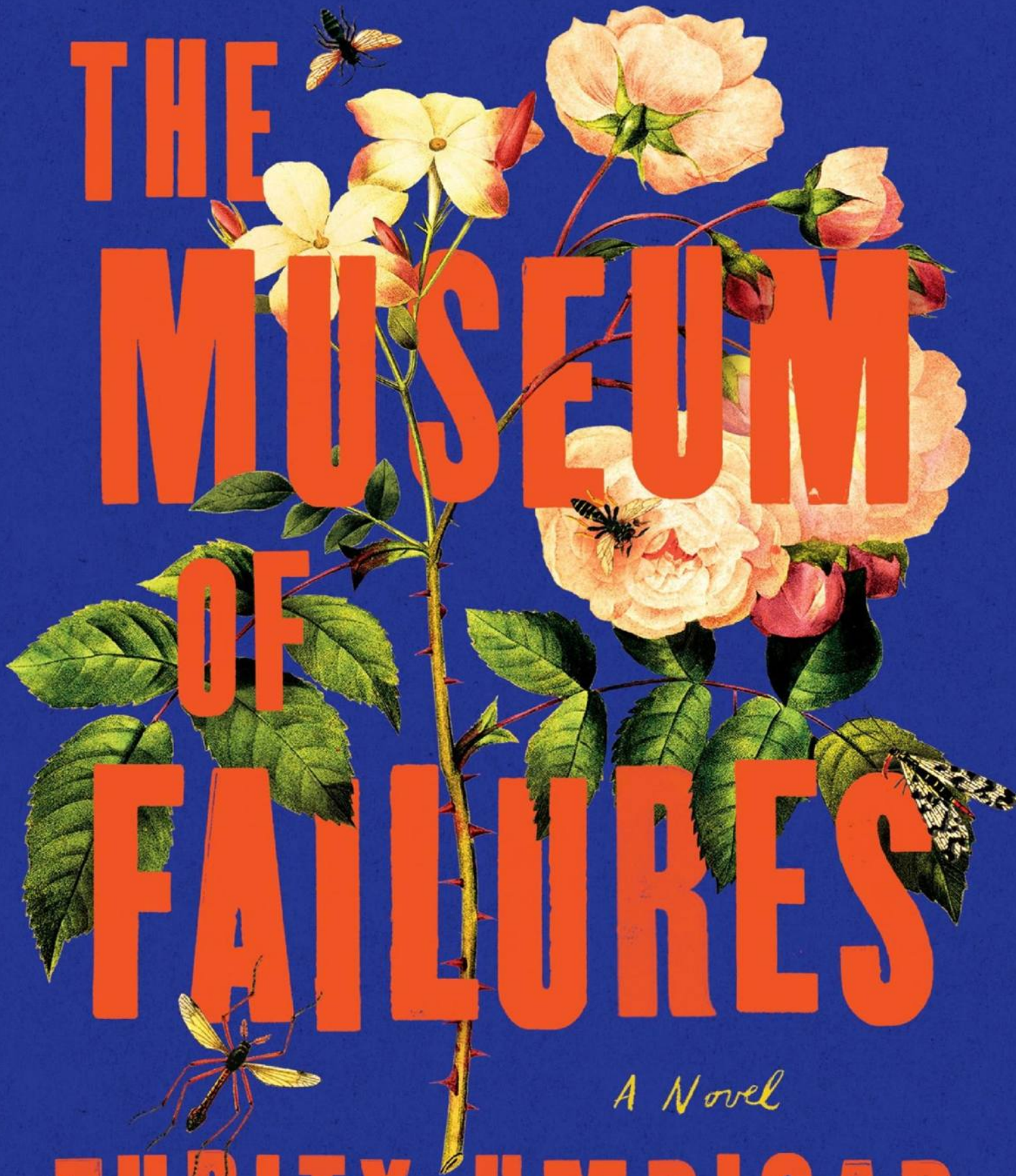


"A symphony of secrets and lies, love and hate, regret and forgiveness . . . Powerful and engrossing."

—MARLON JAMES, Booker Prize-winning author of *Moon Witch*, *Spider King*



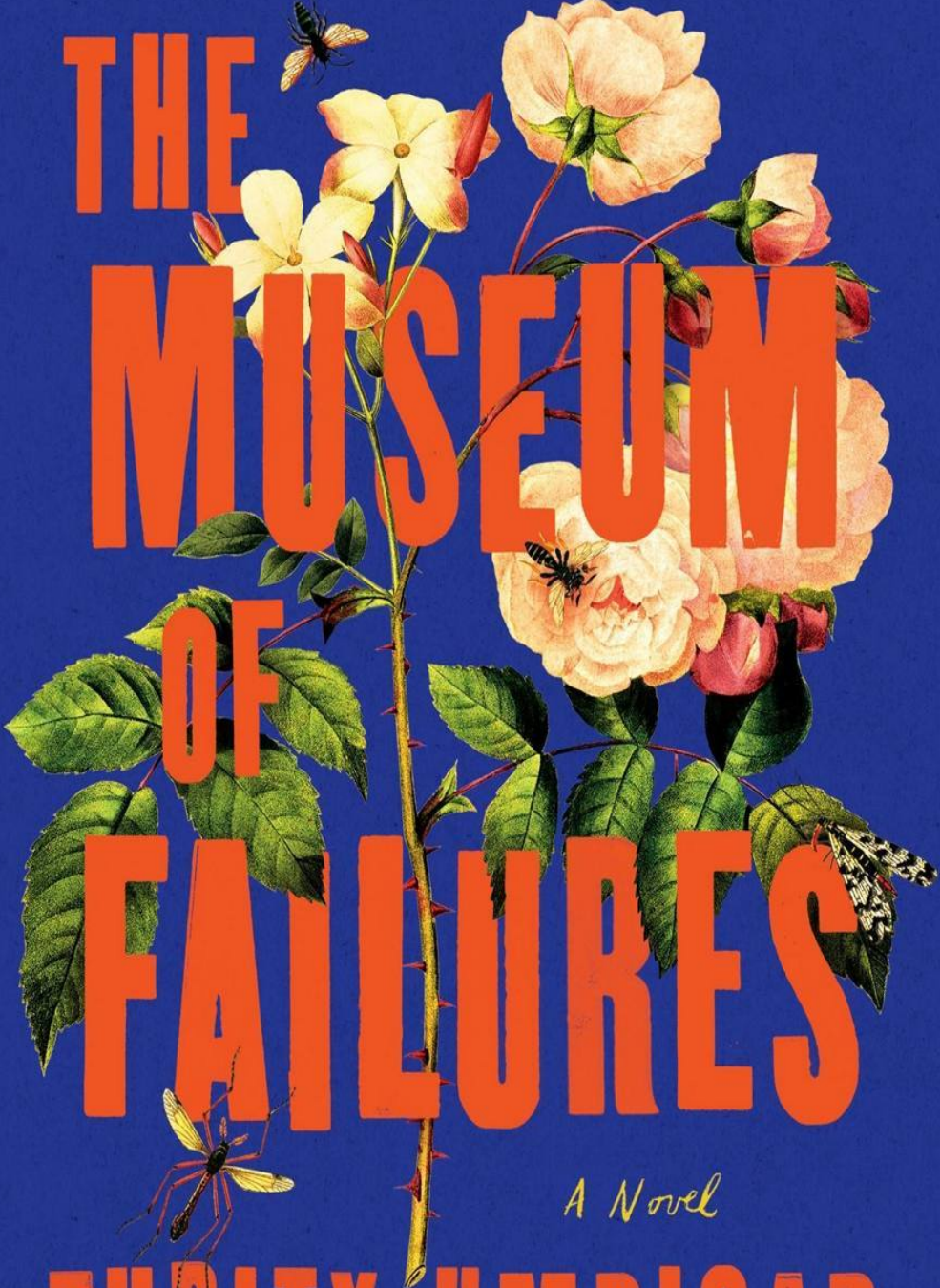
# THE MUSEUM OF FAILURES

*A Novel*

# THRITY UMRIGAR

*Author of Reese's Book Club pick HONOR*

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# The Museum of Failures

a novel

THRITY UMRIGAR



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For  
Judy Griffin, who  
loves this world

*After the first death, there is no other.*

—DYLAN THOMAS

The Museum of Failure in Helsingborg, Sweden, was a collection of failed products and services. It now operates as a traveling exhibition throughout the world.

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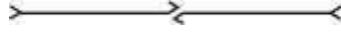
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# BOOK ONE



## CHAPTER ONE



ALL NIGHT LONG, the crows fought as a jet-lagged Remy Wadia struggled to sleep in an unfamiliar bed. Occasionally, a dog howled, the sound hairraisingly melancholy, and Remy had to cover his ears with a pillow. He heard the roar of a motorcycle and glanced at the alarm clock: 2 a.m. A few minutes later, he was on the threshold of a dream when loud voices from the street below jolted him awake. He swore under his breath, flinging the sheet off. Finally, at 6 a.m., even though he was afraid of awakening Jango and Shenaz in the next room, he got up to use the attached bathroom. Then he made his way to the small balcony off his bedroom.

A light breeze from the nearby sea made his thin muslin sadra flutter against his skin as he leaned against the railing. He looked down at the treetops. What had made the damn crows squawk all night long? There had been something spooky and unnerving about their nocturnal shrieking, but then this, too, was Bombay—the birds as defiant and absurd as the rest of the city. He looked toward the main road and wondered if his mother was awake, too. Her apartment building was only a few streets away from Jango's, where he had spent the night after his friend had picked him up from the airport.

Remy yawned; it had been a long flight from Columbus, Ohio, and he was exhausted. Then he reminded himself of the reason for his visit to India and felt a throb of excitement. Shenaz's niece, Monaz, was to arrive at 10 a.m. He thought about taking a quick shower but worried that the sound of running water would disturb his hosts. Still, he wanted to look his best when Monaz came, wanted no trace of his fatigue to show. "First impressions are often the last impression," Dad used to say.

Dad. The thought of his boisterous, warmhearted father made Remy smile. It was his first time back since Cyrus had died three years ago. He had not visited his mother since then, and he felt the usual pang of guilt at the thought. Well, he would see her in a few hours, would surprise her by showing up at her door. Maybe things would be softer between them now that Daddy was gone and Remy no longer had to protect him from his mother's grievances and sharp barbs.

A solitary crow rose from the tree and fluttered past the balcony. He'd hated them since his childhood, when one of them had swooped down and stolen the sandwich right out of his hand, its sharp beak slicing his finger. Remy rubbed his thumb against his index finger, tracing the path of the injury, which had faded to a faint scar. How old had he been on that Sunday at the zoo with his father? It had been a happy day but bookended by disaster.

His parents had planned a different excursion, but something had gone wrong. They had fought—Remy closed his eyes against the memory of the rumble of voices, as steady and incessant as rain, coming from his parents' bedroom. When at last his mother had emerged, her eyes were red. A wave of outrage had risen in the young Remy and he'd run up to hug and console her. Which was why he had been stunned when she'd gruffly pushed him away.

Cyrus had come out of their bedroom in time to see Remy stumble, had noticed the tears that sprang into the boy's eyes. His face flamed.

"Shame on you, Shirin," he said to Remy's mother. "You're taking out your khunnas against me on an innocent boy?"

It was too late to stop the tumble of memories: His mother's grief turning into anger. Her accusing Remy of putting on a show for his father's benefit. Cyrus roaring with indignation. The look his mother threw at Remy before she locked herself in her room.

Remy had crept away into his own bedroom, but a few minutes later, a grim-faced Cyrus stood in the doorway.

"I'll be damned if I waste this beautiful day waiting for Shirin to come to her senses," he'd said. "Where would you like to go?"

Remy didn't have to think. "The zoo," he said. A baby elephant had been born there a few weeks earlier. Jango had gone last week and was still gushing about it.

"Done," Cyrus said. "Go put on your shoes and socks."

They had stopped at the market and bought three coconuts and a rockhard orb of jaggery to feed to the elephants. Remy squealed with excitement when the adult animals stomped on the coconuts with one foot, splitting them into two halves and expertly scooping out the meat; he shrieked with delight at the baby elephant's hapless attempts to imitate his parents.

As they left the enclosure, Cyrus put his arm around Remy's shoulder.

“Happy?” he asked, and Remy nodded. “Good,” Cyrus said. “Because, son, you have only two jobs in life—to be happy and to make others happy. You understand?”

Remy wondered what kind of jobs he’d have to get to keep that promise, but for now, he was content to nod. “Yes, Daddy.”

They were walking toward the tiger enclosure when Remy’s stomach growled. He looked up at his father, embarrassed, but Daddy didn’t seem to mind. Cyrus reached into his bag and handed his son the chicken sandwich he’d packed. Remy took a bite. It was delicious. He’d opened his mouth to take a second bite when there was a flutter of wings, a blur, and bright blood on his finger. It took him a minute to realize the sandwich was no longer in his hands. Then he began to scream at the sight of blood.

“Hush, sonny, hush,” Cyrus muttered. “Here, let me see.” He removed his handkerchief and tied it around the boy’s index finger. “Damn. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

By the time they reached Dr. Surati’s apartment, Remy’s screams had subsided into occasional hiccups of pain and outrage over the stolen sandwich. He resolved to pack small stones in his pocket to fling at the sinister, bold birds who were seemingly everywhere in Bombay. “I hate them,” he said, and Cyrus made a consoling sound. The doctor, an old family friend, chuckled.

Remy had gotten three stitches, and his reward for being a brave boy was a promise from his father to take him to the movies the following week. When they’d reached home, Shirin took one look at the bandaged finger and covered Remy in kisses.

How mercurial she was, his mother! Still, his complicated relationship with her, the haste with which he’d fled back to Kathy in America after his father’s death, feeling as if he were escaping from under the waves of some twilight ocean—all of this was, hopefully, behind him. For the first time, what had brought him to the city of his birth was not the undertow of the past but the tug of the future.

By THE TIME Remy emerged from his shower, the rest of the household had awakened. As he dressed, he heard the clanging of pots in the kitchen and smelled tea being prepared the Parsi way, with fresh mint and lemongrass. There was a knock at his door. Jango stood at the entrance, still in his sadra and pajama bottoms.

“Saala, you’ve already showered?” he said. He sniffed in Remy’s direction and grinned. “I can smell that aftershave from across the room. What’re you trying to do, seduce my wife with your fancy American airs and all?”

Remy grinned back. Any awkwardness that he had felt at inconveniencing his friends the night before fell away at Jango’s trademark irreverence. Superimposed over the well-built man with the thickening waistline was the wisecracking boy who had befriended moody Remy on the first day of second grade.

“Come,” Jango said. “Tea is ready. What would you like for breakfast?”

“Anything is fine. Maybe some toast?”

Jango looked at Remy balefully. “Maybe some toast?” he mimicked, thumping Remy on the back as they walked down the short hallway into the dining room. “Has Kathy turned you into an anemic rabbit or something? Arre, saala, you’re in a Parsi home, not at some fucking monastery. If I feed you breakfast without the requisite eggs and cream and butter, I will have to renounce my religion.”

Remy laughed, shaking his head. “Okay, okay,” he said.

Shenaz came to the dining table, carrying a tray with three cups of tea. As Remy took the tray from her, she gave him a peck on the cheek. “You slept okay, darling?” she said. “Bed was comfy?”

“Like a baby,” he lied. “Everything was great.”

“Are you sure you have to leave for your mother’s today? Can’t you just stay with us the rest of your trip?”

“I wish.” He wondered how much the couple knew about his distant relationship with his mom. Despite their closeness, he had never discussed his family life with Jango. But Jango had spent many a day at Remy’s home during their childhood and adolescence. Surely, he had noticed how much closer Remy had been to his dad. *Did* children notice these things? In some ways, they had led such innocent and oblivious lives, all their talk revolving around sports and music and girls.

“Well, you’re always welcome here,” Shenaz said. “You know that.” He smiled vaguely.

After a beat, she said briskly, “Okay, chalo. I want to be done with breakfast before Monaz comes. How do akuri and French toast sound?”

Remy moaned. “Oh my God. Akuri alone sounds divine.” His mother used to make the dish, spiced scrambled eggs tossed in fried onion and

cilantro and garnished with nuts and raisins. It had been their usual Sunday breakfast, but sometimes Remy used to ask for it for dinner and his mother unfailingly obliged.

“So WHAT'S SHE like?” Remy asked with his mouth full. “Your niece.”

Jango and Shenaz exchanged a bemused look. “Slow down, yaar,” Jango drawled. “A half hour ago you wanted to eat dry toast, remember?”

Shenaz smacked her husband’s hand. “Okay, enough with the teasing,” she said. She turned to Remy. “Monaz is . . . What to say? I mean, she’s a typical college student, you know? Good in her studies and all, but the girl has no street smarts. She grew up in a very sheltered home. That’s what makes this whole thing so tragic.” She exhaled. “I mean, Remy, can you imagine? She didn’t know she was pregnant for five months? How clueless can a person be?”

Remy felt a pang of sympathy for a young woman he’d never met. “Actually, Kathy said it’s more common than you’d think. It’s called a ‘cryptic pregnancy,’ where the woman doesn’t know until much later.”

“That sounds crazy to me.” Shenaz shrugged. “But I guess we weren’t so bright at nineteen either. And Monaz said she plays so many sports she was used to not getting her period for months at a time.” She paused. “Thank God her best friend at college finally dragged her to see a doctor. That’s when she found out she was pregnant with a boy. When she broke the news to us, I couldn’t believe it.”

Remy reddened and stared at his plate. *TMI*, he thought. They had emailed him Monaz’s picture, and he had immediately seen the family resemblance between Shenaz and her niece—the straight dark hair, the sharp, clear eyes, the full lips. Unless Monaz’s boyfriend looked like Shrek, her baby would be beautiful.

Jango cleared his throat. “To think I spent a whole year trying to help you guys adopt from here. Believe me, I was no further ahead than the day I started the process. You can’t believe the red tape, Remy. Everything in this country moves at a snail’s pace, man. I finally told the social worker, ‘Arre, madam, at this rate, my friend will be an old man with a gray beard and dentures before he becomes a father.’ So when Monaz confided in us, I immediately thought of you and Kathy.” He gave his wife a sideways look. “This one though. She was in such a shock she couldn’t function for a few days.”

“You don’t know my brother Phiroz,” Shenaz said, addressing Remy. “He and his wife—well, they’re not like us. They’re small-town folks, very conservative. They live in Navsari. I don’t know what Phiroz would do if he found out.” She lowered her voice. “Jango is right. The timing of this was a godsend. If you were not willing to take the baby, I don’t know what we would’ve done.”

Remy bit down on the most obvious question: Why hadn’t Jango and Shenaz offered to adopt Monaz’s baby themselves? Sure, Jango had always claimed that they enjoyed being childless, bragged about how much they valued their freedom, their ability to be footloose and fancyfree. But faced with an unwanted child in the family, surely they would’ve changed their minds. He and Kathy had gone through their twenties certain that they didn’t want kids. But when Kathy had turned thirty-one, she had abruptly changed her mind and he had agreed. It hadn’t occurred to them then that they’d be unable to get pregnant. Remy recalled the small fortune they’d spent on fertility treatments that didn’t take. After Kathy proposed that they adopt a child from India, he had called Jango and requested his help.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Shenaz said, misreading his expression. “You’re wondering why Monaz didn’t have an abortion, right?” Her eyes searched his face. “How could she? She was so far along when she came to us. Stupid girl.”

“It’s all going to work out,” Remy said, putting an arm around Shenaz. “This—this is so much better than us adopting an unknown child. This way, it all remains in the family, you know? You and Jango can visit us anytime and get to know the boy.”

“And also, yaar, we know that the child is half-Parsi and comes from a good family,” Jango said. “If you’d pursued the other route, who knows what we would’ve gotten? Most likely an orphan from the slums, right? With God knows what family history and all. And almost certainly a Hindu or a Muslim child. Not too many Parsis give up their children for adoption, correct?”

Even though Remy had had the same thought when Jango had called him in Columbus, he winced at hearing it said out loud. He thought of himself as a progressive, secular man. Neither he nor Kathy was religious. But it was undeniable: adopting a Parsi child was hitting the jackpot. Their small, insular community had a higher death rate than birth rate, and so they were a dying breed, less than a hundred thousand of them left worldwide. To find a child from within this affluent and educated



community was miraculous. He didn't know his mother's views on adoption, but at some point, he'd have to tell her about the reason for this trip, and getting a child whose provenance would be known to them would surely make the whole business more palatable to Shirin.

Embarrassed by his thoughts, Remy changed the topic. "Kathy and I . . . You know. We'll make sure that Monaz's baby—*our* baby—lacks for nothing. We'll be good parents, I promise."

"As if we have any concerns about that!" Jango said. "This will be the luckiest baby in the world. Arre, if I were a few years younger, I'd have begged you and Kathy to adopt *me*."

Shenaz struck her forehead in faux exasperation. "Thirty-six years old, and he still cracks his ridiculous jokes," she said. "God help me."

She looked at Remy. "Will you return to Bombay for the baby's birth? It might be best if Monaz doesn't get a chance to bond with her son."

There was a sudden silence at the table as if the enormity of Monaz's loss had hit each of them.

Remy sighed. "I'd like to," he said. "But let's talk to her about what she'd prefer when she gets here." He rose from the table. "I think I'll rest for a few minutes."

"Yes, go take a nap," Shenaz said. "You must be so jet-lagged."

HE WOKE UP with a jolt a few minutes before ten, brushed his hair, and went into the living room to await the mother of his future child. A pulse beat at the side of his neck and he put his index finger on it to quiet it. He could hear Shenaz in the kitchen, giving instructions to the cook.

Monaz was late but hadn't called to say so, and for some reason this disappointed Remy. *Relax*, he said to himself. *You're not adopting her, just her baby*. He imagined a small boy tottering around their yard in Columbus, an alert, curious child in cargo shorts and red sneakers, and his heart did a strange little flip at the thought. He fidgeted in his chair, unable to control his nervousness.

Remy rose when the doorbell rang, and remained standing while Shenaz opened the door and let in a slender young woman. Monaz was wearing a white T-shirt, blue jeans, and tennis shoes. A leather bag was slung across her right shoulder. She looked as if she'd be at home on an American campus, and Remy was pleased at the realization.

He smiled as he watched the teenager give her aunt a hug and then cross the long, rectangular room to where he stood.

“Hi, Monaz,” he said, sticking his hand out to shake hers. “I’m Remy. I’m so happy to meet you.”

It was only now that he looked her fully in the face and took in the red eyes, the strawberry nose, the trembling lower lip. “Hi, Remy Uncle,” the girl replied. “I’m so very, very sorry.”

“Oh, that’s fine,” Remy said, waving a hand to dismiss her apology. “You’re not *that* late.”

The girl stared at him and then scrunched up her face. “I’m sorry I made you come all the way from America. But I’m keeping my baby.”

## CHAPTER TWO



REMY FELT NUMB as he listened to Jango and Shenaz berating the girl, who had folded upon herself. Of all the scenarios he had imagined, he had not entertained the possibility of the girl changing her mind. *I've never seen Jango lose his temper like this*, he thought with an odd detachment. Shenaz was crying, accusing her niece of embarrassing her in front of her husband's oldest friend.

"Do you think Remy just strolled in here from Juhu Beach or something?" Shenaz said. "This poor man left his wife and his business in America to fly here to meet you."

"I had said all along that I would have to meet him first before I agreed," Monaz replied sullenly.

"What?" For a second, Shenaz faltered. "Yes, that's true. But we—we thought it was as good as done." She looked angry again. "Do you think you can ever find a better home for your son than what Remy and Kathy can provide? You remember what I told you about them? They are model people. A model couple."

"Shenaz, please," Remy said, emerging from his fog. "Let's all take a deep breath." They all turned to him, looking to him for guidance, but he fell silent. His head felt woolly, as if fatigue and disappointment had formed cobwebs in his brain.

"Shame on you for cutting my nose like this," Shenaz resumed. "Who are we going to find that's better than Remy?"

"There's no need to find anyone else." Monaz's voice had grown louder, more strident. "I'm trying to tell you that, only. I am going to keep my baby. Gaurav and I are getting married."

There was a stunned silence. Three pairs of eyes stared at the girl, who sat there shaking but defiant.

"Chokri," Shenaz said at last, "have you gone mad? Do you think your father will allow you to marry a non-Parsi?"

"I'm nineteen. I don't need his permission."

"Last week, you told us this Gaurav person didn't want anything to do with you," Jango said. "And now you're going to marry him?"

Monaz opened her mouth to explain, but Remy had heard enough. He didn't need to know any more of her personal business. His best chance to adopt a child from India had evaporated, and he felt foolish for having rushed here, for having put all his eggs in one basket. A private adoption had seemed like such an elegant solution.

"Excuse me," he said, standing up. "I—I need to call Kathy." His stomach heaved at the thought of his wife's disappointment. Adopting an Indian child had been her idea. "The child should look like at least one of us, honey," Kathy had said. "And getting a . . . a white kid is going to be hard." He had tensed at the thought of yet another link tying him to a country he had been determined to leave behind. But Kathy had seemed so convinced that he'd acquiesced.

"Remy, wait," Shenaz cried. "I'm sure I can knock some sense into this girl."

He shook his head. "It's okay," he said. He forced himself to meet Monaz's eye and smile. "Good luck with everything."

"I'm so sorry, uncle," she said, wiping tears away. "I didn't do this on purpose, I swear."

"I know," he said, feeling a trickle of sympathy. "It's okay. Congratulations to you."

"SHE WHAT?" Kathy said.

"She changed her mind. She's keeping the baby," Remy repeated.

"What?"

He fell silent, knowing that Kathy needed a few minutes to absorb the news. "I'm sorry, honey," he said at last.

"I don't believe it. I mean, how could she? What gives her the right?"

He didn't state the obvious: that they had no signed agreement with Monaz, and even if they had, they were not the kind of people who would force a mother to give up a child against her wishes.

"I knew I should've come with you. Maybe if she'd met me also."

His heart twisted at how crushed Kathy sounded. "How could you have? You have that big conference coming up."

"I know," she said miserably. "But this was more important."