

Prologue

Karachi, Pakistan, 1991



THE CLASSROOM FELT LIKE the inside of an oven. The combination of an exceptionally dry summer and the explosion of traffic around the school over the last few years had thickened the air, making learning a rather uncomfortable experience. Feroza fanned herself with the end of her dupatta, wishing, not for the first time, that her parents could afford to send her to a school with air conditioning. She tried her best to concentrate. History was her favourite subject; she wanted to give it her full attention.

Miss Akram had brought in a large map of South Asia from home. She had unrolled it onto her table at the start of the lesson and pinned down its corners with cups from the canteen. They all stood huddled around as she explained how the 1971 war with India and East Pakistan eventually led to the formation of Bangladesh.

‘East Pakistan was very different to the Pakistan we know now,’ she explained, looking up at the class. ‘We live in an area that was once called West Pakistan. Now we just call it Pakistan because East Pakistan eventually became Bangladesh and there were no longer two Pakistans.’ She scanned the students. ‘Can anybody tell me about the key differences between East and West Pakistan at the time?’

Feroza looked at the other girls, waiting for one of them to answer. Nobody raised their hand. Good, she thought, another opportunity for her to show Miss Akram she was still the cleverest girl in class. She put up her hand. Miss Akram nodded at her.

‘Miss, they both shared a dominant religion of Islam, but were very different in terms of language, ethnicity and culture.’ She looked around smugly. ‘The East Pakistanis voted for a political party that advocated autonomy for the East but were blocked by the government in the West, which led to mass protests and eventually war.’

‘Very good, Feroza.’ Miss Akram looked impressed.

Feroza beamed with pride. ‘Thank you, miss.’

‘*Teacher’s pet*,’ Sania hissed in her ear.

‘You’re just jealous,’ Feroza whispered back.

The thing Feroza loved most about history was learning about Pakistan. She knew it was still a relatively young country, one which had a lot to do before it would catch up with the rest of the world, but they had just had a female prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, who had finished a second term in office only last year. That was progress. She often wondered what it would have been like being alive and living here before the British came, before the partition of 1947 when India had been hastily and brutally carved up by the Raj. She imagined the people from all backgrounds, cultures and religions living seemingly peacefully side by side. The bell rang, marking the end of class. She gathered up her things.

‘Did you have to embarrass the rest of us like that?’ Sania asked as they made their way to the school gates.

‘Sania, it’s not my fault you don’t do the reading before class.’ Feroza shrugged. ‘Maybe if you spent more time studying, you would know the answers too.’ She stopped to wipe the sweat from her forehead. ‘It’s so hot,’ she complained. ‘Can’t we take a rickshaw home?’

‘And who is going to pay for that?’ Sania demanded. ‘Do you have the money?’

Feroza shook her head.

‘Then we are walking.’ Sania grabbed Feroza’s hand. ‘Come on, Azeem will be waiting.’

Azeem was Sania’s brother. He came from helping his dad out at the market each day to walk the two of them home. Sania lived two streets away from Feroza and their parents knew each other. Feroza’s dad bought meat from Sania’s dad’s market stall, so she was allowed to walk home with them.

Sania spotted her brother and headed towards him. ‘Salaam,’ she said to him, handing him her school bag. He gestured for Feroza to do the same.

‘It’s okay, I can carry my own things,’ Feroza said. It was the same thing she told him every day.

He shook his head. ‘Give it to me. I will carry your bag for you,’ Azeem said quietly.

Feroza handed him her bag. ‘Thank you,’ she said. He nodded.

Azeem led the way. The streets of North Nazimabad were heavy with traffic. They had to navigate a busy roundabout where several lanes of traffic came at them haphazardly. People on mopeds whizzed passed, honking the horns. Brightly coloured buses inched out from the roads, not waiting for other vehicles to give way. Azeem cautioned them as they walked past a stray dog who was nursing her pups on the side of the road. All Feroza could think about was getting home and lying underneath the ceiling fan in her bedroom.

They eventually got to Feroza’s street.

‘You can leave me here, if you want,’ she said to Sania. ‘You don’t have to walk me to the door, it’s too hot.’

‘Are you sure?’ Sania asked.

‘Yes. I’ll be fine.’

‘Okay, Azeem. Let’s go,’ Sania said to her brother.

Azeem shook his head. 'No, we will walk you all the way home,' he said to Feroza.

'But Azeem, it's *so hot!*' Sania complained. 'She said she will be fine. I can see her house from here.'

But Azeem had already started down the street. Feroza looked at Sania, shrugged and followed. They got to her house. Azeem handed her back her school bag.

'Thank you,' she said. 'See you tomorrow.' Azeem nodded and headed back up the street, Sania in tow.



Sania wasn't in school the next day. She had come down with a kidney infection and the doctor had advised a few days of rest. Feroza planned to get a rickshaw home that afternoon. She would get the money to pay for it from her mum; she knew her parents would prefer that to her walking home on her own. It was another hot day. She came out of the school gates and headed towards the main road in the hopes of flagging down a rickshaw.

'Feroza! Salaam,' a voice called from behind her. She turned to look. It was Azeem.

'Salaam, Azeem. What are you doing here?' she asked, confused.

'I've come to walk you home, same as always,' Azeem said. 'Shall I take your bag?'

'But I thought with Sania off—'

'I walk you both home,' he said. 'Dad said I should make sure you get home safely too.'

Feroza stared at him. Was she allowed to walk home alone with a boy? She wasn't sure. If his dad knew about it and her dad had previously approved, then she supposed it wouldn't do any harm. And besides, it would save her parents the rickshaw fare.

'Okay, well, let's go then,' she said.

'I'll take your bag,' Azeem held out his hand. Feroza gave him her bag and they set off.

'How is Sania?' she asked.

'Not well. The doctors gave her an injection of antibiotics and want to see her again today,' Azeem replied. 'Careful,' he said, pointing at some excrement on the road. Feroza side-stepped it just in time.

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

'Be careful here,' Azeem said. 'Aunty Sajda's goat has got loose again. She can be very dangerous.'

They all knew about Aunty Sajda's goat, Pasanti. She was old and probably a bit senile, and only gave a little milk each day. Really she ought to be slaughtered for meat, but after Uncle Mohnis died, Sajda only had the goat to keep her company.

'I'll be careful,' Feroza said. She had heard of Pasanti running at strangers if she felt cornered.

They got to Feroza's house.

'Thank you,' she said, taking back her bag. 'Do you think Sania will be back tomorrow?'

'I'm not sure,' Azeem replied. 'I'll walk you home either way.' He turned and walked off.

Her mum was in the kitchen, preparing dinner.

'Assalamualaikum, Mum,' she said.

Her mum looked at her and then the clock. 'Walaikum salam,' she said. 'You're late.'

'Sania is ill, she has an infection,' Feroza explained. 'I was going to get a rickshaw home, but Azeem came anyway to walk me home.'

Her mum furrowed her eyebrows. 'Alone?' she asked.

Feroza nodded. 'I suppose he wanted to make sure I got home safely.'

Her mum looked at her. 'So why are you late?'

'My last class ran over time,' Feroza lied. She could see that her mum wouldn't be happy if she knew she had not only been

walking home with a boy, unaccompanied, but taking her time with it.

There was a pause as her mum looked at her.

‘Go wash your hands and help me with the rotis,’ she eventually said. ‘Your father and brothers will be home soon.’



Sania still wasn't in school the next day. Azeem waited for Feroza at the gates. She handed him her bag and off they set. The street vendors were setting up their stalls, hoping to entice people with the smell of their food and repetitive calls.

‘Do you like gol gappay?’ he said.

‘Gol gappay?’ Feroza asked, confused by the question.

‘Yes, gol gappay,’ Azeem repeated. ‘You do know what they are, don't you?’

‘Of course I do,’ Feroza replied.

‘Well, that vendor over there does the best gol gappay in all of North Nazimabad.’ Azeem pointed at a man who was busy frying crispy puris in oil. ‘You should try them.’

‘Maybe one day,’ Feroza replied. She watched as the puris puffed out into hollow balls in the hot oil. The man pulled them out, placing them carefully inside a glass box. She knew she didn't have enough money to waste it on street food.

‘Why not now?’ Azeem said, excitedly. ‘I haven't eaten anything all day.’

‘I should get home . . .’ Feroza said. Her mum would worry if she was late again. ‘And I don't have any money.’

‘It's only a few rupees, and besides, we sold out on lamb at the market today so Dad gave me a bit extra.’ He looked at her. ‘Come on.’

‘Azeem, I don't want to be late.’

‘We will eat fast.’ Azeem was already at the vendor. ‘Give me two portions, and don't be stingy on the size!’ he said. The vendor nodded, plating up several of the gol gappay, filling

them with the mix of potato, onions and chickpeas and finally pouring in some spicy water. 'You have to eat them fresh and all in one go.' He opened his mouth and placed one of the filled balls inside, laughing as some of the water escaped and rolled down his chin.

'You are making a mess,' Feroza said. 'Let me show you how to do it properly.' She took one of the gol gappay, placing it inside of her mouth. It tasted delicious but was too big to eat all at once, so some of the water and chickpeas escaped. Azeem burst into fits of laughter.

'Show me how it's done, eh?' he said. They tried several times to eat a whole one in one go, but neither succeeded. 'Right, come on,' Azeem said. 'We don't want to worry your mum.'

He walked her to her door and handed her back her school bag. She thanked him and rushed inside.



For the first time since she could remember, Feroza found herself looking forward to the end of school. The clock seemed to tick along slowly all day. Eventually the end-of-school bell rang, so she quickly gathered up her things and rushed out to the gates. He was there.

'Sania tells me you like history,' Azeem enquired.

Had he been talking about her with his sister? Feroza felt something inside of her she hadn't felt before. She didn't know how to describe it but it felt good – jittery, but good. 'Yes, it's my favourite subject,' she replied. 'I like learning about our culture, where it came from, how it has been shaped over the years. Usually by outside influences.'

'What is it about our culture you like so much?' Azeem said as they walked past a cow that was tethered to an iron gate.

'I don't know,' Feroza mused. 'I suppose I like how it has stood the test of time. So many things have changed over the

years, especially with British rule, but we have held on to our values. The things that make us Pakistani.'

'And what is it that makes us Pakistani?' he asked, suddenly stopping to look at her.

His stare felt simultaneously uncomfortable and pleasant. She looked away. 'I don't know. Everything, I suppose. Our religion, food, dress, country, language, values – so many things. But things that are easily lost if not looked after.'

Azeem nodded. 'You are very clever,' he said, smiling at her.

Feroza felt herself blushing. They got to her door.

'I bought you this,' Azeem said, handing her over a plastic bag.

'What is it?' Feroza asked, taking the bag and peering inside.

'Chicken thighs, freshly slaughtered this morning. They will make a good karahi. Thighs have the best flavour.'

'Thank you,' Feroza said. He was staring at her intensely. 'I'd better go in.'

He nodded. 'See you tomorrow.'

'Assalamualaikum,' she said to her mum, who was sitting on the sofa sewing. 'Azeem gave us this, says it's fresh from this morning.'

'What is it?' her mum asked.

'Chicken thighs.'

Her mum took the bag and looked inside. 'Feroza, we can't afford all of these thighs.'

'He doesn't want any money, Mum,' Feroza said. 'I think it is a gift.'

Her mum looked confused. 'A gift for what?'

Feroza shrugged. 'I don't know, but he didn't want paying, so I took them.'

Her mum stood up and went to the kitchen. She placed the thighs in the fridge. 'Feroza?' she said.

'Yes.'

'Don't tell your dad about these thighs.'

‘Why not? He loves chicken,’ Feroza replied.

‘Yes, but you don’t want him getting the wrong idea about why they were given to you,’ her mum explained.

‘What do you mean?’ Feroza said. ‘They were from Azeem. Dad knows the family.’

‘Just listen to me, okay. Don’t tell him,’ her mum said sternly. Feroza nodded.

‘We will have them for dinner tomorrow. I’ll tell your father I got them cheap from a street merchant. Now go get changed out of your uniform, we have to get dinner ready.’



Poor Sania was off for the next two weeks with her kidney infection. Azeem would wait for Feroza each afternoon at the gate.

‘Here,’ he said, handing her a book. ‘I found this at the book stall at the market, I thought you would like it.’

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘A book, silly!’ He laughed.

‘I know that. But what kind of book?’

‘A book about Pakistani heritage,’ he replied. ‘My reading isn’t so good, but Pervais who owns the stall says it’s all the different kinds of people in Pakistan and where they came from.’

Feroza took the book out of the paper bag and stared at it. She had never been given such a thoughtful gift before.

‘Don’t you like it?’ Azeem asked.

‘I do,’ she said slowly.

‘Good. Pervais says it covers all the ethnic groups of our great country: Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Kashmiris, Uzbeks. He even says there is a chapter on the Afghans in the North.’

Feroza nodded, turning the book over in her hands. ‘Thank you. You didn’t have to spend your money on me.’

‘That’s okay. I don’t read as many books as you, but I know

Pakistani culture is made up of many different things and many different people.’ Azeem started walking again. ‘We’d better hurry, or we will be late.’



Feroza pushed the front door open. Her mum was waiting for her inside.

‘Is Sania back yet?’ she asked.

‘No, not yet. Azeem says she is getting better and might be back next week.’

Her mum nodded. ‘Did he walk you home again?’

Feroza also nodded. She didn’t like the tone of her mother’s voice.

‘Did anyone see you?’ her mum asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The neighbours. Did anyone see you alone with that boy?’ her mum demanded.

‘I don’t know. We weren’t doing anything, just walking. So what if they saw us?’ Feroza was confused.

‘Get changed before your father gets home,’ her mum replied.



The last class of the day was science, and Feroza took notes as the teacher explained how to balance out chemical equations. She looked at the clock. Only half an hour to go before she would see Azeem again. When the bell went, she rushed to the bathroom, took her hair out of its usual plait and brushed out the waves until it was smooth. She had put some of her mum’s lipstick in her bag that morning and she quickly applied it before heading to the gates. There was the usual rush of students and parents milling around. She looked at the spot where Azeem usually waited. He wasn’t there. *He must be late*, she thought. She hurried over so she could wait for him.

Eventually the number of people started to dwindle as parents took their children home.

‘Salaam, Feroza,’ a voice called from behind her.

She turned to look. It was her father.

‘Walaikum salam, Abu,’ she said, looking to see if Azeem was anywhere.

‘Who are you looking for?’ her dad asked.

‘Sania’s brother Azeem. He usually walks the two of us home,’ Feroza said. Her dad knew this.

‘I will be walking you home from now on,’ her dad replied. ‘Come on.’

‘What about your work?’ Feroza enquired.

‘I have made arrangements. Hurry.’

Feroza obeyed. Where was Azeem? Why was her father here? She struggled to keep up with her heavy bag of books. They eventually arrived home. Her dad stood at the door. ‘Go inside, I have to go back to work. I will see you tonight.’

She went inside. Her mum was chopping onions in the kitchen.

‘Mum, why did Abu come and collect me from school today?’ she asked.

Her mum put her knife down and walked over to her daughter. Without saying anything, she took Feroza’s bag and emptied the contents onto the floor. The lipstick rolled across the tiles, coming to a halt by the table. Her mum went to pick it up.

‘Why did you take this?’ she asked.

Feroza didn’t say anything. Her mum pursed her lips and nodded.

‘Go get changed, we need to prepare dinner.’

Feroza didn’t answer. She picked her things up off the floor, putting them back in her bag, and went to her room.

After she had finished making the rotis, Feroza set the table. Her dad returned home from the office. Her brother was still

at the shop and would eat later. Her mum brought over the daal she had been preparing.

‘Feroza, could you get me a glass of water?’ her dad asked. She got up and went to the kitchen to fill a jug. Returning to the table, she poured her father a glass. ‘Feroza, how old are you now?’ he asked.

She looked at him, puzzled. He knew how old she was. ‘Eighteen,’ she replied.

‘I was speaking to Uncle Rehman today. You know his son, Abdul?’

Feroza shook her head. She didn’t know Abdul.

‘He is a good boy with a good job. He has plans to go and work in England.’

Feroza didn’t say anything.

‘I think he will be a good match for you,’ her dad said. ‘He will look after you.’

‘But Abu—’ she said, trying to protest.

‘I have spoken to your mother and she thinks it is a good idea too.’

Feroza looked at her mum.

‘England, beta,’ she said. ‘Such a good opportunity.’

Feroza finished her daal quietly.

‘Can I finish college first?’ she eventually asked.

‘You can continue with college until the wedding,’ her dad said. ‘After that, it’s up to your husband.’

Feroza nodded, trying her best not to cry.

‘Good, that’s settled then,’ her dad said proudly. ‘I’ll ring Rehman tomorrow to tell them the good news.’

Feroza helped clear the table after dinner, and then went to her room. She could hear her parents talking in the living room. She took out the book Azeem had given her. She flicked through the pages, stopping every so often to read a paragraph. She probably wouldn’t have any need for it now, she thought. She would be moving to England; what use was Pakistani culture

there? She'd be leaving it all behind – her family, her culture, the traditions she loved so much. She held tightly to the book. She would take it with her, she thought. An act of defiance, a reminder of who she was and where she came from. She stopped flicking through and went back to the beginning, chapter one. She wanted to know everything.



Part One

**London,
Twenty-Five
Years Later**



Chapter One

Yousef



YOUSEF WAS STANDING ON the sidelines watching his girlfriend play football while rehearsing different ways to break her heart. He was also trying not to get sauce on his white shirt as he ate his cheeseburger. But every time he took a bite, the meat slipped further back in the bun which increased the threat level to his shirt. He decided enough was enough – on both food and his internal monologuing – and stuffed the rest of the burger in his mouth, wiping his hands on the cheap paper napkins the takeaway had provided.

Jess's football team were practising for their final game of the year. They'd had a good season, and if they won their next game, they could top the National University League table. The stakes were high but for Yousef they felt insurmountable.

The whistle blew for the end of training, pulling Yousef out of his thoughts. Jessica ran over to him. Her hair was tied in a ponytail and she wore a blue headband to stop stray strands falling in her face as she darted across the pitch. She gave him a kiss on the lips. The taste of her strawberry lip balm mixed with the salt of her sweat flooded Yousef's senses.

'You taste like burger,' she said, taking a sip from her water bottle. Yousef didn't say anything. 'Everything okay?' Jess asked,

handing him her water bottle so that she could pull her pony-tail tighter.

'Yeah, fine, just feeling guilty for not having got you one,' Yousef said.

'It's okay, I'm going out for dinner with the girls tonight, remember?' Jess gestured to her teammates who were heading back to the changing rooms. 'But I'll come over after if you're still going to be awake?'

'Yeah, sounds good.' He kissed her again before she ran to catch up with the rest of her team. He heard her laughing loudly as they all disappeared into the old sports hall.

Yousef could have kicked himself. She had been standing right there. He should have told her but he had bottled it again. He had resolved to tell her today, right after the football practice, but as soon as she had kissed him he knew it had been a futile trip. He screwed the burger wrapper into a ball and, taking aim, he threw it into the litter bin half a metre away. He missed. It wasn't his day. He picked it up and placed it inside of the bin, looking around to see if anyone had seen his failed effort. He was alone. Throwing his backpack over his shoulder, he went home.



'So did you tell her?' Rohit asked as Yousef entered the house.

'No, she was busy . . . it wasn't the right time,' Yousef said, dropping his rucksack on the floor.

'There's never going to be a right time. Just bloody get on and do it.'

Rohit was Yousef's housemate as well as being his best friend. They'd met on the first day of university, five years before. Yousef's parents had dropped him off and helped him unpack. Like most of the freshers, he'd chosen to spend his first year in the shared university dormitories rather than individual flats. Yousef figured that by sharing a kitchen and bathroom he would make more friends.

‘It’s not very clean, is it?’ Yousef’s mum had said back then when she’d inspected the shower. ‘There is mould on the ceiling.’

‘It’ll be fine, Mum,’ Yousef had said quietly, looking around to make sure none of the other students could see them.

Yousef’s parents always wore traditional Pakistani clothing. When they were home in Birmingham it was fine, but here he felt they stuck out like a sore thumb. The other parents, who were mostly white, were wearing toned-down dresses or smart shirts. Unfortunately, there didn’t appear to be a ‘toned-down’ version of Pakistani clothing. His mother wore a powder-blue kameez emblazoned with a large floral print and, despite the rain, sandals that were covered in glass jewels. His more conservative father wore the traditional Pakistani kurta, which was essentially a very long green shirt and billowy white trousers. Yousef had looked around furtively, hoping nobody would see them as they headed towards the kitchen.

‘Look at that cooker, it’s still got last year’s food on it,’ his mum had said, grimacing.

‘Do you want me to make a complaint to the university?’ his dad had asked.

‘No, Dad. I will just use the microwave,’ Yousef had said, ushering them out of the kitchen.

‘Beta, you should have gone to Birmingham University, that way you could have stayed at home where it is nice and clean,’ his mum had said.

‘I told you, Mum, I didn’t get in. With medicine you just go where you get a place.’ Yousef had lied. He’d been offered a place at Birmingham Medical School but he had torn up the letter as soon as it arrived. He’d wanted to get away from Birmingham, away from his parents who governed his every move. Besides, London wasn’t a million miles away. It had still felt like a compromise to Yousef, who would have been happy to go as far as possible if needed.

‘Well then, they are silly for turning my boy down,’ his mum

had said, squeezing his cheek. 'You are going to make a fantastic surgeon.'

'Thanks, Mum,' Yousef had said. He'd had no idea if he wanted to be a surgeon. 'I think that's everything. I'll be fine from here.'

'Make sure you focus on your work,' his father had said as he walked them out.

'I will, Dad.'

'And don't forget to put the meals I made you in the freezer. There is enough for two weeks,' his mum had said. 'I will send more once you have eaten that.'

'Yes, Mum.' He had no intention of putting them in the freezer. He hadn't wanted to be known as the boy who smelled of curries on his first week. They had gone straight in the bin. He'd waved his parents goodbye and went back to his room.

He had been keen for them to leave immediately so he could get on with starting university life, but the minute they left he'd felt suddenly alone. He hadn't known how to 'start' his university life. Was he just supposed to wander around and hope to be accepted into a clique of some sort? He had laid down on his bed wishing his parents had stayed a bit longer. He could hear the chatter of the other new students and their parents through the door. He'd wanted to go home.

Eventually Yousef had forced himself to get up and put some music on. He'd chosen the music he played carefully, conscious that everyone outside could probably hear it. He'd picked a hip hop artist who wasn't too mainstream to be considered a sell-out but also not too underground so nobody had heard of him. He'd propped his door open deliberately so the music resonated down the corridor.

'Love this tune, mate.' A boy had stood in the doorway. 'Have you heard the remix?'

'Yeah, I have it here,' Yousef had said, pointing to his collection of vinyl.

‘Whoa, are those proper records? That’s sick,’ the boy had said. ‘Can I see them?’

Yousef had gestured for the boy to come in. ‘I’m Yousef.’

‘Rohit.’ The boy still had his eyes focused on Yousef’s record collection. ‘You got some seriously good stuff here.’

‘What are you studying, Rohit?’ Yousef had asked.

‘Accountancy, you?’

‘Medicine,’ Yousef had replied.

‘My parents would have loved it if I’d wanted to study medicine. I think that’s every Asian parent’s dream,’ Rohit had said, sitting on the end of the bed.

‘I actually wanted to be a vet, but my mum wouldn’t let me.’

‘Nah, you don’t get many Indian vets.’ Rohit had laughed.

‘You get even fewer Pakistani ones!’ Yousef had said, laughing too. ‘Do you know what she said when I told her I was going to apply for veterinary school?’

‘What?’

‘Son, why do you want to be a vet? When the white folk kick us out of this country, nobody has pets in Pakistan. You will be jobless, on the streets.’ Yousef had done his best impression of his mother. ‘Be a doctor, it will be easy to get you married then.’

They had both fallen into fits of laughter.

‘What did you tell her?’ Rohit had asked.

‘Well, I’m studying medicine, so she got her way.’

‘She sounds like a bit of a traditionalist,’ Rohit had said.

‘You have no idea. Mind you, with Brexit she might be right.’

Rohit laughed.



Yousef had met Jessica at the freshers’ ball. It hadn’t really been a ‘ball’ – none of the boys wore suits and none of the girls were in posh frocks. It had been no different to any of the student nights at the student guild, it just had a different name. Yousef

had never had a girlfriend before. In fact, his parents had strictly forbidden him from talking to girls.

‘You are going to university to become a doctor, don’t mess around with girls. They will distract you,’ his mother had said. ‘I will find you a nice girl to marry after you qualify.’

He’d paid the barman for his drinks and headed back towards Rohit who was sitting at a table with Steve, another student who lived on their corridor. He’d handed them their beers and taken a sip of his drink.

‘What’s that you’re drinking?’ Steve had asked, gesturing to Yousef’s drink.

‘Coke.’

‘Don’t you drink?’

‘No, I’m Muslim, we don’t drink,’ Yousef had said. He felt suddenly out of place, with everyone laughing loudly and drinking shots or pints.

‘But Rohit’s drinking,’ Steve had said as Rohit took a huge gulp of his beer.

‘I’m Hindu, mate. We can drink as much as we want.’ Rohit had downed his pint to emphasize his point. ‘You want another one?’ he’d said to Steve.

‘Yeah, go on.’

Rohit had disappeared, leaving Yousef with Steve.

‘So you’ve never had a drink?’ Steve had asked. Yousef had shaken his head. ‘Wow.’

Before Yousef had been able to answer, three girls had laughed loudly behind him.

‘Is anyone sitting there?’ one of them had said. She’d pointed at Rohit’s chair. The girl had brown hair that fell softly over her shoulders and the softest-looking lips Yousef had ever seen.

‘Actually there i—’ Steve had said.

‘No, it’s free,’ Yousef had cut in. ‘You can sit down.’

‘Great, thanks.’ The girl had picked the chair up and taken it to another table where other girls were sitting. Yousef had

watched as she tossed her head back and laughed with the other girls. He hadn't been able to hear what they were saying but he'd had a sudden urge to know what it was.

'Hey, where's my chair gone?' Rohit had stood holding three drinks, looking confused.

'Yousef gave it away,' Steve had said, pointing at the group of girls, 'to that girl over there.'

Rohit had looked to see where Steve was pointing and noticed Yousef was staring in the same direction.

'Just go and talk to her, mate,' Steve had said, placing a hand on Yousef's shoulder.

'Nah, she isn't my type.' Yousef had laughed.

He'd lied, he'd been nervous. The truth was, he hadn't known how to simply go up and start a conversation with a girl who was clearly out of his league. As a result of his mum constantly telling him about the perils of the opposite sex, Yousef had feared talking to all girls. They had been an enigma, to be wary of in case they jeopardized any chance he had of becoming the surgeon he didn't know he wanted to be. He had simply expected one to be handed to him on a plate when the time came for him to be married, and his parents would make sure that happened.

There was something different about this girl. Yousef felt as if he was in a trance. Every one of her movements seemed like a beautiful dance in motion. He noticed how she pulled her earlobe ever so slightly when she was listening intently to what her friends were saying and when she laughed Yousef felt his heart tug. This had been a new feeling; none of the girls he'd come across before made him feel this way. She'd noticed him staring at her, and he'd quickly looked away.



It would be the following week before Yousef saw the girl from the freshers' ball again. Yousef was sitting in the lecture theatre; he had arrived early. It was his first medical school lecture. The

previous week had been filled with joining various university clubs and societies but now it was time to work.

The lecture theatre felt huge and steeped in history. In the corridor outside were pictures of the medical school deans from years gone by. Yousef wondered how many doctors had started sitting right there, the same as him. It was set out like an auditorium and Yousef sat himself down in the third row. It felt like a safe bet. He'd wanted to sit in the front row but didn't want to appear too keen and the second row already had people on it. So, the third row it was.

Professor Moore had given the lecture and he'd joked that he was a vascular surgeon in his 'spare time' but preferred teaching. He'd been wearing a pair of jeans and a white shirt that hung loose, making it look as though he had carefully planned his casual look.

I'm a professor and a surgeon, but I am also hip and cool, like you guys.

Yousef had got out his laptop to take notes. To his disappointment, the lecture had contained very little medical information. Professor Moore had begun by saying how privileged they all were for getting into medicine and embarking on a 'trusted and noble' profession. Yousef had heard all of this before. In fact, he'd used these same words during his interview to get into medical school. He'd closed his computer and allowed his mind to drift. He hadn't made any friends on the course yet. Neither Rohit nor Steve were studying medicine. He needed to find a group he could talk shop with.

The front row had been full of students who were hanging off Professor Moore's every word. Technically, everyone at medical school was a bit of a geek. You had to work hard and get top grades to get in. They also liked it if you excelled in an outside interest – something that said you were a 'fully rounded individual'. Yousef had briefly taken up ballroom dancing in order to beef up his application form; when his

offer for a place at medical school came through, he never attended another class.

He had decided the crowd at the front of the lecture theatre looked too ‘fully rounded’ for his liking.

He had turned his attention to the second row – a group of students were sitting there that appeared to know each other. They had been whispering things and smiling as Professor Moore talked. Yousef had noted that most of them looked like they hadn’t washed anytime recently – they had a very earthy, hippy vibe about them. They wore loose baggy trousers bearing elephant prints that Yousef had only ever seen worn by people on television who belonged to a commune, and they had corduroy jackets and backpacks that bore environmental symbols. Yousef was all for saving the environment, but this group had looked a bit too hardcore for him. And besides, he had tried to go vegan once for a biology project but was immediately derailed by his mother who refused to cook separate meals for him or buy anything other than cow’s milk.

‘You think I have time to cook two dinners?’ she had said firmly to him. ‘You eat what we eat, or you go to Asda yourself and buy your own food. I’m not your slave.’ Yousef didn’t have the funds to buy his own food from Asda, so he did what he always did: succumbed to his mother’s will.

To his left had been the religious groups who had clearly found each other during freshers’ week: the Muslim boys and girls, who sat separate from each other. The Jewish students, who were paying very close attention, and a group of neatly dressed Christians. No, none of them had been for Yousef.

Yousef had looked at a group of black students who were sitting to his right but hesitated. He’d joined the Afro-Caribbean society during freshers’ week, his only point of reference being that he liked R’n’B music. They had welcomed him with open arms and told him about the activities they

ran. Although he wasn't black, he felt a kinship with anyone from a minority background. A connection that was there but didn't have a name. He couldn't see any familiar faces so decided he'd keep them in reserve in case he couldn't find another group of friends. Not far from them were the Malaysian and Chinese students – an impossible group to penetrate, Yousef told himself.

He'd turned around and taken a quick glance at the back row, which tired-looking boys in caps and girls in tracksuits dominated. In any other situation the current group on the back row would be considered geeks or swots, but now they were in a room where everyone needed top grades to even be there so these lot were simply the least geeky and swotty and were now the 'cool' crowd. Yousef felt slightly intimidated by them, so he'd decided he would also keep them on the reserve list too.

'Is anyone sitting here?' a voice had said, bringing Yousef out of his thoughts. He looked up. It had been the girl from the freshers' ball, the one that Yousef had not been able to stop thinking about. He'd quickly grabbed his bag from the seat and gestured for her to sit down.

'No, it's free,' he'd said, trying to sound as casual as possible.

The girl had smiled at him and sat down. Professor Moore had broken his 'cool' persona to give them a pointed look which simultaneously reprimanded the girl for being late and also sent out a message for them to shut up.

Yousef had kept chancing sideways glances at the girl. Her hair had been tied loosely in a bun and she'd worn a grey T-shirt with a pair of jeans. Yousef had thought she looked even more beautiful that day than when he had first met her. She must have felt as though she was being watched as her eyes had darted over in his direction, and he'd quickly looked away, hoping she hadn't seen him staring at her.

'My final words to you all are: remember to treat the patient,

not just the disease,' Professor Moore had said proudly as he finished off the lecture, staring triumphantly into the crowd. There had been an awkward silence where Yousef thought Professor Moore had expected applause. Clearly one of the Jewish students had the same thought and had started clapping slowly. Nobody else joined in.

'Oh no, you don't have to clap,' Professor Moore had said, not in the least bit embarrassed.

'What a wanker,' the girl had muttered under her breath. Yousef had snorted, trying to suppress a laugh. She'd looked at him and smiled.

'That's the second time you have asked for my seat,' he'd said to her.

'Sorry?' She had looked confused.

'Oh, you probably don't remember but you asked to borrow a chair from our table at the freshers' ball,' he'd said, trying his best to keep the conversation going.

'I can't really remember much from that night, sorry,' she'd said. 'It was a heavy night with the football girls.'

'You play football?' Yousef had looked surprised. The girl hadn't matched up to his idea of what football girls looked like.

'Don't look so surprised, girls play football too.' She'd laughed. 'Usually better than men.' She'd winked at him. He hadn't known what to say. 'I'm Jess.' She'd held out her hand.

'Yousef,' he'd said, shaking it.

'Nice to meet you, Yousef,' she'd said as she stuffed her notebook back into her rucksack.

'Jess, do you fancy maybe going for a coffee?' Yousef had chanced it.

'What, now?' She'd looked surprised.

'Unless you're busy?' He'd felt his face heating up. One of the advantages to having brown skin was not blushing but it didn't stop the heat rising into his face.

‘Sure, go on then, and you can fill me in on whether I missed anything at the start of this lecture.’

‘Well, I can tell you that now: you didn’t.’ They’d both laughed.



Yousef and Jessica sat together in every lecture that week. He looked forward to seeing her each day. She asked a lot of questions. In the past when white folk had asked about his culture Yousef felt as though they were mocking him or getting him to justify something they had read that no longer applied to his religion. It was always ‘What, you’re a Muslim? So that means you can have four wives, right?’ or, ‘Is it true women are forced to cover themselves in your religion?’ Yousef found himself inadvertently becoming the spokesperson for modern-day Muslims. But Jess was different, she would ask genuine, gentle and open questions about him and his culture. It wasn’t morbid curiosity but interest in *him*.

The more he learned about her, the more fascinated he became. She had a joy for life. Everything was something to be enthusiastic about, even the small things Yousef took for granted. They had been having lunch in a park and a butterfly had landed on a dandelion nearby. It hadn’t even registered with Yousef, but Jess had made it sound like the most wonderful thing on the planet. She talked of the patterns on the wings of the butterfly being unique to just that one insect and they had got up close so they could see its long tongue drinking from the dandelion.

‘That’s its proboscis,’ she’d said. ‘Isn’t it fascinating?’

Yousef hadn’t been looking at the butterfly any more, but at Jess. ‘Yes. Yes, it is.’

They had their first kiss a month after meeting. Jessica had initiated it – Yousef had been too nervous. He had never kissed a girl before. He had, of course, seen kisses on television when

his mum wasn't in the room. The first time he had seen it, he couldn't believe people put their tongues into other people's mouths – that was so gross. But the thought of Jess's tongue made him slightly dizzy. She caught him watching her lips one day whilst she was talking.

'You're looking at my mouth.' She smiled. His heart skipped a beat.

'No, I wasn't,' he protested.

'Yes, Yousef, you were. It's okay.' She smiled again and looked him in his eyes. The scents of the flowers around them suddenly became more vivid. 'Do you want to kiss me?'

'Yes,' he whispered. 'Very much.'

She waited. He didn't know what to do. She must have guessed. 'Let me show you.' She took his hand and their fingers interlocked. She tilted her head and moved her face towards his. Her lips were as soft as the ripest of strawberries, and he could taste her breath. He pushed his lips against hers, taking charge. He felt the flicker of her tongue inside his mouth; he did the same to her. Then their tongues met and it wasn't gross at all. It was wonderful. Yousef didn't want to stop. After a few seconds she pulled away.

'Not bad for your first time,' she said.

'That was . . . amazing,' he said, dazed. She laughed and they kissed again.



They officially became boyfriend and girlfriend a few days later. It was new territory for both of them. Jess had had boyfriends before but nobody as serious as Yousef. Their first night together had been awkwardly magical. They were both nervous but it felt right. Yousef knew what he was supposed to do, but still felt woefully unprepared. They took it slow, and the night culminated in a wonderful moment for the both of them. Yousef told Jess he loved her the following morning, and she said the

same. They went out for coffee and scrambled eggs. It had been perfect.

‘So, when do I get to meet your parents?’ Jessica said to him one morning as they were lying in bed.

‘Sorry, what?’ Yousef’s voice came out much higher than he had wanted it to. The question had caught him off guard.

‘Your parents, when are you going to introduce me to them?’ She gave his hand a squeeze.

The thought of introducing Jessica to his parents had never occurred to Yousef. He had always intended to keep his university life very separate from his family life. In his head, the two would never meet.

‘Why would you want to meet my parents?’ he asked. Jessica untangled herself from his arms and sat up in the bed.

‘Because that’s what couples do.’

‘Well, I haven’t met your parents.’

‘They’re coming up to visit in a couple of weeks. They want to take us both out for dinner to meet you.’ She ran her hand through his hair. ‘Mum says you look handsome in the photos I’ve sent them.’

‘You’ve sent them photos?’ Yousef felt like he was being blindsided.

‘Of course I did, I tell my mum everything,’ she said. ‘Obviously Dad will do the whole “make sure you treat my daughter right” thing, but he’s a pussycat really.’ She laughed.

‘Your dad knows about me too?’ he said, his mouth becoming dry.

‘Yes.’ Jessica stopped playing with his hair. ‘Yousef, what did your mum say when you told her about me?’

Yousef stared at the ceiling. It had always surprised him that Jessica was friends with her parents. She called them up every other day and he could hear her chatting to them in turn, laughing and going into the details of her day. He had even heard her casually swear whilst talking to them and they hadn’t told her off.

He had a very different relationship with his parents. He might speak to them every day – at his mother’s insistence – but the conversation revolved around what he had eaten, whether he was studying hard and who exactly he had spoken to that day. It was more interrogation than conversation. He had definitely not told his mum about Jessica. It would confirm her worst nightmares.

Also, he feared for Jessica’s safety if his mum found out about them.

‘Yousef?’ Jessica said, more firmly this time.

‘I haven’t told her about us yet,’ Yousef said quietly.

‘What?’

‘There just hasn’t been a good moment.’ He sat up to meet her gaze.

‘Yousef, it’s been eight months,’ Jessica said flatly. ‘Why haven’t you told your family about us?’

‘It’s complicated,’ he said, getting out of bed. ‘You wouldn’t understand.’

Jessica stood up. ‘Try explaining it to me then! Whenever we talk about your family, you just change the subject or go quiet, so how am I going to understand?’ She got dressed.

‘Hey, listen, don’t go,’ Yousef said. ‘I’ll make us breakfast.’

‘I’m happy to stay if you want to talk about your family with me.’ She looked at him. Yousef stayed silent. Jessica sighed and left.

Yousef sat on the bed. He thought about what Jessica had said. As naive as it sounded, he had hoped to keep Jessica a secret from his parents for ever. He didn’t have an endgame, he just assumed that the relationship would have fizzled out by now, but instead he had developed feelings towards Jessica and now missed her every time she left the room. Being away from his family meant he had the freedom to explore these feelings and he had never felt better.

When he returned home during the Christmas break, he resumed his role as the dutiful son, getting the meat from the

halal butcher's, going to the mosque with his dad and arguing with his sister over the television remote. Jessica was separate from this life, she didn't fit in. He had told her that the phone reception was poor where they lived so he couldn't ring her every day but would text.

'You are always on that bloody phone,' his mum said as they sat watching one of her favourite Indian dramas. 'Who keeps messaging you?'

'Just Rohit, Mum. It's nothing,' he said.

She had given him a knowing look. 'As long as it is just Rohit and not some girl.' Luckily, her drama show had begun so she wasn't giving him her full attention. He looked at his dad to see if he was listening. He had nodded off in his chair.

He had come back to university in January and his other life picked up where it had left off. He and Jessica were spending more time together and things just felt right. He was happy as long as the two parts of his life remained distinct. The way he saw it, nobody was losing out.

He was wrong.