



Chapter two

‘It’s only a three-week voyage to India,’ ayah-Sapna says, unpacking my trunk in the cabin. I have the whole room to myself.

‘*Only* three weeks?’ I say, pushing my fringe off my forehead.

‘Indeed,’ ayah-Sapna says, putting a folded shirt in a drawer. ‘In the old days, the journey took four months, because ships had to sail down the length of Africa and up through the Indian Ocean. Then, about a hundred years ago, the Suez Company built a canal right through Egypt, connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. It’s a very important sea route now.’

‘I know,’ I mutter. ‘It’s why Mama and Baba are being sent to Egypt. The canal needs defending from the Nazis, who are determined to take control of it.’

Ayah-Sapna looks impressed with my knowledge. ‘What else do you know about the canal, Master Hasan?’

I shrug. ‘We’ve already defeated the Nazis in some battles there, but they’re refusing to give up. We must protect the canal at all costs, because Indian soldiers and oil are shipped through it. Both of these are vital to help us win the war.’

‘They are indeed,’ ayah-Sapna says, clicking my trunk shut. ‘Sometimes I don’t think people realise how important the Indian soldiers are to Britain’s wars. They fight, get injured and die. I hope they will be remembered for their service to King and Country in the future.’

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That first night on the ship, the nightmare returns.

I can feel the heat of the flames. I can smell it... the stench of burning... it’s in my hair and my skin... it’s everywhere... it’s making me retch and...

My eyes snap open and bulge as they see the ceiling of the cabin. The bed covers are drenched with sweat and my heart won’t stop beating.

‘It’s all right,’ Hana soothes, sitting beside me on the bed.

‘What are you doing here?’ I mumble.

‘I’m always here,’ she whispers.

I give her a small smile.

‘What fear do you carry inside you?’ Hana asks.

I push my fringe off my forehead and mull over the question. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Think about it,’ she insists. ‘What are you scared of?’

‘We’re going to a new country, with new people,’ I eventually say. ‘What if we don’t like it?’

‘Grandpa’s there,’ she says. ‘He’ll make sure we’re looked after. That’s why Mama and Baba are sending us there.’

‘How is that protecting us, though?’ I demand, sitting up in bed. ‘I heard Mama and Baba talking. They said Japan is threatening to invade India. What if they bomb Calcutta? We can’t go through another bombing, and Baba won’t be there to save you this time.’

‘Is that why you’re so anxious?’ Hana asks. ‘You think we’re going to get hurt again?’

I am silent. In a way, Hana has helped me to understand why I feel so anxious. I didn’t realise until now that I’m afraid of the fire being unleashed at us from the dragons in the sky.

‘The Japanese haven’t invaded India yet,’ Hana says. ‘And if they do, I’m sure we’ll be called back to England.’

‘Do you really think so?’ I ask hopefully.

‘I do,’ she reassures me.

‘It’s funny, Hana, I’m two years older than you. I should be the one making *you* feel better,’ I say, feeling a bit embarrassed that my little sister has to calm my worries.

Hana gets to her feet. ‘I’m going to sleep now, but I want you to think good thoughts.’

She disappears and I lie back in my narrow bed to do as she advised. Think good thoughts, I repeatedly tell myself. After all, good thoughts lead to a peaceful sleep. That’s what Mama told me when I’d told her about my nightmares.

Good thoughts. Good thoughts. But *what* good thoughts? I can’t think of anything that feels good right now.

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The days pass one after the other on the sea. Mama had instructed ayah-Sapna to double up as a governess, so I am required to sit with her every day and complete one hour of sums and two hours of reading. To tell the truth, I quite enjoy the second part. There isn’t much to do on the ship and I love the adventure and mystery books Mama has packed for me.

Ayah-Sapna and I keep to ourselves. The other passengers view her as a servant, and as I'm just a young boy, no one really talks to us. Two weeks pass without any major or exciting incidents, until one morning an old lady takes offence at my presence on the upper deck. I'm with Ravi, one of the lascars – the Indian sea crew, who likes to play bat and ball with me.

‘What are you doing here?’

I turn around at the sound of the shrill voice. It belongs to a woman who is glaring down from the railing. The umbrella above her head is casting a shadow on her face, but there's no denying the fury in her every feature.

I look over my shoulder, wondering who it is who's on the receiving end of her anger.

There's no one else here.

‘Who are you talking to?’ I ask.

The lady looks like she's going to froth at the mouth.

‘How dare you?’ she rasps. ‘Insolent boy!’

I don't understand. What is wrong with this lady?

Ravi decides to make a run for it. He bows his head and begins to retreat backwards at a fast pace. I decide to make a run for it too. The old lady is acting strangely and I don't really want to be left alone with her on deck. What if she has superhuman strength and tries to throw

me overboard? My lips twitch at the thought. That's the kind of thing Hana would say if she was up here with us.

'Stop!' The old lady's command hits my back, causing me to freeze mid-step. Her second command follows. 'Turn around now!'

I turn slowly to face her. Ravi stops his retreat and bows his head.

'I want to know what the two of you are doing in a Whites Only area?' she demands.

Whites Only area.

The three words repeat in my mind. What does she mean by 'Whites Only area'?

'Were you both up here to rob frail old ladies like me?' she barks.

What? I glance over my shoulder at Ravi. His head is still bowed. Why is he afraid to look up? I realise then that Ravi is not going to say anything to defend us. Well, *he* might not, but I certainly will. I've never been accused of being a thief before, and to defend myself, I ignore what Baba has taught me: to always respect your elders.

'I don't know who you are and why you think you have the right to talk to me and my friend like that, but you don't,' I blurt out heatedly.

The old lady's mouth falls open. She looks visibly shocked for a few seconds and then she begins to scream. 'Help! Help!'

I stare at her, confused. Why is she screaming? Neither of us are touching her, and she's in no danger.

'Run,' Ravi hisses, turning to flee.

I stand for a second in bewilderment and then do the same. I can't keep up with Ravi. He seems to have disappeared into the Service Only area so I head for my cabin. That was the strangest encounter I've ever had and I'm not sure what to make of it all.

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Later that evening as I sit reading, ayah-Sapna walks through the connecting door.

'Master Hasan,' she begins in her strictest voice.

I look up, placing the book on my lap, guessing that her next words will be about the episode with the old lady.

'The ship's captain asked me to speak with you about your rude behaviour to one of his fragile older passengers,' she says.

I feel a rise of resentment. Did the old lady really have the gall to complain about me to the ship's captain?!

'That old crone is not fragile,' I grit out.

Ayah-Sapna looks startled. 'Master Hasan!'

‘I’m sorry,’ I say, before she starts to lecture me.
‘I didn’t mean to be rude to you.’

‘And what about earlier, to Lady Hattersley?’

That must be the name of the old lady. ‘I wasn’t rude to her,’ I protest. ‘It was she who was rude to me and Ravi, up on the deck.’

‘But that’s a Whites Only area,’ ayah-Sapna says.

Those words again! I jump to my feet. ‘What does that even mean?’

Ayah-Sapna hesitates and then says slowly, ‘It means people like us cannot be in that place.’

‘What do you mean by “people like us”?’ I demand.

‘People who are not white or not fully white,’ ayah-Sapna explains.

I’ve never heard anything so strange. ‘We don’t have rules like that in Coventry.’

‘But this ship is on its way to India, and many people from Britain who live and work there believe that Indians should be kept separate from white people. They call themselves the colonial British and they do not like to mix with the locals.’

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. The whole thing sounds ridiculous. What kind of place are our parents sending us to? It makes me worry even more.