

"A powerful, important, unforgettable book." —CHERYL STRAYED, author of *Wild*

HONOR

A detailed illustration of a mango branch with two mangoes and several green leaves. The mangoes are shown in various stages of ripeness, with one being more yellow and the other more green. The branch is set against a solid red background.

A Novel

THRITY UMRIGAR

Bestselling author of THE SPACE BETWEEN US



HONOR



a novel

Thrity Umrigar

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL 2022

For Feroza Freeland,
whose light brightens our path

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What we don't say
we carry in our suitcases, coat pockets, our nostrils.

—“Town Watches Them Take Alfonso,” ILYA KAMINSKY

This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.

—“Good Bones,” MAGGIE SMITH

HINDU WOMAN SUES BROTHERS WHO KILLED HER MUSLIM HUSBAND

BY SHANNON CARPENTER
South Asia Correspondent

BIRWAD, India—Her face is a constellation of scars.

Her left eye is welded shut, while a network of stitches has reassembled the melted cheek and lips. The fire rendered her left hand useless, but after reconstructive surgery, Meena Mustafa is once again able to hold a spoon in her right hand to feed herself.

The fire that took the life of her husband, Abdul, has long since been extinguished. He was allegedly set on fire by Ms. Mustafa's two brothers, Hindus who were infuriated by her elopement with a Muslim man. Police allege that the brothers tried to kill the couple to avenge the dishonor caused by the interfaith marriage.

“My body did not die the night of the fire,” Ms. Mustafa says. “But my life ended then.”

Now, a new fire glows in her heart—a burning desire for justice.

This made her defy the wishes of her embittered mother-in-law and her Muslim neighbors, and demand that the police reopen the case. With pro bono help from a group called Lawyers for Change, Ms. Mustafa is taking her brothers to court. She says it is to seek justice for her dead husband.

In a country where dowry deaths, bride burnings and cases of sexual harassment are commonplace, such an act of defiance makes Ms. Mustafa a singular figure in her community. But the move has also made her a social pariah in this small, conservative Muslim village, where many fear

retribution by the Hindu majority. Still, she is undeterred. “I’m fighting this case for the sake of my child. To tell my child that I fought for her father’s sake,” she says.

A petite, demure woman, Ms. Mustafa has a soft demeanor that masks an iron will. It is this same will that earlier allowed her to defy her older brother and get a job at the local sewing factory where she met her future husband.

Encouraged by her lawyer, she agreed to be interviewed in the hopes that her courage would inspire other Indian women to confront their perpetrators.

“Let the world know what they did to my Abdul,” she says. “People need to know the truth.”

BOOK ONE



CHAPTER ONE



THE AIR SMELLED of burnt rubber.

That was the first thing that Smita Agarwal noticed as she stepped out of the cool, rarefied air of the airport and into the warm, still Mumbai night. The next instant, she recoiled as the sound hit her—the low rumble of a thousand human voices, punctured by occasional barks of laughter and shrill police whistles. She gaped at the sight of the wall of people, standing behind the metal barriers, waiting for their relatives to emerge. She wondered if the old Indian custom of entire families converging to drop off travelers still prevailed in 2018, but before she could complete the thought, she felt her throat burn from the smell of exhaust fumes and her eardrums thrum from the blare of the cars just beyond the waiting crowd.

Smita stood still for a moment, cowering just a bit. She traveled more days of the year than not, her foreign correspondent job taking her around the globe, and yet, barely a few seconds into India, and already the country was overwhelming her, making her feel as if she had been hit by a force of nature, a tornado, maybe, or a tsunami that swept away everything in its path.

Her eyes fluttered shut for a moment, and she again heard the lap of the waves in the Maldives, the paradise she'd left hours earlier. In that moment, she hated all the weird confluence of events that had brought her to the one place she had spent her entire adult life avoiding—the fact that she'd happened to be on vacation so close to India when Shannon had desperately

needed her help, that Shannon's contact had procured her a six-month tourist visa in a matter of hours. Now, she wished his effort had failed.

Get a grip, Smita thought, echoing the stern talking-to she'd given herself during the flight. *Remember, Shannon is a dear friend*. A memory of Shannon making Papa smile during the dark days following Mummy's funeral flashed through her head. She forced herself to cast the image aside while peering through the mob, hoping to spot the driver that Shannon had sent. A man stared back at her brazenly and pursed his lips in a suggestive pout. She looked away, scanning the crowd for someone holding a sign with her name on it while reaching for her cell phone to call Shannon. But before she found her phone, she saw him—a tall man in a blue shirt holding up a cardboard sign emblazoned with her name. Relieved, she walked over to him. "Hi," she said, from across the metal barrier. "I'm Smita."

He looked at her, blinking, confusion on his face.

"You speak English?" she said sharply, realizing that she had asked him the question in that language. But her Hindi was rusty, and she felt self-conscious using it.

The man spoke at last, in perfect English. "You're Smita Agarwal?" he said, glancing at his sign. "But you were not supposed to get here until . . . The plane was early?"

"What? Yeah, I guess so. A little bit." She looked at him, wanting to ask where the car was, wanting to get out of the airport and into the Taj Mahal Palace hotel at Apollo Bunder, where, she hoped, a long hot shower and a comfortable bed awaited her. But he continued staring at her, and her annoyance rose. "So? Shall we go?" she asked.

He snapped to attention. "Yes, yes. Sorry. Sure. Please. Come around this way." He motioned for her to walk toward a gap in the barricades. She passed the boisterous, squealing reunions that were occurring around her,

the profusion of kisses bestowed on the faces and heads of teenagers by middle-aged women, the extravagant bear hugs with which grown men greeted one another. She looked away, not wanting to lose track of her driver as he pushed his way through the crowd toward an opening.

On the other side, he reached for her carry-on suitcase, then looked around, puzzled. “Where’s the rest of your luggage?”

She shrugged. “This is it.”

“Only one bag?”

“Yup. And my backpack.”

He shook his head.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said as they resumed walking. “It’s just that . . . Shannon said you were Indian.”

“I’m Indian American. But what does that . . . ?”

“I didn’t think there was an Indian anywhere in the world who could travel with only one suitcase.”

She nodded, remembering the tales her parents used to tell her of relatives traveling with suitcases the size of small boats. “True enough.” She peered at him, puzzled. “And you are . . . Shannon’s driver?”

Under the glow of a streetlamp, she caught the flash in his eyes. “You think I’m her chauffeur?”

She took in the blue jeans, the stylishly cut shirt, the expensive leather shoes—and knew she’d made a gaffe. “Shannon said she would send someone to pick me up,” she mumbled. “She didn’t say who. I just assumed . . .” She took in the bemused way he was looking at her. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s okay. Why sorry? Nothing wrong with being a driver. But in this case, I’m a friend of Shannon’s. I just offered to

pick you up since you were arriving so late.” He flashed her a quick half smile. “I’m Mohan, by the way.”

She pointed to herself. “I’m Smita.”

He waved the cardboard sign. “I know. Same as the Smita on the placard.”

They laughed awkwardly. “Thank you for doing this,” she said.

“No problem. This way to the car.”

“So, tell me,” Smita said as they walked. “How is Shannon doing?”

“She’s in a lot of pain. As you may be knowing, the hip’s definitely broken. Because of the weekend, they couldn’t do the operation. And now they’ve decided to wait a couple more days until Dr. Shahani gets back into town. He’s the best surgeon in the city. And hers will be a complicated case.”

She looked at him curiously. “And you’re—you’re close to Shannon?”

“We’re not boyfriend-girlfriend if that’s what you mean. But she’s my dear friend.”

“I see.” She envied Shannon this—as the South Asia correspondent for the paper, Shannon could put down roots, form friendships with the local people. Smita, whose beat was gender issues, was hardly ever in the same place for more than a week or two. No chance to stay in any place long enough to plant the seeds of friendship. She glanced at the suitcase that Mohan was carrying for her. Would he be surprised to know that she kept two other identical bags packed in her New York apartment, ready to go?

Mohan was saying something about Shannon, and Smita forced herself to listen. He mentioned how frightened Shannon had sounded when she’d called him from the hospital, how he had rushed to be by her side. Smita nodded. She remembered the time she’d been laid up with the flu in a hospital in Rio, and how isolating it had felt to be ill in a foreign country.

And that hospital was probably paradise compared with this one. Although Shannon had been covering India for—How long had it been? Three years, maybe?—Smita couldn't imagine her having to undergo surgery alone in a strange country.

“And the conditions in the hospital?” she asked Mohan. “They're good? She'll be okay?”

He stopped walking and turned to look at her, his eyebrows raised. “Yes, of course. She's at Breach Candy. One of the best hospitals. And India has some of the finest doctors in the world. It's now a medical destination, you know?”

She was amused by his wounded pride, his quickness to take insult, a quality she'd noticed in several of Papa's Indian friends, even the ones—*especially* the ones—who had lived in the States for a long time. “I didn't mean to be rude,” she said.

“No, it's okay. Many people still believe India is a backward country.”

She bit down on her lip, lest the thought that leapt into her mind escaped her lips—*It sure was, when I lived here*. “The new airport is gorgeous,” she said as a peace offering. “Light-years better than most American airports.”

“Yah. It's like a five-star hotel.”

They walked up to a small red car, and Mohan unlocked it. He heaved her suitcase into the trunk and then asked, “Would you like to sit in the back or front?”

She glanced at him, startled. “I'll ride in the front if that's okay.”

“Of course.” Even though his face was deadpan, Smita heard the quiver of laughter in his voice. “I just thought . . . Since you thought I'm Shannon's driver, maybe you wish to ride in the back.”

“I'm sorry,” she said, vaguely.

He pulled out of the parking lot, eased the car into the lane, then swore quietly at the bumper-to-bumper traffic heading out of the airport.

“Lots of cars, even at this time,” Smita said.

He made a clucking, exasperated sound. “Don’t ask, *yaar*. The traffic in this city has gone from bad to worse.” He glanced at her. “But don’t worry. Once we get on the main road, it will get better. I’ll have you at your hotel in no time.”

“Do you live near the Taj?”

“Me? No. I live in Dadar. Closer to the airport than to your hotel.”

“Oh,” she cried. “That’s ridiculous. I . . . I could’ve just taken a cab.”

“No, no. It’s not safe, for a woman to get in a cab at this hour. Besides, this is India. We would never allow a guest to take a taxi from the airport.”

She remembered her parents driving to Columbus Airport through the sleet and storms of Ohio winters, to pick up visitors. Indian hospitality. It was real. “Thank you,” she said.

“No mention.” He fiddled with the dial for the air-conditioning. “Are you comfortable? Hot? Cold?”

“Maybe turn up the air a notch? I can’t believe how hot it is here, even in January.”

Mohan gave her a quick glance. “The joys of global warming. Imported to poor countries like India from rich countries like yours.”

Was he one of those nationalist types, like Papa’s friend Rakesh, a man who railed against the West and had plotted his imminent return to India for the past forty years? And yet, Mohan wasn’t wrong, was he? She had often argued the same point herself. “Yup,” she said, too tired to start a political conversation, her eyelids beginning to get heavy with sleep.

Mohan must have sensed her fatigue. “Take a nap if you like,” he said. “We have at least another thirty minutes.”

“I’m fine,” she said, shaking her head, distracting herself by looking at the long line of shanties built on the sidewalk. Even at this late hour, a few men in shirtsleeves and lungis lounged near the open mouths of the huts, kerosene lamps burning inside some of them. Smita chewed on her lower lip. She was no stranger to third world poverty, but the tableau they were driving past was so unchanged from what she remembered from her childhood. It was if she had passed these very same slums and the same men the last time she and her family had driven to the airport twenty years before, in 1998. So much for the new, globalized India that she kept reading about.

“The government paid these people to vacate and go into government housing,” Mohan was saying. “But they refused.”

“Is that so?”

“So I’ve heard. But in a democratic country, how can you force people to relocate?”

There was a short silence, and Smita had the feeling that simply by staring so openly at the slums they were passing, she had made Mohan feel defensive about his city. She had seen this phenomenon often in her job, how middle-class people in poor countries bristled against the judgment of people in the West. Once, while she was in Haiti, a local official had almost spat in her face and cursed American imperialism when she’d tried questioning him about the corruption in his district. “I suppose you can’t blame them,” she said. “This is their home.”

“Exactly. This is what I try to tell my friends and coworkers. But they don’t understand what took you less than ten minutes to understand.”

Smita felt unexpectedly warmed by Mohan’s words, as if he’d presented her with a small trophy. “Thanks. But I used to live here, you know. So I get it.”

“You lived here? When?”

“When I was young. We left India when I was fourteen.”

“*Wah*. I had no idea. Even though Shannon told me you were Indian, I just assumed you were born abroad. You sound like a *pucca* American.”

She shrugged. “Thanks. I guess.”

“And you have family here?”

“Not really.” And before he could ask another question, she said, “And you? What do you do? Are you a journalist, also?”

“Ha. That’s a joke. I could never do what you and Shannon do. I’m not a good writer. No, I’m an IT guy. I work with computers. For Tata Consultancy. Have you heard of the Tatas?”

“Yes, of course. Didn’t they buy Jaguar and Land Rover several years ago?”

“That’s right. Tata makes everything, from cars to soap to power plants.” He rolled down his window a bit. “So, we’re going over the new Sea Link, which connects Bandra to Worli. It wasn’t here when you were living here, obviously. But it will cut down on our driving time a great deal.”

Smita took in the lights of the city as the car climbed up the cable bridge that spanned the dark waters of the Arabian Sea below them. “Wow. Mumbai looks like any other city in the world. We could be in New York or Singapore.” Except, she thought, for the acidic smell of the warm air blowing into the car. She was about to ask Mohan about the smell but thought better of it. She was a guest in his city and the truth was, the knot in her stomach was growing as they got closer to their destination. The truth was, she didn’t want to be in Mumbai. No matter how many beautiful bridges the city threw up, no matter how beguiling its new, bejeweled skyline, she didn’t want to be there. She would spend a few days with Shannon in the hospital, and then, as soon as she could, she would clear out.

It would be too late to rejoin the others in the Maldives, of course, but that was okay. It would be nice to return to her brownstone in Brooklyn for the rest of her leave. Maybe take in a movie or two. But there she was, in a car speeding toward her hotel room at the Taj. Speeding toward her old neighborhood.

Smita Agarwal looked out of the car window onto the streets of a city she had once loved, a city she'd spent the last twenty years trying to forget.