



JASBINDER BILAN

TAMARIND
& THE
STAR OF
ISHTA

Chicken
House

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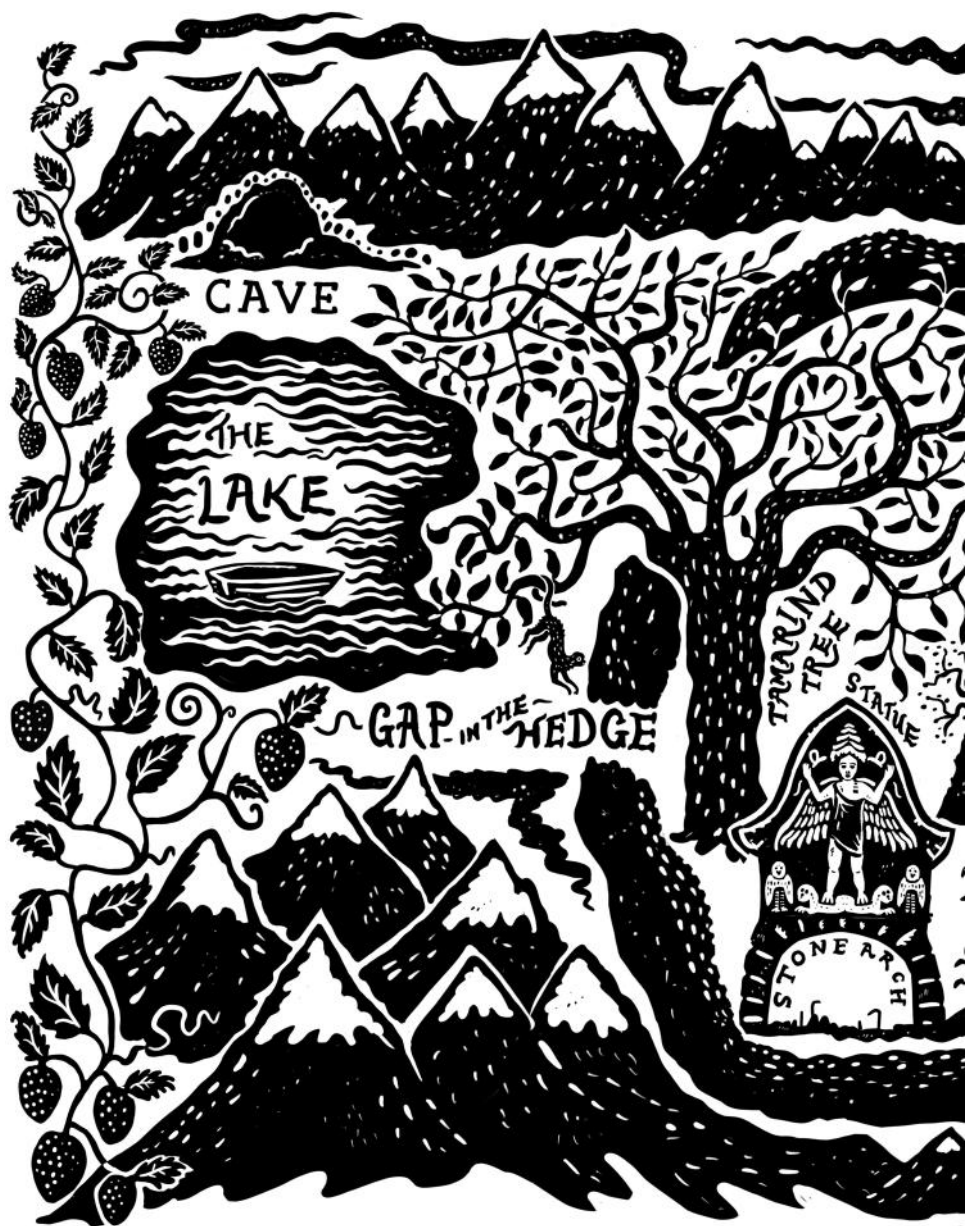
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*This book is dedicated to my dearest mum,
Gurjinder, who knows what it means to
grow up without a mother and has
opened her beautiful heart to everyone.*

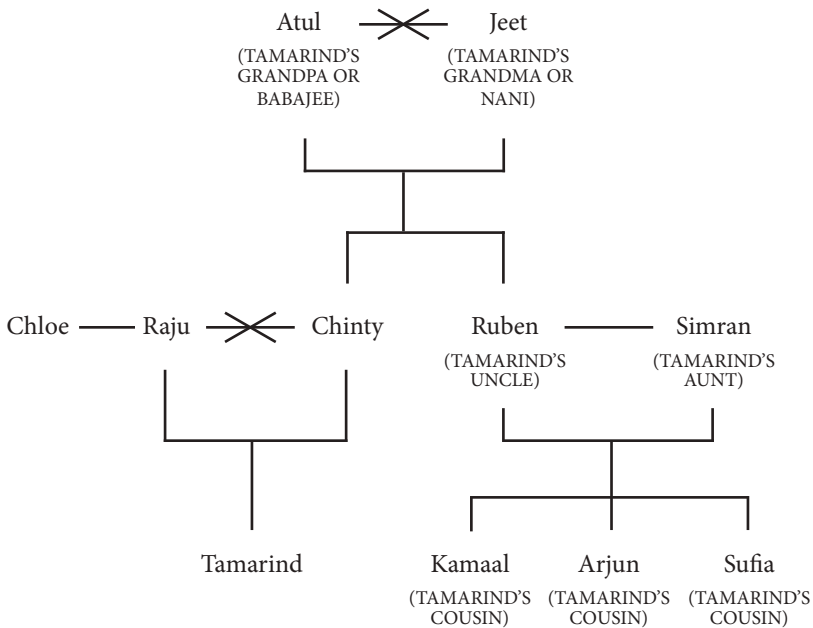


MAP OF THE GARDEN
TAMARIND & THE
★ STAR ★ OF ISHTA





TAMARIND'S MATERNAL FAMILY TREE



A mother is always the beginning.

AMY TAN, THE BONESETTER'S DAUGHTER



There's a small photo I keep on my bedside table; it's old and crinkly with a neat fold along the left-hand corner. In the photo Mum's about my age, but I can't really tell if I look like her because the photograph's taken from a long way off. She's on a home-made swing and it's fixed to a huge tree in full blossom. Her legs are waving in the air, and behind her I can just make out a house with a verandah all around it. I love this photo because Mum's full of life, but it makes me cry that I never got to know her or hold her hand or snuggle into her shoulder.

It's the only thing of Mum's that Dad would let me have, the last gift she ever gave him, and I'm keeping it safe for both of us.

I don't know what happened to Mum, Dad won't tell me much – all he'll say is she was poorly, and died when I was a baby. But now, for the first time, I'm

going to find out. The thing is, I'm not sure I want to. I slip Mum's photo from the back of my passport and hold it in my palm, shuffle away from Chloe and turn to face the aeroplane window. I don't want her quizzing me again, asking me more questions about how I'm feeling. Being all motherly.

I flick her a quick look but she doesn't see; she carries on reading, absorbed in the book, long blond hair hiding her freckled face. Do we look like a family when we're out together? Me and Dad with our golden skin; Chloe, who goes raspberry red at the sight of the sun?

Dad leans across, taps me on the shoulder. 'Mint?' he asks, shoving a bag of sweets under my nose. 'We'll be landing in Rinigaar soon, and remember about ears popping?'

My stomach turns a double somersault when I think about staying with Mum's family all by myself. I hold Dad's gaze, plead with his warm brown eyes that everyone tells me are just like mine, and hope he's going to change his mind about leaving me there alone. He pulls a funny face and his dimples appear.

Chloe puts her book down and digs into the mints. 'Mmmm . . . these are yum. Have one, Tam, they haven't got any gelatine in. I double-checked.' She smiles at Dad and glances down at the photo.

I move further towards the window and slide the photo away, putting everything back in my green Scandi rucksack.

‘Dad always gets the ones without gelatine.’ I take a mint and put it in my mouth.

Chloe ties back her hair and fiddles with her wedding ring. ‘I’ve been learning a few new veggie recipes too. I think it’s great to eat less meat.’

I keep looking out of the window. When she was just Dad’s girlfriend, we were OK, but ever since they married and she moved in, it’s been so different. I know she’s my new mum now, but what does that even mean? And lately I just can’t seem to be nice to her.

Dad’s voice jolts me from my worries. ‘Tamarind. Chloe’s talking to you.’

I try to swallow the lump that’s been burning my throat since we set off on this journey. If I was still five, I’d jump up and down and throw my things around, maybe even scream until Dad calmed me down, but instead I curl even further towards the window, stare at the clouds that stretch on and on and the blue sky above them. ‘Thank you,’ I croak.

*Would Mum have checked my food for gelatine?
Would she have loved me even through my tantrums?*

I've thought about Mum my whole life, even though she hasn't been there: I've never given her daffodils on Mother's Day or made her a special card. There's a painful space inside me, and the closer we get to India and the family she left behind, the more tangled it's feeling.

Dad gives me his stern face. 'Let's go for a little walk.' He nods at Chloe. 'We won't be long.'

My stomach churns. I scoot past Chloe and follow Dad towards the loos at the back of the plane.

He holds my shoulders gently and stoops so our faces are close. 'I know this is hard, Tam.'

I feel my face flush, take a long breath and chew the edge of my thumb.

'I know you're scared, but everything will be OK. Chloe just wants to be the best mum to you . . . give her a chance.'

I kick at the carpet with the toe of my trainer, close my eyes and blink away the tears that have been waiting to fall. 'What happened to my real mum? I need to know.' I brush my cheeks roughly with the back of my hand. 'I'll be meeting the family any minute and I still don't know a thing. What did she die of?'

Dad's face softens but he doesn't answer my question. 'Take a deep breath.' He pulls me towards him

and gives me a big hug. He smells of mints and after-shave, washing powder and home.

It's like he wants me to forget my question – but I don't give up. 'I need to know a bit more than *I met Mum while I was backpacking in the Himalaya*,' I mumble into his shirt. I push him away. 'I want to know what she was *like*. Please. It's your job to tell me!'

'Look. Your mum loved you to bits, and one day when you're a bit older I'll tell you everything, but for the moment . . .' He pushes his fingers through his hair. 'I don't want to upset you.'

But it seems to me like he's the one who's getting upset.