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The Art of Eating Icecream

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts
by

Piya Chatterjee

March 2015

Thesis Committee:

Professor Mark Haskell-Smith, Co-Chairperson
Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson
Professor Tod Goldberg

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The Thesis of Piya Chatterjee is approved:

Committee Chairperson

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Art of Eating Ice-cream

by

Piya Chatterjee

Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Program in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

University of California, Riverside, March 2015

Professor Mark Haskell-Smith, Co-Chairperson

Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson

In the teeming and chaotic Calcutta, Seema, a small time crook and prostitute becomes a surrogate for a gay American couple. About to give birth to a Caucasian child, Seema realizes that the birth fathers, Bill and Dave are not going to show up. Terrified but always resourceful, Seema leaves the child at the doorstep of Sunil and Bethie, who have tragically lost their own baby to still birth, and desperately want a family. Bethie, so recently depressed and suicidal, is delighted to have finally found motherhood in India and Sunil swallows his misgivings for the sake of his adored wife. Seema, unable to let go of the baby she has abandoned, joins the family as a nanny. For a while, all is well, until Sunil discovers the baby's parentage and Bill shows up at their home to claim his biological child.

Set in the backdrop of a chaotic, confusing modern day India, the story questions the true nature of love, who we are allowed to call our own, and the price we pay when we choose to give our hearts.

Chapter 1

I had not expected it to be so dark. I had also not expected for everything to be so loud -- the slap of my rubber slippers, the creak of the elevator gate, the loud ping with which it declared that I was on the right floor, the gush of my breath -- everything seemed to give away my presence. Suddenly I had new respect for thieves. Did their hearts thud in their throat like mine did? Did they have to creep through dim corridors? And, *Ma kali's dibbi*, the hardest thing of all, how did they identify the right door in a sea of similar doors?

I had scoped out your flat from the ground level, I had counted the flights of floors, but how could I know exactly which door was yours? I was taken to hotel rooms, yes, and some of them were expensive, but who would let me enter a building like this with its real marble floor and landscaped garden?

My baby stirred in my arms. I knew I did not have much time. In a few short hours I had learned her ways. Now she rustled, and would soon cry. Even in this desperate place, I took out my breast and she rooted towards me, her mouth wide open while her eyes remained shut, the lids pale and translucent. I hugged her closer. We had so little time, this girl and I.

I took one deep breath, and looked around. The door to my right had lemon and chili strung together above the frame and a faded Om fingered in

kumkum from last Diwali. You and your wife had still been in the US, and it was on the night before Diwali that she had lost your baby.

The next one was more promising. A bright red door, glossy with new paint. Could this be yours? It looked like a fancy designer had recommended the color and the mat in front was a complicated pattern that looked expensive even in the dark. There were shoes outside – someone did not like to carry in the dust from the road – was your wife picky like that? But the sandals – they were party shoes, silver and rhinestones, the kind I would wear if I had that sort of money. Your wife was not able to party. The rumors of her behavior, her sadness, your helplessness were everywhere. Everyone talked about how good she truly was, how undeserved her tragedy, how you had loved her so much that you married a firangi, a good Brahmin boy like you, who could have had any girl in Calcutta. Any child of yours would be blessed, adored, showered with gifts. But you remained childless. Your baby was dead in America. And Bethie would not wear those party shoes. Not yet.

The next door was yours. I knew it without entirely understanding how. There was no string of limes, no celebratory Oms, no welcome mat, no mat at all. No one had cared to decorate. But the door gleamed in a way I had not seen before. Perhaps it was some sort of special wood. The knob was a brass globe, heavy and intricate under my silent fingertips. I had never seen anything like it, perhaps it was an heirloom of some sort. I would not know. But I knew that this

was where you lived. You had taken your wife to get her away from her sadness. You had not paused to beautify.

I softly inserted my little finger into the baby's sleeping mouth and withdrew my breast, tucking it back into my blouse. My hand grazed on my baby's face, and for a fraction of a heartbeat, she opened her huge, bright eyes, so like her father's, and looked at me. Had she continued to gaze, I would have lost my steel. But instead she sighed and went back to sleep.

You were on the other side of the door. One noise from the baby would give me away, but it felt like my slippers had glued themselves to the floor. The long corridor ended in a single window and a shaft of streetlight gleamed around me, and I knew I had to hurry. I was not allowed to feel bad. This was what I had to do. It was the best for everyone.

I dragged the expensive floor mat from the neighbors and lined it with my shawl. I placed my baby on it and tightened the swaddle, tucking the folds of cloth under her chin. She would be warm until your wife found her. Last, I placed my hand over her forehead and asked Kali for a good life for her. May life lead her to better, more well lit roads. May she have the luxury of doing the right thing, always.

Chapter 2

Man, it was true what they said about jet lag - that it got you in the end. Sunil Banerjee had believed he was doing okay. Helping unpack, going to work, finding his way back in Kolkata after all this time. But look, here he was, wide awake at three thirty in the morning. And, worst of all, he could fucking swear that he heard a baby. Right here somewhere, as if it were next door in the small room that Sunil had loudly labeled study and which was now stuffed with the boxes that they had not yet gotten to.

There could not be a baby between the boxes. Of course there couldn't. A baby, suddenly appearing out of the blue, after all this heartbreak? *Mad ramblings of a tired mind.* There'd never be a baby. They had established that much already. And it was his fault, even though Bethie would never directly say it. But there it was again, a high wail of a hungry newborn, so close that Sunil started in his bed. Beside him Bethie rustled and rubbed her face, but did not wake. Perhaps her dreams were always full of crying babies.

Sunil slid his feet into his slippers and padded into the living room. No baby. Of course, no baby. He was hearing things. No baby on the sofa, nothing under the coffee table or in the dining room. Gingerly Sunil opened the door to the study and switched on the light. An expanse of brown boxes. There was no baby. Who'd ever heard of an infant appearing between packing boxes? Was he becoming as mad as his wife.

And there it came again – an unmistakable wail, insistent and angry. That was no cat. He followed the sound, and opened the front door.

There it was. Laying on its back, swaddled in a cheap shawl, a tiny infant with blonde hair like Bethie's. After all these years, here she was, right at their feet, delivered to their door, a tiny creature no larger than Sunil's arm gazed up at him with furious eyes. A baby.

Sunil sank to the floor, blinking away sleep and confusion. So suddenly, in India, in the middle of the night, a perfect infant with Bethie's hair and Bethie's blue eyes, a small Caucasian child in a city full of brown skinned Indians. Sunil reached out a finger. Warm, slightly damp skin, plump, cushy flesh. This was no dream. He was not mad after all.

He nearly turned back inside. Took the newborn inside to Bethie, and woke her with her best dreams. What celebrations they would have. Sweets, a band, friends in Diwali attire, and Bethie in a party dress, transformed back to his old Bethie, the one who loved him, who would meet his eyes when they talked.

But this wasn't their child. They had no child. This kid belonged to someone else. They couldn't just take it in as if it were a stray kitten.

In his sleep addled state, Sunil walked slowly down the corridor, examining the tiled floor for clues. Who'd walked this way to their door? Sunil peered, bending over, holding the baby close to his chest. What was he looking for, exactly? Footprints? Some edge of cloth caught on a nail? A cigarette butt? It was ridiculous. He was no Sherlock fucking Holmes. He should just wake Bethie.

She'd know what to do. But even as he thought it, he recognized the flaw in this story. Bethie would see the baby, and then there'd be no more reasoning with her. If he woke her, they'd be keeping this baby. But would that be such a bad thing?

And then, right there, next to the elevator, Sunil saw it – a bright splotch of blood. So someone *had* been here with the baby. Of course. The baby could not have parachuted to his door. The mother had brought the child herself. *Go home and wake Bethie*, he told himself. But he could not. He could not do it. Still holding the child, Sunil made a pact with himself. He would go downstairs and look around a bit more. If no one waited for the baby, he would wake Bethie. If someone cared enough to wait in the streets, Sunil would return the kid.

Sunil slid back the elevator door and slowly went down to the garden entrance. The guardsman was bent over his table, lit by the bare bulb over his head, fast asleep. A few birds rustled on the *gulmohur* tree. The night was as silent as Kolkata could ever be, with the wheeze and snuff of the early buses starting to run on the distant main street. A single auto rattled by, the driver half asleep. Very soon, it would be light.

Sunil saw the shadowy frame of a person, hidden in the small clump of trees, standing perfectly still. Despite his determination, something sank in Sunil. Gently, he put down the baby. "Take your child", he called softly. "Take the baby, now. I won't tell anyone."

He touched the child softly, once, on her face. He should not have come down. He should have returned to his wife and given her the child. This chance would not come again.

Chapter 3

Mairi, everywhere I looked there was work for *Rubydi* – the baby’s diapers needed washing, her cotton *knatha* soaked in dettol, my only nightdress was still stained with blood and my blouses crusted with breast milk. I had finished everything she had cooked last week and needed food, and two bottles of milk from the grocery store. I would have done some of this myself yet I was trapped under the sleeping form of the child who woke up and wailed each time I tried to lower her onto the *razai*. I needed *Rubydi* to help me. She had looked after me from the time I had moved to the city, and knew better than anyone else how I lived. But when I heard her knock on the door, I swiftly wrapped the baby in her shawl and tucked my *anchal* over her head.

“I’m feeding the baby, di” I called out. “Could you get started with the lunch? I’m entirely out of food.” My voice quavered as I spoke but she did not notice.

“You’ve had the baby?” she said and I warmed at the delight in her voice. At least someone thought my baby was a blessing. “Durga, durga, durga, what a gift to come upon the house. A boy or a girl?”

“A baby girl,” I said, my heart filling up despite myself. “A little goddess Laxmi.”

“True words,” Ruby*di* appeared at the door, and peered in. I tucked the sari more closely across the child’s head, hiding her hair and skin. Ruby*di* took my maneuvers for modesty, though she should have known better. Perhaps she thought that motherhood had changed me.

“Oh, my girl, I’ve seen more breast than you have seen sunrises,” she chuckled from her place, “But yes, a new mother, you want to be left alone, I know.”

I lowered my face and did not speak. I trusted her with so much, but how could I explain to her the way I had given birth to a child like this?

She got to work with a brisk efficiency. She cleaned and cooked out in the kitchen, rushing in and out with hot water to mop the floor, groceries for my meals and fresh diapers for the baby. “A new mother needs lots of help,” she talked as she worked, “I never was blessed as you are, but that is a truth that everyone knows.”

I smelled the scents of her jobs – the dettol with which she wiped down the counters, the ginger with which she boiled my milk, a soft steam of freshly cooked rice, the curry simmering on the hob. Exhausted by tension and tiredness, I must

have fallen asleep, dozing off as she worked around the house, changing the sheets, cleaning the laundry, taking care of me. I napped in my chair – for just this week, I had enough money in the bank, I had *Rubydi* to look in on me ever so often, I had this baby, and perhaps I could forget her fathers. I thought of my own mother, far away in the village, and the small path that led to her house. Could I go to her, even though she had told me, many times that she wanted to have nothing to do with me? Perhaps she would change her mind and steam me soft rice with the spicy fish that I loved, the fish that she had once made for me when I was young.

When I woke, I saw *Rubydi* standing before me, her hand across her mouth, her eyes horrified. The folds of my sari had dropped in my sleep, and the shawl had loosened about the baby's face. She was awake, her eyes bright like the sky, and the pale curls of her hair light against my brown skin. Her small hands lay on my breast, pearly starfish flayed against the tea-tones of my chest, her tiny, fat fingers digging into my soft flesh.

“What have you done?” *Ruby*'s face was tense with terror, “Whose child have you stolen? What have you done with your own?” Her voice rose with each word, and her concern for me fell away, revealing terror for her own self, at being embroiled in something this dangerous. Women like us had little room to deviate from the law. Having chosen this life, we had to be eternally cautious to not draw attention to ourselves in other way. And now, I had done the unthinkable.

I started out of my chair, and stuttered through the truth. But even to my own ears the facts sounded fake and pitiful against the reality of the white baby curled on my brown skin. The truth was right there for all to see – the baby was white, and belonged to another. I was brown, I could not be its mother.

“Whose child is she?” Rubydi repeated, “What have you done? Where have you taken her from?”

I tried again. But she retreated from me at my words – Homosexuals. Surrogate. America. Money. Even the truth labeled me as a liar.

“Listen, my girl,” she said, as she walked backwards into the doorway, her eyes fearful and wide, “It’s one thing to be a whore, and another thing entirely to trade in babies. Whatever you have done, it will make you a marked woman. You can’t hide that child’s skin, no matter how much you try. Return that baby to whoever she belongs. Do it as soon as you can. The cops will turn a blind eye on trading, especially if you give them a night or two for free, but *firangi* babies are more precious than our lives. You will rot in jail. Who would care if you disappeared? Who will fight for you if the cops come? Leave the child in the railway station, float her in the river. But don’t be caught with a brat that looks like that.”

The door clicked behind her. Her final words were spoken from the hallway, whispered into the keyhole “And don’t say the baby is yours. Anyone can see it’s a better class of child than a prostitute’s brat. Even a blind pimp can see that she is a rich man’s kid.”

Chapter 4

Sunil paused next to the clump of trees. Impulsively, superstitiously, he sank to his feet near the dust where he saw, hidden among the kanchan trees, the sharp impression of a woman's feet. Had only been two nights ago? Bad decisions turned days into months, and he had made the worst call of his life. Using his index fingers, Sunil neatly transcribed a message on the ground: "Come back. We'll take the baby." It was a sorry little sentence; it said nothing of his desperation and the state of his wife, but it was something at least.

All day he obsessed, as he had done the past week. But this time, there was an added hum of anticipation. Would she see his message in the dust? Or had she already gifted away the kid? Did she haunt his garden, check on his door? Did she ask the neighbors about how his wife cried, all night, whimpering into her fingers, turning away when he tried to hold her? What did the woman know about Bethie that she had tried to gift them their impossible dream?

That night, when Sunil, sleepless, heard again the child's wail, he shook his wife awake. "Bethie", he said softly, "Bethie, I think I hear a baby."

Chapter 5

They had nearly made it. If it had happened one month later, they could perhaps have saved the baby. The incubators at UCSF were strong enough, and they had the best doctors. But when Bethie went into labor, it had been too early. For nearly two weeks, she rested at home, her water broken, with Sunil at her bedside. Each day, the swell of her stomach deflated, though the baby still stirred in her belly.

“If it comes to that, tell them to save our baby,” she had begged, “Please, Sunil, promise me.”

But how could he promise? He had held her and for the first time in their lives, she had shrugged him away.

And then there was the sepsis. She very nearly had died, and the fact that she had not was a small miracle of medical science. But the baby had not made it.

Bethie had been unconscious when they had asked if he wanted to see their still born son, and Sunil had gazed onto a tiny, flawless child, no larger than the palm of his hand, eyes shut in otherworldly contemplation, skin the cold perfection of marble.

He had thought he would never unsee that sight. But this new, fantastically alive and warm, boisterous baby had shot energy and activity into

what had so recently been a life of stupor. A giant compared to that first infant, this one functioned constantly – wetting diapers, sucking on bottles, crying and sleeping. Her animation propelled constant happy action and conversation – milk that had to be warmed, bottles that needed to be washed, swaddles that needed to be wrapped and in the middle of it all, a baby that demanded to be constantly adored. Bethie had no time for reflection. Every night she fell asleep with a new urgency. The child would wake soon, and she needed her rest. But as Sunil lay down beside her, tentatively, too full of the recent past, she turned over and wrapped her long, disheveled body around him, and rested her head on his shoulder.

When he woke, she had a shopping list for him.

“You didn’t think I was done with the honey-dos did you?” It was a joke between them. Bethie was organized, and Sunil claimed that she had made it her life’s mission to organize him as well. “I was hoping we’d left this part behind in San Francisco,” Sunil said, getting out of bed and wrapping one arm around his wife’s waist. “Is there coffee?”

“What do you think?” Bethie raised her eyebrows at him. His wife was awake. She was dressed. She had made a list. How could so little fill him with so much joy?

“I’ll make some,” Sunil ambled towards the kitchen, reading aloud from his list:

“Swing. Baby gym. Baby bathtub. Six bottles, glass. Bethie do we really need all this crap?”

“Yes,” she swung her legs onto the sofa and grinned at him. “We do.”

Sunil ground the coffee beans, the noise and the smell pausing their conversation. He was making Indian coffee, brewed to espresso strength and then diluted with steamed milk and more sugar than Bethie would have tolerated in San Francisco.

“If we are buying an entire store for the baby, I think we deserve to buy a little treat for ourselves. To make the sleepless nights worth it.” Truth was, he wanted to celebrate, throw caution to the wind, proclaim to the world that Bethie was back. Would Sunil ever tire of seeing her smiling face? Already the past, with her red-rimmed eyes, her unwashed hair, the unlaundered pajamas worn continuously, felt like a lie. Here was his wife, alert and affectionate, able to make conversation. That other Bethie was gone.

“A nice thought,” Bethie said, as he handed her the yellow mug, one of the pair that he had bought at the airport on a whim, with red hearts proclaiming that they loved San Francisco. At that time, she had not even glanced at the bag he’d handed her. “It’s still too hot for you, babe,” she said. Sunil put down his cup while Bethie took a greedy sip.

“What did you have in mind?” She asked.

“Espresso machine? A wine fridge? Tickets to Goa? A nanny?”

“How about a name for our daughter?”

Bethie was laughing, but Sunil could hear the seriousness behind the banter. He had been putting off naming the child. All he wanted was to see into the future, ensure that Bethie would be as she was now. It all rested on the presence of this child, the one who had appeared so suddenly. There was a birth mother out there in the world. He had seen her. She had suddenly gifted them a child. Might she, just as suddenly, want her child back? What would happen to Bethie then? A name would make the child theirs, a name would make her official. And, Sunil kept expecting someone to show up, and claim the child back.

But as the days passed and no one came, and the baby remained theirs, swaddled in a white *kantha*, the fear grew less sharp. Milk was delivered, milk was poured into bottles, diapers were changed and washed, the baby was bathed and dressed and rocked to sleep. In the presence of the child, Sunil felt that they had always been her parents. Even the knowledge of her appearance that first time, in the dead of night felt like a lie. That shadow woman, that splotch of blood, the meeting in the garden, all felt so unreal in the presence of a screaming child, needing to be soothed. Wasn't he the one who rocked her to sleep, who rose with her in the exhausting dawn, who wiped poop from the backside, the real parent? The one who got to keep her forever?

Chapter 6

If I had given up the baby like I was meant to, to Bill and Dave, her own fathers, to a life where I knew she was wanted and loved, I would have been able to brush aside her absence. I had imagined the scene before I had her: we would meet at the hospital bed, her fathers would bring some balloons like I had seen Americans do in movies. Perhaps someone would have knit her a blanket for the Calcutta winter. Dave would take the baby from my arms, and Bill would thank me for my work. Someone would discreetly write me a check and hand it to me, saying that mere money could not repay me for the gift I had given them. They would forever be beholden.

I would take the check as if it were not a lot of money for me, as if it was not going to change the direction of my life. I would say thank you graciously, and rise up from the bed. As the bedspread fell by, my lovely new nightie with machine-made lace would be revealed, another gift from America. I would not have to sell it for cash or wear it for work.

After this point, I had not imagined much about the baby. Instead, I had imagined myself spending the money – putting a down payment for a small sari shop near Malda, renting a room in a respectable home, buying fish every weekend, and having *Rubydi* come to live with me, as a friend and not a maid. I had imagined my son going to school, calling me Ma, living with me permanently in a room that he did not have to share with many cousins. I had imagined myself

buying him more than one shirt at a time and many toys, all without looking at the price tag. I had imagined that he would grow fond of me, like sons were of their mothers.

But now I had to make other plans. I knew that I was out of money in the bank, but I also had one silk salwar with a machine embroidered dupatta that I knew I could sell, especially to a new girl entering the dhanda who would not have the right attire for night work.

I myself could not work nights quite yet, but I could try to find work as a maid for some of the other girls, taking in their washing, helping with makeup, accompanying them to jobs when their fixer would not go with them. I knew that I would be okay, though it would be a hard life, with little money and less ease. What I did not know was where I would live after here. My mashi wanted this flat back for night work, and I had nowhere else to go.

For a moment, I felt panic rise in my throat. My body, on which I relied, was a broken thing now, leaking blood from the *susu* and milk from the *mai*. No one would pay for their use. I thought of who could help me – my father was dead and my mother was as good as dead to me, she had told me that herself. My son was still a child. Rubydi had disappeared, and Bill and Dave were untraceable.

I looked again in the cupboard. I rooted in the shelves. I looked under the bed. But there was nothing more than I had already known. Cheap gaudy outfits and no food or money. Finding nothing new, I left the house, locking it even though there was nothing to protect.

Outside, I immediately felt better. The sharp cold air whisked away my glumness. Right before my door, a beggar woman sat with her aluminum bowl with no coins and a handful of rice. She looked at me with thoughtful eyes but did not raise her palm. I smiled at her kindly. It would be a long time before I would be reduced to her stature, and that was a cheerful thought.

Across the street, an ironing guy had set up shop and ran his hot press along an expensive cotton sari, the sizzle and slither of his heated iron crushed out the creases and the folds. It was beautiful, I saw that in a glance – the white opaque with lovely threads, and the border crafted into swirls of red. It was a sari that only a decent woman would wear. I watched as he folded the fabric into long rectangles. A few bony dogs played with scraps along the gutter, nipping and yelping as they sank their teeth into each other. The ironing man shooed them away, and carefully stacked the sari. Despite myself, I caught his eye, and lowered my lashes. His gaze lingered on my face and neck, but then he turned back to what he was doing. I watched his hands, as they held the hot tool with quiet expertise. His fingers were long and his wrist thick and hairy. Under his knitted cap, I could see that his hair was gray. He would like his sex quick and want a cup of tea afterwards and a small bidi. He would pay with cash and not haggle on the price. He would want to feel like he was back home in his village, and the legs belonged to his wife. He might not care too much that I was bleeding. It would remind him of a time when his wife was young, and when they were still excited

about each other. I resolved to come back later. Who knew, perhaps he could buy me lunch.

Did I know then that I would make my way to my child? I did not intend to, I can promise that much. As I walked, it was without purpose, through city streets that honked and beeped and clattered around me. Kolkata still had the chill of mid winter, and the streets were lined with trees sagging with dust but somehow still full of flowers. The yellow petals had fallen off, and carpeted the filthy pavements in bright circles. As I walked past them I felt my heart lift. I would be fine. It would all fall in place. I just did not know the manner in which it would all correct itself. But surely I would figure that out?

Somehow, I was outside her building. There was the kanchan tree, there was the street lamp, there was the balcony where I'd seen Bethie. There was the window, behind which my baby lay. Was she sleeping? Was she safe? Had they given her milk to drink? Did they keep her close at night, or was she alone in a new space? I had missed her these last weeks, but now suddenly I could not breathe from needing to hold that child again. I was all she had known. My smell was familiar to her from my womb. My touch was comfort to her. My breasts still leaked with food for her. What other belly was swollen still from birthing her? Now she had a home with mahogany fittings and heirlooms. Now she had parents who owned a car, and, I imagined, a fridge full of food. I had nothing except a machine made dupatta. Yet, it was true, I was all she needed. I had to see my girl.

I looked more closely, considering my options. The apartment was quiet, at the time of the day when the business of the morning had stalled, allowing for a pause. The men had left for work, and the women had not yet started the cooking. I heard voices and crouched behind the familiar shrubs and peered between the leaves. The darwan was squatting in the garden balancing a *bidi* in his mouth as he watched the housemaid sweeping the front porch with a lush new broom. Their voices carried over the garden wall.

“The milk man has already left three bottles. He tried to take the lift but I soon put a stop to that. Lazy buggers, all of them.”

“Is she feeding the baby cow’s milk then?”

“I think *saab* has gone out to buy powder milk. He drove the car himself. Why not keep a driver if you can afford? Taking away work from those who need it.”

“He’s a very good husband, wouldn’t you say? Good looking, too.”

“More a woman, I’d say, than a husband. Thinks too much.”

“There’s that,” the housemaid said, pausing. “But I’d take a woman if it meant that they’d help me out, once in a while, especially once there was a baby.”

The darwan snuffed out his *bidi* and I watched, careful to not reveal myself. The housemaid was close now, and one move from me would end this game.

“I wonder if they’ll ask around for a *ayah*?”

My skin tingled. An *ayah*. Of course they'd need a maid for the child. Why had I not thought of that? People who lived in buildings this fancy hired child-care. I held my breath and listened.

"I'm sure they will." The swoosh swoosh of the broom made hearing hard and I tried to not tense. I wanted to hear everything I could.

"You never know. White women are not like our *memsahibs* - they like to do house work."

"Yes, but with a baby it's like work for one thousand houses, the minute you clean one room the other one needs sweeping. No time to put on lipstick or watch television."

Finally, the maid put down her broom and I thanked Kali. She gathered the fallen leaves into a newspaper, and sat down beside the darwan, and reached for the bidi. I could do an ayah's work. I had looked after my own son, all those years ago. I knew the basics. Every mother did. Could I do them again? Of course I could.

"It will not be easy to work for her, I don't think. She will want everything perfect for that baby. The sun will come out that *sefed* brat's ass, you wait and see. A spoiled little *firangi*, she will be, I'll tell you that right now." A small puff of smoke floated my way and I ducked deeper into the shrub. This was not the time to make mistakes.

“All this excitement, and for what? Just a puny little girl, not even their own. I understand that the wife is a memsahib and doesn’t know better. But saab was born and brought up here.”

“America has changed his ways.”

“Yes, you can say that! Sending fifteen rupee rasgullas to all the flats! That’s about five thousand rupees, right there, spent on strangers, and the kid is less than a month old.”

Five thousand rupees would have changed a lot for me, but what was the point in thinking about fairness. At least they would pay well for the job I knew I must get.

The maid was getting up. Tucking her sari about her waist, she gathered up the leaves. “And a stranger’s brat too. Appeared in the middle of the night.” She turned to the *darwan*, mockery in the way she jutted out her hip. These two had once been lovers. I had known that in the way she had reached for his *bidi* and filed away that knowledge for later use. “Heard you saw nothing? Some *darwan* you are.” She smiled unkindly. She did not like him.

“I did not say what I saw or not,” the *darwan* protested, indignant. He would screw her again, if he could.

I smiled, the leaves tickling my cheek. He’d seen nothing, I had made sure of that. A small tablet in his water glass and he had slept like the dead.

“My sister would like the job,” the housemaid was moving away, and her voice was less carrying. “I’ll have her come by tomorrow, first thing in the

morning. It would be good to live in the same house as her, after all these years apart.”

“I’m sure,” the darwan stretched as he rose, and I heard the ping of the elevator gate. “Don’t tell the saabs I let you ride the lift.”

“Yes, and I wont tell them either how you’re selling the neem tree, branch by branch for firewood.”

Chapter 7

His mother said, “Sleeping okay, *beta*?” She sat upright, her hands folded on the white tablecloth, fingers not touching the silverware. She reached for the iced water, but did not drink it.

Sunil nodded as sipped his *chaanch* – it was delicious, tiny flecks of butter in the spiced drink, with the ice clinking against his teeth. The air-conditioning, the scent of his mother’s Hermes, the sour tang of the yoghurt against his tongue, and Sunil was ten again, rushing back from school at 3 o’clock, his uniform filthy after a day of play, racing his sister to the polished mahogany dining table, where every afternoon, his mother prepared fresh idlis and chaanch to drink. Sunil closed his eyes. If he concentrated, he could insert himself into those long ago afternoons, the artificially cold rooms, the long curtains drawn against the Indian heat, his mother’s admonition to wash his hands before he touched the food. If he focused, Sunil could smell the Liril soap, his sisters hair oil, the bright gleam of

the red ribbon against her dark hair, the way her left sock invariably pooled around her ankle.

“You know how it is, Ma,” he said. “Sleep three hours, wake for two. We’re both sleeping, but it’s not all that restful.”

His mother looked at him over her spectacles. A waiter hovered discreetly in the distance. Behind glass doors, the South City mall was getting ready for the day.

“The baby seems well?” His mother lifted her coffee and took a delicate sip. She had been concerned that the newborn had been sick in some way. Why else would she have been abandoned, like a bag of trash?

“Yes, very well,” Sunil said. “No sign of AIDS, yet, mother, though it’s still early days. No leprosy that we can see either. Hepatitis, Meningitis, Pneumonia, who can tell? I’m sure she’ll develop something appropriately infectious and kill us in our beds before long.”

“Durga, durga,” His mother lifted her free hand to her forehead in an abridged namaste and then also tapped the table under the white tablecloth. “Is this a joking matter, shona?”

“I don’t think that’s wood, Ma,” Sunil kept a straight face. “And, no protection against HIV in any case. You need condoms for that,” he beckoned to the waiter to order his breakfast. A major benefit of moving back to India was that he got to tease his mother in person.

“A little child given to you in the dead of night, god knows from where... “
She grew silent as the waiter approached.

“It’s okay, Ma,” Sunil refused to whisper. “We’re not going to be secretive about this. Someone gave us a child. We are keeping her. She is ours.” As he said the words, Sunil felt a few of his misgivings fall away. Here he was, on a shopping spree with his mother, buying cribs and mattresses for a baby. His baby, at least for now, perhaps for eternity. Almost certainly for eternity. “Today, we are going to name her.”

He had expected his mother to warn him to be careful, to go to the police, to locate the foreign embassies. She had suggested all these things when he had called her, panicked and torn, the morning after they had brought in the baby. But now, it seemed that she too had made her peace.

“I had prayed to the lord Murugan that I should be blessed with a grandchild. And look, after two grand sons, here she is, the perfect little granddaughter.”

Sunil looked at her gratefully. The waiter still hovered. “A dosa, please for me,” he ordered from the menu, “And another coffee.”

“Just a coffee for me,” his mother waved away the waiter, and skimmed her hand over her water glass. No more water. She just wanted the man to go away, so she could talk.

“And, Bethie? Doing well?”

“Very.”

Sunil met her eyes briefly. Only his mother knew how desperate things had gotten between them. How once, so soon after her fortieth birthday, Sunil had found an article about the Golden Gate bridge on Bethie's iPad. "Killer Beauty", it had been called and had described at length the suicides on the bridge. Then, weeks later, Sunil had found a Google map direction to the same bridge, printed out and saved in Bethie's glove compartment. It had been his mother who had entreated that they move back to Kolkata, at least for a while. To get Bethie out of that place where she was so alone with her thoughts, from the house where she had hoped to bring home her baby.

"That's so wonderful to hear," she said, and Sunil noticed, with a sharp and sudden pang of heart how much older she looked. The last few years had taken their toll. She had been the person who had cried with him when their baby had died. It had been she who had come to spend the day with them on the anniversary of that tragic labor. More recently, she had come to see their new baby, and, sucking up her own misgivings, she had celebrated with Bethie, as if this was exactly what she had dreamed of for herself – a stranger's child, picked up by her son, and made into a grand-daughter.

"And today you'll name her?"

"That's what Bethie wants. It's been weeks now."

"That it has. I'm assuming..." The dosa appeared, a giant puff of crisped crepe. His mother paused, impatient as the waiter placed the coffee in front of her. "Thank you," she nodded.

“No one has come to claim her,” Sunil did not meet his mother’s eyes.

“And have you looked around?”

Had he? Had he made any phone calls? Had he asked the police? Had he even sent an email to the US embassy to ask if any American babies were missing? Or, the British embassy? He had been cocooned at home with Bethie and the baby, and his worries had been cerebral, internal. He had taken no action. Did he even want to know? What would he do if he found the biological mother? What would Bethie want him to do?

“Don’t worry about it, beta. I knew you’d be too busy to do any of that. So, I hope you will not mind, I did it all for you,” His mother paused and took off her spectacles, wiping them on the edge of her sari. “None of the embassies reported any pregnant citizens with missing babies. The Americans, the British, the Germans – they all said the same thing. All the mothers have their babies with them. None have been stolen. I called the hospitals. I went to the orphanages. All the same thing. No lost babies.”

“Ma,” Sunil imagined his seventy-five year old mother, crisp in her starched sari, spending these last weeks from hospital to orphanage, while he languished in his mind, worrying. “Mother, you...”

She lifted her hand, her thin gold bangles clinking along her thin wrist. “Your place was with your wife, beta. You have longed for this time for all these years. After all this time, I was grateful to finally be of use to you. To be a Nani to your child as I have been to Sunita’s.” For a moment they were both silent.

“But Ma, just because she has not been reported missing does not mean she is not lost,” Sunil leaned forward. “She appeared in the middle of the night. Twice. I saw the mother, at least I assume it was the mother. It could have been anyone.”

“But it was a woman?”

“I think so. It was so dark. I did not have my contacts on. It could have been a man in a lungi, I guess. But I thought it was the mother. That blood.”

“And she came back twice.” His mother was not asking a question, she was just restating what she knew.

“And what if she comes back again, Ma? Then what do we do? Bethie wants to name the kid. She wants a monitor, a swing, a battery operated musical mobile. She expects to keep this kid forever. If she loses this child, I know that she will actually die. Really. She will find another bridge to throw herself off, she will find an ocean to swim into. I can’t keep moving her each time something bad happens.” Sunil’s voice had risen in a panic in the quiet eatery, and he felt eyes on him and grew silent. He was happy to discuss his new daughter in public, but not the state of his wife’s mind.

But it felt good to articulate his anxiety. To discuss the restless mess that swirled inside of him.

His mother put her glasses on. She reached over the table and took Sunil’s hand in both of hers. “Listen, shona. I really don’t think anyone will come to take the child. It was a huge act of will for someone – let’s just assume it’s the mother

– for her to come and leave the baby that first time, that was an impossible thing she did. But to come back again, the second time? She must really not have had any choice. She won't come back, Sunil. Stop worrying so much. Why not enjoy this time?"

He could not let it go. With less urgency he said, "But Ma, what if she does? What do we do then?"

"You," his mother extricated a slender envelope and drew out two thin pieces of paper and handed them to him. "You say that the baby is yours."

Sunil looked at the papers. A birth certificate and an application for a passport.

"Your father had friends in high places, beta, and everyone is grateful to be able to do something for you. Let go of the past. Pick up your baby, and give her the name that Bethie undoubtedly has already chosen."

Chapter 8

That very same afternoon, I was back at your building, knocking gently on your door, smoothing down the rich red swirls in the border of my sari, and patting at my pony-tailed hair.

Your wife opened the door with my baby cradled to her chest. I had expected a servant, but there were none. Instead, the door opened into a vast,

sunlit space, and I took off my too small sandals, and immediately shivered from the sharp cold of the marble floor. I kept my eyes soft, but it was hard to not feel nervous. I was not sure that I knew how to behave in this situation, how a good nanny would behave in front of her prospective employer. Everything I had learned was to do with seduction and teasing. That would not work here. Instead, I used my voice that I had learned from my clients, and said, “Darwanji said that you were looking for a maid for the baby?”

I had promised the *behenchod* five hundred rupees if I got the job, and a packet of imported cigarettes.

Your wife looked surprised, but whether at my extra-refined voice or my words I could not exactly tell. Instead she walked to the living room and eased herself onto the sofa, beckoning me to sit. “How kind of him to pass along the word. We’ve only just started to talk about help. I think we’re hoping to advertise in the local paper.” Then she looked at me, my baby still cushioned on her chest. “Or is that not appropriate in India?”

She looked to me for an answer. I never read the papers. But she seemed to think I was the sort of woman who had the Statesman delivered daily. “Usually ayahs are hired through friends and family. Someone who has worked for someone else. Or you call a center that hires out ayahs for the day.” My auntie ran such a center. She had promised to be a reference for me for this job. In return, I had to give her my first week’s pay.

Your wife nodded absently, not really listening. She held my baby as if she were more valuable than real jewels, and as I looked she leaned down to touch her mouth to the child's warm head, and I knew I had to keep my wits about me. Everything in my body wanted to snatch back my girl.

"I'm Seema," I said, when your wife did not ask. "I have worked as a nanny for many years. I have good references."

I was jabbering out of nervousness, and I tried to breathe calmly. This was harder than I had thought. To behave like a woman a mother would trust. So much about me was wrong. My face was too young, my eyes too hard, my body still bloated. My English was too labored. I had learned it in the trade, working with foreigners who were looking for something more up market. I knew words to make conversation in bed. I had to find new words for this role.

Your wife looked at me for the first time. Her eyes were blue like the sky in my village, clear and open. She looked at me as if she knew me already, and despite myself, my heart hammered. It was easy to lie to someone who was expecting lies. It was much harder to fool someone who thought you were her friend.

"What do you like about being around babies?"

I had prepared lies for the questions I was expecting – who I had worked for, how much I wanted to earn, how I bathed a baby, how I put a child to sleep – workaday questions that Indians asked their maids. But what *did* I like about babies? Truth was, I did not like babies much. They whimpered, and cried and

created little messes wherever they went. It was just this particular baby – my baby, the one I had given birth to – that I had found that I could not be separated from. But how could I disclose that? That answer would be no help at all. But the seconds were ticking away and Bethie was looking straight into my eyes, and I could not think. I felt like a trapped winged insect, pinned down onto the table. I tried to collect my thoughts while my panic buzzed in my brain. Next to me, so close that I could finally touch her, my baby began to fuss. Her tiny mouth opened in a wail, and I knew that she would cry even harder soon.

Swiftly, I walked to the kitchen and washed my hands with soap. I saw the clean bottles, and filled them with cow's milk. I tucked the bottle into my blouse, so it smelled of my skin and was warm as the milk from my breast. I gathered the folds of my stolen cotton sari around my waist the way Rubydi did and sat cross-legged on the floor, next to your wife's feet. For a few seconds I let my girl cry, as loudly as she could, and watched your wife fuss uselessly. Then, I cupped the baby's head in my hands and lifted her onto my lap. Her head was still soft and wobbly and her face had not lost its creased, drowned look. She fit into my arm like she had never left, and her cheek rested on my neck. My entire body curled about her weight – my back hunched, my shoulder lifted, and my voice crooned a song. I was so thankful to be back to my rightful place. I to cover her with kisses, to give her my breast, to be her mother. Instead, I touched her mouth with the tip of a bottle, and she opened her lips to feed.

I lifted my face to look at your wife. My mind was clear. "I love her already," I said, stating the simplest truth. She looked stunned, as if she had just watched a circus act and I knew then that I had the job. For a brief while I relaxed, and I hugged the child to myself, and closed my eyes, lowering my face to touch the top of her head, and smelled in her scent. Unbidden, I felt tears rise to my throat. I would not have to count the grains of rice, I would not have to beg for work with the whores, I would not have to miss my child.

When I opened my eyes, your wife was looking at me. This time, her glance was sharper and there was something new in her face.

"Do you have children of your own?"

Perhaps it was all the hormones of having just given birth, but something about her question brought tears into my eyes. I blinked them away furiously, and averted my face, but she had seen me. Her hands touched my face, and just for a moment she held me close. I rested my hot face against her smooth cold one, and let myself cry, for just a minute, for all that I had lost, all my hopes and dreams, for this child who was to be my way out and my final grace, and for all my own potential, now forever lost to me. I cried for two, maybe three minutes, aware that sorrow smells stale to those who don't taste it. And then I collected myself. What was gone was gone. No flood of tears would bring back Bill and Dave, and I had to fend for myself.

"I understand," she said, "Oh, how I understand." She cradled me as if I were the baby, and rocked me in her arms.

My tears were done, but I held the last drop of water in my eyes, because I knew she needed to offer comfort, and I calculated what this would buy me. I had the job already, I knew, but this closeness would be a bond that I could use later. So I allowed myself to hold my baby, and close my eyes, and let myself be the loved one.

Chapter 9

Buzzing with things to discuss with his wife, Sunil felt ridiculously disappointed when he found her ensconced with a stranger in the living room. His mother had a birth certificate for their daughter. She had the paperwork for a passport. Today, together they would name the baby. Then they'd find a place that took baby photos and prop the kid on their laps as the cameras flashed. They'd help the assistant cut along the lines of the photo and paint glue onto the back from old-fashioned glue pots. They'd hand the filled out form to Ma, and she would work her miracles. Soon, as soon as the baby was old enough to travel, they'd return home to San Francisco, where they'd apply shockingly early to the best pre-schools. Bethie, he knew, already had a list saved on Google docs. Their heartache was over. They were a family now. All this he wanted to tell his wife,

but was stymied by the presence of the other woman. How could he not feel just a bit resentful? He had bounded up the stairs, not waiting for the elevator, hungry with things to tell Bethie. Happy, celebratory things that he would now have to set aside.

But his news would wait. It was the first time in India that she had had a visitor, and should he not be thankful?

Bethie's visitor sat cross-legged on the floor in a gleaming sari and poorly cut hair. More flashy than a domestic worker, she wore bright red lipstick, poorly applied kajal and chipped burgundy nail polish. Yet she sat close to his wife, her arm resting on Bethie's leg, dandling their baby girl. Bethie leaned forward, the swing of her blonde hair nearly touching the stranger.

As he entered, Bethie looked up at him with glowing eyes. She had the slightly swollen look of someone who had been crying, but there was nothing but happiness on her face when she looked at him. She had showered after he'd left. Her hair was clean. Her shirt was buttoned correctly. Sunil exhaled the breath he had not realized he'd been holding.

"Sunil, meet Seema. She's consented to work for us as an ayah for our baby."

Sunil nodded, wanting to be nice. He had hoped that the search for a nanny would be a joint effort for Bethie and him, the first time that they would work together as a family, asking around the neighborhood, putting up an ad, interviewing and checking references. He'd imagined sitting in a café with the

baby on his lap, discussing different candidates. But she had found someone she liked, and was that not enough? There would be a lifetime of activities they would do as a family. His mother had made convincing arguments. He had the papers they needed. He would swallow down any vestiges of doubt and follow his mother's advice.

With new determination, he smiled at the new nanny. "Seema," he said, "Nice to meet you." Out of habit, he extended his hand.

She lowered her eyes in a slightly suggestive manner and met his fingers with her own. Long nails with chipped burgundy polish, and cheap silver rings. What kind of ayah had long nails? And wouldn't those rings scratch the baby? Sunil shook her hand with misgiving. But perhaps she had not expected to shake hands? No one did that in India, did they? And even in San Francisco, would he have shaken a nanny's hand? He was too new to this and did not have the right manners. But this much was true: if he had participated in the choosing, this woman would not have been his choice. There was something not quite right about her – her expensive over formal sari, the teased hair, even the redolent way she leaned against his wife, too intimate in a domestic worker – she looked and behaved nothing like a nanny.

But still. Bethie liked her. He could tell. That was plenty. She would be the one staying home with the baby while Sunil went to work, at least in the early months. Bethie had to be the one who'd have to get along with Seema, not Sunil. So why should he fuss? New to India, this was the first independent decision she

had made without Sunil's help. And Seema would surely cut her nails and leave her jewelry at home?

But still. That sari. Appropriate for a formal lunch or a small wedding, it did not match the blouse – a cheap, shining thing that a prostitute might wear. She had worked as a nanny previously; surely she had more befitting things to wear?

“So where did you work before this, Seema?” Sunil lifted his baby gently from her hands, “Anyone we know?” He'd lived away for many years, but still he felt his roots in Kolkata ran deep.

“Maybe dada,” she said, her voice cultured and soft. Perhaps he was making too much of her attire. Poor girl. Perhaps someone had lent her that sari for this interview. Even Bethie wore too much make-up to interviews. Sunil had never thought it was his business to comment. “My mashi runs an agency. I have worked as a day ayah for her for many years now. Most recently, I worked for a little girl, they've moved abroad. But you can talk to my auntie if you wish to learn more.”

So they could not talk to the hiring family. Had Bethie asked her any of this?

“And your mashi, she hires out only ayahs?”

A shadow fell across the girl's face and she averted her eyes. What had he said that prompted her discomfort? “Yes dada,” she said, but he would swear that she was lying. What else did the mashi do? Sunil would have to find out. “No

nurses or cooks?" he persisted. Domestic worker agencies often hired out all manners of servants.

"No," she said, shortly, looking at him. What was in her glance? Some level of prevarication, but for what? Bethie had already hired her. She already had the job. Why was she looking at him with uneasy eyes?

"Do you have children of your own?" This time, he saw Bethie shake her head at him from the sofa, "Don't," she mouthed silently, looking at Seema.

The girl seemed to not have any such hesitation. In fact, for the first time she met his eyes squarely.

"I do," she said, "A little boy of four. I had to leave him with my mother. His father never married me. He left when I was four months pregnant and starting to show. I had to leave my son when he was born and come to the city to earn a living. I send almost everything I make to the village. But my mother won't let me see the boy. Ever. Not even on Diwali or Durga Puja. She says I'm a bad influence. How can a mother be a bad influence on her own child? How is that even possible? But she won't listen to me. That's why I want this job. I want to be able to save some money and bring him to the city to live with me. He's four now, and starting to understand things. Perhaps with this job I can save enough to put him in a boarding school. I'd be able to see him in the evenings, once I put the baby to sleep."

The entire story rang true, and above her head, Sunil met his wife's eyes in empathy.

“If you want to bring him now,” Bethie said softly, “we’d make space for him in our home. You could find a school close by? To not let you see your own son? That’s awful.”

Sunil could not see how exactly they’d handle a pre-schooler while just getting settled with a newborn, but even so, he nodded, moved as much by Seema’s directness as by her story. She had told her story without hesitation, without asking for pity. “I appreciate your situation,” he said formally in Bengali, and tucked his baby under his chin. Immediately, she began to fuss. “Oh baba, oh baba,” he said, rocking her, “Does *shona* not like Daddy’s beard? Does it tickle?” It was the first time he had referred to himself as Daddy and his heart filled with tenderness. But the baby remained untouched and opened her small mouth in a giant protest. Immediately, Bethie was on her feet. But Seema was swifter. She rose from the floor in one fluid motion and came to Sunil.

Some sudden alarm rang in his head. Had he met her before? But the baby was wailing her head off now, her face red and angry, little fists pummeling the air.

“Hey, hey, little buddy,” Seema stood close to him, her arms extended. Slowly he felt Seema gently lift the baby away from him.

“Shooooooooosh,” she crooned, her face transformed with a new softness. “Lokhi shona, chander kona,” She curled the child to her chest and lowered her cheek to rest on the baby’s head. Her entire body relaxed with the touch of the baby. This woman was a natural. Their child would be safe, she would be cared

for, she would be loved. Sunil's eyes met his wife. Finally he understood her choice. He should never have hesitated. As Bethie smiled at him across the room, Sunil smiled back, relieved.

Chapter 10

I had my own room in the servants' quarters.

Windowless. No fan. A small dark bathroom with no running water. But my own. So even though the first thing I did every morning was to switch on the light-bulb, my door had a lock and the bed with its smell of sour milk was mine for the entire night. I slept well and worked hard. For meals, your wife fed me things that I had never eaten – cheese and tomato sandwiches, macaroni that took me days to digest, and one day, beef. I wished everyday for something normal, just rice and some daal and maybe a plate of chicken jhol, but that never came, never, and some days my stomach would just growl from being hungry even though I had just been given thala bhora food. But I ate at the same table as your wife, on plates that were made of porcelain, and she gave me forks and

spoons even though I could not use them. She never made me feel bad. Even when I used my fingers to eat the slippery spaghetti in the spiceless sauce, she looked only at me and continued to chat. Every week, she gave me my money first thing in the morning on Sunday and the entire morning off so that I could spend some of it. I spent nothing, hoarding the money in my bank account. She gave me more than I needed – pink Lux soap, the entire bar, new in its own box, Pond’s cold cream, even though the weather was getting hotter, a comb, too fine toothed for coarse Indian hair, slippers that fit me perfectly, and talcum powder, detergent and peel-off and stick-on sanitary towels that I saved to sell later. Instead, on my mornings off, I went to the Internet café and logged on to see if Bill had written. He never did. I never had any emails at all.

The boy at the store made me pay for an entire hour, so rather than waste money I sat on the plastic garden chair and clicked slowly on the keyboard. All my old emails were from Bill. He had set up my email account, found me this Internet café and given me the simplest password, the spelling of my own name, followed by my son’s birthday. He was the only person who wrote to me, the only person who wanted to. And I read through all his last letters, trying to find a clue.

“We can’t tell you how happy we are that you are having our baby for us.

Every morning we wake up, dreaming of her, and every night we talk about her before we go to bed. Her room is done now, and I think you’d love it – pink and green and with a polka dot theme – Dave did all the interiors from a magazine! He even painted all the walls himself! We have all her clothes –

everything from Gap, Dave went shopping last week and brought back enough dresses to last the kid to tweenhood. It cost a bucket but we don't care. Poor little girl, she's going to be spoiled rotten!

Seema, we can't WAIT to meet her! Just a month more - our baby girl! We already love her so, so much, and we haven't even met her. Our tickets are bought – we'll be there in 2 weeks, so hold on okay? No premature labor or anything! Sit tight till we get there, lady ☺ Just joking! We'll see you soon.

Hope your son is well, and our baby is kicking (but not too hard) inside you! Send us pictures please of your big old belly, and here is an instagram of us in Baby Molly's room. Do you like the giraffe night light? We also have a matching sound machine, but of course we won't give it to her right away. Choking hazard!

My mom is hosting a baby shower for us this weekend, if it stops snowing. It's been awful this week. Anyway, I'll send you pictures of us opening the gifts! We so wish you could be here.”

All his letters were like the last one, sent a month before I gave birth. Just one more month, and all that wonderful, delicious money would have been mine. Instead I was left with a picture of a room, green like a guava, with pink dotted curtains and a toy giraffe that Bill was excited about. How had it have gone so wrong? Had he found out that I was a prossie? Had my auntie told him somehow? Had someone else? How did he know? But the baby was his, despite my profession. He would have come back for her, regardless of me and my ways.

He would not have cared. I could have sworn my own life, and every penny I owned on that part – he loved the baby. So why had he abandoned me?

It was too much of a mystery, and my hour was up. Bill had not written. He was gone. It had been months. The baby was Bethie's now.

At the counter, the boy stared at my breasts as he counted out the change. Instead of placing the cash on the counter, he reached out to scoop it into my palm, his fingers lingering on mine.

“Want to meet later,” he asked, simpering. He was just a kid and it would not take me long to work him up. It would be an easy job, and I would be richer at the end of it.

“In your dreams, chotte,” I said, pleasantly, regretting I had wasted my cash here.

Bill was gone, that much was clear. Perhaps he had found a better belly somewhere in America, a nice firangi woman who'd deliver his kid. He'd forgotten me, he had forgotten his baby, and it was best if I forgot him too.

On Monday morning you had gone to work and I'd just gotten Asha down for her nap.

In the kitchen, Bethie was microwaving yet another one of her tasteless meals, and I gathered up the baby's clothes to wash later.

“Seema, would you like this dress?” Bethie asked me, moving past me into the bedroom and holding up a pale blue frock with tiny black polka dots. It was a

dress that a movie star would wear on beach while singing a song about love. I tried to keep the greed away from my voice and talk like a grateful maid. “If you don’t want it any more, Bethie, I’d love it.”

“It’s a silly old thing,” she said hesitantly, putting it down on the chair, next to me, “but I thought it may be nice when the weather warms up.”

I hid my face by looking down at the laundry. Did this woman ever go out in the street? Women like me could not walk down the street in an expensive dress like that. I had to wear things that covered my legs, and keep my flesh from showing. But the dress was stunning and would be a good addition to my severely depleted wardrobe. I thanked her nicely, looking at her in the eyes.

“You’re so kind Bethie,” I said, and it was not hard to act this part. She *was* kind. Which other employer gathered toiletries for their maids, clean towels and talcum powder? If only she were not always so eager to please. If only she let me make my own meals. “Would you like me to try it on?”

She looked so grateful, as if I were doing her the favor. “I’ll take the laundry,” she said, not like a mistress at all, but like a young girl, eager and excited. I realized for the first time how lonely she was. How few friends she had. I’d worked for her for nearly a month now, yet no one had ever come to visit her. In my village, when a woman had a baby, ladies from the area would drop by, all day long, bringing gifts and food, taking away her washing, and making her lie down. Your mother and sister had visited, sure, but they had sat in the living

room, like guests, instead of making her jhol and tarkari in the kitchen. This girl, she had no one to spoil her, only you. And you were gone all day.

“You don’t have to take the laundry,” I said, gently, “Why don’t you sit down? I’ll get these into the machine, okay? And then try this on.”

She sat down like a pleased child, her hands clasped on her belly.

“Use my bathroom, Seema, there’s a lot more room.”

This was an understatement. Your bathroom was double the size of my bedroom in the servants’ quarter. It had a window and a fan so you could have your ass chilled while you shat. I guess that’s what you’d grown used to in America? Cold air on your butt, while we who lived downstairs swatted mosquitoes all night?

I washed my face in your lovely porcelain basin, splashing my eyes, and rubbing my wet hands under my arm to ease the stink of sweat. I dared not use the fluffy pale towel, but scrunched a bit of toilet paper to wipe my face. I rubbed the faintest bit of your cologne under my knees, so faint that Bethie would only know that something pleasant had wafted into the room. Then I discreetly did up my eyes and mouth with her authentic American makeup. At last I tried on the dress.

If you only saw us with clothes on, you’d say that Bethie and I were the same size – but if she had seen me in that dress, she would never have given it to me. In that dress, I could have stolen any man right from under her nose. It clung to my milk-swollen breasts, and skimmed under my chest. It fell in folds over my

still rounded stomach, hiding the bulge and making me look more feminine. It ended just above my knees, and I itched to try on Bethie's gold sandals, sitting so temptingly next to the bathtub, where she had forgotten them. Instead, I released my hair from its daily pony-tail, and let it fall in waves about my face. This dress alone could have paid my rent for months. I could have gotten work in the best hotels, and been invited to stay the night.

In this dress, I could have been Bethie, with you as my husband and a child I could keep.

When I walked into the living room, her jaw dropped. Had I expected envy? Had I thought she would be a little bit jealous? For all her money, Bethie was a pale looking thing. Pretty in the most spiceless way. No one would have paid to sleep with her. But what she lacked in sex appeal, she made up in sweetness.

When she saw me, she jumped up from the sofa, putting aside her lunch. "Oh my, Seema just look at you," she said, giving me a hug and then holding me away from her to look at my face. I thought she suspected that I was wearing her makeup, but that was not it at all. "You're such a lovely girl, Seema," she said, "Look how pretty you are." And then she hugged me again. I stood there, stunned by her gesture. When had anyone touched me, if not for sex?

"Let's take a picture, shall we? You can send it to your son?" And she picked up her fancy phone and made me stand so that the sun shone onto my face.

“Here,” she said, “I’ll print out, okay? You can post it tomorrow.”

I nodded, not quite knowing what to say. My son would have no need of color photos. He needed shoes, and clothes and food to eat, and a place with me, his mother. A photo would mean nothing to him. He did not know who I was.

Bethie had no understanding of these things. “Come here, Seema,” she said, wandering back into her bedroom and opening her wardrobe, and exposing a wide sweep of rainbow colored frocks. “Let’s see,” she said, “Take this.”

A pale yellow chiffon fell into my arms. “And this.” A red skirt. “Which will go with this.” A white lace top. A navy blue shirt. A black pair of tailored trousers.

Your wife gave me clothes that were worth more money than the salary you paid me, and for once, I felt like I was tricking her.

“Bethie,” I said, laughing, “Bethie you can’t give me all this.”

“Sure I can,” she said, turning to me in a sweep of blonde curls. “These are all mine to give.”

“Yes, and you should wear them, these are all new. You can’t just give them to me.”

“Then who can I give them to?” she looked at me with her sky-colored eyes. “Who do I have who will take gifts from me?”

Her eyes had filled up as she spoke, and she wiped them quickly.

Your wife is a strange girl, Sunil. So loving. So kind. So loved by you. Yet, there is a pit in her that can’t be filled. No one can ever love her enough. I saw that then, and felt a chill. I spent all day with her, alone with the baby. With you

gone, and no friends, would she expect me to love her, and make up for the ways that the world had done her wrong?

“Thank you, Beth, I said, “I love all of them.”

“You’re welcome,” and she smiled a wobbly smile. I tried to harden my heart. I could not become her friend.

“Now,” I said instead, guiding her to her chair. “Let me make lunch today okay? You feed me everyday, it’s my turn now.”

As she protested, I said “Please? You’ve given me so many things. Just today, let me cook you a treat?”

And even I felt bad, looking at the happy, thankful expression on her face. But this one time, we were going eat egg curry and roti, and tomorrow, I would sell that yellow chiffon evening dress and send the money to my son. Perhaps he could get new shoes for school. Perhaps my mother would let me talk to him once he had new shoes to wear.

Chapter 10

Bethie talked as she chopped apples.

“Apple,” she said enunciating clearly. “Apples are delicious, Ashawasha, apples are Mama’s favorite fruit.”

She walked over and handed Sunil a slice. “See,” she said, “Daddy loves apples too.”

“Yes,” Sunil said, flipping the pages of the newspaper. “He does. Hey Beth, you want to go over to the movies later today? It seems *Gone Girl* is playing. Rosamunde Pike, you like her, no?”

“Mama likes to go to movies,” Bethie said, “In Calcutta, there are not enough American movies for her to watch. Mama needs to learn more Bengali. And Hindi. When you are older you can go to movies too.”

“Of course you can. Now, Beth, yes? What show? There’s one at seven but it ends a bit too late for dinner. How about the one at five? We could go to Mocambo? My dad always took us there for our birthdays.”

“Where will we go for your birthday, Ashawasha? Birthdays are special days, especially first birthdays. Especially for little girls called Asha.”

She had been doing this a lot, talking incessantly to the child and using Sunil’s questions to spout inane rubbish. Would it be so hard to just directly answer him? Sunil bit back his irritation and focused on the paper. He’d get the tickets for the five o’clock show. If Bethie didn’t like it, she’d just have to deal. From the corner of the kitchen, Seema looked up, her hands still inside the sink where she was washing Asha’s bottles.

“Maybe we can have a big party, we’ll get to know more people by then, okay, you and I? Mama will make a big old cake. With chocolate frosting and rainbow sprinkles.”

He’d have to special order the sprinkles right away, and the cake mix too, unless Bethie wanted to make it from scratch. But why were they discussing

birthdays? Asha was just a couple of months old. But as she spoke, Sunil felt bad. She had so few friends here, in this new country where he'd been convinced she'd be safer. And she was. But in San Francisco, she'd have friends to meet, co-workers to get drinks with, places that were familiar. Here, she was home with Asha and Seema pretty much all day, making it really hard for her to meet anyone new. But each time Sunil tried to coax her into getting out of the house, she'd cave in, wanting to spend her every waking minute with their daughter. Sunil had tried to arrange for her to meet some of his college friends, many of who had children themselves. But each time, Bethie would make excuses and cancel.

"Let's sing a song," Bethie said, "Do you have a favorite song? Mama likes twinkle twinkle. Shall we sing that together?"

"Beth, I'm trying to read," Sunil said, as gently as he could. "Perhaps you could sit down here with me?" *And shut up for a moment*, he did not say.

"Well, I'm not stopping you." She had stopped slicing the fruit, and was now leaned up against the kitchen counter, hip jutting to one side to accommodate the weight of Asha, suspended from the baby bjorn.

"No, you're not. I'm sorry sweetie. It's just so loud in here."

"Well, I'm not the one being loud," Bethie said reasonably. She had in fact been talking in a pretty soft voice, the kind she used with the baby. "Everyone knows how really, really good it is to talk to kids. I've been reading about it, children's vocabularies are set by the time they are eighteen months old, and kids who have better comprehension at two remain more articulate up until high

school. It's pretty amazing, how early their brains start to differentiate words. And, the book says, babies can understand their mother's voices better than anyone else's. The more a mom speaks, the smarter the kid gets."

"But does the book say you have to talk to the kid every goddam moment of the day though? That can't be right. You'll be exhausted. And poor Asha, she'll be pretty exhausted too. I'm sure our moms did not talk to us incessantly. We turned out okay, right?"

"We want more for Asha than we received, don't we? We all want more for our kids? And, talking..."

"Yes, you already said. I know it's important babe, I'm just saying you can relax a little. You talk to her enough, just by being around. You read all those books, you sing songs, you say so many things – maybe if you worried a little less? It would be more fun?"

"It's already fun! I don't mind talking to our own baby."

From the sink Seema met his eyes for a second. Was there a warning in her eyes? Empathy? Judgement? A mix of all of these? It was hard to say.

"How about you give me Asha for a minute, Beth? Drink a hot cup of tea? It's nice for me to have a few moments with her on weekends."

His wife finally smiled. She sat down gingerly next to him, still trying to maneuver her body while wearing the baby. She unsnapped the button, "Here baby! Here's Daddy," gently she eased Asha's doughy weight onto Sunil's arms. And gathered her own body closer, snuggling into the baby as she boxed her little

arms into the air. Already Asha so much bigger than just last week. The small tendrils of hair, more fur than anything else, stood up in clumps all over her head, and her tiny fists curled into balls, swatting at Sunil's mouth as he leaned to kiss her head. "Mouth," Bethie whispered, touching the baby's lips, "nose", "ears."

Sunil turned to his wife, her face on his shoulders.

"Bethie," he said gently, "Shut the fuck up."

Bethie laughed softly into his tee. "In your dreams," she said, "My baby, my ways."

"What a lovely little thing she is," Sunil said. This battle would wait. Bethie had heard what he'd had to say, and she'd relax sooner or later. They were all getting used to this new life, these new, wonderful responsibilities.

Later it felt like the bloody afternoon would never pass. He'd sent Bethie off to nap, in anticipation of their date night at the movies. The baby, diligently awake, sat snugly in his arms and cried loudly each time he tried to lower her onto the baby gym that Bethie had ordered from FlipCart. So far, the kid wanted to have nothing to do with it, instead, she stared fixedly at the fan above Sunil's head, watching its whirring.

"She'll never rest on her own, if you hold her every time she protests a little,"

Sunil jumped. Seema had this odd way of coming into a room totally silently. The baby in his arms started to rustle, and root towards him, her mouth open.

“She’s hungry, I think,” Seema looked a little uncomfortable. “Should I get a bottle ready? Do you want to feed her?” The kid caught at Sunil’s t-shirt with her mouth, suddenly frantic.

“Yes, please. How weird. She was totally fine a minute ago.”

“Babies,” Seema said. “They are all like that,” she held out a bottle,

“Here,” she said.

At first a tad reluctant, Asha took to the bottle that Sunil held.

“Do you remember how much your mother spoke to you,” Sunil asked, making conversation. He had been wondering where Bethie was getting her facts. Was it true that children’s destinies depended on how much their mothers’ spoke to them? That could not possibly be correct, could it? It seemed unfair, entire human circumstances dependent on parental interaction. How much had his own mother spoken to him? Sunil could only remember snatches – long afternoons with his mother and Sunita, reading books, with the windows shuttered against the relentless heat. Was that why he had done so well in school, because his mother had read books to him?

“I was the last of my mother’s six kids. I only heard her voice if she was angry,” Seema sat across from him in an arm chair. “But I don’t think I should be

your guide for Asha. I think that Bethie would like your daughter to be a lot better than me.” She was smiling and it was a joke, but still Sunil looked up.

“We’ll see about that,” Sunil smiled back, “but I was wondering what you see in your line of work. Do all mothers try to talk as incessantly as Bethie?”

For a moment Seema looked like she did not understand the question at all.

“As a nanny,” Sunil repeated, “Do you see some children are smarter? More engaged? Just because the parents engage with them differently?”

Was he talking over her head? All this was maybe too intellectual for her, too American? Did Indian families stress so much about being perfect as Americans did?

But then she said, “Everyone struggles, these first few months. Everything is just a bit harder while you are trying to figure it out. It gets easier after the first year, the kids cry less, smile more, and you get more sleep.”

“Sleep,” Sunil laughed a little. “Yes, that would be nice, no?”

“It will happen. Already she is sleeping so much better, wouldn’t you say? Sob kichu ki ar ota taratari hoy?”

“No, you are right, of course,” Sunil nodded, picking Asha up to change position. Seema reached out and picked up the baby, expertly burping her over her shoulders. The baby was falling asleep and Sunil lowered his voice.

“Everything takes time. Especially babies. But for Bethie, it’s been such a sudden change. The baby appeared without us expecting her at all. And at some

level, both Bethie and I worry that the biological parents will show up, you know?”

Seema was stroking Asha’s head, her face tender, her mouth soft. She seemed like those Italian paintings of the Madonna, with his baby on her lap. The window cast a glow behind her, lighting her hair. Almost absently she said, in Bengali, “Well, you don’t have to worry about *that*.”

For a few seconds, Sunil did not realize what she’d said. Then, slowly, carefully, he asked, “Ki jano, tumi?” *What do you know about that?* The Bengali came awkwardly to him, like a foreign language, each word laborious, but the air had stopped in his throat, and all noises had stilled.

Seema straightened. Sunil could swear that her words had been accidental, something that had slipped off her tongue. Now however, her eyes were keen, intelligent. Sunil’s mind whirled. This woman was no maid.

Almost kindly, she said, “I know just that much. You are the real parents. Anyone who takes in a strange child, gives her shelter, looks after her, they are all that a baby knows. What do you have to worry about? You are the real parents.”

Was that all she had meant? Sunil tried to gauge from her stance. But there was nothing particularly telling. Asha lay sleeping on her lap, her baby mouth open, lips suckling the air. Seema’s hand rested protectively on the baby’s chest, dark brown against the pastel dress. Nothing about her seemed threatening or malevolent. She was just a nanny. Wasn’t she?

“If there is anything I should know...” He said, quietly.

“You should know that the child is yours,” Seema said, “Forever.”

She leaned forward a tad, and her eyes were earnest, honest.

“Forever,” she said.

Chapter 11

Once, while rifling through a magazine in a five star hotel, I had read that the Chinese symbol for misery was the picture of three women under one roof. In your home, Sunil, it was Bethie and I, and she was the best thing about my job as well as the worst.

God knew she adored the kid. She would do anything for her. But she had longed for a baby too much, and now that she had my child, she could not bear to mess up.

As I tidied the breakfast things, Bethie picked up the baby and placed her with the greatest of tenderness into her little baby carrier. Everyday I saw this and winced. Every day I held my tongue. The baby was Bethie’s now, and she decided how to raise her. But to me, it felt like she should be either held with love or let loose on the carpet to scoot and play and chase the shadows with her eyes. This American idea of strapping a child into a rucksack was not practical in India. It was too hot here, and too humid and Bethie’s chest was often a mess of sweat

and crushed fabric by the time she loosened Asha for her nap. I wanted to tell her to let the child be, but today, like every other day, I said nothing.

“I love you, my little honey pot,” Bethie cooed and reached down to kiss her fuzzy little face. The baby dangled before her, small legs bow-shaped in space, little feet suspended in the air. Bethie walked slowly to the living room, the child’s legs kicking her thighs, and switched on music. Loud classical western music. Again. Again all day I would have to shout over the music to talk, and wait for Bethie to pause her incessant nattering to Asha to pay me any heed. I had great sympathy for the Chinese now. If just one woman could drive me so crazy, I could see why another one would create the universal picture of trouble.

Still I said nothing. I was a maid. She was the mistress. Instead I collected bottles from the bedroom and nursery, and withdrew into the kitchen. I washed them out in hot soapy water, and cleaned the dishes from the night before. None of these were a part of my duties, but I knew that these were the small things that made me loved. I washed down the floor and the wiped the counters. Relax, I told myself, Asha was still such a tiny infant, and a little bit of chaos would be fine.

But in the next room, the music blared, and Bethie rocked to the rhythm, Asha attached to her middle. Bethie danced along to the music, hugging the child and swinging her body in rhythm to the music. The baby’s eyes were wide open and her tiny arms were stiff by her side. Soon, she would begin to cry.

I stepped into the room, and sat down on the sofa. No talking, I told myself. Just sit there and be quiet. Listen if she speaks.

And sure enough, in three minutes Bethie opened her mouth.

“Babies like music,” she said, “The stimulation is good for their brains.”

She had read this on the Internet, I could tell, and while her words sounded confident, her face looked unsure.

“Yes,” I said, “Music is wonderful for developing brains. Everyone knows *that.*”

Bethie’s shoulders relaxed.

“Do you think so? Have you seen that in your work? Did your mother sing to you?”

“Mothers are great at singing to babies,” I said, touching her arm, resting my palm flat on the warm, white expanse of her skin as she waltzed past. Still she danced. Still the music played. Could something so wonderful be also so annoying? Two more minutes, Asha would start to cry. And Bethie would get sad. A child had no way to make an adult more secure. A baby was just a baby, not an universal solution for sadness. Already Asha’s little face was drooping with exhaustion. My fingers itched to switch off the music, to stop Bethie from swaying her head, to stop all the action and just pick up the baby, and let her gauge the world which was already so stimulating to her. I knew how her milky little head smelled, and the way her mouth rooted when she was sleepy. She was right there in front of me, but I could not grab her away like I longed to.

“Beth,” I said, hoping she would not get angry. “Do you think that the baby is getting tired?”

She glanced down at Asha, instantly solicitous. “Tired? You think? But it’s early, isn’t it?”

“All the music,” I said, “Babies. Their ears so sensitive you know? Perhaps something quieter? Maybe you could sing to her? Very very softly?”

“I am not a good singer,” Bethie said, her voice so low that the tunes nearly drowned her out, and my brows unfurrowed.

She was worried that her voice was not pretty enough for the child. I continued to wait, and when Asha started to cry, I withdrew her from the carrier, touching Bethie’s shoulder as I eased out the child. “Diaper change,” I explained, and scooted away with her to the nursery, and soothed the child with kisses. Swiftly, I unbuttoned my blouse and let her suck at me, for just a few minutes, while her heart beat regulated and her eyes softened again with sleep, and then I drew up a plan.

Next day when the baby woke, I wrapped her in a muslin swaddle and took her to Bethie.

“I think that she would like to hear some terrible singing,” I said, smiling, “I think she told me that.” I kept my voice light and my eyes merry. I joked like I did not mean it. “I’m too good a singer for her tastes, she wants to hear some truly terrible American songs.”

Bethie looked me with her clear eyes, considering. For a moment I felt that she would dismiss me to my work, take the child and squish her back into that dreadful bjorn. I knew that she saw through my jokes, and heard everything that I had resolved to not say. I was sure she would ignore me. But no, she asked, “What shall I sing?”

Was there ever another adult woman quite this helpless? Sing what you want, you fool, I wanted to say, any song. The baby does not care. She only knows that her mother, who she loves, loves her too. But, Bethie was looking at me, part humorously, as if she saw through my machinations. But the other part was nervous, shy, wanting to be led, and I responded to that. Cross legged, I scooted near her and touched her hand.

“What was the song you first heard with Sunil?”

As soon as I said your name Sunil, her face eased, as I knew it would. Her mouth lifted and her shoulders relaxed. “Oh,” she said, “Sunil. With him there was no first song. He used to always hum, that man, every day something new, something funny, something to make me laugh.” I smiled along with her memory, seeing you the way she saw her past – a young handsome man, in love with her, wanting to please her, to turn her towards him. One day, I hoped, someone would want to do the same for me.

“Well, then. How about you sing something he sang for you? Her Daddy’s song, for little baby.”

It was true, what Bethie said. She was a terrible singer. But she was happy thinking of those days with you, and her voice lilted with the words.

Day, is a day-o

(Daylight come and we want go home)

Day, is a day, is a day, is a day, is a day, is a day-o

(Daylight come and we want go home)

Whatever it may be said about your wife, Sunil, I see why you love her. In these short months, I was growing to love her too. Even I felt like I had to protect her. Which was laughable because just look at us – she, the rich lady of the house with her husband and her imported car, and me, a small town prostitute giving away the baby she had birthed. But I felt no envy. I wanted to help her, wanted her to be happy. It was not because she had been exceptional in any way, or that she had said she loved me. Yet, in a thousand thoughtful ways, she had always chosen to be kind, chosen to be gracious, even when she did not have to be. That, in brief, was the difference between in – she was lovable, she would always be. I was not.

She sang softly, and I saw the baby grow interested, and turn to the sound of her mother's voice, warmed by the warmth of her skin. Bethie relaxed with the tunes, thinking of you, Sunil, and the times that you had been happy and had sang songs about wanting to go home. Bethie picked up her own child and I felt myself slowly becoming the outsider. She dipped her head until her hair mixed with the baby's, yellow on yellow, like a blanket of sunshine, and she crooned

softly. I slowly drew away the baby carrier and folded it up. In front of Bethie's eyes, I tucked it into the drawers that held tablecloths and fancy linen. "We don't need this any more," I said, "Let's put this away for now."

She did not disagree but continued to sing, thinking of you, her youth, and the city you'd left behind. After a while I got up and went about my own day. There would be no more loud music, or tight little carriers. Bethie would be fine. The baby would be okay.

It was only later that I wondered. If you had been so happy and so in love when you sang this song, then why was it that I'd never heard you sing it in the months I worked for you? Who took your tunes, Sunil? Where was your song of going home, now that you had everything you had ever wanted?

Chapter 12

When he got home from work, Sunil took the baby so that Bethie and Seema could get a break. After a long day of legalese and negotiation, it was such a relief to tuck the small face next to his chin and kiss the warm, doughy face. The baby was much more mobile now, and more responsive. Each time Sunil brought his nose down to touch her own, she'd burst out in toothless giggles. It never got old, for either of them, and Sunil could lay on the sofa for hours, holding his child, making her laugh.

His presence also allowed the women to relax - Seema went down to the servants' quarters to have her shower and get rest, and Bethie washed her face, put on makeup and often changed into a dress before dinner. She still rarely left the house, though last week she had met his mother for lunch.

Today, Sunil poured them a glass of red from one of the bottles in the new wine fridge. On a square white plate, intended for company, he sliced thin layers of brie and goat's cheese that he'd picked up from the new Spencers. He had stopped there from his way back from work, gazing at the various snacks, a far cry from what was available in San Francisco, but weird and out of place in Calcutta. Cheddar cheese next to diced pancetta, intended for cooking, salami wrapped in layers of plastic packaging, marmite next to Nutella. The products were arranged on a silk covered central dias, demanding attention. Yet, anyone who had used these goods would never have put them together in quite that way, a profuse and confusing mess of foreign goods, arranged by someone unfamiliar with their use.

Sunil had picked out his choices – trying to discern what had spent the most time in customs or in imports. Last time he had bought goat's cheese it had been covered in mould. No plastic covering could quite battle Kolkata's humidity. But at least, with the wine, that was not a concern.

Tonight, they had poured the best part of a Californian Pinot into giant goblets, and Bethie was curled up against Sunil's body and the baby was cradled in his arms, gazing up the revolving fan overhead.

“Once she starts sleeping through the night, let’s have a small dinner party,” Bethie said, “We can invite your sister maybe, the boys, and the neighbors down the street? I’ll make paella, you can maybe make a cheese cake?”

There was no cream cheese in India, Sunil knew, even in the highest end grocery store, and it would be pretty tough finding a substitute for graham crackers. Perhaps one of the Indian cookies could be persuaded to crumble into a convincing crust. But these were details. Bethie wanted to have a party. When had she last requested such a thing? Sunil could not remember. He nodded against his wife’s face, resting his cheek against her bright hair. “That sounds like a plan. Sunita would love your paella and the boys would love to see more of their little cousin.”

Bethie reached out and touched Asha’s face. The baby then instantly opened her mouth and moved her head in the direction of the hand, rooting for food. “We can make it a rice eating party, don’t you think?”

Sunil had seen Bethie read about Indian ceremonies for babies, and it was sweet that his American wife wanted similar celebrations for Asha. But Asha was four month olds, and the rice ceremony happened at six months. Was his wife planning ahead?

“You don’t think it’s a bit too early? For little girls, the annaprashon is at six months. Asha is too little to eat solids, no?” Sunil bent to kiss the baby, who lifted her arms and tried to grab at his face. “Look, she seems to know her own name.”

Bethie settled back on his shoulder, “Hi Asha-baby! Do you really know your name?” Then she turned to Sunil, “The rice ceremony sounds lovely, Sunil. Let’s figure out how to go about it. Figure out a printer for the invitations? And maybe a caterer? Though I’d much prefer to make everything myself, that’s what we’d do at home, no? And yes, let’s plan it for her six month birthday, get an astrologer to pick out an auspicious date.”

“You are becoming quite the Indian, Beth. Auspicious date, huh?”

“Well, we ran into enough of it for our wedding,” Beth teased back. This was true. Bethie had wanted a Christmas wedding, but had been asked to postpone it by the astrologer.

“Will Asha eat rice pudding for her annoprashon? Will she have big fat teeth by then? Will she? Big teeth and a red dress for her big day?”

As if in response the baby babbled happily and thrust her hands into space. A line of drool dripped down the side of her face. “ I think that’s an yes,” Sunil wiped her chin. “Drools are baby language for high-fives, I’m pretty certain.”

“You are getting masterful in understanding ‘baby’,” Bethie said kissing his neck, “A very valuable skill. I bet it’s much in demand among nannies.”

“Our nanny seems fluent,” Sunil looked at his wife, feeling her face stretch into a smile against his arm. He shifted slightly so that she rested against his chest, her hair touching the baby. He lowered his face so that his cheek rested against the both of them.

“Stubble. Sunil.”

Sunil raised his head, grinning. “The thanks I get for a hard day’s work. I bet you’re much nicer to Seema.”

“Well, she does speak better baby than you, like you pointed out, and,” Bethie raised her face, “She never scratches me with an unshaven chin. Plus, she lets me sleep.”

“True. Sleep is worth more than husbandly love.”

“You think you are joking,” Bethie was smiling. “But in fact you are exactly right.”

Easy going as she was, Asha was still a terror at night, still waking multiple times to feed, to cuddle and to be changed. She was much better with Seema, rarely waking when with her.

“Perhaps Seema has access to opium, eh?”

Bethie whacked his arm. “Don’t even joke about it,” she took a big slug of her wine and yawned widely.

“Well, it looks like she’s lacing your wine bottle too, eh,” Sunil nudged his wife, “As well as the baby’s milk?”

It was a common fear in Kolkata – a number of Nepali nannies had seemingly been working miracles in childcare, and then it was discovered that the entire troop had slowly been drugging the infants in their care with opium in their milk bottles.

“Well, she’s welcome to drug me anytime she wants, if it means that I’ll get more than two hours at a stretch,” Bethie swirled her wine glass and savored the last dregs of the pinot. “And I’m off to bed. Shattered.”

“What, no dinner?” Sunil was genuinely shocked. They always ate together.

“Sorry sweets,” she said, kissing first him and then the baby. “I don’t think I can stay awake tonight. It’s Seema’s night tonight, and we can both get some rest. If I go to bed now, I’ll get eight hours straight.”

And with that, Bethie was gone, leaving Sunil holding a half empty wine glass, and a wide-awake baby.

Four hours later, Sunil was the only one awake in a silent house. He’d eaten a hurried dinner, and polished off the rest of the wine. Now he sat alone in the same sofa, with a book open in his lap, and a peg of whisky in a heavy shot glass. How rare it was these days to find time alone with a book. His time had become more and more in demand, even before they left San Francisco, and visits to fertility specialists had eaten up whatever precious leisure he would otherwise have had. And now, here in Calcutta, it was true that they had more help. The driver, the darwan, the part-time cook, Seema to help with the baby, but still, whatever time he had, he tried to spend with the baby. The other day, at a business meeting, the client had brought up the latest work on the Iran conflict, and Sunil had been ashamed to admit that he had not even heard of it. Such is the

life of parents, he had told himself, but his shame had propelled him to at least buy the book.

The baby was rustling in the next room. Somehow, in the short months that they had been parents, Sunil felt that he had developed a peculiar sixth sense about his child. His sense of hearing was now especially acute, he'd swear that he could hear the baby breathe in her nursery even when he was in the deepest sleep. Bethie too, would wake at night, suddenly alert, and sure enough, the baby would start crying a second or two after. How did she know? How had this connection developed, in both of them? How had a child transformed them into parents, when previously they had merely been adults?

Sunil felt his muscles stiffen as Asha shuffled in her sleep-sack. Was Seema awake? He waited for what felt like several minutes, before he heard the nanny murmur softly in Bengali. All was well. The baby stopped fidgeting, and Sunil went back to his book.

The hours passed. The ticking clock, the rustle of the pages of his new book, the pop of the bottle, the glug of the bourbon as Sunil refilled his glass. Such peace in this house. The book was excellent. If he finished it tonight, he could lend it to Bethie. Perhaps she could go to a café and read. Perhaps she'd meet a few other mothers there, similarly educated and housebound. It would be nice if she met a few people, started a couple of friendships.

The baby. She was rustling again in the nursery. Surely, Seema was awake? Sunil strained to hear a sound from her, but the room was silent again. Was the

baby hungry? Wet? Did she have a stomachache? She was so restless tonight. So far, Sunil and Bethie had never disturbed Seema on the nights she was with the baby – “A girl needs her privacy,” Bethie had said, but this was different. If Seema was asleep, perhaps Sunil could give the child her night feed, and burp her before going to bed himself. It was late. Nearly two. He would check on the child quickly, and if Seema was awake, Sunil would retreat as silently as he had come.

Sunil carefully opened the door to the nursery. He had oiled the hinges just last week, and for a brief moment, he felt proud of how silently the door moved, how quietly he stepped into the darkened room. The curtains were drawn, the overhead lights were off, only a small night-light burned dimly in the corner. But even so Sunil could tell that something was off. The room smelled of the baby – the potent mix of lotion and shampoo, and the barnyard smell of diapers in the trash. But Asha was not in her bassinet, and for a second his head lurched. Had someone stolen his child? Even while he was in the next room? Come in through the tightly shut window? But he could hear her, still scuffling. His eyes, adjusted to the dark and he followed the sound. His tiny blonde child lay asleep on the floor-mat, cradled in Seema’s arms. The woman’s blouse was open to her waist, her eyes closed, and arms curled to hold the baby to her side. Instinctively, Sunil turned away from something so private, ashamed that he had stumbled upon a half naked woman while she was exposed in her sleep. But something made him turn back, half ashamed of himself, and half horrified at what he was about to see. Seema’s breasts were bare, and the baby’s lips were

fastened around a nipple, suckling energetically. Sunil felt his head spin, had he drunk too much? How was this possible? He peered closer, swallowing back his sense of shame at gazing upon such an intimate scene. Seema was asleep. Her single exposed breast with its dark brown nipple was stark against the baby's blonde hair. The baby's rosy mouth clasped the other breast, the cheeks actively working as she found her food. Seema's hand was loosely curled about Asha's head, tender even in sleep. There was no mistake. Sunil had seen all there was to see – somehow, this Indian woman was breastfeeding their blonde Caucasian daughter. Somehow, against the odds of all biology, this Indian nanny was their blue-eyed girl's biological mother.

Chapter 13

The next night Sunil made Bethie go to bed before him, and waited up. Instead of whiskey, today Sunil drank just water, to keep his head clear and his vision reliable. He waited until the clock struck two, and felt the baby stir. He crept on his toes to the door, and put his ears to the keyhole. There was no sound from Seema, just the sounds of the baby fidgeting. Slowly, hardly daring to breathe, he opened the door to the nursery. And there they were again, the baby resting against the woman's bare breast, its mouth active in the light of the night lamp, sucking on her mother's breast. Sunil had not been mistaken. As he turned to go, out of the corner of his eye, Sunil saw Seema sit up. She adjusted her sari so

that it covered her front, while cradling the baby to her chest. Her eyes gleamed whitely in the dark room.

“I think we have to talk,” she said, looking up at Sunil from the floor.

Sunil nodded his head in affirmation. In the other room his wife slept the sleep of all new mothers, exhausted and blissful, hearts full of love and anxiety, knowing that all tomorrows would bring the joyful face of their growing child. In this dark room, with his sleeping child and the woman who was her birth mother, Sunil knew that he had been waiting for this reckoning.

Chapter 14

I had gotten too comfortable. Far, far, far too comfortable. Just because Bethie treated me like a sister, did not mean that I was really her sister. Just because I felt like family, did not mean that I was family in anyway. How could I have left that door open? How could I have gone to sleep? We shared meals, Bethie and I, we shared clothes. Sometimes we shared the bathroom, even. But we did not share this child. I was not her mother, regardless of the birth. That was a small detail in the life of any child. It was Bethie to whom she belonged. I was her ayah. Why then had I continued to breast-feed? What idiot would do that? Those meals, those invitations to sit at the table, to leave the dishes, to get some rest – that was for the ayah of a beloved child, not for me. I should have been more discreet. I should have locked the door at night, saying I needed

privacy. I should have been more cautious about never sleeping when my body was open to the child. And now, I had given myself away.

My servant's room was too small for pacing, but still I walked the length of the room. Two steps forward, turn, two steps back, thinking through my options. My head was muddled with fear and I had to take a deep breath and one more. I had to calm my mind and look at the facts before I spoke with you, Sunil. What did I have to lose? And what did I stand to gain?

In the scheme of things, losing this job was not such a hard loss. Now, I had the knowledge of a nanny, and Bethie would have been a good reference, before you found out. But perhaps you'd be so ready to get rid of me that you'd give me the best reference of all, Sunil. I could get another job as an ayah, perhaps not as highly paid, to tide me over. And, I consoled myself. This was not such a great job. I worked from morning to night, diapering, bathing, feeding and burping. Rocking to sleep, laundering clothes, folding garments, washing bottles. I tended all day to Bethie's demands for friendship. As soon as I had gotten the baby to sleep, I had to reassure Bethie, which was a lot more exhausting. She was a great mother, yes, she was. No the baby had no idea that she was not truly her mother. Yes, of course the baby loved her, look at how she looked at her. There was no rest here.

For all the trouble, I was reluctant to lose this job. I was reluctant to lose the closeness of the baby. I was fearful of being far away from Bethie. I was afraid of roaming too far from you, Sunil. Somehow, in these short months, I had been

loved more than I had ever been, from the nestled head of the baby in my arms, to Bethie's smile when she saw me everyday, to the questions you asked me, everyday about how Asha had slept and whether she had been good. For the first time, I had grown into the fabric of the day, as essential as sunshine to a garden. For someone who had always bartered in love, this was the first time I had felt needed. It had been this love that had taken me by surprise, that had made me so soft, so unwary. I had always been so careful. For a moment, it had felt that I could relax. But now see what I had done. What a fool I was.

I knew you would want to fire me, Sunil, for you now knew one of my secrets. But you would not hand me over to the police. You would not file a report. You would not look for the father of the child.

So you see, I knew your secrets too. I knew how much you loved Bethie. I knew how you feared for her. You knew that she loved me. And I knew, that if I played my cards right, I could be safe.

I went to bed that night trying to work out how I could use your love against you.

The next morning, I went up to work in the usual manner. Bethie was awake, snuggling with the baby, singing softly in her tuneless way.

"Bethie," I said straight away getting to the point. "Do you think I could have a couple of hours off today? I need to meet someone from the village who has news of my son." I had to settle all of this before you came into the room, and I spoke fast.

“Sure!” Bethie looked eager, delighted that she had a way to please me in some way. “I hope your friend has good news for you. Would you like to buy a gift to send your son? And maybe something for your mother? Perhaps a flashlight?”

I paused. This was the thing about Bethie. You dismissed her as clueless and then she suddenly surprised you by being astute. A torch was a gift that my mother would have liked, had I ever sent her anything. The village had Internet connections, and all the homes had cell phones, but the streets were lampless and unpaved, and made slick by the monsoon. I resolved to buy my mother a torch the next time I truly did meet someone from the village. It would help her navigate the muddy tracks of my hometown. And perhaps she would return my calls.

“That would be great Bethie,” I said, as she reached for her purse.

As you came into the room, I met your eyes instinctively, my breath coming fast, the secrets churning low in my belly. Will you tell your wife? I asked without opening my mouth, looking at your drawn face. You had not told her yet, I knew, but would you want to tell her soon? You looked away, looking more tired than I had ever seen you, and for once I wondered what impact this knowledge had on you. You had not wanted me here. You had known somehow that something was wrong. I did not look the part. I did not act the part. But you could tell I loved your daughter and that I loved your wife. And now, suddenly you had to contend with the knowledge that I had birthed your kid. *Would you tell your wife?* I met your eyes again.

You looked away, looked ashamed. You would not, I knew then. You needed to protect Bethie from this knowledge. She was a lovely girl; wealthy, married, pretty in her own way. What need she had of protection? She already had everything. Yet, it felt like the entire world conspired to keep her happy. Would anyone ever do that for me?

Such thoughts were useless. I washed the dishes from the night before and retreated downstairs to my room.

My cell pinged with a text.

We need to talk, you said.

Yes, I typed, I have the afternoon off.

Another ping. Meet me in half an hour. Flury's in Park street.

It was the poshest café in town and half way across the city. I swore under my breath. I would have to rush. Swiftly I wore my stolen sari, carefully pleating it around my still over-large midriff. I had bought nothing for myself in the time I worked here, and I did not want to meet you in your wife's cast off clothes. The sari – over formal as it was, was my only real option for an outfit.

I was so full of confused apprehensions – what would you ask, what would I say, how late would I be as I half ran, half walked towards the metro station. I was nearly at the station gate when a strong hand clasped around my arm. Instinctively, I wriggled my hand out of the grasp and made a dash for it. No one who intends well catches hold of you as you are walking, and it's always a good

idea to get away. Yet, he was a match for me, and even as I ran, I felt his footsteps mirroring mine, and at the edge of the Metro station I gave up.

“What is it?” I said, too undone with the events of my day to truly fight back.

“Why did you steal the sari?” His face had looked familiar and now it fell into place. The ironing man. My exhaustion took him by surprise, and he looked at me with a mix of irritation and curiosity. I don’t think he had expected to catch me, and now he was unsure of how to proceed. I looked down at myself, the smooth white fabric against the whorls of red. I had stood out against the dust and concrete of the city, and he had followed.

“I had nothing to wear, and I needed the job.” Sometimes truth was your best friend. I was going to gamble on it with you anyway, Sunil, so why not get a bit of practice?

He did not have an immediate rejoinder to my plain speaking, and while we waited I looked at the sun. It was nearly noon. “Could we hurry? I have to meet my employer and I’m already late. I have money now. Do you want me to pay you?”

“I got into a lot of trouble over losing that sari,” the man looked at me, still not angry, but with a forcefulness that made me want to linger. His was a handsome face. Rugged and strong-jawed, with a beard that was common in the northern states. Despite myself, I found myself dallying, even though I knew you waited across the town for me.

“I am sorry,” I said, playacting at humbleness and regret. “I really had no other clothes to wear. I can pay you. I did get the job.”

“And I lost mine.”

I looked up, startled and now truly sorry. His hand was still clasped around my wrist, and as we waited, he slowly let go. We did not say anything, just stood there on the pavement while traffic rushed by us, everyone going somewhere, everyone in a hurry to get some place.

Very tentatively, I touched his wrist, filled with real regret.

“My boss is always sending his shirts out to the dry cleaner. Perhaps I can put in a good word for you?” I was not even sure that I had a job anymore, but I had to do something.

“Let it go,” he said, sighing with resignation. “I had been angry when I first lost it. I can always set up store somewhere else. Keep the sari. It looks better on you than that *moti harami*. I’m glad you got the job.”

I knew that any minute now he would walk away. “Let me at least buy you a dinner for your troubles?” I had seen him looking at me that first time, and his clasp had been careful to not hurt me.

A large bus rumbled by us, puffing smoke that got into my nose and hair, I waved it away ineffectually. He leaned into the fumes and blew into the wind, clearing the air around my face, and I breathed into it, greedily.

Chapter 15

Sunil had arrived early – a few minutes to catch his breath. After all the drama, it was nice to sit down for a while, away from Bethie and all the things he had not told her yet, and away from Seema and everything she knew, and had not shared. But they had the birth certificate, at least there was that. Proof that they had given birth to the baby, in Mumbai, only four months ago. No one would be able to take the baby away from them. Even if Seema was indeed the mother, she would never be able to prove it. Even if she were still nursing Asha, her body still leaking milk, Bethie was the one who had the official piece of paper saying that she had birthed Asha. And Bethie had the passport. If things got messy, she would just leave with the baby for San Francisco.

But it would never come to that. Regardless of official proof, if there was ever a debate, who would believe Seema? She was young, uneducated, poor. On the other hand, Bethie was white, educated and rich. But still, it would be best to keep Seema on their side. If she were the birth mother, she could create trouble, and why would Sunil want that? It would be best if she just disappeared quietly, willingly, without disturbing Bethie's newfound happiness.

He ordered a chai latte and a masala chicken roll for himself, and after a bit of contemplation ordered a Frappuccino for Seema.

She arrived as he waited for the drinks. Her hair neatly tucked into a ponytail, she looked like an anxious school girl, arriving for an especially hard exam.

Away from his flat, Sunil felt that he saw Seema properly for the first time. Her belly was still slack from childbirth and her breasts strained against the fabric of her blouse. Now that Sunil knew the facts, the truth felt obvious – hers was the body of a woman who had recently given birth, the loose mass around her waist, the carefulness with which she carried herself, as if transporting precious cargo. The way Bethie would have looked had things turned out differently. But what was the point of revisiting those old tales? They had a baby now that belonged to them. Seema had abandoned her infant at their doorstep, not once but twice. How could she fault them for prizing what she had discarded?

“Seema,” he called across the café as she stood at the open doorway, letting the heat in. She shivered for a moment, whether from nervousness or the air-conditioned air, Sunil could not tell. He rose and pulled out a chair for her.

“Thank you,” she said, not smiling, glancing for a moment into his eyes. What passed in that glance? As she sat poised on the poorly made table, her hair neatly combed, the cotton of her blouse damp from her journey, Sunil wished that he had offered her a lift. They had made the same journey from the apartment to the café, but his hair had not curled from the humidity, nor was he discreetly wiping away sweat from his forehead.

“Thank you for the drink,” she said, as the frosted glass sat before her, beaded with moisture, “I’ve never had a frappuccino.”

Of course she never had. The drink was two hundred and twenty rupees. Sunil sipped his tea, inhaling the scent of the spices. “I love this tea,” he said, smiling. “I missed it in the States.”

Seema looked up. “I can make that at home,” she said, “Why would you pay money for a masala chai? Just add some ginger to your ordinary tea, *na*, and heat the milk. What’s there to pay so much money?”

“Well, I can make *your* drink,” Sunil said, because it was best to have this sort of chit chat, “Just add ice to your coffee and some extra sugar. Blend it in a mixie. Why pay so much money?”

Seema laughed, and for a moment Sunil saw how young she was. At her age, he had just finished college. “Is that all it is? You would not know to see it, looks so fancy.”

“Yes, but looks are deceiving sometimes,” Sunil teased, getting closer to the business.

“Yes,” she said, meeting his eyes. “That is true.” This girl was no idiot. He’d have to tread carefully.

“What else can you cook?” Sunil asked, picking up his chai and taking a long, luxurious sip.

“I’m no cook,” Seema said, “I’ve always worked as a nanny.”

“But your English?” Seema’s English was a lot better than she let on at home. Sunil was genuinely curious.

“My father was a teacher,” Seema’s face softened, and all the fight went out of her eyes. Always start with the family, Sunil thought to himself, it worked every time. He should do more of that in his line of work.

“He sent me to the village school, made me practice my English, just a few words here and there. My mother used to get upset. Why educate the youngest daughter, she would say, if you give her ideas, she’ll never get married. She was right. After my father died, I dropped out of school, met a lorry driver whom I thought I loved. If my father had been alive, he would have made the guy marry me. But who wanted to marry a pregnant girl without a dowry or a father to crack the whip? My boyfriend it turned out, was already married and had no intention of staying around for me. I was too scared to get an abortion. I could have stayed home, but my mother would not let me. I had shamed her, shamed my family, she said and had no business ruining the child. I left my baby with her and came to the city to try my luck. My father had spoiled me for a respectable life in our small community. He had given me dreams of a better life. I thought I could find it in the city.”

“And then?” Sunil was genuinely mesmerized by her tale. They’d get to the baby soon enough.

Seema looked into his eyes for a moment. She knew what he was doing, Sunil realized and was playing along. There was no point in this game. She held too many cards. Best just get down to it.

“But we know what happened then, yes?” He asked gently.

“Yes, I had a baby.”

So it *was* true. Even though he had expected this outcome, Sunil still felt an emptiness in his belly. So she’d had another affair. What had prompted this self-possessed, smart young woman to dispose of the baby in such a random fashion, at their doorstep? And then muscle her way into their lives, pretending to be a nanny? What had she been thinking?

“And it did not occur to you to take the baby to an adoption center?” Sunil felt he was back at court, questioning the witness.

“It’s not how you think, Sunil.” Seema said. He did not have the energy to correct the use of his first name. They were beyond that now, and no one calling anyone “sir” would change the conversation he was having with the mother of his child, nothing would excuse the secrets he was keeping from his wife.

“The baby,” she said. Sunil could see her gather herself, square her thin shoulders and lift her chin. There was a gallantness about her that caught at him. “The baby,” she started again. “It was not meant to be this way.”

“You thought that the man would marry you? That you’d have a baby together?” He’d have to watch his temper. This was going well, he was not going to ruin it by losing control. He took a deep breath.

“There was no man. It was not like that.”

So now she would claim to be the Virgin Mary. Seriously, this country. Would he really have to sit through a discussion on immaculate conception?

“There was to be two fathers,” Seema rushed on. Sunil’s thoughts must have been plain on his face for Seema’s face reddened.

“Let me talk, Sunil, please, before you judge me.”

“Well, look Seema, here you are, sitting here telling me that there was no man, and then in the next breath, I am told that there were two fathers. Help me understand.”

Seema looked at him, her eyes clear and unconfused. “I was an illegal surrogate. The couple who hired me were homosexuals. No regular agency in the country would have them, so they came to my auntie, who approached me. I was not qualified by the normal channels, but they were willing to take a chance, and so was I. I was tired of the life I was living. My aunt would hire me out as ayah, or a nurse for old people, but there was no future in that. I wanted the money. I wanted comfort. I felt I could change my life around. And they wanted a baby. So I became their surrogate, the carrier of their child.”

Sunil could feel himself staring at Seema.

“For a while, things worked,” Seema said. “I got over my distrust of gay men, we wrote out a contract and more easily than I had expected, I was pregnant. It all happened very fast. One of the dads, Bill, flew all the way down from America to see me, to take me to the doctors, to the first sonogram. They were delighted that the baby was a girl. They had a name picked out for her: Molly. They showed me pictures of the nursery they were decorating for her – it was going to be pink and green. The money was good, and I was richer than I had

ever expected. I was paid every other month, but the real money, the big check would come after I gave birth, when Bill would take the baby. But even the installments were a lot to me – I saved everything I could – and pooled it all to put down a deposit for a small flat near Malda. After my father died, things had been hard at home. I thought that after I was richer, I could convince my mother to come stay with me. We could all get along, her, my son and I. We could have a comfortable life. My son could go to school and I could maybe start a sari shop. I had such dreams. I went to an Internet café every Sunday to Skype with Bill. He loved my growing belly. We became very close I don't think that after my father died, anyone else had been so nice to me.”

Seema paused. “And then?” Sunil asked.

“And then suddenly there was nothing. No more Skypes. No more money. No contact at all. I entered my final month, and began to panic. My auntie tried to contact Bill but the phone number she had was never answered. She sent a letter and then another, we both sent many emails, I even called Bill's work number. But no one answered. It was as if he had never existed. But the baby existed just fine. And two days after you and Bethie moved into your flat, I gave birth to Asha. Of all the things that I expected to go wrong, I never thought that Bill would abandon the baby. I never dreamed that I'd be left with a white baby in an Indian bustee.”

There was a long silence. And then Sunil cleared his throat. “And instead of taking her to an agency, you decided to give her to us. Leave her on the doorstep, unannounced in the middle of the night.”

Seema looked at her drink. “I had intended to take her to an agency. I really had.”

“What made you change your mind?” What had she been thinking when she left Asha on their doorstep?

Seema looked up. With great dignity, she said, “Sunil, I saw Bethie crying. I had a baby I could not want, and she was sitting in your veranda, and crying because she wanted a baby she could not have.”

Sunil still remembered that day. It still broke his heart. Bethie *had* cried. She had seen a family with a baby on the beach and had cried for what she could never have. But Sunil had not known that their childlessness was common knowledge within the neighborhood. Gossip spread quickly in India, Sunil knew, everyone knew each others' business. Perhaps his mother had talked to his sister in the car while the driver was listening. Perhaps the driver had told the *darwan*. Stories spread like malaria in this country, and this piece of gossip was juicy enough to pass on. A local man returning from America with a *firangi* wife, with too much money that still could not buy them what they really desired. It was an irresistible piece of chit-chat. “We have no cash,” the *darwan* must have said to the dishwashing maid, “But at least I have two sons and one daughter. Wife got pregnant as easily as a rabbit. Two months into our marriage and she was

throwing up all over the house. I was looking forward to her making me some *laddus*, instead, I had to do all the housework, because *memsahib* was too sick to get out of bed. Life is a *behenchod*, sometimes.”

“Yes, I got two kids in three years,” the dishwashing maid must have agreed, “And then I went to the doctor to have a knot put in my tube. The *haramjada* can’t leave me alone, but at least there is nothing wrong with his *susu*.”

Seema must have overheard such gossip. And now, she was sitting across the table, and telling him that she had taken pity on them. Seeing Bethie cry had moved her to irrational action, she had abandoned her plan of taking her newborn to a shelter, and had given the baby to Bethie instead. What had possessed her? Just the illogical kindness of a hormonal woman? Or a studied decision of a desperate girl, who saw the marked resemblance that Bethie bore to the baby? Regardless, Asha had appeared on their doorstep.

“I had heard horror stories of pretty little girls in adoption centers,” Seema said. “Girls given up to brothels, girls sold to Arab men, all sorts of stories. Plus, the baby looked so different from me, I did not know how to explain how I came to have such an American looking baby. Would they charge me with kidnapping? Would they call the police? I was afraid to go to a center. And then I saw Bethie crying that day. Even at its best, adoption takes a long time, I knew. Even if nothing bad happened, why would I leave the tiny thing in a shelter for months on end, without love or care, when there was Bethie who would adore her

instantly? I watched her while you were at work for a whole day. She was so good, so kind, and you – Sunil it has always been obvious how much you adore her. You would make such good parents. Why should I search for anyone else? You were perfect. I thought about it as much as I could. And then, that night, I left the baby for you to find.”

“But then why could you not leave them alone? You had already lost all that money. You knew you could not keep the baby. So why pretend to be a nanny? Weren’t you afraid that someone would give you away? Other people must have seen you pregnant. Your auntie knew. She could show up any day. Weren’t you afraid that you would be found out?”

Seema fiddled with her napkin. “It’s hard to explain. I did think of all that. But you see, while the baby had parents who loved her, who wanted her, while I knew she would go to her fathers, I felt no connection to the child growing inside me. I knew she was not mine, and I was happy with that. It was about money for me, and a family for Bill. But once he disappeared, I grew attached to the child. Protective, you know? And even when she came to Bethie, I found I could not leave her. I’m not her mother. But really, in Bill’s absence, nobody has greater rights to her than I do. I am both her mother and not. Even though I had intended to leave her, in the end, I found I could not. I needed to see her, to make sure that she was safe, that she was loved. She had been a part of my body for ten months. I could not let her go, without at least a real goodbye.”

Sunil nodded. He did see. He would feel the same way. And for such a young girl, pregnant by near strangers, abandoned by those who trusted, this was perhaps the wisest decision she could have made. “But you see how that it not fair to Bethie, Seema.”

Seema looked uncomfortable, hands working away at her sari, pleating and unpleating the fabric.

“Making her feel like she was a mother, after all those years of childlessness, and then secretly breast-feeding the baby, claiming the one thing she could not do, was that fair.” Sunil saw the heat rise in the girl’s throat and paused. Now was the moment. “How about I propose a plan?”

Seema looked up “A plan?”

Sunil leaned forward, “Tell me how much money Bill owed you. Whatever it was, I’ll write you a check for the entire amount. In return, you make some excuse to Bethie – your son missing you, maybe – and leave us alone. You know now that the baby is safe and looked after. She has parents who adore her, your work is done. You can now leave, right? Plus, you get your money. It works out great for everyone.”

Seema looked him, considering. Sunil took a sip of his stone cold tea. Would she agree? So much depended on that. He had to get rid of Seema, wipe away all traces of Asha’s origins. Only then would they be a real family.

Finally, the girl sighed. “How about two months?”

“You leave after two months?”

“Yes.”

“No, that’s too long. Fifteen days and you get half of your due.”

“One month, and you pay me everything I am owed. And you write me a reference for a job.”

“Okay,” Sunil said, “But one more thing.”

Seema jutted out her chin.

“No more breast feeding.”

“But...” Seema started to protest.

“No.” Sunil said, and meant it. “No. You know it’s not fair to Bethie. You know that in your heart.”

Seema was silent. “But the baby?”

“The baby is Bethie’s.”

“Yes,” Seema said. “Yes, okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Okay, no more breast feeding. And from now on, I won’t take her at night. She is Bethie’s daughter. Not mine.”

“That’s right,” Sunil said, his job done. “That’s right.”

Chapter 16

I had told so many lies now that it was impossible to keep track. And you had swallowed them all, Sunil, against your better judgment. I think that somewhere in your heart you knew that I had not learned English from a fuzzy old teacher in a Bengali village, that I had not worked as a nanny all my life, that I was not this naïve girl you'd let into your home.

But you desperately wanted me to be that girl. So, I took pity on you and just told you the part of the truth you wanted to hear – that I was a surrogate, that there were two fathers, and that they had disappeared. What I did not tell you was the rest – that my mother had kept me from school after twelve, noticing the looks that the men in the village cast at me, and the looks I returned. That had been the end of my education. All the polish, all the genteelness, I learned on my job. But you did not need to know any of that. What would you have done with the knowledge?

But perhaps I should have told you this: That Bill had loved his baby from the time she was a picture on the sonogram machine. I don't know a lot of things, but I do know men. And it is my business to know what they desire and how much they will pay for it. And that man, he wanted that baby. He would have sold his soul, even before she was born, to have her with him. But how could I tell you that? It would be cruel. And, look, I could be wrong. Bill, he had not come to take the child. He had not appeared when he said he would. He had changed his mind.

I have been wrong before, many times. I accepted your offer of money, but leaving the baby with you and never seeing her again? I needed to think about it.

I took the rest of the day off. You'd have too much on your mind and Bethie was too kind to ask me why my half-day turned into a full day. Instead, I met the ironingwala for dinner at the Dhaba. I owed him a meal for stealing the sari. Plus, I was curious. The ease with which he accepted my thievery told me that he was not a saint himself and I was tired of my own lies. So when we sat across from each other on the rain stained plastic table, in the dhaba and he said: "So, what's your dhanda," I decided that he could take the truth.

"Today, it's being a nanny to a baby I gave birth to. A few months ago, I was carrying a child for cash. And months before that I was screwing rich men for money. So you could say that I am a girl in every trade."

He leaned back into his chair, taken by surprise. For a moment he opened his mouth but then he quickly closed it again, his eyes growing merrier as he processed my words.

"Ho!" the ironing wala said. "a beshya turned into a bai" A whore turned to a homemaker. His tone was amused rather than shocked but I could not meet his eyes.

I raised my chai glass with slightly shaking fingers, and to my own embarrassment my own eyes stung with tears.

You'd landed in my room less than 24 hours ago, seen me bare breasted and vulnerable, I had feared for my job, I'd met you all the way across town, I'd

been caught as a thief, I'd tried to tell you what you wanted to hear, and finally, sitting in the steam filled dhaba, waiting for our roti and tarka, I felt the events of the day catch up with me. Whore. Nanny. Thief. I was all these things. But I had a son who I had last seen four years ago. If I stayed quietly as a good girl, washing dishes and making tea for others, I would never see him again. I blinked as hard as I could, and slurped my tea.

“Arre, arre,” he said, reaching out across the table and touching my elbow. “Dekho, I meant no harm.” He'd leaned forward, his eyes softer now, though still amused. “I have no cause to judge you,” he said, “At least you sell something that is yours, fair and square. And who can argue with that, bolo?”

I rubbed my eyes.

“I'm coming up against the last few years I can do this, and make money,” I said. “Soon, no one will want to pay for what I have.” And I would lose my son forever.

“And so the womb renting?” he'd caught on faster than I had thought, and I finally looked at him, clearly in the face.

“It could have made me rich,” I said, “but the father disappeared and I was left with a white kid.”

“So that's where my sari went, eh? You needed to impress a white man?”

“A woman,” I said, off hand. This man was keeping up with me, beat upon beat, just as he had done this morning when I had tried to escape. When had that

happened, that someone followed me through the angles and alleyways of my tales?

“So now you nanny for your own child?”

“She’s not mine,” I said, sharply, looking at him. “I just gave birth to her. She was just a dhandha, like everything else.”

He looked at me for a long moment, saying nothing.

“As you say,” he said easily.

The food arrived. Steaming hot tadkta daal, a bunch of green chilies and a plate of fresh rotis. He reached over and served me the food, his square strong hands clasped around the spoon as he ladled lentils onto my proffered plate.

“How’s this going to end?” He asked.

“The boss told me today that he’ll pay me the money I lost,” I said. It was the first time I had said it out loud. I’d make the money I was owed and leave with a good reference. Just one more month and I’d be out. Asha would be Bethie’s and I could get out of the race. I’d buy that flat and I could start my own business. Who could keep my son from me then? We would be together forever.

“And you’re looking forward to all this money?” He raised one eyebrow, his bearded face slanted to the side. He chewed on his food as he waited, not that hurried.

“I’m just tired,” I said, rubbing my face.

“Dealing with lives will do that to you,” he said, and from the way he looked away, I knew he knew what he was talking about.

Deftly, as two people practiced in it, we changed the subject. We talked of the ways of our employers, and the unusual cold and all the new movies that neither of us had seen. We planned on catching one sometime. When we were done eating, we drank some toddy from a small brown bottle and walked back together.

It was later than I had thought, and the steam rose from the asphalt as it cooled with the night. The dusty trees guarded our walk back and if I grazed my body against him, it was the effect of the alcohol.

He spent the night with me, and we made love. My skin felt right and smooth against the brush of his belly, and when I arched my back, it was only partly fraudulent. I did not ask him to leave, or get dressed. Instead, when we were done, I tucked my chin against his arm, and breathed in the scent of his glazed body, and went to sleep, as if we really were lovers, and the night was our friend.

Chapter 17

Their apartment buzzed with conversation. Arranging the sandwiches on his mother's silver platter, Sunil felt like he was back in San Francisco, in the early days of his marriage. Glasses clinked in the other room, and along the windowsills tiny candles flickered in the damp Mumbai breeze. In the middle of it all was Bethie, splendid in a turquoise sari, a gold bindi glowing on her forehead,

clutching Asha to her chest like a treasure she would never relinquish. The child's blond hair curled against Bethie's chin, and ever so often his wife paused mid-sentence to kiss the top of the baby's head. "Six months, today," Bethie was telling Sunita, "And already so smart. I swear she coos back to me whenever I talk." This was true. The baby knew the sound of Bethie's voice and wriggled and giggled each time his wife held out her arms, cooing in response to her name, nuzzling into Bethie's shoulder when she was picked up. The dark circles had disappeared from under Bethie's eyes, her skin glowed with vitality and happiness. One arm cuddled the baby close to her chest and another arm rested on the child's head, protectively curled. The baby closed her eyes, smiling and dozy.

"I would not have recognized her," His mother was close to him, watching Bethie. "She looks ten years younger. So much energy."

Sunil offered the sandwiches to his mother. "These ones are vegetarian," he told his mother, "Bethie made them especially for you."

"Bless the girl's heart, it's not like she does not have enough to do, all this cooking with a six-month old, I don't know how she does it."

"She puts the baby on the swing next to her," Sunil said, smiling, "And sings while she cooks."

His mother's face softened. "*Durga, durga*" she blessed, "May she long be this happy. Look at them, who would say that they are not biological?"

It was true. The child looked so very much like Bethie that it was startling. The same blond hair, paler and curlier in the child, the same shade of blue in the

eyes, the same long fingers. They blended together seamlessly, the child balanced on Bethie's hip as comfortably as fruit on a tree. Next to her stood Seema, in a new dark red sari that cast color onto her face. Nothing about her looked like the child, and yet there was an unmistakable tenderness in the glances that she cast at Asha.

"You were lucky to have found Seema when you did, *beta*," his mother was saying. "The first months are hard. It gave Bethie the rest that she needed."

"Yes, Amma, it was very lucky."

"And equally lucky that she is leaving now. The child was rather too attached to her nanny in the early weeks. Now, she is much more connected to Bethie."

Sunil looked up, startled. Amazing. Nothing escaped his mother.

"Yes, Amma, I wonder what she makes of all this, such a big party and she welcome as a guest rather than a maid. Today was her last day, you know. Tomorrow, she'll be back with her own son in her village."

"Oh, I think she is eager to get away."

"Really?" Sunil looked over at Seema, nearly unrecognizable in Bethie's gifted attire. Her black hair was braided to her waist and she had more color to her skin than she had done before. She was slither now, and almost beautiful. She stood demurely behind his wife, like a moon to Bethie's sun, watching the activities. At no point did she try to hold the child, or touch her as Sunil knew she

longed to do. She had been true her word, Sunil knew and he admired her for it. It could not have been easy.

“This has been a hard job for her. Not what she is used to, I don’t think, even though she seems to have these years of experience. And – with that baby – she’s like no nanny I have ever seen,” his mother was looking at Seema thoughtfully, assessingly. “I think she is excited to get back to her village. Her mother will come around once she is a business woman, with a home and money. She’ll have no trouble getting back her son.”

“Yes, that was unnecessarily cruel, to keep her from her kid,” Sunil stacked the food onto a platter and went to rejoin the party.

“The ways of the world are mysterious,” his mother said, “Who knows what the real story was.”

Sunil went from guest to guest, offering finger food and tiny forks, and when he got to Seema, he met her eyes briefly, and she looked back at him, into his eyes, and smiled, lifting one shoulder in a rueful shrug.

Most of the guests were gone, and Bethie had gone to shower, exhausted with the day. Only Sunita’s kids remained, playing hide and seek while the baby slept. Sunil was to walk them over to Sunita’s apartment once they had adequately exhausted themselves. In the kitchen, Seema washed up the dishes from the party, and Sunil could hear the faint clink of the wine glasses as she put them away. He poured himself the last glass of wine. Tomorrow Seema would be

gone, and with her would leave all the knowledge of the baby's true parentage.

Sunil would soon move them back to San Francisco and leave behind all traces of the child's origins. No one would ever have to know. They would say that they had been pregnant when they left the US, and with the child's marked coloring and Bethie's obvious adoration, the lie would soon become the truth. Their small family would be perfect, protected from all harm, Sunil would see to that.

"Sunil *anna*, Sunil *anna*, come play hide and seek with us, come, *na* play!" Ravi was tugging at his arm, nearly spilling the wine on Bethie's prized rug. "Not now, *beta*, not now, it's too late you see, and the baby is asleep," Sunil wanted to read, now that all the guests were gone. He rarely got a minute to himself these days. "I'll keep an eye out for thieves, you and Anil play with Seema. She's better at hiding, much more practice."

"But..." Ravi started to protest, just as the bell rang. What good luck, Sunil thought. Saved by the bell.

"Go see who that is," Sunil said, spinning the boy by his shoulder. "Go see what rude person is interrupting us at such an hour. Go see who it can be. Two rupees for the person who gets back to me first."

The boys dashed off in a mad scramble, fighting and jostling in their race to the foyer, elbowing the other to reach for the handle. Just as the door opened, Sunil paused mid-sip, suddenly tense. Really, who could it be at this hour?

The boys were talking to the stranger at the door, their voices muffled, too low to hear above the music. But in the kitchen, Sunil saw Seema stiffen, her hands at the faucet, Bethie's best crystal frozen in her fingers.

Sunil switched off the music. The room fell unnaturally silent after the recent hullabaloo. At the kitchen sink, Seema peered over the counter, looking at the open door. Slowly the glass fell from her hand, shattering into the sink, tinkling into a hundred pieces as the boys dashed back. The door slowly pushed itself open and a stranger stood looking at Sunil with eyes that were achingly familiar. Blue like the sky, with hair curled in a way that was etched in Sunil's heart.

He did not have to ask who it was.

"Sunilmama, Sunilmama, it's a foreigner. He is looking for Seemadi, he says. He says his name is Bill."

"Who is he, Sunilmama, who is he? And why is he here so late at night?"

Sunil felt weak on his feet, breathless with panic. His words spoke themselves. "He's a friend of Seemadidi, from America."

"Seemadidi?" Ravi frowned in puzzlement. How did an Indian maid have a foreign male friend?

"Yes, she used to work for his sister," his lies were as effortless as sight.

"Who is it Sunil?" Bethie's muffled voice rose over the sounds of the shower. Soon she would be done.

Ravi ran to answer. "It's a friend of Seemadi's," he danced a little jig before the closed bathroom door. Sunil's heart thudded in apprehension. "He's come to visit her from America, all because she worked for his sister."

"Oh how nice," Bethie said, still inside the bathroom. "Ask Sunil to invite him in, I'll be out in a minute."

He would have to act quickly.

"You have to get rid of him," he hissed to Seema.

She looked at him with wide, panicked eyes. "How can I?" she hissed back, "It's his baby. I made him a promise. Your Asha is his Molly. He's come to take her back."

Sunil felt the floor tilt under his feet. Behind him, he felt the bathroom door click open. Bethie would be out any minute. Seema's eyes flitted into the bedroom. She felt the same panic.

"What can I do?" she asked, her fingers pleating the edge of her sari.

"Take him downstairs into the garden. Don't promise anything. I'll join you as soon as I can."

Relief flooded her eyes. "Yes," Seema said, "Yes, I'll do that."

The garden was still warm despite the late hour. Sunil paused at the edge, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. An old familiar smell wafted from the shadows. What was it? Champa? Chemeli? Jui? It was a smell from his childhood. Was it not just yesterday that his mother braided Sunita's hair before school, with

a small bottle of oil that smelled just like this? And now, look at where he was. About to wrangle with a stranger so that Bethie could one day pony-tail pale blond hair. “Mind you listen to your teacher,” she would say, just like his mother had, “and don’t get your dress dirty. We are spending millions on laundry.”

Just one more day, and Sunil would have been free. Just a few more hours.

How easy other people had it. Those who got laid, got pregnant and had a baby, as easily as that. The most natural thing in the world. But not for him. Not for Bethie. Instead he had to trick honest people and wrestle away their babies.

“Sunil,” Seema called him from the shadows. Turning Sunil saw her tense face, watching him from under the Nagraj tree. Wasn’t it where Sunil had left that first note for her, asking for the baby? Could it only have been six months ago? So little happened in six months. It was hardly any time. Yet, in that short space, Asha had nestled her way into his heart, as surely as a termite in wood, and now he was weaker, softer, and so much more destructible. Now he could never return her as easily as he had done that first night. Now, he had become hers, her only father, the one who could never live a day without her in his arms.

“Hello Bill,” Sunil spoke softly.

The other man looked at him with his daughter’s eyes. “Hello Sunil,” he said equally gravely, “Seema has been telling me about you and your wife. I’m sorry to show up like this on your door-step.

There was no other choice. There could be no small talk on a night like this. Sunil took a deep breath.

“I understand that Seema was expecting you earlier,” he said.

To his surprise, he saw the other man’s eyes well with tears.

“Yes,” Bill said, “I had intended to be here for the birth, both Dave and I had hoped to be here...” His voice choked. “But life had other plans.”

Sunil waited.

“We had an accident on our way to our baby shower. My mom had planned it for us. She’d bought all these baby clothes, all pink and frilly, and jewelry for Seema that we were supposed to take to the hospital with us, like in the movies. Such fabulous plans. They seem so ludicrous now. They say that God laughs at human hopes. Instead of opening gifts at the shower, we were rushed to the hospital. Dave died immediately. I was in a coma for months.”

Seema touched his arm. For a few minutes there was silence.

“She’s all the more precious now that Dave is dead. That baby is my only link back to him. She’s all I have.”

The dark gathered about Sunil as he stood in the garden. Something rustled in the tree above him, a bird, perhaps interrupted from its nest by the sorrow in the other man’s voice. In the half-light, Sunil saw Seema’s eyes, soft with sadness.

“I can’t give her back to you,” Sunil said, hating himself. To lose a lover after so many years of togetherness was a hell that he hoped he would never see.

What meaning would life have, if he lost Bethie? What good would life be, if he did not have her to share it with?

“The baby is ours now, my wife is her mother, I am her father. I’m so sorry for how things have worked out for you, but I can’t just hand our Asha back to you as if she were a bag of flour.”

Bill opened his mouth to speak, his eyes hollow and empty.

“He’s right,” Seema’s face was tight with misery. “I’m sorry Bill but he’s right. I gave them the baby. I acted too fast. I should have known that you would arrive, that something huge was causing your delay. I got frightened. But you see, Asha is theirs now. Bethie is her mother. You would understand if you saw them together. It’s like they are the same person. It would be impossible to tear them away from each other. Bethie would not survive it, the baby would not either. How can you take a child from its mother?”

“But how can you take a baby from her father?” Bill asked, looking away.

“I can ask the same question,” Sunil whispered into the darkness.

“So can I,” Seema said, her face taugth and unhappy.

“I tried to call,” Bill was whispering almost to himself, trying to find a way that could make sense of the mess. “As soon as I came to. I called many, many times, every day that week, but your cell phone was switched off.”

“I disconnected the mobile,” Seema said softly. “I thought you weren’t coming. That you had changed your mind.”

“Oh my god Seema, I’m so sorry.” Bill was near tears now. “I wish I could have come here sooner. I had never intended for you to feel forsaken. It must have been terrifying. Of course you got scared.”

“I acted too fast,” Seema said again. “I should have known you would come. But the baby was blonde and I was dark. I did not know where to turn. And Bethie. Bethie is such a great mother, Bill. It would break your heart to see them together. No one could love the baby more.”

“What a mess,” Bill said, rubbing his face. “What a mess I have made.”

Sunil sat down on the lawn. The night was getting cooler and he felt the dampness of the sodden soil spread through the fabric of his good trousers. They were all silent. This was like the judgment of Solomon. There was really nothing new to say.

Unbidden, Sunil thought of how he had left his wife. Tired from the excitement of the day, Bethie had taken Asha to bed with her. They were both fast asleep, the baby’s fist curled against his wife’s chest, and Bethie’s mouth half open against the child’s head, frozen in an unfinished kiss. A thin line of drool threaded its way from her mouth, lost in the mass of baby hair. As Sunil had watched, the night-light turned the wetness to silver, and the bond between his wife and his child felt unbreakable and precious.

This was nothing. He would battle with lions to keep his wife with his child. He would have to be taken apart, limb by limb, before he would let Bethie lose sight of Asha, even for a moment.

The city slept around them, dark and silent. Beside him, a man mourned his lost love and a woman regretted her generosity. Above him, the stars gazed on, bright, loveless and disinterested. They would each have to make their own way. They would each have to live with their decisions. And tomorrow, he would have to tell Bethie.

Chapter 18

It lay where I had left it, in the hidden pocket of my faded wallet, concealed among my mangle of salwars and saris, a secret within a secret.

I fished it out, slowly. I did not have to unfold it to see the numbers, and in the dark of my servant's room, I caressed the heft of the official paper, knowing without having to look, that the figures and the signature made this my final ticket to freedom.

All I had to do was cash it.

Tomorrow, all I had to do was put on my last pair of stiff, ill-fitting sandals and take the bus to Park Street to deposit the check I held in my hands. After that, I could buy the best shoes I wished too, right there in the shops of Park Street, and no one would be able to turn me away. I could get my nails done while I was there, or buy a sari made of real silk. I could become a real person, someone

who people would say hello to when they walked into a store, someone whom the waiter would bring water for, in a glass tumbler, with ice and maybe even a slice of lemon. This one check with its many numbers would make me that person, and I would never again sit in the dark in a damp room and have no one to care for.

And yet, I hesitated. Nothing in my small life had ever allowed me to truly be generous. I had never had enough for myself – enough love, enough softness, enough sweetness or kindness, to allow myself to share any of this. Whatever I had, I had clutched onto with the stubbornness of a sad child, and one by one, I had lost each thing I held – my father, my man, my child, my money, my hopes, my own self. Bethie was the opposite of me. She gave everything she had. She gave herself, as if there was nothing there worth saving. She gave away her smiles, her kisses, her thoughts, her sorrows, and reserved nothing for herself. It was because she had always been rich, that was true. And I had always been poor. But I suspected that our ways had nothing to do with rich and poor. She was generous. I was not. But watching her, I wanted to be giving too.

I could not give you the baby, Sunil. I could not take her from Bill, not after I had seen his face. Taking the check from you would make it official, that she was nothing to me. But if she was not mine, how could I give her back to Bill?

I wish it were simpler. I wished that I could say that returning Asha would solve all our problems. But it would not be like that, I knew that much. She had become yours, Bethie had become hers, and I had learned to be a part of something. Cashing the check would not change any of this. It would only make

me richer. But still I could not do it. I had to hold on to the possibility that somehow everything would fall in place. But to do that, I first had to return the baby to whom she belonged.

I leaned back against the wall. My bottom hard against the lump of the mattress, and rested my head against the scrape of the wall. I wanted that money. I had earned it, many times over. I had carried the baby, I had watched my food and my health, I had given birth, alone in the bathroom, and I had washed away the afterbirth. I had found a place for the baby, I had given her to the one family who could receive her wholeheartedly and I had guarded her, as well I could. This money was mine.

I folded away the check and secreted it back in the pocket of my wallet. I hid the wallet under my mattress and tucked the sheet around its edges. Finally, I lay down on the uneven bed, the thin pillow under my head, and stared at the ceiling. A small fan swung down at me, pale in the dark room. It had never worked, the entire time I had lived here, and I had never told Bethie. Had I said anything, she would have instantly marched her way into the servant's quarters, and incensed at the lightless rooms and bare brick walls, she would have energized an army of people to paint, fix and renovate. I had not felt up to that kind of attention. I did not want her to know how poor my life was, compared to hers. In her eyes, I was a master at my job, excellent at handling Asha, swift to respond, alert and intelligent. I did not want her to know how little I was worth in

everyone else's eyes. She thought I was precious, and for a brief while, I had become valuable to myself.

The fan remained suspended above my head, useless and dusty. It had one task in this world – to waft comfort in an airless room. When it failed to do that, even the space it occupied was a waste.

My only job in this city was to help Bethie. To hold her hands as she became a mother. Now that I no longer offered that aid, how much longer could I pretend to be me?

I got up from my spot, and slowly extricated my bag from under my bed. One by one, I folded all the gifts that Bethie had given me, a flashlight for my mother, a handcream for myself, a stick of expensive lipstick that was too pale for my skin, dresses I could never wear. Her things nearly took up all the room in my small bag – and I tucked in my own things around them – cheap, flimsy fabrics and ill-fitting underwear. I hid them away under my finer things. Lovingly, caressing the fabric and the folds, I smoothed down each useless gift. I wished I had the life she imagined I had, where I was free to follow my own heart, and had the strengths of a kind and good person. Perhaps, if I had been born to wealth, I could have been like that, but I suspected that it had nothing to do with riches. I was born scheming and plotting, and trying to jump from one floating boat to another. Had I been born to Bethie's life, I would still have found a way try to broker a better deal, and squander every graceful thing that was offered to me.

I zipped up the bag and changed into my own salwar kameez. It was my last day here, and I was ready to go.

I walked down the dark streets, lamplit and spooky with the lateness of the hour. A few drunk men stumbled about the corner, laughing and nudging each other as I passed.

“Mere sapno ki rani kab aigi tu,” One of them sang after me, but without any energy or intent. I thought briefly about delaying my journey and taking them up to a hotel and getting some petty cash to tide me over, but their shoes were old and their belts made of fake leather, and I ignored their calls and made my way. By the time I got to my destination, my bag had cut red grooves into the palm of my hand. I smoothed down my hair and pursed down my lips, even though I knew he would not care.

The lights were still on under the crack of the door and it opened as soon as I knocked. He'd been expecting me. I was right to come. Besides, I had nowhere else to go.

We stood in the arc of the light, darkness behind me. He took my bag from my hands and put his arm around me. Slowly, I moved into his embrace, and let myself hold him close. We clung to each other, like orphaned children with no place to call home. I smelled the stale sweat and exhaustion, coming from his skin, and the perceptible scent of being foreign.

I hugged him close. “I’m so sorry, Bill,” I whispered into his chest. “I’m so sorry.”

He held me still, and I could feel his hot tears on my neck.

“I’ll get her back to you,” I said. “I promise. I will.”

And for once, I was telling the truth.

Chapter 19

When they had first gotten married, Sunil had not been ready to start a family.

“There’s still so much to do,” He’d said one evening over martinis. Bethie had just gotten off work, and Sunil had taken a break from his brief to meet her near the Embarcadero. Behind Bethie, the giant window held a view of the Bay Bridge, its steely arch dividing ocean from sky. Bethie had reached for a piece of sushi.

“I’m not getting younger,” she’d said, not smiling, a small crease appearing between her brows.

“Come on!” Sunil had been dismissive. “Didn’t Michelle just have a baby? How old is she anyway? Forty? Forty-one?”

“Forty,” Bethie had acknowledged. “But...”

“And look how healthy you are, no one ever guesses that you are a day older than twenty-five! You know that yourself, don’t you?”

Bethie had always looked younger. Once in college she’d dressed as Alice in Wonderland one Halloween, and Sunil had felt vaguely depraved holding her hand. It was a real problem at work, with clients not taking her advice seriously because of the beguiling look in her big eyes. Knowing this, Bethie always wore black. “Let me at least dress the part of a manager,” she would say, laughing as she bought Banana Republic suits. But no amount of dark suits could hide the hopeful shine in her eyes, the way her mouth took over her face when she smiled, as if she’d never had cause to restrain her optimism, as if life were a big Christmas gift, picked out just for her.

“I do look younger,” Bethie had said, drinking her gin, “But I’m not really, am I? I’m thirty-three. What if we run into problems? What will we do then?”

“We’ll adopt,” Sunil had said airily, knowing that nothing could ever go wrong. Not to them. Bethie’s mom had three kids, Bethie’s sister had twins, Sunita was pregnant at thirty-five. Why would bad luck strike them?

The years had passed. Bethie had become a director at her firm and then a vice president. One by one her colleagues had babies and dropped out of the rat race. One of them bought a house in Mill Valley, and Sunil drove them up a long winding avenue to a stucco house with a red tricycle over-turned in the front yard.

“Shoot me now,” Sunil whispered into Bethie’s ears as they approached the housewarming do. “I’ll be the only non-white guy here. Want to bet?”

“The public schools are the best in northern California,” Bethie had said, softly, but before Sunil could ask how she knew, she was congratulating her friend, crouching down to pick up a toddler, depositing their gift of Veuve Cliquot on the granite counter. If her smile had looked strained, if her eyes were wistful, Sunil had been too distracted to notice. He was indeed the only Indian guy in the room. He should have made Bethie take his bet.

How had the years passed? Later Sunil would berate himself for being so stupid. Bethie had been thirty-seven when they finally decided to try for a baby, and Sunil had every belief that she would get pregnant that first month.

“Did you even read a paper, do any research? Did you talk to a doctor? What were you thinking, Sunil? What were you thinking when you made me wait?” Bethie had asked, on their way back from the doctor’s. Her eyes were no longer hopeful. They no longer joked that their trip to Napa was a procreation vacation. Instead, they had started to chart temperature and Sunil made trips to Walgreen’s to buy ovulation kits. He was trying not to panic. What had he done to Bethie?

A year passed. Still, there had been no pregnancy. It was then that Bethie had suggested that they go see a doctor. Sunil would have called in shamans had she said the word. They had seen a specialist and the doctor had been grim.

“Did you even look it up on Google?” Bethie had asked, on the drive back. “Did you?”

Sunil had not. He had heard about Angelina Jolie, and Cate Blanchett and Michelle, a colleague, and had made his assumptions. He had made a decision for both of them, and he had been wrong.

Everything started in earnest after that. Blood work, tests, doctor’s appointments. Acupuncture, therapy, a hypnotist. X-rays, semen analyses, Chinese herbs, yoga. A test where dye was shot through Bethie’s body that made her cramp up in pain. Nightly hormone shots that Sunil had to inject into his wife’s belly. Sex scheduled so exactly that no joy could be wrung out of the act. One morning, bringing coffee up to his sleeping wife, Sunil saw that her face was streaked with dried tears. This is what he had done to his wife. He had trapped Bethie into a life with him, yoked her happiness to his, and this was what she had to bear.

When she got pregnant, it was Sunil who cried.

“It’s over now,” Bethie had smiled for the first time in ages. “It’s done, sweetie, and we must look forward. There’s to be a baby! Imagine that!”

The doctor had warned them that the pregnancy was fragile. Spewed statistics of miscarriages, and warned them to take it easy. And they did. Every day, Sunil would tuck Bethie in front of the television, with saltine crackers and Gatorade.

“Have fun,” he’d say, only half joking. Bethie had gone through hell backwards, surely this time of relaxation could only be a good thing? Bethie seemed to think so too. “Nausea is a good sign,” she’d respond, gleefully rubbing her belly. “Look how round I’m getting!”

She miscarried at twenty weeks.

Even now, as Bethie slept in the bedroom with Asha, Sunil lay awake in the living room, reliving the look of defeat in Bill’s eyes. “She’s the only link I have back to Dave,” the man had said, and the words still rang in Sunil’s ears. He knew what that felt like. He lived it everyday. For Sunil knew this from the bottom of his heart – if he lost Asha, he would lose Bethie too. Their marriage would not survive another loss, another instance where Sunil failed to bring a child to Bethie. Asha was his last hope of making his family safe, his only link back to the Bethie of the happy eyes and smiling mouth. To lose Asha would be to sink back again into the nightmare that had gripped his wife.

Slowly dawn broke across Bombay. From his sleepless post on the sofa, Sunil watched the sky turn from night to a dishwater gray, and then finally to reluctant light. In the next room, the baby fussed, and Sunil heard as if from far, his wife shush the infant, and croon softly to her. “Who does mamma hug, baby bug? Who does mamma love, tiny dove? Who does mamma kiss, little fish?” He heard the creak of old wood as Bethie got out of bed, the rustling of Asha’s clothes as she changed her diaper, the soft murmurs of a mother soothing a child.

The door opened. Bethie, baby in her arms, looked about the stale living room, still bearing traces of yesterday's festivities. Instinctively she straightened a chair, tugged the tablecloth, drew back a curtain.

"That was a good party," she said, happily, "But now I want my coffee."

Sunil did not stir. Let her be happy for one more minute before he ruined it all again. But already she was looking at him, her eyes cloudy with instant concern,

"Babe," she said, touching his forehead to check for fever, "Sweetie, you feel okay?"

Sunil looked up at her, "Bethie," he said, "Bethie I have something to tell you."

Bethie's eyes met his for a long moment. What did she see? Sunil felt gritty with the sleepless night, his stubble itching with unshavenness, his party clothes sour and crushed against his skin. The night's knowledge had taken its toll and the events were etched on his face. As she looked at him, Sunil saw all the joy drain out of Bethie's face.

She already knew. Sunil saw her clutch the baby closer, her eyes angry and fearful, and she said, "I don't want to know. Go away, Sunil. Go away from me. I don't want to know."

There was so much to be done. There was no respite for sadness. Sunil who had hoped to catch a breath and plot out the actions for the day, found

himself answering the door, first for the *bai* who came in the morning to make chapattis. Then the *dhobi* came in with the laundry and fast on his heels came the *darwan* with the milk bottles.

“Do you need more for the baby?” The man squatted against the doorframe, counting out the used bottled that Seema had left out the night before. “The *munni* is growing fast-fast, you must need more than just this? Or is your wife feeding her also?”

“I’ll talk to her,” Sunil said. Would they have a chance to increase their order? Would they get to keep Asha for months longer, demand more bottles of milk, scrutinize carrots for worms before they mashed them into puree? Would they get to order a garish Cinderella cake in bright pink for her birthday? Would Sunil get to give in to demands for Disney princess outfits for Diwali? All the ways that he had hoped to accommodate himself was threatened now, and all Sunil wanted to do was confidently increase the order for milk.

“Yes,” Sunil found himself correcting his words, “Yes, baby-ji will need more milk. Increase the order to six bottles.” He tried to shut the door, but the man looked up, pleased, “Yes Sir-ji,” the *darwan* said, his moustache curling with approval, “ You can never feed them enough milk. Why, my *munna-beta*, he drank full-full glasses, three times a day. My wife complained it was too expensive, but I said, let him drink, I will work extra hours, let the child have enough milk. See now, he is a big boy, already in tenth class. Maybe he will be a

real man, go to America-schemerica. Not just be a *darwan* like his father. I'll bring him one day to meet you Sir-ji. He needs some educated people to talk to."

Sunil could not breathe. How we all hope for our children, how little return we crave. He nodded, "Yes, yes," he said. His last glimpse was of the other man's hopeful face through the swift shutting door.

"I want a glass of milk, Sunilmama, one glass for me please, with your American chocolate Heshees"

"Hershey's" Sunil touched the boy's head, still tousled with sleep. Sunita's boys had camped overnight in Asha's room, making a tent with bed-sheets and pretending to be explorers. That room would have to be neatened too, and all the pillows put back on the sofa. Where the hell was Seema?

"Yesterday was Seemadidi's last day," Ravi seemed to read his mind as he cozied up to the refrigerator, waiting for Sunil to make him his chocolate milk. "That's right," Sunil said, already missing her. He found the glasses she had washed last night, put away before Bill had rung the bell. He touched the cold surfaces, briefly wishing her back. "Now tell me how you want me to make this drink."

The apartment was too small for them to ignore each other. Even without Bethie speaking, Sunil felt her anguish in all the sounds she did not make. No nursery rhymes this morning, sung in whispers to Asha, no soft laughter as she interrupted diaper changes with kisses on the belly, on plump dimpled knees, on peachy elbows. No sudden demands to "Oh look at the baby, Sunil do, look at

how she smiles at her daddy.” Instead the bedroom was unnaturally silent. Were they both asleep? Could Bethie be feeding the child? She had plenty of powdered formula with her, Sunil knew.

He tried the bedroom door, but the bolt held fast. She had locked the door. Sunil rested his head against the wood. “Bethie,” he called, and there was no answer. “Bethie,” he called again, louder. The baby cried, startled perhaps from sleep, and he heard Bethie shush the child. “I’m taking the boys back to Sunita,” he said, softer. “I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

“That’s fine,” at last she spoke. “Take your time,” she said. “No hurry.” Perhaps when he got back, they could talk. Sunil could explain how things had come to this. He could ask her for help. Perhaps they would sort this mess out together.

Strangely gladdened, Sunil hustled out the boys, still with chocolate milk moustaches, still in their pajamas.

The sunlight felt like an affront. The street, vibrant with activity, rang with voices and conversation – a vendor sold garlands of marigold, a basket heaved with lychees and star fruit, a small boy carted sticks of tamarind and behind them all, under the shade of the banyan tree, stood an ice-cream cart, its white frame gleaming in the shade.

“Ice cream?” Sunil offered, smiling at his nephews. Sunita would be furious, he knew, but the kids would remember this always, an adult buying them

chocolate cones before breakfast. How could he resist this opportunity? A brief moment of happiness on this day.

Walking down to Sunita's with his own cornetto, flanked on either side by a delighted kid, Sunil was reminded of his first date, so many years ago now. Bethie and he had each bought a gelato – strawberry for Bethie and chocolate for himself, and they'd walked the hills of Berkeley, happily brandishing their sweets. Sunil had a method of eating ice cream that he had perfected. First, fingers loose around the middle. And then with a hasty tongue, one had to lick the ice cream quickly, first, left, then right, into a perfectly spherical half globe. The order was key. One could never lick the center before getting to the right. And then with a sharp and pointed tongue, Sunil made a moat - the trick was to make a groove, maybe one eighth of an inch deep, into the body of the ice cream, just along the edge of the cone. If you did it right, with the correct amount of pressure, there was a circular groove all along the cone. This was to catch the drips from the melting cone. No ice cream eater worth their name should ever tolerate dripping custard onto one's napkin, and even, God forbid, onto one's fingers.

After the moat, the next step was easy. With the flat of the tongue, Sunil pressed down on the ice cream, deepening it into the cone. It did cause a slight tumescence in the body of the ice cream if one weren't careful, this flattening was key – it gave the entire structure of the ice cream a rare stability. Even an earthquake would not shake the ice cream now.

“What on earth are you up too?” Bethie had questioned, laughing up at him, her eyes shining in the lamplight. “Are you even enjoying your cone?”

Sunil had paused, mid-lick. Was he? He gave an experimental, unnecessary lick, to the far right, where he would not disturb the order. The ice cream was nutty, a depth of creaminess that surprised him even though he was halfway done.

“There’s an art to eating ice-cream,” he had said, mock pompously. “It’s not for the faint hearted. When you eat your ice cream perfectly, from start to finish, you are rewarded, right at the end, with a secret, miniature cone. A tiny dessert. That’s the true test of a perfectly eaten ice-cream.”

Bethie had laughed, her gladness ringing out in the Berkeley fog. “There’s no art, you moron. The only art is to enjoy it.” And before Sunil’s eyes, she had licked her messy fingers and pertly bitten into her strawberry. “A perfectly eaten ice cream is the one you eat happily. Here,” she’d said proffering her own cone, “See how delicious.” That night, when they kissed, their mouths tasted of chocolate and strawberries, and Sunil had thought he had never been more happy, never even understood before what happiness truly meant.

He would hurry back to her. He would bang on the door until she opened it. He would tell her that he had no strategy, no agenda. That he loved her, he loved their baby. They would find a way to make it work. Asha was theirs, no one could take her away. They would find a way. Bethie was right. Sunil over-thought

the simplest stuff. There was no art to this. The only art was to live in the moment, to enjoy each minute for what it was, to be happy.

Sunil hastily deposited the boys at Sunita's doorstep, ignored her indignant yelps at their state, and by the time he got home, he was panting and breathless. He had not waited for the elevator.

"Bethie, where are you?" he called.

The living room was oddly empty, the sofa bare of the usual mess of toys and blankets. "Bethie," he called again. The apartment was awfully quiet. No coos from the baby, no CD playing Mozart, no lullabies. Bethie was not in the kitchen, not making up a bottle. Not in the bedroom, shushing the child to bed. She was not in the nursery, singing to Asha. Not even in the veranda where the butterflies flitted around the potted plants, and Asha smiled at nothing at all. Bethie was not in the shower, giving the baby her bath. Bethie was not there. Bethie was nowhere. She was not in the apartment, at all. Sunil checked again, everywhere, but the unthinkable was true.

Bethie was gone. Bethie was gone.

And she had taken Asha.