

SUCH

BIG

A Novel

*Reema
Patel*

DREAMS

"Visceral and kinetic ... a splash of a debut."

—**ZALKA REID-BENTA**, author of *Frying Plantain*



SUCH BIG DREAMS

— *A Novel* —

Reema Patel



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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

THIS TIME, THE FLAMES ARE everywhere—licking the walls, sweeping across the tin roof of my one-room hut.

I bolt upright in the dark, a full-body scream ready to erupt from somewhere deep inside my lungs. My hands reach for my throat as I gasp for air. Panic courses through my body while I try to recall Dr. Pereira's bad-dream exercise, the one she told me to do each time this happens.

"When you wake up," she said, "sit on the edge of your bed and put your feet on the floor." I had to tell her I don't have a bed, just a thin mat. "So sit at the edge of your mat cross-legged," she replied, patiently. "Then, name out loud the objects in the room."

Trembling, I fold one leg under the other and try to focus on the dim outlines of my belongings scattered around me.

In the corner of the room, my heavy, steel cabinet. "Almirah."

Beside it, the cooking vessel I never use. "Pot."

Drenched, sweaty clothes plastered to my back. "Kurta," I mutter.

Then I notice the damp, heavy weight tickling my neck. "Hair."

I slide a cautious hand toward the little blue Nokia that Gauri Ma'am gave me when I started working for her. "Phone." I clutch it tight. The small screen oozes a dull green glow, which I hold up in front of me to illuminate the room.

Shining the light on my cassette player, I press the eject button with a trembling finger and retrieve the tiny crystal elephant from its hiding spot. "Elephant." As I say the word and cradle the figurine in my palm, I can sense the flames of my nightmare start to recede.

And now for the last, most stupidest part of Dr. Pereira's night terror exercise: "I am awake," I whisper into the shadows. "I am safe."

My shoulders tense as I wait for flames to climb back up the walls, sparks to burrow into my clothes. None of that happens, though. I let out a deep breath and flop back onto my mat, dank and musty from my sweat and the humid monsoon air.

The nightmares started eleven years ago, after the paanwala incident. Just after I lost Babloo. They used to come almost every night. They've since tapered off to a few times a week, but they're just as vivid as ever. Most nights I try to stay awake for as long as I can, fighting the lull of the dead air and emptiness of my one-room hut, before drifting into broken sleep by two or three in the morning.

Behrampada slum sprawls out over seven acres in the middle of Bombay—or Mumbai, if that's what you want to call it—an island city flooded with too many people with too-big dreams. By the time I come home in the evenings, the slum roars with noise: The hiss and flare of gas cooking cylinders being lit; tawas and kadais clanging on stovetops. Women shouting at their husbands, who in turn shout back. Someone's shrieking child is always chasing someone else's bleating goat. And when India wins a cricket match, firecrackers burst in the lanes like fistfuls of corn popping. By midnight, though, people retreat inside and switch off their television sets, and the pressures that build up in Behrampada's crowded huts and narrow lanes fizzle out until dawn. Except for the squeals of horny rats and the occasional bottle smashing, all goes quiet—and that's when the night terrors come for me.

Letting out one of those big yawns that almost unhinges my jaw, I roll onto my side. Last night, flash rains banged down on my leaky tin roof like a herd of sharp-clawed cats. The steady sound of water dripping into a plastic bucket would drive anyone else to tears, but I was grateful to be kept awake for a little while longer. As the storm died down, though, so did the noise, and I eventually fell asleep. If I had the secret weapons that important people do, like loud English or proper Hindi, I'd command the nearby Garib Nawaz Masjid to keep the call to prayer going all night, crying out

“Allahu akbar” and “la ilaha illa-Allah” on loop from their tinny loudspeakers. “We have to help Rakhi keep the night terrors away,” the muezzin would reply flatly, if anyone complained about his six-hour azaan.

Already, I hear the clamor of the people of Behrampada as they start to stir, which means it’s just past five. By six, the sun has risen, and by seven, I’ve used the stinking public toilet and bathed. By eight, I’ve drunk a cup of tea and gotten dressed, and am ready to leave for work.

On this muggy July morning, the main road from Behrampada to Bandra Station glistens with a slick layer of oil, water, and dirt. I take careful strides over the puddle-filled potholes dotting the street, but the cotton ankles of my clean salwar end up speckled with mud anyway. “Dressing smart tells the world you think our work is valuable,” Gauri Ma’am told me during my first week at the office, after I wore the same salwar kameez for three days straight. She handed me a stack of her daughter’s old clothes the next day.

It’s only as I pause on the station bridge to inspect the mud splatters on the backs of my pant legs that I spot my train pulling into the station. The people who have been waiting on the platform are already getting inside, which means I have less than fifteen seconds before it departs. By the time I fly down the stairs to the platform, the train has started to move again. The slanted green-and-yellow stripes of the ladies’ general compartment are exactly two cars away.

I haven’t chased after a moving train in a long time. During our years living on the street, Babloo and I were always running. Running away, that is—from policewalas, shopkeepers, and passengers who’d had enough of us. While other children had their hair oiled and combed, rode in autorickshaws to school, and ate proper lunches and dinners, we were leaping onto moving trains, traveling ticketless up and down the railway lines, looking for something to put into our growling bellies.

The train picks up speed, so I do, too. There’s only one way on now, and it’s to jump in the open door closest to me—the first-class ladies’ compartment. I don’t have a first-class pass, but that’s never stopped me before. I reach out for the pole in the doorway, the tip of my middle finger

grazing the cool metal, but it's inching away from me. I'm going to have to leap for it. Bracing myself, I lurch forward, stretching for the pole with my left hand, this time gripping it firmly. Quickly, I suck in my breath and vault over the gap as the train gains momentum, and my outer hip takes a sharp blow from the pole while my feet slam down onto the metal floor. Out the open door, the city rushes past me. I am inside. Panting like a dog on a summer day, but inside.

The train roars down the Harbour Line toward the next stop, Mahim Station. I'll hop out there and switch into the ladies' general compartment. The total fine for ticketless travel would come to three hundred rupees if they caught me right now. I only have seventy rupees in my purse, and the Railway Police holding cells swell with ankle-deep sludge during monsoon season.

The wind from outside undoes most of the curls from my ponytail, which blow about in a thousand directions. I must look like some deranged woman, the kind whose uncle or husband drags her to a temple so a priest can beat the evil spirits out of her. As I twist fistfuls of hair into a massive bun at the back of my neck, strong gusts continue to hit my face, and the curls around my forehead whip at my temples.

When I finally turn away from the door and toward the inside of the car, I am struck by the emptiness, the quiet of first class. Nobody is inching in front of me, threatening to steal my breeze. On the bench facing me are a tall college girl in a pink T-shirt and a squat lady in a faded yellow salwar kameez with white embroidery. Between them are two whole inches of empty space. In the general compartment, four or five women will squash onto one bench together. The last one to jostle in will tell the others to "shift, please," until at least a third of her behind is on the seat. And she'll hang off the edge like that, straining her hips and thighs, because if she doesn't sit there, someone else will.

Seats by the window with maximum airflow are in high demand, like gold at Diwali, or a fair price for onions. At this time of day, the ladies' general compartment is so packed that nobody who boards at Bandra gets breeze. Only a few months ago, in the pre-monsoon heat that drives the

entire city into random fits of rage, some fat, middle-aged woman with green glass bangles thought she could elbow me out of a seat I was about to squeeze into. She didn't know who she was dealing with. Somewhere in the scuffle, her glass bangles snapped, scraping into my wrist, cutting deep enough to leave a mark. I got the seat in the end.

Apart from the extra room and the softer seats, there's not much difference between the compartments. First-class ladies pay ten times more so they can buy space for their first-class hips, I guess—and more air for their first-class noses, too.

Outside, the city flies by, followed by the mangrove swamps that protect the city from storm surges, then Mahim Creek, choking on thickened blue-black sewage. Now we're passing a row of squatting bare bottoms. The pink-shirt college girl wrinkles her nose, but the naked bums greeting the Harbour Line passengers in the morning light make me smile.

The first time I laid eyes on Bombay was like this, from the window of a train. That was sixteen years ago, when I was seven. The city had only just been renamed Mumbai, and I was merely hours away from being renamed Rakhi myself.

Our train rolls into Mahim Station, and only three women board the first-class compartment. I peek out onto the platform to see thirty or so women fighting their way into the general car. I duck back into first class. One more stop in this breezy compartment can't hurt. As soon as we start to move off, one last woman hoists herself into the first-class car, leaning back on the wall opposite me.

Shit. It's Gauri Ma'am. We're moving too fast now for me to jump out. I slouch down, lowering my head. She hasn't seen me and I intend on keeping it that way, at least until I can slip out at the next station.

Gauri Ma'am, or Gauri Verma as she's known in the newspapers, is the executive director of Justice For All, the NGO where I work. Ma'am is one of India's biggest human rights lawyers. I know this because when she gives interviews to the papers, it's my job to cut the news stories out and keep them in a big yellow folder. Gauri Ma'am leads a team of lawyers who argue human rights cases and do social justice campaigns, fighting for the

rights of Dalits, Hijras, blind people, children, prisoners, women, that sort of thing. “Champion of the Exploited,” they sometimes call her in the papers.

Lately, Gauri Ma’am has been talking about how we have to focus our efforts. When I say “we,” I don’t mean me. I don’t get involved in this social justice funda. That’s for the lawyers and interns. My job is photocopying important papers I’ll never understand, and boiling tea for everyone several times a day. Accepting deliveries, going to the post office, organizing things here and there. And, of course, taking care of the foreign interns, who somehow require more attention than small children. Ma’am calls me her office assistant. Most people would just say “peon” or “office girl,” but Ma’am says our office doesn’t endorse classist language. Still, I take home less than a quarter of what the others earn per month.

Gauri Ma’am dabs the sweat from her upper lip with a starched white handkerchief. With her wire-framed glasses and cropped peppery hair, she stands at least a head taller than me. Her broad hips and bulky shoulders are swathed in a gray handloom-cotton salwar kameez. Standard Indian intelligentsia look. Pulling her BlackBerry from her purse, she punches at its tiny keyboard with her thick thumbs.

Trying not to make any sudden movements, I hold my breath and drift farther away inside the train, but she glances up from her phone and frowns. “Rakhi?” Her eyes narrow. “What are you doing, riding in first class?”

“Ma’am, by mistake—”

“If the ticket inspector comes, you’ll be fined for traveling without a pass.” She presses her lips together. “How much is the fine these days?”

“Two hundred fifty rupees penalty, Ma’am, plus the first-class fare...So, three hundred.”

“That much, only?” Gauri Ma’am tilts her head forward, raises her thick, black eyebrows, and pauses as if she has just made a closing argument in front of the Bombay High Court, before lowering her eyes to her BlackBerry screen once more. She doesn’t have to say anything else. She’s good like that.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I return to the doorway without a word, ready to switch compartments at the next station.

“Accha, listen,” Gauri Ma’am says. “There’s a new intern starting this morning. A Canadian. He’s a Harvard graduate student. We’ve never had someone from Harvard before.”

What’s Harvard? And why is she telling me now, only? Usually I spend a good month preparing for a foreign intern’s arrival.

“He can sit at the empty desk in the corner. And when we get to VT, fetch a bottle of mineral water for him. I don’t want to hear any this-that about loose motions in the first week.”

The train rattles on. I scan the advertisements plastered all over the car’s interior. Most of them are written in English. Gauri Ma’am made me take lessons when I first came to work for her. “Your spoken English is slow and choppy, but you read and understand well,” my tutor told me. “You just have to converse more.” I told him I got plenty of practice while babysitting the foreign interns at the office, which was a lie, because those firanghis mostly talk to each other, only. I read over a sign with big black block letters: “Ramesh Balakrishnan, astrologer, offers help with all problems in the life: marriage, infertility, in-laws, divorce, health, disease, accident, evil eye...”

Before I can finish the list, I feel two hard taps on my shoulder. Then an unfamiliar, stern voice says, “Ticket.”

I glance back. It’s the squat woman in the yellow salwar kameez who, moments ago, was sitting with her hands folded in her lap. Now she’s got an ID card around her neck and the smug sneer of an undercover ticket inspector on her face.

“Ticket,” she says again, her lips curling.

“Wait one second.” I rustle through my bag, pretending to search for a ticket I don’t have, clinking coins together for dramatic effect. If Ma’am wasn’t here, I could stall the inspector until the train slowed into the next station, then hop out and sprint down the platform. Nothing I haven’t done before.

But Gauri Ma'am is here, and she's staring me down. What would she do if I made a run for it? Scold me? Force me to pay the fine? Send me to Dr. Pereira every day instead of once a week, when I already hate having to go at all? Or worse, would she fire me for cheating the railway? I'd be jobless. Nobody would hire me. I'd have to live on the street again. And then what?

I shove those thoughts back into a distant corner of my head while I continue to push coins around in my purse.

"This ticket must be in here somewhere," I mumble.

Gauri Ma'am clears her throat, then steps forward and wedges herself in between me and the inspector, her legs planted wide.

The inspector ignores Ma'am and starts to scribble a ticket with a blue pen.

"Put that away, right now," Ma'am demands.

The stone-faced inspector glances up from her notepad, oblivious that the woman towering over her has argued twelve different cases against the government at the Supreme Court of India, and won eleven of them. "If I don't see her ticket, she pays the fine. Three hundred rupees."

Gauri Ma'am raises her voice now. "The only reason she is riding in first class is because these damn trains are stuffed beyond capacity. What is she supposed to do, let ten of them pass her by until she can get in? Tell me," Ma'am bellows, "is being on time for work only a privilege of the rich?"

When the other women on the train start to peer up from their newspapers and mobiles, Ma'am calls out to them. "Ladies! Are any of you bothered that this girl is riding in here?" The women glance at one another, but none of them answers Gauri Ma'am.

"You see?" Ma'am turns her attention back to the inspector. "Go on. Deal with actual problems instead of troubling yourself with who's traveling in which compartment."

Unmoved by Gauri Ma'am's rant, the inspector finishes writing the ticket and tears it from her notepad. That's when Ma'am snatches the paper from the inspector's hand, crumples it in her palm, and flings it out the

moving train. Then she lowers her voice and leans in very close to the inspector's face. "If you try and write another ticket, I will lodge a formal complaint about you with the BMC. And you know none of the goondas who run this city will bother defending you."

The ticket inspector takes a step back.

"Thousands of people are waiting for a job like yours to open up," Ma'am adds. She holds out some creased bills. "Take this."

Without missing a beat, the ticket inspector seizes the money and slips it into her pocket. Cracking her knuckles, she steps off the train at King's Circle Station.

My ears burn from embarrassment. India's top human rights lawyer just offered hafta? For me?

"That was a tip, not a bribe," Ma'am grunts at me. "And how many times must we go through this? You must work at undoing all these bad behaviors with Dr. Pereira, or you'll keep finding yourself in situations like this."

"Ji, Ma'am."

Frowning, she pulls out her handkerchief again and wipes her forehead. "I can't keep bailing you out, Rakhi. You have to behave like an adult now. Nobody lives a life without consequences."

"Ji, Ma'am."

Ma'am eyes the rest of the women on the train and then glances back at me. "This city is mutilating itself with these bloody class divides. If they did away with this first-class nonsense, there would be more space for everyone."

Now is not the time to point out that she herself travels in first class.

For the rest of the journey down the Harbour Line, we travel in silence, until our train rolls into VT station, its final stop. The inside of VT is a drab warehouse filled with soaring ceilings, old trains, thousands of people, and a few extended families of crows who glide from beam to beam, raining shit everywhere. On the outside, though, it looks like a grand palace. The kind of place where firanghis stop to click photos.

Gauri Ma'am says that fundamentalist governmentwalas renamed Victoria Terminus as Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus after the Maratha warrior king, even though it was the Britishers who built the station. That was in 1996, a year after Bombay became Mumbai and VT became my new home. A lot of names changed then, but no one I knew called the station CST, so neither did I. Babloo, the other street kids, and me, we knew the building inside out, all its main arteries and hidden veins. We learned who was allowed to go where, who wasn't, and how to get there anyway. We named all the gargoyles on the outside of the station after famous movie villains—Gabbar Singh, Mogambo, Kancha—and we steered clear of the beedi-smoking older boys who also lived around the station, dodging their violence, offers of hard drugs, and attempts at sex. Well, we tried, anyhow.

I hop out of the car before the train grinds to a halt, waiting on the platform for Gauri Ma'am to descend with the other first-class ladies. She plods toward me, hands me twenty rupees, and waves her handkerchief, motioning at me to keep going without her. "Go buy water for the new intern. I'll see you at the office. And make it quick, haan?"

I weave past slow-walking older women, sinewy porters with large parcels atop their heads, and half-asleep stray dogs sprawled on the ground. A little girl with a tangled ponytail, sun-bleached yellow T-shirt, and tattered orange shorts steps out in front of me.

"Just one rupee, didi," she moans, her cupped hand outstretched my way. "Didi, didi, one rupee."

I shake my head no and she pivots to the woman behind me. I could teach that girl a few things. You have to relax your eyes, for one. Droop your upper eyelids, specifically. But no dramatics. Quiet crying can double or triple your earnings with firanghis. And don't take no for an answer. Following someone closely—but not too closely—also works.

"You have big eyes, and you're a girl, so you'll make good money begging," Babloo told me the day I arrived in Bombay. So, when a particularly good target came along—a firanghi, usually—I would walk up to them and release big, fat, silent tears. Pocket change fell freely into my outstretched palm. Once, I built up to a carefully timed whimper and

managed to squeeze a five-hundred-rupee bill out of an old gora with beige socks pulled up to his pale, freckled knees. I told only Babloo about the money. We hid it behind a pile of bricks in our little laneway and spent it, bit by bit, on movies and food. That was after we finally managed to find a shopkeeper willing to take such a large note from us.

When I was twelve, Babloo and I were picked up by the police, and that was the end of my time on the streets. I haven't seen any of the other kids we ran with since. I heard some girls ended up in the brothels of Kamathipura, to no surprise. Most of the boys got involved with local gangs. One of them became a political goonda, terrorizing Muslim shopkeepers and taxi drivers from Uttar Pradesh. A couple of them are dead now. But I never heard anything about Babloo.

When I returned to Bombay five years ago, I circled around the city for weeks, asking if anyone knew Babloo's whereabouts. Nobody around VT had a clue. Not the beediwala, not the poori bhaji guys, not even the old ticket-selling uncles waiting for retirement. I still scan the faces of thin-limbed beggars to see if any are his.

The road outside VT crawls with morning traffic. A chauffeur-driven jeep honks furiously at the bicycle delivery boys carrying four-foot-tall stacks of newspapers. Sidestepping a bullock cart that appears out of nowhere, I turn three corners to Sai Krishna Vegetarian Lunch Home. Outside the restaurant, potato vadas crackle and hiss in a huge black kadai filled with hot oil.

"One Bisleri," I say, motioning toward the large water bottles in the fridge behind the counter. Ma'am prefers me to buy this brand for firanghis because the plastic bottle is sturdy enough for them to reuse, even though they end up chucking them anyway. I count out some of my own coins and point to the kadai. "And one of those."

Even though Gauri Ma'am is waiting for me to hurry back, freshly made vada pav is impossible to resist. I tear off the paper wrapping and sink my teeth into the soft white bun and then the crispy fried potato inside. The tamarind chutney is sweet and tangy. I wipe my oily fingers on the hem of my kameez and grab the cold, sweaty water bottle for the intern.

As I turn a few more corners to reach the Justice For All office, beads of cold water roll off the bottle and onto my hands and down my wrists. I dab the wetness onto my throat. It is refreshing for a few seconds, but then the water dries, leaving my neck hotter than before. I roll the bottle against my cheek, behind my ear, shaking my shoulders a little to help the water roll farther down my back.

Mid-bottle-rub, I hear a foreign-sounding voice behind me. “Hi, excuse me?”

I turn around, yanking the bottle out of sight. A light-skinned man in a pressed white shirt and shiny brown shoes walks up the street toward me. A dark blue BMW idles behind him, too wide to pass by a small lorry blocking its way. The driver squints out at the buildings on either side of the narrow lane. Using the back of my hand, I try to brush the vada pav crumbs from the corners of my mouth.

Up close, the man’s face shines like buttered toast and his brown hair is neatly combed. “Excuse me? Speak English?”

I nod yes.

He breaks into a wide smile and holds out a small piece of paper with an address written on it. “Do you know the Maarr-tray-eeya...no, May-treeya Building? My driver thinks it’s on this street.” His voice has that familiar firanghi drawl where they stumble over and then spit out Indian names they’ve never heard before.

I nod again and point down the lane toward our office, which sits on the second floor of the Maitreya Building, an old four-story structure with monsoon-blackened outsides, fungus-dashed ceilings, and a lift that’s always out of service.

Before I can tell him that I’m going there myself, Gauri Ma’am’s voice cuts through the air: “Ah, this must be our new intern from Canada.” She plods down the lane toward us, beaming.

Ma’am and the firanghi exchange greetings, and she tells him that the office is a few steps away and she’ll be ready for him in an hour. She trudges along and calls out to me in Hindi. “Take him upstairs and get him settled in. And show him around the office, introduce him to the others.”

The firanghi jogs over to the BMW, bends down so his head is level with his driver's, then points my way. Once the car disappears, he jogs back to me. His eyes are a muddy green, and his eyelashes are thicker than mine. Pleasant-looking, in that Jawaharlal Nehru sort of way. Tall, like so many firanghis are.

“What’s your name?”

“Rakhi,” I say, rubbing my arm.

“Alex Lalwani-Diamond,” he says, his hand hovering over his chest.

I want to laugh. A name like that, and he couldn't figure out how to say Maitreya?

GAURI MA'AM'S HUSKY VOICE THUNDERS from across the office. "Rakhi! Have you cleaned up the empty desk for the new intern?"

"Ji, Ma'am. Almost done."

With a damp blue towel, I wipe specks of dirt from what's supposed to be Alex's computer mouse. Bombay grit gets everywhere. It blows through the windows daily, caking furniture, lodging itself under your fingernails.

She calls out to me again. "Where did he go?"

"Sitting in the waiting area." I peek out from behind the computer to see him standing before a faded prisoners' rights poster by the front door, stroking his chin. We printed those posters a few years back, when we still had money to waste on things like that.

Gauri Ma'am grunts something about how the new intern was supposed to arrive much later in the morning. "So eager, these Canadians."

I set down the mouse, now several shades lighter than how I found it. A vinegary scent swells as I wring the towel out in the morning light. Last Monday, one of our other foreign interns, Saskia, found five newborn kittens taking shelter beneath her desk. I used this same towel to scoop the kittens up while a raging Saskia shrieked about everything that was wrong with India. I left the kittens outside on a piece of cardboard behind a parked bicycle, hoping their mother would turn up before the rats.

Showing the foreign interns around when they first arrive is one of my jobs. This year, we have Saskia and Merel, two Dutch graduate students who have been with us since the middle of May. For Saskia, the office is too hot, the tea is too sweet, and she complains of employee abuse

whenever one of the senior lawyers asks her to go to court to file documents. Merel is always taking photos of herself with her digital camera. A few weeks back they returned from a mini holiday in Rajasthan, and Merel showed everyone pictures from their trip: Saskia winking beside two villagers in bright pink turbans; Merel raising an eyebrow and frowning into a beer bottle by the hotel pool in Udaipur; both girls in the middle of the desert, riding creaky old camels dripping with faded multicolored pompoms.

I work the musty towel over the computer screen, leaving sideways streaks that won't go away no matter how hard I wipe.

"Hey, Rakhi?"

Startled, I turn around to find Alex behind me. Who told him to come in?

"Are there other interns working here? Or is it just going to be me?"

"Yes," I say. "Two girls."

He lowers himself onto an office chair a few feet away. It's off balance, so he tilts down on one side. In his starched white shirt and shiny leather shoes, he looks like he should be working at a bank with sparkling white tiles and glass doors. Not a human rights law office cluttered with lopsided chairs and stacks of yellowing papers bundled with string, and dusty cobwebs fluttering from the ceiling fans.

"Where are these girls?" he asks, fiddling with the knobs under his seat.

I shrug. How should I know where they are? I haven't spoken to Merel and Saskia since the kitten drama. "Pata nahin," I mutter to myself.

"Sorry," he says with a laugh. "My Hindi's a little rusty. Can you say that in English?"

How do I reply? *I am not know? I do not know?* "I...no know," I offer.

Alex gives me one of those polite nods that's meant to show he understands, even though he doesn't. Firanghi classic.

Lately, Merel and Saskia have been showing up three days a week only. A year ago, Gauri Ma'am might have cared. These days, though, she has more to worry about than a couple of unpaid interns bunking off. Her funding agency in England is only giving her half the money she needs for