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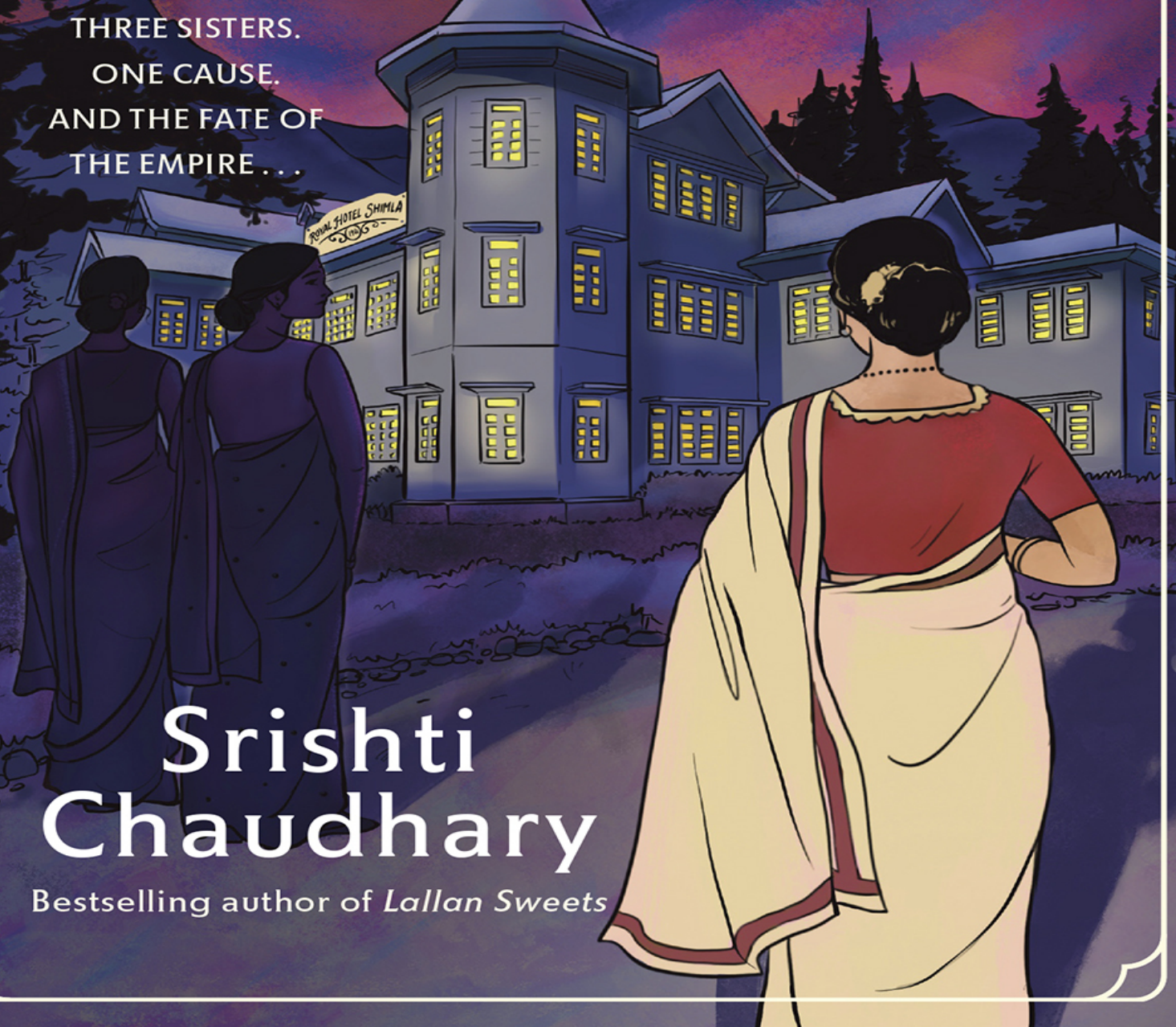


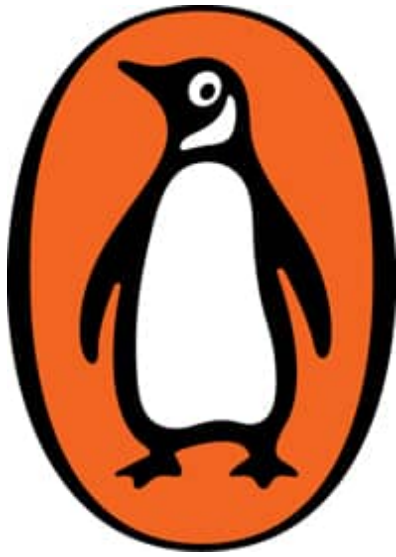
A SHIMLA AFFAIR

THREE SISTERS.
ONE CAUSE.
AND THE FATE OF
THE EMPIRE...

Srishti
Chaudhary

Bestselling author of *Lallan Sweets*





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A SHIMLA AFFAIR

Srishti Chaudhary is the author of the bestselling novel *Lallan Sweets, Once upon a Curfew*, and now, *A Shimla Affair*. She was born in Delhi and studied literature at Lady Shri Ram College, and creative writing at the University of Edinburgh. Currently, she is doing her PhD in Indian literature at the University of Tübingen in Germany, and also teaches creative writing there.

She has had several short stories and articles published by the BBC, *Hindustan Times* and Huffington Post, among others. She spends her time between Delhi and Tübingen, and can be found obsessing over the next great book or TV series that she has irredeemably fallen in love with.

PRAISE FOR LALLAN SWEETS AND ONCE UPON A CURFEW

Lallan Sweets

‘*Lallan Sweets* makes for a perfect summer read—one that will literally leave a pleasantly sweet taste in your mouth once you are done reading it’—***New Indian Express***

Once upon a Curfew

‘Simple story, crisp language, and powerful narration’—***India Today***

‘An engaging, light-hearted read packed with strong characters that keeps the reader hooked to the story’— ***Hindustan Times***

‘Where the author triumphs spectacularly is her storytelling. Hers is a style that is unique and timeless. Through spaces and silence, through the weaving of the inessentials and historical fact, she presents a simple yet powerful tale of realistic love that wins against all odds’—***Deccan Herald***

‘A love story that simmers just below the surface until it erupts into a tangled mess of confusion and fear’—***Women’s Web***

Srishti Chaudhary

A SHIMLA AFFAIR



*For my parents,
who let me be free,
by letting me be me*

A Note on the Spelling of Shimla

Before 1972, Shimla was called Simla, but for the sake of modern conventions, the newer spelling of the city has been used.

Prologue

I realized quite early on in life that acting beyond what was expected of me, above the role of the good woman I was supposed to play, could be the only difference between a life of servility and a life of truth. By servility, I do not mean to a husband, who as Lord and saviour, would help me fulfil my true destiny by giving me the chance to be a devoted wife and mother, as the scriptures say he would. I mean the servility that every man or woman owes to their birth and their circumstances, the servility that defines our boundaries and decides our fate. The only way to overcome this servility is to chase the truth, and the path to truth is laced with freedom.

One can only know freedom as one knows fresh air—the value of it only grasped when it's gone. Conversely, those who never had it would live with the feeling of something missing, but would find it hard to quite put a finger on what. A woman would find it hard to imagine how she would live like a man, as a king of the world.

I must have been barely five when our father had taken us on a short trip to Matheran to marvel at the wonders of the train. We went into the forest and I was thrilled to be surrounded by my sisters and our father, all of them standing over me like branches of a shady tree. Suddenly, I had noticed a blue parakeet with her little chicks, fluttering around a branch, and I tugged at my father's arm, willing him to enjoy the wondrous sight. A smile appeared on his face on seeing the parakeet family, and he stopped in his tracks to gaze at it. I felt unbearably happy and smug at having found this parakeet, the sight of which fascinated my father so much.

'Look at them,' he had pointed, 'see how they take care of each other? It is their duty. All the birds and animals in this forest, each one is doing its duty.'

That's what life is about ... just like them, you must also do your duty, girls, when the time comes for it.'

'What is duty?' I had asked him. I wanted to fulfil it to the best of my abilities.

'Doing what you are supposed to do. And each creature in the world must do their own duty.'

I made a mental note and looked forward to the time when I could show my father that I was indeed doing my duty. When he made to leave, I told him I wanted to take along the parakeet so it could live with me. He refused on all accounts, no matter how much I cried or fussed, making it clear that the parakeet must be allowed to remain free. I told him that by that rationale, he should also set me free. He had tapped my head and smiled: 'Do your duty, and you will be free.'

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to win this freedom.

When my sisters and I originally set out to win freedom, we were fuelled by our enthusiasm in what we thought was our duty, our loyalty that told us to fight for all that we hold dear and our deep belief that we held in our hands the strings that could change the world. We believed that we had earned the right to determine the fates of others, forgetting in our innocence that only God had that right. We believed that three women could have the power to change history, the very course of Indian independence.

All so that one day we could say—*we know what it is to be free.*



ACT ONE

Royal Hotel Shimla



1

If I attempt to go back to the beginning of it all, to understand how the tide of our undoing swept us along headfirst into the calamitous sea, perhaps I would arrive at our father's love for stories. He loved telling stories, and maybe that's also what made him such a good trader, besides, of course, the fact that he traded in opium. He had a way of talking that would turn the mundane into the dramatic, that could make one forget the immediate world and move the person to tears—'*baaton mein ras ghol dete hai*, Mistryji!' It was a compliment we often heard about him—that he could sway people with his words.

He often used to say that stories are between you and I, making them seem like a personal, special secret, relating them with penchant and charm. He knew when to raise his tone with a smattering of exclamations, and when to pause and build suspense. He knew how to hold attention, and how to laugh and diffuse it. Even as a child, I realized this magnetic power he had. More than anything else, he knew human nature—what made people smile and cry.

Every week, our relatives would gather over *salli boti* and steaming *dal*, and our father, the all-important storyteller, would regale us with stories of the follies of great kings, the loyalties of loving friends, and the treacheries of seemingly-innocent partners. Stories about statecraft and politics, cleverness

and retributions, love and death. Eventually, he would ask the guests to participate by sharing tales fictional and real, tragic and comic, gloomy and hopeful.

It was the highlight of our time spent with him, as our father had many important businesses to attend to other than just take care of three little girls. Our charge was passed among ayahs, under the watchful eye of an aunt here or there. While most times he remained a distant, strict and awe-inspiring figure, the stories abolished hierarchies and treated all of us equally in their wonderful and mysterious world.

My favourite story, the one I remembered as a hymn late into the hours of troubling nights, was a story from the Jataka tales, of the little quail Latukika who laid her eggs on the feeding ground of elephants. My sisters—Noor, Afreen—and I would be spellbound as we imagined Latukika's tiny eggs in the path of hundreds of bumbling elephants. One elephant, a form of the Bodhisatta, protected Latukika and her eggs from the parade of elephants but, before leaving, he warned Latukika of one wild elephant whom he could not control.

The rogue elephant came and destroyed Latukika's eggs, although she begged him to show mercy. With shattered dreams, Latukika flew away, weighed down by a life that would never be the same again. Yet, a fire of vengeance burnt in Latukika's belly, and she vowed to avenge her hatchlings. Over time, she made friends with a crow, a fly and a frog, and convinced them to join her in her mission to destroy the wild elephant. After days of planning, the crow pecked at the elephant's eyeballs until they oozed blood. The fly then entered and laid eggs inside his eye sockets. When the eggs hatched into maggots, the elephant was in a pain so fierce that the croaking frog, promising a refreshing dunk in a pond of water, was able to mislead the blind elephant off the edge of a cliff. And so, Latukika had her revenge.

'It matters not who has the most strength,' father would say, 'it matters how you use that strength, what friends you have and what cause you fight for.' In the difficult times of life, I remembered Latukika and her courage in

the face of horrifying odds, and over time, my sisters and I became Latukika and her friends, sticking together in the face of all that had happened to us.

When our father died, our eldest sister, Noor, was compelled to save Afreen and I from our relatives, lest they relegate us to a torrid, shameful future. Noor had bravely borne two huge tragedies of life—first when her husband died of tuberculosis and then when we lost our father. She had been forced to grow up more each time and hold life tighter in her hands, and yet, she fought her husband's family to be with us. She left behind her world in Lahore to take her younger sisters to our inheritance: Royal Hotel Shimla.

In a land of heat and dust, Royal Hotel Shimla was an oasis of dreams perched on top of Sunset Hill in Shimla. When our father's opium business stalled, he put his energies into developing the four-storeyed stone establishment. But he did not want to offer just another inn for passersby. He wanted Royal Hotel Shimla to be a stunning cultural centre, a place that hosted soirées for all the beautiful and distinguished people who set foot in Shimla.

The opium was going to be his key to make Royal Hotel Shimla a success, the gateway to his entry in the world of the British and an opportunity for consorting with the Rajahs and Maharajahs. Word spread that our father, Jamshedji Mistry, offered the best opium in all of Hindustan in his hotel. It attracted the influential Nawabs, the dainty princesses, the anglicized civil servants. Our father made gifts of this opium to high-ranking officials, and soon the place was teeming with English officers out to enjoy the summer season. Within months, the who's who were at Royal Hotel Shimla: the Maharaja of Kapurthala, the Maharani of Cooch Behar, Lords and Marquesses, Governors of various Presidencies, fallen-from-glory Sultans, French explorers and Swiss diplomats—all eager to meet with the cream of society.

Every summer, the town came alive with balls, parties, picnics, country fairs and the revelries of the British as well as India's rich. It was the perfect time for single women, accompanied by their mothers, on the lookout for an

appropriate husband. Gossip and scandal flowed as freely as champagne and wine, with dances to aid the meeting of eligible single adults.

In the hotel, I often pretended to be someone else; a desperate Maharani out to negotiate with the evil White men to save her kingdom, an out-of-favour Nawab giving in to intoxicants and falling in love with a courtesan, a little girl locked in the hotel alone to fight the ghosts of its past owners. The fabulous lives of our guests took my imagination to far-off worlds. Surrounded by these important people, I was keen to be someone more exciting and live their life, even if only in fantasy.

While Noor took over the complicated tasks of running the hotel, I was trained in English and taught to welcome the guests and arrange for their needs. I was on call to bring them their towels, show them to the ballroom, make sure the tea arrived and ensure that every room had hot water for their baths. I also kept the fires burning. Afreen, on the other hand, was placed in the kitchen, to oversee the cooking. With her loud mouth, keen sense of justice and resentment, which prevented her from being practical, the kitchen was the only place she could remain out of trouble.

There was always work to do, always things to take care of and always someone to help. I was happy being there, it took our minds away from the past. Yet, as I grew up, the hotel's walls, elaborate though they might have been, weren't enough, and I started getting restless.

I was young and beautiful, I knew as much, but it seemed as though my life had come to a standstill within the four walls of this hotel. Chained to our inheritance, I longed for the world outside that seemed out of reach. In my dreams, I dared to venture far and away to America, to a life of Hollywood glamour, while I was resigned to await the marriage fate had in store for me.

I knew that the hotel was our lifeline. Outside of these four walls, we would be lost, and our self-made house of graces would crumble. I helped my sisters in the running of this place to maintain our semblance of respectability—so that good Parsi men could be found for us, so we may

dedicate the rest of our lives to them and give them beautiful, well-behaved children who would go on to glorify their Parsi name.

In the management of the everyday—the rooms that had to be cleaned, the delicacies that had to be laid out, the small talk that had to be kept up, I somehow forgot my small indignances. I erased my hope for a purpose to make sure my life amounted to something, that I was held in worth, but mostly, my insatiable desire to live and dream of all the lives in the realm of possibility.

Yet, the hypocrisy of our position and the limits of our physical reality frustrated me. I ached for something that would help me understand why it must be so and what I could be.



On a mundane summer afternoon, while I wallowed in self-pity and boredom at the hotel reception, draped in a pale pink sari and ready to listen to the demands of our guests, I was summoned to Noor's office. She wore a plain white sari, and the ringlets of curls that all three of us inherited escaped her tight bun no matter how much she tried to tame them. She had dark, expressive eyes and, just like our sister Afreen, turned heads everywhere she went. For a long time, I had been indignant that the Lord didn't make me as beautiful as my sisters. But he gave me the most brilliant of smiles instead and I learned to make peace with that.

Immediately upon arrival, I could see that Noor was seething, and it was my cue to be as inconspicuous as possible before she started lashing out at me. She paced up and down the room, the jasmine she put in her hair every morning on the brink of falling off.

'Nalini, go to the police station,' Noor said, her voice shaking with anger. 'This is the worst timing! I can't go; five sets of guests are arriving in an hour, I have to manage everything with Khushilalji.'

'What happened?'

‘They have taken in Begum Jaan. A boy just brought the news. Go and speak to them; see what’s going on. Check if a servant is free to accompany you.’

‘I can go on my own, don’t worry!’ I said, perhaps too fast.

Noor raised an eyebrow at me. ‘All right. Then come straight back and don’t talk to anyone you don’t *need* to talk to. There is enough to be done here without you gallivanting about. Understood?’

I nodded vigorously and left after grabbing my shawl, unable to stop myself from skipping down the hill as I made my way into town. I loved any excuse to head there, especially when I was supposed to be working.

It was a crisp, spring day, cold but sunny, and I could smell the fresh scent of pine. I crossed the tower of Christ Church. The snow-flecked mountains behind it cast a deep blue hue over it, making its walls look more sombre than they actually were. The town around it with the little stone houses, colourful roofs, people bustling about, helped liven up its austere tones. Rickshaws rushed ahead, trying to jostle for place alongside the pedestrians. Finally, upon reaching the Mall, I walked through the crowd of women going about their shopping. There was bustle typical of a marketplace—large signboards placed outside shops, windowpanes displaying polished wares, and people pausing to gaze through. I walked to the edge of the Mall and climbed up the steps leading to the police station.

There was a flurry of activity around. People sitting on the floor pleading with havildars, officers at their desks being served tea, the sounds of drawers opening and closing. After convincing the havildars that I was a respectable hotel owner and creating a considerable amount of fuss, I was finally taken to the constable, a no-nonsense Sikh whom I had met several times before. He was sifting through some papers, and upon seeing me raised his eyebrows and gestured for me to come over.

I folded my hands in greeting, and he gave me a courteous nod.

‘What can I do for you, Madam?’

I outranked him socially, but he betrayed no signs of letting that come in the way. He had the upper hand here, with the backing of the British.

‘Your havildars have arrested Begum Jaan, Singhji. She works for us, running the Oriental Bazaar at the hotel, where she sells many wooden handicrafts, ceramic pots, stoneware—all the things the White sahibs like. She makes it all with her own hands. Please release her so she can go back to the Oriental Bazaar. It is an important part of Royal Hotel Shimla, especially during the tourist season. We don’t want to lose out on business, now that the season festivities have been limited as it is with the War.’

Singhji’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion, and he signalled one of his havildars. ‘Who is it again?’

‘Begum Jaan,’ I repeated with an impatient tone. ‘You know who she is. Some call her the Queen of Spies.’

Legend has it that she had once been the Begum of a notorious, high-ranking officer who treated her cruelly, choosing to keep his animals in better shape and form than his wife. Until one day he went missing, making her all-powerful. Not a leaf moved in Shimla without Begum Jaan getting to know about it. Most feared her, thinking her to be a witch, and steered clear of her. But others, like my sisters, who found use for the information Begum Jaan provided through her informants, welcomed and protected her.

‘Ah, and you want me to release the Queen of Spies, Madam? Why is that?’

‘It’s just a name Singhji, you know that. She is innocent! What has she even been charged with? She’s just a woman selling some wooden artefacts!’

He surveyed me. ‘She has been arrested for spitting in the path of an English officer, Madam.’

‘She must not have seen him, Singhji.’

‘I doubt that is the case. Anyway, it is not up to me ... the Sergeant will come and check the details and then decide whether a case will be filed or not.’

It didn’t matter whether he wanted to or not, he could not release her.

‘May I please speak with her?’

He conceded, and I was led to one of the cells in the rear.

Begum Jaan was sitting on the bare floor in her burqa, where several other women squatted near her. Her face was unveiled, a thick line of kohl beneath

her eyes, her salt-and-pepper hair in a bun and her lips dark.

‘Nalini Bibi, welcome. To what do I owe the pleasure?’ she smiled amusedly.

As I approached the bars, I could see the other women trying to listen in, ‘It’s a rare woman that smiles in jail.’

She threw back her head and laughed. ‘How can I not smile while I am bestowed with this honour? To go to jail for one’s freedom is a pleasure like no other.’

‘And here I was, trying to talk the constable into letting you out.’

There were guffaws of laughter from the women at the back of the cell, ‘The *badi* memsahib has come to rescue the Begum! First rescue yourself, memsahib.’

I ignored them, ‘And these quarters ... they are comfortable for you?’

She looked at me as though I, not her, deserved to be the subject of pity. ‘I’ve spent most of my life sleeping on the streets, Bibi. You know what happens to a woman who sleeps on the streets? She is bothered by all kinds of dogs, and I am not just talking about the animal variety. So, yes, these are rather comfortable. They will release me soon, don’t worry about that. The longer I stay in here, the more my sacrifice will be recognized.’

‘Noor is not pleased, she wants you to be back at work.’

‘Your sister is a hard woman to please, Bibi,’ she said with a dramatic sigh. ‘But I promise to return in a few days.’

I knew her position at the Oriental Bazaar was too important for her to give up, it was where she often picked up titbits from the goras.

Begum Jaan beckoned me closer towards her, after looking around for any stray policeman listening in. There was no one nearby.

‘The tide is changing, Bibi. The Imam has called for people to make their sacrifices, if we are to be free.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I abhor this question! I know because I listen—my people listen. Every child on the street knows Begum Jaan, and, in turn, Begum Jaan knows what every child wants. I have ears everywhere, you know that. My ears tell me

that not just Muslims, but also others in the city are gathering, and they have promised to stand by their brothers who have been unfairly sent off to war or arrested. The Hindus are coming together, and it puts us at unease; we know it is time for us too. Shimla was once a docile town of hillsmen, not any more. They understand my effect in the community and have called me up to serve them.'

'Noor will not be happy to hear that ... Begum Jaan, you will have to choose. The Oriental Bazaar or this fight.'

'There will come a time when we will not be able to choose any more. I cannot ignore their calls. I have been with them ever since I made my way to Shimla all those years ago after my husband's family accused me of his murder. When I arrived here, the Muslims here protected me. Not one of them spoke a word against me. Nobody knew Zainab Fatima Khan, they only knew Begum Jaan, the crazy, local woman who lived on the streets. I helped each one of these people back, and today they look to me for leadership, because they know that I am aware of everything that is going on. And I will listen, because Shimla is calling, Bibiji.'

One of the women in the cell crawled up next to Begum Jaan and leaned towards the bars. 'Shimla calling, Bibi. Did you hear it?'

Begum Jaan pushed the woman and I stepped away from them, startled.

Begum Jaan inched even closer to the bars. 'I must do my part. And you must too, Bibi, along with your sisters. Afreen Bibi, at least, I have seen her around, and word on the street is—'

The other woman came back to where we stood and Begum Jaan slapped her hard. Upon hearing the commotion, a havildar attempted to shoo me away until I reminded him to mind his manners. I yelled out to Begum Jaan, telling her to report to the hotel as soon as she was out. In return, she gave me a big smile, revealing her crooked teeth and the mischief in her eyes.

I walked away from the police station with Begum Jaan's words ringing in my ears, feeling energized. If she, who had far less, could define her life with so much depth, why couldn't I?

It was true that the mood in Shimla seemed to have changed; no longer were people eager to obey the White sahibs as easily as they had before the War. Rumours abounded of the Mahatma leading a new revolution. Every day, we heard of skirmishes breaking out in the Lower Bazaar. The Indians who worked for the British found ways to rebel.

I pushed these thoughts away as I faced the Harrison Brothers Bookstore, one of the few places that was friendly to me, an Indian. A little bell jingled as I pushed open the door and entered. Beautiful and intricate volumes of books were on display in stands, with the rest tucked behind neatly in shelves, their spines gleaming under what was obviously constant care. One table in the corner displayed letters and paintings, while the shelves above it groaned under the weight of more books. Behind the counter was one of the Harrison brothers.

‘Morning, Miss Mistry,’ he called out cheerily. ‘Nobody escorting you today?’

‘No, Mr Harrison, my sister agreed to let me venture out on my own ...’

‘Then we better be quick, you should not be out once it begins to get dark.’

‘So, do you have it?’

The twinkle in his eyes was more than an answer. I squealed in delight as he excitedly went to the back of the store and emerged several minutes later with a large file. He opened it to reveal the most breathtaking spectacle ever to be delivered on a poster: Clark Gable holding Vivien Leigh in his arms as everything in the background burnt. Rhett and Scarlett, *Gone with the Wind*.

I caressed it with my hands, holding it close to me, as if the poster would swallow me and transport me to their world if only I stared at it long enough. One day, I could be an actress. Surely, someone in America would be willing to cast in their movie a woman from India with fair skin and thick, curly black hair? There must be roles for people who looked like me. I had no way of realizing that dream just then, especially without going to America, or at least Bombay. Nobody would come to Royal Hotel Shimla and discover the passion in my heart. I feared that I would remain unremarkable, but until then, I had these rare posters.