

Chapter 1

Jaanvi

Massachusetts, August 2019

If there was one thing that Jaanvi Chowdhury couldn't endure these days, it was stillness.

She had taken the week off to rest. On Saturday, she'd managed to sleep in until 6.30 a.m. On Sunday, she'd briefly reclined in a hammock with a novel. She had even gone for a massage and manicure on Monday. But by Tuesday, she was climbing the walls of her old Massachusetts colonial, desperate for something to do. Jaanvi took in a whiff of fumes from her so-called VOC-free paint and sighed. Clearly, the concept of a staycation was lost on her.

Instead of relaxing, she had painted the whole house this week—Pewter Gray, Retro Mint, Secret Cove, and even the more risqué Berry Frappe. But as she glanced around the living room on Friday night, she realized that neither the new colors that graced her walls nor the smell of fresh paint that permeated her house evoked the sense of renewal that she had hoped for.

She'd planned the time off back in May, after a rough patch at work. As a general surgeon at a local community hospital, she had seen her patient load explode after a nearby hospital was shuttered. In her mid-career, she'd borne the brunt of the work—experienced enough to handle a variety of complex cases that her younger colleagues might shy away from, energetic enough to keep up with the demands of the operating room that older colleagues had grown weary of. But the workload left little spare time. Each day was an exercise in triage and damage control. Most of the time, she loved the adrenaline rush of handling surgical emergencies but increasingly, she felt as though something in her life was off. What it was she could not name. At one point, after a particularly grueling week dealing with gangrenous gall bladders and perforated colons, her

husband, Gautam, had suggested she take a week off. *Take some time for yourself*, he'd said. At that point, the staycation had seemed like a good idea.

Now, as she surveyed the room strewn as it was with canvas furniture covers, empty paint cans, varying sizes of excess baseboard, wads of used painter's tape, and misshapen, half-dried paint trays, she wondered if it actually was. If anything, she'd be working later into the night tidying up after her painting misadventure than if she had just gone to work. She shook her head. What on Earth was she thinking?

She gathered several unwieldy pieces of extra baseboard and unsteadily made her way up the stairs to stow them in the attic. The floorboards creaked with familiarity under her feet, flooding her with memories of countless trips up into the cavernous storage space. Jaanvi had grown up in the very same house, here in Worcester, Massachusetts. She and Gautam had moved into the colonial with their twin sons, Akash and Varun, when her parents had relocated to a nearby retirement community. She loved the house, from its exacting symmetries and quaint dormer windows to its Shaker cabinets and ornate crown molding, to the ample backyard perfect for their golden retrievers, Mirchu and Meetu.

Still, as she made her way up the time-worn steps to the attic, she took pause. Long ago, during his Ouija board days, her brother Rakesh had been curious about the dusty place, convinced he'd make a fortune discovering some old treasure from the Revolutionary War days, perhaps with the help of a long-dead resident. Jaanvi, on the other hand, was certain he'd awakened phantasms bent on vengeance that continued to lurk among the rafters.

She balanced the baseboard in one hand and opened the diminutive attic door. Greeted to a burst of stale air, she ducked to enter. She switched on the hanging lightbulb, taking a quick look around the disheveled, crowded space, rife with creatures with more than four legs and God

only knew what else. Boxes were strewn in every direction, some stacked together in a seeming attempt at organization, others solitary and uncategorized. Making sure that the baseboard cleared the door, Jaanvi veered slightly to the right and navigated her way to the far side of the attic where she laid the material against the wall. She'd hardly been there for a few minutes, and the place was giving her the creeps. Eager to make an exit, she didn't notice the stack of precariously perched boxes behind her, colliding squarely into them and losing her balance. As she tried to right herself, three boxes promptly slid off one another and crashed on to the floor. All manner of photographs, knick-knacks, baubles and trinkets came spilling out.

"Damned ataxia!" she muttered, cursing everything from her utter lack of coordination to her half-baked idea to paint the house to the unkempt nature of her attic, and then chiding herself for breaking her ten-day expletive-free streak.

She shook her head, surveying the mess. This would take forever to clean up. She had planned to have a full, home-cooked dinner ready for Gautam and the boys when they got home from Varun's basketball game; instead, as usual, she'd barely have a pot of water boiling before they arrived. Some mother she was.

She crouched down and began to shove the wayward whatnots back into the boxes, still scolding herself. Initially, she gathered the photos from the floor without paying much mind to their provenance. Turning one of the images over so it was right side up, she realized she was holding a black-and-white photograph. It had to be old—very old—judging by its creased, yellowed edges. In the snapshot were three women, two white and one Indian. Their arms were locked around one another and they wore generous smiles, as if the image had been captured right after one of them had cracked a private joke. Jaanvi couldn't help but smile as well. The friendship between them seemed to jump off the vintage photo paper.

She dropped to the floor into a seated position, dust bunnies scurrying from under her, painting project and dinner entirely forgotten, as she studied the Indian woman more closely. Jaanvi felt like she was looking at a replica of herself; the only distinguishing difference was that the woman in the photograph wore a diminutive golden ring in her nose and a bindi on her forehead. In the background Jaanvi noticed a bricks-and-mortar building bearing a sign that read “London School of Medicine for Women”. She looked at the back of the image and noted a scrawled inscription: “*Kalyani, Emma and Elizabeth. London 1928*”.

Jaanvi turned the photo over and stared again at her doppelgänger.

Kalyani? Could this be the same Kalyani she’d heard mentioned a few times over family get-togethers—the long-lost aunt that nobody in the family seemed to know much about? What was she doing posing in front of the London School of Medicine for Women?

Jaanvi shook her head. Honestly, she never paid much mind to the old Joshi family lore. She wasn’t sure how much of the stories to believe, and unlike the other laboriously detailed Joshi yarns, this one was rarely discussed and exceptionally vague. Jaanvi scratched her head. Was it possible that Kalyani had attended medical school in London back in 1928? Jaanvi would have assumed that women, especially Indian women, wouldn’t have been allowed to in those days, but here was photographic evidence of an entire school dedicated to women in pursuit of just that line of study.

She scrutinized the image again. There was something about the aesthetic, something about the vitality memorialized in the exposure that mesmerized her. She thought about the skill of the photographer who’d taken the snap. They’d not only considered the lighting, symmetry, and spacing but read the very mood of the moment. Then again, perhaps it was just a matter of luck. In the vacuous hush of the attic, a wave of nostalgia swept over Jaanvi. One of her

photography professors in college used to say just that. *The most memorable photographs are usually a matter of serendipity.*

That was a lifetime ago.

Brushing off her reminiscences, she glanced at the snapshot and then out of the dormer window. The summer sun was descending languidly, as if it were willing to give her the luxury of time for more discoveries. But Jaanvi had lost track of the hour. Mirchu and Meetu still needed to be fed, and then she had to get some semblance of dinner ready for the family.

She considered the remaining items lying spilled out across the floor and began placing them back into their boxes, her discovery encouraging her to handle the rest with more care. Standing up, she took stock of the mess of boxes around her, slid the photo into the oversized pocket of her flannel shirt, and made her way out of the attic. Apparently, there was more to the room than dust bunnies, six-legged creatures, and phantasms bent on revenge. Maybe tomorrow she'd ditch the dirty paint brushes and rollers and come back to explore the eerie alcove instead.

Relief washed over Jaanvi. Finally, she had something else to do with her time off.