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Set Me Free

Written by Hina Belitz

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SET ME FREE

Headline Publishing

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Part One

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Chapter One

Clerkenwell, London

That day I heard a noise as I entered our home. It was unlike those of every day. A tremor hovered in my chest as I crept up our narrow steps to the sleeping rooms upstairs. My eyes fixed upon the rusty-coloured swirls of the dusty carpet. A banister support had fallen out a little while ago, fallen right away, and someone had with little skill tried to wedge it back in place. It leaned away from where it should have been, and for some reason on this day it troubled me. And then I heard my brother's voice from the bedroom at the top of the stairs. The door was closed. I looked around and saw the slatted airing cupboard door and the other painted white to Mama's room were just a little bit ajar. As if like me they sought to listen carefully.

'Papa, Papa, is that you?' Nu said. I paused not quite at the top. Was it true? Could it be that Papa was here?

'Nu, beta[1], I was waiting for you. Your mother didn't say? She didn't tell you anything of why you left?'

I hadn't heard my papa's voice in years. I held my breath

1 son; this term is also traditionally used for daughters as a term of endearment

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and took another step towards the bedroom door where voices spoke. Then I froze. I didn't want to see his face, wasn't eager for his embrace.

I heard a gasp and a shriek. 'Papa, Papa, why?' I heard Nu cry.

'You don't even know what you are? Haramzada[2]!'

Silence flooded in and deafened me. Something in me turned to electricity. A second sense, a knowing, punched the breath out from my chest. I panted, found I couldn't breathe.

'Well,' he said, 'it's time to put things right.' I heard the first crack and blow. And then a scream. A scream that carried on and on for years inside my head and took away the calmness in my soul.

'Mani! Mani!' my brother called to me. I ran to the door but stopped just as a thudding beat began. Something heavy drumming evenly in time.

'Ma . . . Ma . . . Maaa . . .'

The thudding carried on, Papa grunting harder with each strike. My hand was on the handle of the door, but trapped inside I felt a breathless, foolish anxiety. It stopped me in my tracks. I knew what I should do. I had to save my Nu. But I was scared, panic spinning in my head, and in that moment, in a flash, I hid behind the slatted door ahead. Curling like a sorry ball of cowardice, anti-hero, anti-me. I didn't want a bruise to land upon me too.

The beating slowed and morphed into a thrash, and now I couldn't hear the voice or breathing of our baby Nu. In my

2 bastard

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mind I saw him as a child again, playing with his stones the way he always did.

I listened hard to raspy breaths and heavy steps, but I didn't move. Silent tears damp upon my heated skin. But still I didn't move to save my Nu.

And then silence.

After a while I heard the cracking open of the door. Papa stepped out. I could only just make him out through the gaps in the airing cupboard door. His arms were red, with flecks of blood upon the shadowed darkness of his face. At the corner of his mouth the blood made smiley marks, the marks on children after berry drinks.

He stood so still. Then, without a glance to left or right, he turned to face the door where I was hiding. In a lengthy moment, through the angled slats, his eyes were on my eyes; he saw my soul. And then he smiled.

Not a smile that showers affection and connection. But one that lords its power over you. A smile that says: I have you. And he did. He had me then. He has me now.

He's had me ever since.

No hit, no pull, no scratch could ever hurt me more than that.

As he smiled, some blood spread on to his teeth. In that moment, with all his dark and ugly bloody looks, I despised myself much more than I did him. It was me that had let him hurt our baby Nu. He reached towards the handle of the airing cupboard door. I pushed back hard against cold wall, my feet slipping on the chipped floorboards underneath. As he touched the door, he pulled away, mesmerised by blood upon his arm. He rubbed his bloodied skin upon his

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shirt and turned to me again just as voices sang through the open window in the hall. Chat and laughter pierced by resonating heels walking on the street. He lurched away and ducked as if to hide, his sniping eyes shifting left and right. Then slowly he rose, still bending at the knees, pressed his palms upon his hair as if to tidy it, and crept away. Down the steps, closing the front door carefully behind him, making sure the lock had latched.

I looked about the room. The bedding and some clothes were heaped along the wall, and further down and on the left, Nu lay curled up in a ball. Around him in a perfect swirl, a pool of his own blood. His right arm bent back, and cuts and gashes oozing blood on to his stripy shirt. White and blue and red. His jeans were slick against his legs, heavy with a liquid weight. And on the window pane above the bed, a firework of red. I fell to him and lifted him to me. His eyes flickered open, and he smiled a bit and said, 'I'm OK, Mani. Do you think that was our pa,' then faded out again.

I couldn't speak; I could hardly breathe. I just rocked him in my arms, deep and grainy sobs rising from the pit of me.

I stood to work out what to do. The floor beneath me seemed to move. 'Mama! Mama!' I screamed as I ran about the house. She was out. I ran back up the stairs and grabbed the bedding on the floor to cover up our Nu. And as I pulled it away, that was when I saw. Underneath the quilt was Ma. A mess of death all sprawled across the floor. I paced here and there, my arms held up, palms forward to push the scene away.

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I screamed. Mad and rhythmic whooping screams rising and falling with melody.

When the medics came, I showed them in, then hid in Mama's room. Placed a towel on the floor beside her bed. A makeshift prayer mat for my sins. I rubbed my forehead on the floor until it felt sore, and as I did, I begged, 'Dear God, please, please save my Nu and Ma. Forgive me for what I did.' I moaned and cried, the taste of salt and dried-up devastation on my tongue.

Quite quickly I was done. I folded up the towel and placed it on the bed. I knew that Mama would be mad at me if I left it on the floor. And then I swallowed all my grief within. I felt it moaning in my breast as medics swept away the death and took my brother's beaten body far away from me. Just where he deserved to be.

I feel the grief within me still.

I walked around our small square garden in the dark the night that Mama passed. The privet looked alarmed, all stalks of overgrowth, all ragged. I let its branches stroke my cheek and saw the smile upon my father's face again. The moon was moving out of sight behind a darkening sky, and I heard my brother's voice echo in my head from years ago. 'You are an and-gel' he'd say to me. I ducked behind the privet bush, hiding like the moon. I knew that what I'd done would one day be found out. Just like the moon, it would eventually come out.

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Chapter Two

You: bus route 12 to Big Ben

6 November

My dear,
I was thinking about you lots today. Your deep blue eyes and the way the lines around them smile deeper than your lips. I'm thinking of you reading this, your fingers stroking ink. Writing to you makes me feel I've lived. It's like a need, a gnawing deep inside that this alone can satisfy. And I will see to it that you get this letter, whatever it may take. I'll follow you. Make sure the moment's right. Make sure that I'm not seen . . .

I know it to be true now. That it isn't just memory that muscles have. They carry joy as well. Happy muscles are strong, sad muscles weak. Just days ago, right after the Day of the Frying Pan (light aluminium but still bruising), it wasn't with a confident, rounded hand that I wrote. No, my love. My helplessness bore down upon me like a weight and squeezed my muscles weak. The script of my secret letters to you all thin and stringy, like the cotton-thread legs of those unsteady spiders.

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Today I feel as if I have swallowed a red-hot, pulsating thing. I am strong, blood-filled, throbbing. And my script is bold and curvaceous to prove the point. Grooves all nibbed across the sheet; the subtle bleed of ink. It's because of you.

People will say it's wrong, you and I. But they don't understand. They don't understand at all. I know you will, my love. When I tell you things I haven't said to anyone before.

You know how I feel. Loving you is real. The thing I was born to do. Look. The truth is, I'm all yours, not his. It's you I love, just him I'm sleeping with. And don't worry, I won't stop writing, whatever happens – even if it hurts. People hate bad things happening to them but they really shouldn't. I don't. We mustn't judge the forces that make us. And when I tell you all, you will know how I became the person that I am, and why I love you so. I wrote the story down, you see. I wrote it down for you. And I will tell you everything, a part each time we meet. Soon you'll come to know. The story of my love and how it came to you.

With all my love, until next time,

Mexx

I leave the house, banging the door too hard. You'd say I was happy if you saw me. Because for the first time in months, I am behaving like it. Firm stride, wide steps, arms swinging in a march. I love the feeling I have now. It swells so big, it's everywhere. Not just inside, but in the sky above and the floor beneath my feet. The rust-scabbed iron gate

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wolf-whistles as it swings me out, and every part of me is in step, in metronomic time. My letter to you is flapping and bending as I stride.

I wait for the bus. Ten uncomfortable minutes have passed. Uncomfortable because the letter pinched between my thumb and forefinger is electric, alive. Like a bird; some small sparrow or finch eager for release. Freedom. It sends currents to my stomach that tickle me on the inside. I feel it when I think of what I'm about to do. I feel it when I think of you.

The silence at the station breaks with a slap, flesh upon flesh. A young mother smacks her toddler's bare leg. I catch the hush before the ripping caw. Why do we hurt our own? I think.

The number 12 arrives. It's a red double-decker, and I take a window seat, not so much for the views, but to hide behind the veil of dirt smeared upon the outside of the window. The graffiti of London's grime. Modern art.

The faint smell of pummelled dust and dried urine rises as I throw myself down upon the bench. The bus swerves to the right as it begins to move. I hold the rail in front to steady myself as it makes its way through the streets of London. My sleeve falls back to reveal a dirty smudge of a bruise at the centre of my left forearm. I quickly cover it over. Do they ever clean these buses? I wonder. My eyes trail the theatrics of an abandoned beer can, rattling as it rolls, a curled trail of beer forming a near-perfect circle. I sit for quite a while watching tides of passengers wash in and out at each stop.

The excitement wears me down, but as Parliament with its many bays and towers comes into view, I spot you getting

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on. The bus idles at red traffic lights and judders as it stills. I feel comforted by it. You don't see me, do you? I get up, moving slowly, cautiously to you. You touch the back of your neck as if a part of me had touched your skin, my flesh upon your flesh.

We all do things we can't explain. I wonder if that's why I'm right behind you now. So close that I can touch the bare skin of your neck and breathe upon your hair. The pounding in my chest is spreading to my fingertips. I feel my cheeks rise. It's not a smile, but something promising to be. I hold my place, decide to wait a moment more . . .

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Chapter Three

White boy in Lahore

Years earlier

I'm waiting and I'm watching by the door.

Chink, *chink*, *chink*. You always hear them first. Their ankle bells sounding with each footstep on the floor. And then the singing as the dancing begins. *Chink*, *chink-chink*, *chink*.

I'm seven and I'm watching from afar, crouching down like a little mouse hiding in our home. Commotion starts and I can see it clearly as our door is open wide. Neighbours coming out to see what's going on. Who's singing in the courtyard, dancing in our street. I've never heard or seen such things before.

'The *kusorey*[3] are here,' I hear my papa say. I creep forward to the door. My face is hidden by the wall and only eyes and fingertips can peep. I see the three of them, two dressed in red saris, the other one in green. Each gently resting both their hands upon one swinging hip. Thrusting, lurching up. Their faces scare me: the way they force the feminine upon their strong square jaws; red lips, brown paint

3 transvestites

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to hide the stubble on their chins, something wrong about their wide clown-like smiles.

A few men from the local residences come out to chase the transvestites away. I see Sultan, who is my papa's friend. He runs to them with his finger wagging up and down. Sultan's son, Imran, is running with him, swinging round his thighs as if he's tethered by a leash.

'There is no wedding here,' I hear Sultan shout. 'You have the wrong address, now go!'

'But we heard about the birth and we came to celebrate with you.'

'*Chal chal*[4], shoo, be gone.'

Pulsing jangles rise with a blur of dust as once again their stamping feet begin to thump.

'*Challo*, go! It was a girl.' Sultan shouts to stretch his voice above the noise.

The *kusorey* stop dancing all at once, and now only random chimes sound as they gather up their skirts and sari folds and start to leave.

'Commiserations, brother; we'll pray that next time it's a boy.' I hear their muted bells clatter as they step away, but then the one in green turns back and reaches out a palm. Vines of henna grow up his veined and sturdy arm.

'A few rupees for lunch? God bless you with good health and sons, brother.'

There's sadness in Sultan's eyes because the *kusorey* don't know that his wife, in giving birth, has died. He walks away. The transvestites leave and the chinking fades.

4 go, go

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I run back inside our home, and in the middle of an empty space I start to stamp my feet. I raise my arms up high and then I twist and spin inside our little room.

'What are you doing, Mani?' Mama says to me.

'I'm dancing, Mama, dancing for the baby girl.' Mama takes me in her arms and swings me round so fast her *dupatta*[5] falls off her head. Then she sits me on her lap and feeds me dried *chapatis*[6] from the other night. I chew and chew until my teeth begin to hurt. Papa lays his hand upon my head the way elders do.

It was the first time I had ever seen the *kusorey*, and despite the strangeness of their looks and ways, it wasn't thoughts of she-men lingering in my mind; it was the silencing of bells because a baby girl had been born.

Lahore. That was where it started. Back when London was just a word. A word unknown to me, spoken to impress. That was how I learned that words could change a person's thoughts; make people like you more. In the courtyard fronting the single room in which we lived, you could hear people speak, and see them too; like a theatre stage, the homes curved and pointed in. I often saw my papa speak to guests and neighbours there. *London*. Each time he said that word out loud, they'd nod with eyebrows raised and downward smiles upon their face. And Papa would tell again how Mama's father, my *nana abu*[7], met the Queen of England

5 scarf women wear around their neck and upon their head
6 flat bread
7 grandfather on the mother's side

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when she came to Gonda in a wide-brimmed summer hat. There was a picture he'd sometimes make me fetch. Proof that it was true. In it Nana Abu sat beside this British lady amongst a group of men framed in mock bamboo. We kept it on the high shelf in our home. He'd shine it up against his puffed-out chest, then hand it round the guests like the picture of a son who'd gone to study medicine. I think the lady in the hat wore pink, though I couldn't say for sure. Just like we didn't know whether this lady really was the Queen. We kept that to ourselves.

Papa was a short and sharp dark man. As if he'd caught upon his skin the darkness of night. If he loved at all, he kept it tight and closed within. He spoke in simple words, firing them at us like an insult or a nag.

'Hira, get!' and then he'd point and shake his wrist, eyes averted, knowing my ma would do just that. She would run across the tiny room in which we lived, past the cooking rings in the corner where she spent so much time crouching, feet flat upon the floor, knees around her ears, turning onions, lamb and *aloo*[8] in heated earthen pots on top of massive flames. Then she would return and wait for what Papa would say next, always ready to obey.

I never saw Ma sitting still. She'd move around the room cleaning, cooking, tending to Nu. She never looked at me, just focused on Nu and the endless doing filling up her days. And when she stopped to think, her eyes upon some middle distance only she could see, she'd roll and turn the ring on her finger. Mama said it was real gold, so sometimes when

8 potato

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she cooked and cleaned, she took it off and put it high up on the shelf with Papa' s watch and special things. That was where we kept the picture of Nana Abu with the English woman in the wide-brimmed hat. As a toddler, Nu merged the words into one. The new name stayed, and from that day we called our grandpa Naboo. Even Mama called him by that name. In the picture on the shelf, Naboo looked so different, young and fresh. The photo looked as if it had fallen into Mama's pot of spice. The black and white tinged with the colours of turmeric and cumin. We weren't allowed to touch those special things. But often Nu or I would climb up on a chair and stare at her. That British lady in a summer dress.

The air in Lahore was always loud. And where we lived, a place called Angel's Arc, the curve of single-storey homes seemed to funnel all the sounds to us. Thick with heat and the hum of activity: the faint whisper of moving traffic, the staccato squeal of a child, metal clanging against metal and a distant hissing like a thousand bees. The warmth oozed in through the windows and doors and squeezed little insects into the lattice mesh. The scent of jasmine. No breeze at all. And later in the night, the fizz of onions in a butter broth would push the other scents and sounds back out. The blur of sounds was only broken by the singing of *azaan*[9], the call to prayer.

It was from here that Mama would soon run with us like animals being chased, casting backward glances all the way. Rain had started falling, fat, warm drops that mingled with our sweat. I didn't know where we were going or why we

9 call to prayer

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were running, I just followed on as any child would do. Mama held my brother Nu like some shoplifter's loot and left me clutching on behind, holding her sari as it billowed reds and yellows with each stride.

It was with the birth of Nu that things began to change. Nu arrived with skin as white as the sheet that he was swaddled in, despite the dark skin of our family. We all felt it. The mysteries that hid beneath his baby skin. Sultan brought sweet *mitai*[10] to celebrate as Nu lay curled upon Mama's lap, eyes closed, a tree of veins, pink and blue, on his lids. And Papa sat in his corner on the floor, doubt and questions forming in his own eyes.

'Congratulations, Nafsi, Baji[11] Hira, now finally you have a son,' Sultan said. He didn't look at me, but I often noticed how his gaze would linger on my ma. He carried on. 'Someone to care for you in old age and help you with the burden of your daughter's dowry.'

Mama's eyes cut across the room to me, slim and stern and shadowed underneath, then flew back to Nu. I remember Mama's face. The way it changed when she looked at Nu. Her awe and admiration for the boy she had produced. Lips curling down a little as if to hide a smile, dark eyes holding their place just a while longer. Like a guilty secret.

When Nu threw his food on the floor, Mama never told him off. Often she would stroke his perfect chiselled face, stare into his eyes and run her fingers through his blood-red

10 Asian sweets
11 respectful term for a big sister

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hair. But most of all she'd marvel at the brightness of his skin, the flawless whiteness of the boy. And yes, I also knew that he was a thing of beauty, a rare and special child. Unlike me.

I was born a deep and dark and rounded brown. Much darker even than my ma. When I sat with Nu, we looked like night and day. To say I wasn't jealous would not be a whole truth, if a truth can be in parts. But you see, I also loved the boy. He was my little charm who sat beside me day and night. I smelled his milky skin when he ran into my arms. In bed he wouldn't sleep unless he felt me near, his hand moving loose skin at the bend of my elbow.

From the day Nu was born, I knew that Mama loved him more. I became a thought her mind had room for only after she was sure that Nu was safe and fed and warm. Then, and only sometimes, she would turn to check on me.

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