zindabad!’ I yell, stepping into line with them and throwing my fist in the air. My movement captures the attention of a man, and he smiles down at me. Feeling empowered, I yell even louder. ‘Zindabad!’

It’s enough for him to invite me into his circle. He takes a step sideways, making room. I slip further into the crowd, feeling overwhelmed to be part of the demonstration. I wonder if Baba and Mama would be proud of me. They support this call for a free India, although they do it in secret.

‘Zindabad!’ I yell again.

At that moment, a girl with round, shiny brown eyes turns her head and smiles at me. I almost trip over my feet as I stare back at her. I’ve read about twinkling eyes in my stories, but this is the first time I’ve ever seen a pair in real life. The girl turns again to the front and throws a small fist in the air, chanting along with the crowd. The string of jasmine flowers she has pinned to her hair swings and sways with every fist pump. She’s the only other young person on this march, and I want

to know who she is. I try to catch up with her, but she keeps slipping further ahead. The only way to reach her is by squeezing through the gaps between the bodies. The freedom fighters barely notice as I slip through them in my quest to find the girl.

‘Bharot Charo!’

Suddenly a big man’s bulk blocks me from moving forward any more. He’s at least six feet tall and as broad as an ox. I try to get around him but there are other bodies in my way.

PEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

A whistle sounds in the air and the atmosphere immediately changes. The crowd shrinks together, leaving hardly any space between the bodies. I feel myself being pushed into the big man, my nose and chin crushing into his back. His tunic is damp with sweat. and I try to push my head back, but the pressure of bodies from behind just hurls me forward again.

PEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

That’s not a single whistle now. It’s a few of them, blowing at different rates. Long and slow, sharp and urgent too.

What’s going on?

The whistling almost drowns out the voice of the leader, but he doesn’t relent.

‘Bharot Charo!’

‘Bharot . . .’

He’s unable to complete the word as yelling and screaming fills the air. I can’t see what’s happening. I’m too short.

I feel crushed.

I can’t breathe.

Then the big man in front of me falls to the ground. He has a proud-looking face, with a big moustache and beard. His face is contorted in agony. A white stick, much like a baton, connects with his head for a second time. The man clutches his head, screaming as he collapses.

A voice begins to shout in my head.

Run. Run. Run.

My feet don’t obey. I’m frozen to the spot, staring in horror at the man, who is now huddled in a roundish shape as more sticks connect with his body.

And then, from the corner of my eye, I see a stick rise above me, before it comes crashing down on my left side. The sting on my arm is so sharp that I cry out, startled.

I finally realise what’s going on. The men with sticks are policemen, and they’re here to break up the march

by beating the freedom fighters. It hits me that perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea to join in.

Another blow connects with my back, shooting a sharp pain through me. On instinct I throw my hands up to defend myself, but I'm no match for the policeman with the white stick and rage in his eyes.

'Stop!' I yell.

The policeman grins, revealing a missing front tooth, and then hoists his right arm high above him before bringing it crashing down on my head.

The darkness feels like a relief.

'Hasan.' Hana's voice is urgent. 'Wake up.'

My head is throbbing and I clutch it between my hands.

'Hasan...'

'Hana,' I groan. 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm always with you...'

'It's not safe for you to follow me everywhere,' I grumble, noticing a shadowy figure just behind her. Who's that? Why are they blurred? Why can't I see them clearly?

'Put your head down and rest,' Hana says. 'You'll feel better soon.'

'But who...?'

Hana squeezes my hand. ‘It’s all right, she’s a friend.’

Giving up on the shadowy figure, I do as Hana says and close my eyes. The darkness helps and I feel myself drift into a space with less pain, safe in the knowledge that Hana will watch over me. The next voice that pulls me out of my slumber is not Hana’s, though.

‘Hey, are you all right?’

I rub my eyes and open them to see the girl from the crowd. She’s bending over me with a very worried expression on her face. She must have been the shadowy figure I couldn’t see clearly.

I lift my head off the ground and arrows of shooting pain collide. It’s like fireworks are going off in my head. Nonetheless, I struggle to sit up.

‘Where’s Hana?’ I ask urgently.

‘Who?’

‘My little sister,’ I say. ‘She was right here.’

‘My name is Jaya. I’ve been with you the whole time...’ She breaks off as she’s startled by a loud noise. ‘Look, we should get out of here. Can you get up?’

I nod and struggle to my feet. Hana is always here to help me, but she’s disappeared again. I need to have words with my little sister about how she is always running off. Why does she keep doing that? And how

does she even know how to find her way around? We're still strangers in Baba's land.

'Can you walk?' Jaya asks.

I nod, grimacing, and take a step forward. Tall brick walls tower above us on both sides, and I realise we're in an alleyway.

'How did I get here?' I wonder aloud.

'I dragged you,' Jaya says. 'You're heavier than I expected.'

My mouth falls open. She doesn't look very strong. How did she manage it? Hana must have helped her.

'I was afraid you were going to get trampled on,' she explains.

'How long was I out of it?'

'Less than an hour,' she says. 'Come on, up you get. I'll take you home.'

'How do you know where I live?'

'You're Mr Clifford's grandson, aren't you?' she says in a matter-of-fact voice. 'He's good friends with my thakuma. It's all he's been talking about ever since it was decided you were coming to stay.'

'What's a thakuma?' I ask.

'It means grandmother in Bengali,' she says.

'Is your thakuma a freedom fighter too?' I ask, slowly getting to my feet.

Jaya's bright eyes dim and she shakes her head, looking a little sad. 'I wish she was. My thakuma is Lady Sen, and she believes Britain should rule India forever.'



Chapter seven

Two days later, a tall stern-looking old lady appears in the doorway of Grandpa's breakfast room. She has the air of a formidable headmistress. Her back is as straight as a ruler, and she holds her chin slightly upwards, which makes her appear as if she's looking down at everyone else. She's wearing a peach silk sari with a sleeveless blouse. A big red dot, the tikka, sits in a perfect circle in the centre of her forehead, and huge, colourful jewellery adorns her neck and ears, jangling as she strides into the room on high-heeled sandals.

Grandpa gets to his feet and kisses the woman on both cheeks.

'We have missed you at our little card games,' she says in the poshest voice I've ever heard.

Grandpa gives her a smile and turns to me. 'I'd like you to meet my grandson, Hasan.'

Her eyes travel slowly over me, making me feel like I should stand to attention and salute her like a soldier does a sergeant.

'Hello, Hasan,' she says, when her gaze finally reaches my face. 'As I prefer formalities, you may call me Lady Sen.'

Lady Sen! This must be Jaya's grandmother.

'Pleased to meet you, Lady Sen,' I squeak.

Grandpa's lips twitch and he winks at me to put me at ease. I think he knows his friend has the air of a strict teacher.

'I thought you might have brought your lovely granddaughter along with you,' Grandpa says, pulling out a chair for Lady Sen.

'I have,' Lady Sen says, signalling ayah-Meena to pour tea for her. 'But I asked her to wait in your living room. I didn't think it right that both of us walk around your house looking for you.'

'We do answer doorbells, you know,' Grandpa says with a gentle smile.

Lady Sen waves a dismissive hand. 'I can never bear to wait while Meena shuffles to the front door. Honestly,

Vincent, you need more servants. I can recommend two or three. Hard workers who... Oh!

Ayah-Meena has knocked over the china teapot and the spilled black tea is dripping from the tablecloth on to Lady Sen's peach sari.

'Meena! Really!' Lady Sen's fury is apparent as she jumps to her feet.

'It was an innocent mistake,' Grandpa says hurriedly, grabbing a cloth and passing it to Lady Sen. 'I apologise, but I won't have you being rude to my household.'

Lady Sen dabs at her sari. 'You're too soft!'

Grandpa turns to me. 'If you've finished eating, you can go and meet Jaya in the living room.'

I take the opportunity to escape, and as I pass ayah-Meena, I notice the slight smirk on her face. I realise she knocked that teapot over deliberately, confident she would be shielded by Grandpa. I'm not sure how I feel about that. It wasn't a nice thing for her to do, but then Lady Sen did say ayah-Meena was too slow at answering doorbells.

When I reach the living room, I find Jaya staring up at Grandpa's bookshelf.

'Hello,' I greet her.

Jaya spins round, eyes shining, and gives me a wide smile. ‘Hi, I’ve come with my . . .’

‘I know,’ I interrupt.

‘Ah, you’ve met her, then.’

I nod.

‘You didn’t tell her we already met, did you?’ Jaya asks. ‘Remember, I told you she disapproves of the freedom fighters.’

‘Don’t worry. I didn’t say anything,’ I reassure her.

Jaya looks relieved. ‘Do you want to go for a walk? The morning sun is much more bearable than the afternoon heat.’

‘Yes, I’d like that,’ I say.

I run to tell ayah-Meena that I’m going out with Jaya, and she nods in reply. Jaya and I leave the house and walk along the road, passing several huge mansions.

‘Where do you live?’ I ask.

‘Just a few houses down,’ she says.

‘Why is your grandmother called Lady Sen?’ I suddenly ask.

‘Because my grandfather was a knight,’ she explains.

‘Like the knights of the Round Table?’ I can’t hide the surprise in my voice.

Jaya laughs. ‘Something like that. He was made a knight by King George V, and he wasn’t the only one.

There are other Indian knights too. The most famous one was called Rabindranath Tagore. He was a poet and very brave.'

'How so?' I ask, intrigued. 'Did he fight in a battle?'

She shakes her head. 'No, Tagore's bravery was in standing up for what was right. He returned his knighthood to the king to protest against a horrible event. He gave up the right to be called "Sir" so he could stand with the ordinary people of India.'

'What horrible event?'

'It happened at Jallianwala Bagh in Punjab in 1919,' Jaya says in a voice tinged with sadness. 'The head of the army troops, General Dyer, ordered his men to kill innocent Indians as they gathered in a park during the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi,' she explains. 'He sealed off all the exits and his troops fired into the crowd with their rifles.'

'How awful,' I say, shocked.

'It was,' Jaya says solemnly. 'The general was punished for his crime by the British government in London.'

'Well, that's good,' I say.

Jaya scowls. 'The massacre should never have been allowed to happen in the first place.'

She looks upset and I think it might be a good idea to change the subject. 'Have you ever visited Britain?'

‘My thakuma wanted to send me to boarding school there,’ Jaya says. ‘Thankfully, the war put a stop to those plans.’

‘But what would be wrong with that?’ I ask, puzzled.

‘My father, my thakuma and both my great-grandfathers all went to boarding school in England. It’s why they love the Raj so much. British school would have turned me into a mini version of my thakuma.’ Jaya does a pretend shiver which makes me laugh.

‘Maybe you’ll be sent there after the war,’ I suggest.

Jaya’s eyes narrow. ‘Not if I can help it.’

‘Britain’s not as bad as you think.’

‘Tell me what it’s like, then.’

‘When it snows it’s very pretty,’ I say. ‘Everything is covered in white. Spring brings beautiful flowers, and summers are warm but not too hot. In the autumn, the leaves on the trees turn orange and yellow. In London they have the Houses of Parliament and the four lions of Trafalgar Square. There are green fields and my mama’s favourite flowers are daffodils.’

Jaya is silent. ‘Do you miss Britain?’

‘I miss it the way it was before the war,’ I say. ‘Not as it is now. The war has made everything miserable.’

Jaya looks down at her hands. ‘Can I tell you something?’

‘Of course.’

‘I’m afraid to go to Britain,’ she admits in a hushed voice.

‘Why?’

‘What if I like it?’

‘What?’

‘What if I fall in love with it like my thakuma?’

‘So what if you do?’

‘I don’t want to like it,’ Jaya says fiercely.

‘The people in Britain aren’t like the colonial people here,’ I assure her. ‘But maybe you have to be mean to be able to rule over other people. Though my mama and grandpa aren’t like that, and you would call them colonial British too.’

Jaya frowns and I realise she has the type of mind that puts people into groups.

‘You know, you can visit Britain and still believe that India deserves to be free,’ I say. ‘You can do both things without letting go of the other.’

Jaya frowns. ‘I think you’re right.’

We walk in silence as Jaya mulls over my words. I think of something else to say. ‘Is there going to be a march today?’

Jaya shakes her head. ‘No, not that I’ve heard.’

‘That’s a shame,’ I say.

‘Why – why do you want to protest?’

I push my fringe out of my hair as I try to think of the reason.

‘You don’t know, do you?’ Jaya says.

‘Well, erm...’ I try to find the words, but none are forthcoming.

‘All right, let me ask you another question,’ Jaya says. ‘What do you dislike most about the Raj here in India? Whatever it is will be the reason you want to join the protest.’

I know the answer to that. ‘I don’t like the Whites Only policy and I think it should stop.’

Jaya’s gaze lingers on my face. ‘Hmm, yes, you don’t look completely white. Has someone said something to you?’

Lady Hattersley and the train inspector flash into my mind.

‘No,’ I lie. ‘I just think it’s wrong.’

‘Well, that’s a good enough reason,’ Jaya says approvingly. ‘I’ll tell you when the next protest is happening.’

‘Can I ask you something else?’

She nods.

‘Where are your mother and father?’

Jaya's eyes seem to dim, and I realise at once I shouldn't have asked that question. 'I'm sorry...'

She halts my apology by raising her hand. 'It's alright to be curious,' she says. 'My parents died in a plane crash when I was little. That's why I live with my thakuma.'

'I'm sorry,' I repeat, not sure what else to say. It must be very painful for Jaya to have lost her parents and she must miss them terribly. I wouldn't wish that type of loss on anyone.