CHAPTER 1

Mira winced as a spasm of pain shot through her. I put my palm on her forehead. Her skin was burning, like a *jalebi* fresh from a pot of boiling oil. Grabbing a cotton towel from a stack by her bedside, I wet it in her water glass and pressed it to her forehead. The wrinkles on her forehead slowly eased. She let out a sigh.

"What about the baby?" she asked, her speech slurred.

I opened my mouth to tell her, then thought better of it. "Let me get the doctor for you, ma'am."

Her eyes shot open, as if she realized what I was going to say. "Oh, no!" Her eyes filled. "We must tell Paolo."

I blinked. According to her chart, her husband's name was Filip. Was it the morphine speaking? "Paolo?" I asked cautiously.

"My love. Taught me how to paint portraits. Until I met him, I could only paint landscapes. After that, it was as if people were the only things I could paint." She spoke breathlessly, as if she were trying to catch the words before they f loated away. "And now, Whitney has him copying the masters, which is a pity. What a waste of his talent! People like hanging the fakes on their walls, hoping their guests won't know the difference. Most people wouldn't." She gripped my hand. "I'll have Filip bring my paintings." Her mouth twisted. "Of course, I only have the four left." Her English was inflected with something other than the

speech of the *Burra Sahib* or the lilting way we Anglo-Indians spoke. It was softer, the hard sounds squashed down.

She groaned, loudly this time, squeezing my hand so hard it hurt. The morphine was wearing off. I glanced at the wall clock. Two more hours before her next dose.

I eased my hand out of hers, removed the compress from her forehead, now warmed from her skin, and immersed it in the water glass. When I replaced it on her brow, she seemed to relax a little. "You have a lovely smile."

A blush crept up my neck. Once, one of my teachers in third form had said the same thing to me within my mother's hearing. My mother had spat on the ground to ward off evil spirits who didn't approve of vanity. Ever since, I'd been wary of compliments, worried they might cause my mother to fall on her knees and pray to Krishna for my safety.

"Talk to me. Please," the painter pleaded as she clasped my hand once more, wanting me to keep her pain company. I looked at our joined hands, a study in opposites: hers blue-veined and pale, nails bitten to the quick, remnants of paint embedded in the fingerprint swirls, and mine the color of sand, scrubbed clean, slightly chapped at the fingertips. The warmth of her skin, slightly moist from the fever, was strangely comforting, the way my mother's touch was. Mira Novak seemed to crave intimacy as intensely as most patients avoided it; they wanted only to reclaim their body—the one we poked and prodded—as soon as possible, shrugging off the memory of their convalescence.

They had brought Miss Novak to Wadia Hospital around eleven o'clock at night. She was feverish and agitated, cradling her stomach with her arms. The back of her skirt was soaked with blood. Her husband, a pale man with broad shoulders, said she'd been complaining of pain for a few days.

The husband hadn't stayed. He left shortly after bringing her in.

When Dr. Holbrook, the house surgeon, finished tending to

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 10 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

her—she'd needed a few stitches and quite a bit of morphine—Matron assigned me to nurse her. This was not unusual. Patients who were the least bit foreign were assigned either to me or to Rebecca, the other Anglo-Indian nurse on the night shift, because we spoke fluent English. In the daytime, Matron would assign another Eurasian nurse or take care of the patient herself. "She may be here a while," Matron whispered, with a meaningful glance at me.

We're a small hospital, and the patient had been given a private room. It did not escape my notice that she could have been taken to a larger hospital popular with the British but, apparently, there had been need for discretion. Even so, rumors ricocheted around the halls. *This was no simple miscarriage. She had tried to do it herself. Her husband had done it. She had tried to take her own life.* I paid no attention. It was enough to know that a woman needed our help; our job was to heal her.

Even before I read her chart, I knew who she was. Mira Novak. The painter. Famous, even here in Bombay. I'd seen her photo and read about her in *The Bombay Chronicle*. The article said she had studied painting at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenza in Italy when she was just fifteen, the youngest student ever admitted. Her Hindu mother, a woman of high caste, had accompanied her daughter from their home in Prague to Florence, and ultimately to Paris, to nurture Mira's talent. Until the age of twenty, Mira had never once stepped foot in India. But when I looked at the images of her paintings in the article, I didn't see Paris or Florence or any of the other faraway places I dreamed about visiting one day. I saw village women in saris, their skin much darker than mine or Mira's. In her paintings, the women sat quietly, somberly, as they painted henna on each other's hands or tended sheep in the hills or pasted cow dung on the walls of their homes. Why was a young woman of privilege obsessed with the ordinary, the poor? I wondered.

She was six years older than I was—twenty-nine by the date

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 11 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

on her chart. To my mind, she was lovely. Smooth, unblemished skin. A brow line that angled toward hollowed cheekbones. Even though her eyes were closed, I could tell they were large, perhaps a little protuberant, but in a way that would be attractive in her face, dominating it, demanding the viewer's gaze. Her nose, which ended in a slightly upturned tip, gave her an imperious look. That must have come from her royal bloodline. She wasn't beautiful. My mother would have said she was striking, that her face had character.

Now she blinked, her eyes round, regarding me curiously, as if we hadn't spoken a few minutes earlier. Her pupils were constricted, and she seemed disoriented.

"Mrs. Novak?" I waited for a flicker of recognition. "You are at Wadia Hospital, ma'am. In Bombay. You were brought in several hours ago." I spoke quietly, in English accented with Hindi.

She frowned. She looked down at her torso, then back up at me. "Not Mrs.," she said, "Miss Novak."

"My apologies, ma'am." I didn't quite understand but I didn't let it show. How could a woman be married and still carry her maiden name? Still, my job was not to question, and after what happened in Calcutta, I was wary of speaking what was on my mind. There, I wasn't the only nurse whose breasts and behind were pinched by male patients, but I was the only one who had complained—often and loudly—which gave the Matron at the Catholic hospital a migraine and the license to banish me from her sight. I was a troublemaker, she said. Why hadn't I just kept my mouth shut like the others?

But I wasn't in Calcutta anymore. I was in Bombay. And I promised my mother things would be different here.

"How are you feeling, ma'am?"

She closed her eyes and laughed lightly. "I've been better, Nurse..." She let it hang, waiting for me to fill in the blank.

"Falstaff, ma'am."

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 12 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

"And your first name?"

Warm honey spread through my limbs. Most patients didn't bother with anything beyond *Nurse* or *Sister*. "It's Sona," I said shyly.

She opened her eyes. "Sona? Like..." She pointed to the tiny gold hoops on my earlobes.

I smiled. "Yes, ma'am. It means gold." I could have told her that my mother had pierced my ears on the third month after my birth. *Auspicious*, the pundit had told her. She'd taken me to a goldsmith—a safer choice than the tailor. The jeweler had threaded a thin black cord through the holes with a gold needle and told her to bring me back in two weeks. If I'd been able to speak at that age, I would have told my mother not to bother with the expense. The tiny gold hoops he inserted when my mother brought me back cost her two months' earnings.

But I said none of this to the new patient. I didn't talk about my life with anyone except Indira. And even with her, I only revealed a little at a time, the way Gandhi spun thread on his *charkha*, adding only as much cotton to the spool as he needed.

Mira cried out, more sharply this time. My body jerked in response. It wouldn't hurt to give her a smaller dose, would it? As soon as I did, Mira's eyes closed. I watched the painter until she was breathing evenly. Then, I left the room to attend to my other charges.

I found Ralph Stoddard in his striped cotton pajamas reading the newspaper by the light of his bedside lamp. He had broken his left leg when he slipped on the f loor of his bungalow. His servant had recently finished polishing it, but Dr. Stoddard hadn't noticed. He'd been f licking through his mail, walking toward his study. A retired doctor, he was eighty, if a day. At his age, it was easy to break a bone or two.

"It's three o'clock in the morning, Doctor," I scolded.

He lowered a corner of the paper and regarded me through

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 13 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

the thick lenses of his spectacles, which made him look like an owl. "I've broken my leg, Nurse. Not my ability to tell time." A smile played about his lips—lips so thin they folded into his mouth. "Besides, with that racket—" he pointed with his chin toward his snoring roommate, Mr. Hassan "—who could catch a wink?" He went back to reading the paper. On the front page was more news about the Hindenburg disaster. Casualties continued to be found in Lakehurst, New Jersey, a place so far and exotic to me that I couldn't ever imagine seeing it in person.

"It says here England has started an emergency 999 service." He tapped the paper. "If India had one, I would have used it when I fell like a blasted domino in my house instead of waiting for Ramu to return from the shops." He folded the paper and set it aside. "Fancy a game?" he asked hopefully.

I hesitated. We were short-staffed, and I had many patients to look after. But it had been three hours since my last break, and I could use a breather. Besides, Dr. Stoddard's good humor was hard to resist. He was an insomniac who could always coax me into playing backgammon when I had a little time. At his insistence, his nephew Timothy had brought a game board from home, which Dr. Stoddard now kept on his bedside table.

I asked if we wouldn't wake Mr. Hassan in the other bed. He raised his eyebrows and observed dryly, "Not even the Hindenburg disaster could rouse that man."

When Dr. Stoddard had first asked me if I played, I'd said yes. There was a girl at school in Calcutta who'd tried to teach me. But the bell for the next class always rang before we could finish a game. She was a fast player; it took me forever to catch up.

"Smashing," he'd said, his smile sly. On our first game, I noticed he moved his stone six wedges instead of the five on his dice. I let him. After all, I was there to help him pass the time, not challenge him. After the fifth time he made a fast move, he threw up his hands. "Dammit, woman, why are you letting me cheat?"

Too startled to speak, I stared at him.

He took off his glasses to clean them with the bottom edge of his pajama top. "I cheat. Can't help myself. Need someone to tell me I'm a wanker."

I was appalled. "I don't think I'm allowed to say that, Doctor."

"Who says?"

"Well… Matron would never…"

He leaned across the board and pushed his spectacles farther back on his nose so his eyes were magnified. "She's not here then, is she? Unless she's hiding behind the door."

Automatically, I turned to look at the door to his room. When I turned around again, he had moved all his stones on his side of the board, effectively winning the game.

He gave me a charming smile. "Jolly bad luck for you. Another go, then?"

Tonight, as he set up the board, I turned my wrist to look at my watch. Mrs. Mehta was due for her pill in another half hour.

"Focus, Nurse. Focus," the doctor said.

These days, the game went faster. Ever since I'd taken to calling him on the liberties he took with his stones, he'd stopped cheating. I scrutinized the board with a sharper eye and strategized my moves. Ralph Stoddard had made a competitor out of me.

Ten minutes into the game, I heard my name being called. I looked over my shoulder to see my friend Indira, a stack of folded sheets covering half her face. She worked the same shift I did and we often walked home together, but I hadn't seen her since I clocked in at six this evening.

I excused myself and warned the doctor, "Do not move those stones while I'm gone. I have eyes in the back of my head."

"Cross my heart and hope to die," he said, "like a good Christian." We both knew he was lying; he was an atheist.

I followed Indira down the hall. Perhaps she needed my help changing a bed. But she opened the door to the stockroom and said, "Lock the door."

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 15 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

Puzzled, I did as she said.

Then she turned and lowered the stack of sheets that had obscured her face. There was a cut on her upper lip and a bruise on her cheek.

"Oh, Indira." I rushed to my friend and took the sheets from her, setting them down on the bench in the middle of the room. "Let me see." Gingerly, I touched her cheek where a red spot was starting to bloom. "Sit down," I commanded. Like a child, she did as she was told and started to cry.

The stockroom consisted of a wall of shelves where sheets, towels and pillowcases were stacked. At the far end was a first-aid closet. The nurses' lockers were on the opposite wall. (Doctors had their own changing room.) I loved the clean scent of this room: lavender, linen, rosewater, a hint of antiseptic.

I hurried to the first-aid closet and removed the hypochlorite solution, antiseptic ointment and gauze. Back at the bench, I found Indira delicately trying to wipe away her tears, wincing when her hand touched the bruise.

As I cleaned the blood from her lip, I asked, "Balbir?"

She nodded.

I grit my teeth. It wasn't the first time her husband had laid a hand on her. "The cheekbone isn't shattered. Small comfort." I dried the cut with gauze, cleaned it with the antiseptic and applied a little ointment. "Was it the same this time?"

"*Hahn*." She dropped her voice a few registers, imitating her husband. "Three girls and no son! What is the matter with you?" She switched to her normal speech. "As if I could do anything about it!" She was crying in earnest now, not bothering to wipe the tears.

"You'll ruin all my good work, you know," I said gently. I squatted in front of her and took her hands in mine.

She tried for a smile but the cut on her upper lip stopped her. "I know what you're going to say, Sona."

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 16 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

"And what's that?" I released her and bit off a strip of gauze, which I used to pad the swelling below her eyes.

"That having a son is beyond my control. I'm a nurse, Sona! I know that. But he doesn't believe it. You want me to leave him. You've never said it, but I know. And if I leave him, where am I going to go? His mother and father would throw me out of the house and keep the girls." She sniffed. I gave her more gauze to blow her nose. "Can you imagine what their lives would be like? I can't let that happen."

I sighed. Short of treating her wounds, there seemed to be nothing I could do for her. Centuries of tradition had made daughters, wives, mothers dispensable. They either did what their men and their in-laws wanted or they paid an untenable price. To say my mother had been lucky never to have met her English in-laws was laughable. She'd suffered also. When she took up with my father, her family had cut her off as cleanly as an errant thread on a sari.

In my locker, I kept a compact. My mother used cedarwood, sesame seeds and costus root to blend a face powder that made her skin tone lighter. She'd always been proud of my fair skin, which Indians prized for its ability to attract suitable mates, but she still wanted me to use the powder. She also swore by Afghan Snow, a beauty cream endorsed by the king of Afghanistan. I refused to use either, but to appease her I accepted her gifts and kept them in my locker at work. Now, I lightly dusted Indira's cheek and the top of her lip with the face powder.

Indira watched me. "Balbir wasn't always like this. Until our second was born, he would bring me a *laddoo* from the vendor down the street or a sari he'd seen at the bazaar. I loved him then. That was before he started going to Mahalaxmi." With the pressure of so many daughters and the dowries he would have to pay for their weddings, Indira's husband had started trying his luck at the horse track. So far, he'd been losing.

I put my hand on hers. She had happy memories of her hus-

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 17 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

band, and that was good. But those memories paled in comparison to what he'd become.

A knock at the door startled us. Indira and I both stood up. I looked a question at her, and she nodded, straightening her nurse's apron. I unlocked and opened the door.

It was Rebecca, the other half-English nurse who worked at Wadia's. Her eyes narrowed when she saw us. "Don't you two have work to do?" She looked first at me, then at Indira behind me. I shielded Indira from Rebecca's scrutiny.

I gave her my warmest smile. "How are you, Rebecca? Your parents keeping well?" When I first came to Wadia's, I'd assumed she and I, because we shared a common heritage, would become friends. In the end, it was Indira and I who had become close. I wondered if it was because Matron assigned the patients who required the most sensitive handling to me, even though Rebecca had been at the hospital longer. And perhaps the rumors, which might have swayed Matron, were true. Supposedly, Rebecca had become involved with one of the married doctors, who had subsequently transferred to another city. I'd been the subject of rumors long enough—*Sona's father was an escaped convict who had to be sent back to England*; *he stole from the army before he left; he drugged her mother to bed her*—to know they rubbed your skin raw, making it bleed on the inside. I had no desire to defend my father, but I also didn't want Rebecca to assume I was one of the rumormongers. Sometimes, I brought her slices of toffee butter cake my mother had made or a pink peony from our garden to soften her, ease her into a friendship. So far, it hadn't worked.

Rebecca assumed a strange smile, full of teeth and no feeling. "We're all well, thank you. My sister is pregnant again. And your mother, Sona? How is she keeping? Not too lonely, I hope?"

I flinched. Rebecca still had both her parents. Her English mother had fallen in love with her Indian math teacher while she was at boarding school and married him. Rebecca had two sib-

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 18 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

lings from that marriage—a real family—right here in Bombay. My father had abandoned my mother with two small children. It was something I confided to Rebecca when I first started working at Wadia. Then, she'd seemed friendly enough, gifting me a copy of *Jane Eyre*. Now, she was taking pleasure in reminding me that my mother had been deserted, and I regretted having been so indiscreet.

I felt my face grow warm, even as I answered, "She has her sewing."

Rebecca stepped closer, close enough for me to see the acne scars on her cheeks. "Seamstress for hire," she said, her head tilting in a gesture of concern. "Poor thing." She put a sympathetic arm on my shoulder. It made me shudder, and I stepped back until her arm fell away.

"I need to stop at the pharmacy." I excused myself, skirting around her to leave the stockroom.

Behind me, I heard Rebecca, her voice deceptively warm, say "Did you fall down again, Indira?"

The hospital pharmacy was a small windowless room lined with shelves containing bottles of pills, herbs and liquids. It was staffed by a short, humorless man named Horace. Word had it that he was an Ayurvedic compounder long before the designation of pharmacist became official. Even without that title, Matron trusted him, having worked with him for twenty years. She also trusted us to sign out only the medication we needed when he left for lunch or for the day. Those of us on the night shift were used to recording which drugs we'd removed on behalf of which patients. I made a note on the clipboard attached to the door of his domain: *Mrs. Mehta* and *Miss Novak.*

My next stop was Mrs. Mehta's room. A woman of forty-five, she was a regular at the hospital. Sometimes complaining of back pain, sometimes indigestion, sometimes migraines that needed immediate attention. I'd learned over time that she had a very

trying father-in-law, who lived with the family, and found fault with everything she served for dinner or the way his shirts were ironed or the chai that was served too cold. The only way she found relief was to spend a few days in the hospital.

Her husband, a sweet cherubic man who ran a factory where they made earthen clay pots, was devoted to his wife but frightened of his father, who owned the factory. The Mehta family was well-known in society circles, which included many of Wadia Hospital's patrons, so Matron looked the other way whenever his wife checked in.

As soon as I walked into her room, Mrs. Mehta, who was a light sleeper, raised herself to sitting, "I haven't slept a wink. I've been making chai in my sleep over and over so it will be hot enough for His Highness."

I smiled as I stacked pillows behind her back. "Why not make Bippi do it?" I'd become familiar with the family during Mrs. Mehta's frequent stays and knew quite a lot about her household: her favorite servant's name, her favorite food, her regret at being childless.

She brought the fingertips of one hand together up to her forehead, then let go as if she were sprinkling salt. "His Highness won't accept tea from a servant. It has to be made with my hands, as clumsy as he says they are."

I'd heard this before, of course. "I think they're lovely hands, ma'am."

Her expression brightened. She waved me over. We'd been through this before so I lowered my head without being asked. She placed her palms on my head to bless me. I didn't believe in gods, Indian or Christian, but I appreciated the gesture for the goodwill she wished me. I returned her smile.

I'd brought a pill in a small cup, which I handed to her, along with a glass of water. She took her medicine like a good patient. Matron told me they were sugar pills.

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 20 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

Mrs. Mehta turned eager eyes in my direction. "I hear we have a world-famous patient visiting us."

That made me laugh. Mrs. Mehta thought of hospital stays as vacation visits, which is what they were to her.

"I know she's female. And India only has the one female painter everyone knows about." She looked to me for confirmation.

I pressed my lips to keep from smiling.

"So it must be Mira Novak?"

"You know I can neither confirm nor deny."

She nodded sagely. "'*A rogue chowkidar can make the village bankrupt*.'"

As troubled as Mrs. Mehta was about her situation at home, she had all the comforts I wished for my mother. A big house. A loving husband. A home full of servants. Enough saris to fill five armoires. Even with her limited resources, my mother had given me so much when she'd had so little. Would I ever be able to provide a life like Mrs. Mehta's for my mother?

I shook my head. My dreams were cobwebs spun from gold. That's what my mother would have said.

I stopped at Dr. Stoddard's room long enough to tell him we'd pick up the game tomorrow, but he pointed to the board. He'd shifted all his stones to one side. I assumed my haughtiest expression and mouthed "Wanker."

He laughed. "Dr. Mishra played your side out for me."

Dr. Mishra appeared from behind the door, a clipboard in his hand. He must have been making notes on Mr. Hassan's chart. I was surprised to see the distinguished gentleman, now awake, engrossed in *Chokher Bali*, a novel of Tagore's I'd read in Calcutta.

"I was looking in on Mr. Hassan and was somehow lured into the game," Dr. Mishra said, his gaze straying to my cap, then my shoes, then the backgammon board in Dr. Stoddard's lap. Was I the only one who made him nervous or was he like this with all the other nurses? He was our house physician, young, unmar-

ried. He'd been recruited from England the previous year. I'd heard he could have continued practicing there but decided to return to India. The nurses—the religious sisters as well as the medically trained nurses like me—were soft on him.

"Keen player Stoddard is. Beat me handily," Dr. Mishra said. The dimple on his chin deepened when he smiled. In a mock whisper, he said, "Quite sure he cheated." His two front teeth overlapped slightly in a way that made him appear humble.

I raised an eyebrow and said, "Popular opinion, that."

Dr. Mishra chuckled, sending his dark curls flying. "'We can't change the direction of the wind, only adjust the sails,' Nurse Falstaff." I wasn't aware he knew my name. The house surgeon and the registrar called all of us *Nurse*, as if we were interchangeable.

"Out, out, the both of you." Stoddard waved his hands, as if he were irritated by our teasing. But he was smiling.

Dr. Mishra turned to say his farewell to Mr. Hassan, who raised his book to wave goodbye. Dr. Mishra gestured with his chin at Dr. Stoddard's leg. "It's healing nicely. We can remove the cast within the week."

Stoddard rubbed his hands together and looked at me, his smile wicked. "Cracking! Looks like you'll have time to perfect your backgammon game."

"And you to perfect yours," I shot back with a smile.

"I'd better get back to my rounds," Dr. Mishra said, walking toward me, looking at my nurse's cap. I was still standing in the doorway. He tried to maneuver around me, smiling shyly at the terrazzo f loor. I stepped to one side, only to be in his way again. We must have looked like a couple of awkward dancers. I caught a whiff of cardamom and lime on his lab coat as he finally slid past me.

"Oh, good evening, Nurse Trivedi," I heard him say out in the hallway. Rebecca's last name. So mine wasn't the only name he knew. It made me feel less special somehow.

My shift started at six in the evening and ended at four in the

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 22 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

morning. Before I left, I went to Miss Novak's room to give her the full injection of morphine she was due. She woke up when she heard me moving about.

"I'm giving you the rest of the dose now before I leave." I rubbed the injection site with a cotton ball and antiseptic solution. She held onto my forearm and closed her eyes.

"Tell me about your father. I've been thinking about mine."

For a moment, I was speechless. I'd never had a patient ask me such a personal question before, and I'd never even talked to anyone about my father except Rebecca, back when we used to share a plate of my mother's bread and butter pudding. I placed the syringe in the enamel pan I'd brought and applied antiseptic where I'd injected the drug.

Mira was waiting patiently. Finally, I mumbled, "Why, ma'am?"

She opened her eyes. "Is he that odious?"

I said nothing.

"Did he hurt you?"

My jaw tightened.

"I see."

We regarded one another. Which of us would blink first? I wondered. Just because she found it easy to talk about intimate parts of her life, didn't mean she could expect me to. And I didn't appreciate being forced to reveal things about my family even my mother and I didn't talk about.

I walked to the foot of the bed and noted the medication on her chart. "Is there anything else you need, ma'am?"

She shook her head and closed her eyes once more. "This isn't over, Nurse Falstaff." Her breathing was now steady.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow evening, Miss Novak."

In the stockroom, I traded my uniform for a jumper and skirt. The uniform would stay in my locker. All the while, I couldn't shake off Mira's question. Back in Calcutta, everyone had known about my father. I'd only been three when he left. But I'd heard the whispers when I accompanied my mother to her clients'

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 23 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

houses. He had come from Britain to work with Indian soldiers—many of whom had fought for England in the First World War—when he met my mother. She was a seamstress, and he needed a tear mended in his uniform. They had me, then my brother, and when I was three years old, he returned to England and never came back. I didn't have many memories of him. My mother didn't talk about him, and I never asked. Six months after he left, our family was down to two, my mother and me. My brother died before his second birthday. Why would Mira want me to relive the pain of his abandonment? What was it to her what I knew of my father or what I thought about him?

I was lost in thought when my replacement appeared. Roopa was one of the Indians newly recruited into the English nursing system. She was lively, always ready with a smile. She loved to tease and be teased. She was a favorite of the doctors and orderlies.

"How's the old codger?" she asked as she changed into her uniform. "Still causing trouble?"

I laughed. "Dr. Stoddard is waiting for you to brighten his day."

"Did you win today?"

"Not quite. But I'm up ten *paise*." The old doctor and I had started making bets, albeit small ones, when we played.

She snapped her apron on my arm. "Mind you don't spend it all in one place!" Her laughter followed her out of the stockroom.

With a lighter heart, I went down to the equipment room at the back of the hospital to get my bicycle. Most nights, I walked home with Indira to her neighborhood, and cycled the rest of the way home. At four o'clock in the morning, trams were not an option. My mother worried about my coming home at dawn, but the night shift paid much better than the day shift. And the streets were practically deserted in the early hours. It was quiet, peaceful.

The equipment room had a cement floor and walls painted gray. I found the chemical odors here—so different from the medicinal aromas on the floors above—pleasing somehow. More

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 24 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

than once, I'd wondered if I'd have liked to work with my hands, making things instead of tending to people. But my mother had spent every rupee she made on my nurse training, counting on my income to support both of us. When I had received my certificate, I held her hand and pressed my forehead to hers, our private signal that all would be well. What I wouldn't do to ease her worries about our rent, the mutton she insisted on making for me because she was convinced it would bring me strength (even though she never ate meat), the nursing shoes I was required to wear (and the only part of my uniform she couldn't sew)! I wanted to give her the life she should have had instead of the one that had been forced upon her. And nursing was a way to build our savings so that one day I could.

Mohan worked here, cleaning the equipment, oiling the wheels of the gurneys, working the broiler and fixing anything that needed fixing. Tonight, he was repainting a wooden side table, his back to me. I watched him for a while. The smooth, even strokes of his brush soothed me.

I walked to the corner where the bicycles were kept. When he heard me, he looked up, straightened, and offered me a lopsided smile. I'd felt his eyes on me whenever he delivered a piece of equipment or furniture to our f loor. He sought me out to say hello and always tried to chat me up. I held back; a woman of twenty-three without a husband (an anomaly in itself) didn't need to invite rumors of assignations that never took place.

However, Mohan was kind. He felt safe. He was a tall man with thick hair that started low on his forehead. His chin was blue-black, eager follicles already on their way to a new beard (although he'd probably shaved before the start of his shift). His shirt was stained with oil, grease and paint solvents—the room's perfume.

Like me, he worked evenings, probably because it paid more. I had always liked the calm of the night, the barely perceptible

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 25 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

hum of hallways without visitors, without interruptions. Perhaps he did too.

Mohan wiped his paint-stained hands on a rag, which had seen its share of work over the years. I noticed his fingernails, perpetually outlined in black grease. No matter how many times he washed them, the oil remained a stubborn tenant. Those fingernails were one of the reasons I couldn't imagine Mohan in my bed. The image of his blackened cuticles on my hips sent a shiver through me—and not in the way he might have wished.

I had wheeled my bicycle almost to the doorway when I heard him clear his throat. "There's a showing of *Duniya Na Mane* at the Regal tomorrow afternoon." His smile was hopeful.

My face burned with embarrassment. I'd felt him working up to it yesterday and wheeled away with a quick goodbye, pretending I didn't know what he was about to ask. Now, standing a few feet from him, it was impossible to ignore the unspoken request. I looked down at my handlebars. This was the bicycle that one of my mother's clients had given her instead of paying what she owed for the dress she'd commissioned. My mother deserved more than a used bicycle. More than a two-hundred-square-foot flat so close to Victoria Terminus that the trains threatened to shatter the windows. Mohan wasn't the answer to what I wanted for my mother. And I didn't want to give him hope.

I slid my palms over the smooth steel of the handlebars. "My mother and I are going to the market tomorrow afternoon. She needs new shears." I stole a look at Mohan, whose shoulders now drooped.

His gaze fell on the rag in his hand. "Of course. I understand." He looked up with a brave smile. "We'll go some other time."

I nodded and wheeled the bicycle out the door. Oh, how I hated to let him down when he was such a good man, an honest man. When he married, he would be the kind of husband who would do anything for his wife, his children, his parents. But Mohan would remain a maintenance man. He had no ambitions

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 26 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

to be anything else. As far as he was concerned, he'd reached the pinnacle of his career: a secure position with a reputable hospital. A job no one could take away from him. I wanted a larger life. I wasn't quite sure what it looked like or how I would get there, but I knew I wouldn't be working as a nurse forever. No, I had no future with Mohan.

Indira was waiting for me when I came out the door. She was quiet, thoughtful, as we walked toward her home.

The night air was peaceful, free of the low rumble of cars and trams, free of horses *clop-clopping* and the high-pitched hawking of fruit sellers. There was a quarter moon. Several pigeons cooed, milling around a half-eaten roti. We passed a tailor's where two men worked their machines under a dim bulb to meet the insatiable demands of the *Burra Sahib*'s army. The shop next door was also open. A man was weighing grain from a large jute sack into smaller cloth sacks to sell.

"I wish I could be like you, Sona." Indira walked as gracefully in her sari as my mother did. She pulled her cardigan closed and clasped her thin arms around her waist. Early morning was the coolest part of the day even if it was laced with humidity. Later, the temperature would reach ninety degrees in the shade.

"Why do you say that?" I knew of no one who would say they envied me. Not the girls at my government school in Calcutta. Nor my classmates at the convent school where I won a scholarship. Nor my nursing school. Who would want to trade places with a half-caste? Who wants to hear the slurs of *Chee-Chee* and *Blackie-White*? Who wants rocks thrown at them on their way to work? I wanted to trade places with Indira. She was living in a country that accepted her as she was. Generations of her family had lived in India, prayed in Hindu temples. She had the complexion of a roasted almond and dark, dark hair that gleamed in the light. She had family as long as a month and as wide as a year.

"Your mother didn't make you marry at seventeen, Sona. Here

you are at twenty-three, able to go anywhere by yourself. Your neighbors aren't gossiping about where you've been or what your children are up to. You are free."

I scoffed. "Hardly." My mother had been hinting at marriage for several years. So far, there had been no one who had appealed. There was an internist in Calcutta and a teacher I met through one of my nursing classmates, both of whom I found attractive, but one was betrothed, the other married.

Indira asked, "Why do you keep wanting to help me with Balbir? You'll only get yourself in trouble."

I stopped walking to look at my friend. "Remember my first day here at the hospital? You welcomed me with a plant in a small pot. You said chili peppers would sprout and when I harvested and dried them, I was to string them with limes to bring us good luck in our new home. I still have that plant, Indira. And Mum looks forward to making a new garland every year to hang across our threshold. In the meanwhile, she eats the chili peppers raw!" I shook my friend's shoulder gently to coax a smile from her. "Apart from you, no one seemed to understand how hard it was for us to move so far away from our home in Calcutta." My voice caught. "You made me feel we could make Bombay our home. For that, I will always be grateful."

She smiled and patted my shoulder.

Up ahead, a group of young men whispered hotly under a weak streetlamp. The University of Bombay was on our way home; students gathered at this intersection at all hours.

"You have to come, Nikesh!" urged the young man with the wire glasses, so like the ones Mr. Gandhi wore. "Surely you're tired of them strangling our textile industry—the one our ancestors built, yours and mine—for their own profit?"

"What good are protests? The British imprisoned fifty thousand Indians along with Gandhi-ji for protesting the salt tax—"

A bearded student interrupted, "And they only stopped when

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 28 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

the world shamed them into it. But they're back to taxing everything else we make. Where's the progress?"

The glasses-wearer smiled, "It's coming, my friends. And you're all coming to the protest. Now, who's for *chai*?" He held out his thermos.

It was the same everywhere, in Calcutta too. At the *subji-walla*. The *paan-walla*. The rumbling of a patient people who would be patient no more. Oust the English parasites! My father had been one of those parasites, hadn't he? The irony of my existence was not lost on me.

When we'd passed the students, I said, "Indira, if you ever need to stay with us, you know you're more than welcome." Mum and I only had the one charpoy, but I was sure we could manage something.

She shook her head. "And my children? Where would they go? No, Sona. It's kind of you to offer. And I'm grateful for your friendship, but I can't. This life is my fate, Sona. It is the will of *Bhagwan*."

I understood her in the way I understood Indian women who felt the life they were living had been predestined. That there was nothing they could do to change something that needed to run its course. Their children, like Indira's daughters, would follow the same fate. It made me feel helpless—and hopeless for them. We said our goodbyes at the mouth of her neighborhood. Up ahead, there was a billboard for the popular movie *Jeevan Prabhat*. I knew the plot. A couple is unable to conceive so the husband takes a second wife. Would Balbir be tempted to do the same? I cycled home, saddened by the thought.

I had to be especially quiet when entering our building's courtyard this early in the morning. The landlord's family lived downstairs, and the couple who occupied the f lat opposite ours on the open-air landing worked daylight hours and needed their sleep. As I mounted the stairs, I heard the loud snores of my land-

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 29 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

lords. When I reached the landing, excited moans and sharp cries told me the couple across from us was in the throes of making a family. I stopped for a moment to listen. Their lovemaking aroused a feeling that bloomed from my chest down to where my menses f lowed. I'd never been with a man that way. Even the young clerk who had treated me to a movie at the Eros Cinema and tried to sneak a kiss afterward hadn't awakened that desire in me.

As soon as I unlocked the door to our tiny apartment, my mother came forward to greet me. She was always awake when I came home. I'd told her not to wait up—repeatedly—but she wouldn't listen. She told me she napped in the evening, right after I left for work, to catch up on her sleep. I'm not sure I believed her.

Her hand clutched the sleeve of a shirt she must have been sewing. "Everything is good?"

She meant did I still have a job. Keeping my job was mother's greatest concern. In Calcutta, I'd already lost one, and we couldn't afford to lose another. Her business of sewing and altering women's *salwar kameez*, gentlemen's woolen vests and children's school uniforms paid for the food we ate. But it was my income that paid for the rent, dishes, pots, shoes, coats and the medicine for my mother's heart, for which the hospital pharmacist kindly gave me a discount. Given how easy it was to walk away with medications in his absence at the pharmacy, I could have helped myself without noting it on his clipboard, but I'd never been tempted.

I took off my sweater and hung it on the nail behind the door. "Yes, Mum. Everything is fine," I said, imitating the way her head wagged side to side. It always made her laugh, and I liked to see her laugh. Her wrinkles eased; color returned to her cheeks. She searched my face to make sure I was telling her the truth, then patted my arm. She abandoned the half-sewn sleeve and went to the Primus stove to heat rice and *baingan* curry for

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 30 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

me and make fresh tea. I sat down on a chair next to the dining table, which also doubled as my mother's sewing table. On the other side was a sewing machine and the twin of the sleeve she'd been clutching when she greeted me.

I put one elbow on the table and surveyed my surroundings. Our f lat was just one small room. We shared the privy with the couple on this f loor. Against one wall was a narrow bed, which my mother and I shared. A small counter for the Primus stove and preparation of food (although the dining table also served the same function) lined another wall. One bookcase held my nursing books, *Great Expectations*, *Folk Tales of Bengal*, *Emma*, R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, *Jane Eyre* (the one Rebecca gave me), *Middlemarch*, my mother's sewing magazines, the occasional *LIFE* magazine from the wife next door, and a stack of *Reader's Digest*s. After hearing stories from patients like Mira and Dr. Stoddard and Mrs. Mehta, I would come to this flat, deflated. It smelled of turmeric, sewing machine oil, my mother's sandalwood soap and medicine. Not disagreeable, just familiar. Would the rest of my life be as small, as confined, as this? But as soon as the thought slithered into my head, I was riddled with shame. This had been my mother's life also. How could I belittle what she'd done to feed us and house us and make sure I could have a profession that earned this well? Still, I did wonder: what would my life be like if I could break free of this cage? I hadn't shared these thoughts with my mother, not wanting to make her feel as forlorn about our future as I did. Instinctively, I knew that were I to go, she would be left behind. I was all she had; my desertion would devastate her. Abandoned by her husband, her baby boy *and* her daughter? I couldn't bear to do that to her.

When she placed the tea and my dinner in front of me, she tucked a stray hair behind my ear, her touch warm against my cool skin. She sat on the other side of the table and picked up her sewing. "Tell me about your day."

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 31 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

She loved hearing stories about my patients. Private hospitals like mine catered to those who had lived in exotic places and came from worlds my mother had never seen. Her clients were local women whose husbands worked as insurance salesmen or clerks in a local bank.

I told her about Mira Novak. She hadn't known about the painter, so I described the paintings I'd seen in the *Bombay Chronicle*. She asked me what Mira looked like, what she and I talked about.

"She asked for my first name, Mum. No one ever does that. Not patients anyway. Even Matron calls me Nurse Falstaff. And she's known me for two years!"

Mum's eyes followed the journey of my spoon to my mouth, as if she were making sure I was really swallowing. I chewed the eggplant curry, which was spiced to my taste; my mother preferred hotter chilies.

"And Dr. Stoddard. How is he? Did you win tonight's game?"

I shook my head and ate another spoonful of cardamom rice. "His new project is to get the 999 emergency number for India. How he would have made it to the telephone with a broken leg is another question."

My mother's laugh was pure happiness. She found him amusing. For some reason, I didn't tell her that Dr. Mishra had finished the backgammon game for me. Or that he had called me by name, too. Some things I kept to myself, lovely secrets that were just mine, at least for a little while.

My account of Mrs. Mehta was next, followed by Mr. Hassan with the appendix and a sixteen-year-old boy with tonsils. She seemed satisfied with my school report, as she referred to it.

She took my empty plate to the sink. She would wash the dishes in the morning so as not to disturb our neighbors at night with our flat's noisy pipes. She came back with a red chili from the plant Indira had given me. I watched her take a bite, imagining the searing heat in my gullet. It made my nose itch.

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 32 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

"Sona, there's something I need to talk to you about."

I felt a snag in my chest, like a sweater caught on a nail.

She finished the chili and used a wet cloth to wipe the table clean. "Mohan's father came to see me today."

"Mohan?"

She stopped scrubbing, frowned at me. "You know, the young man who works at your hospital?" She went to hang the towel from the lip of the sink.

"In the equipment room. That Mohan?"

Now she sat down across the table from me, behind her sewing machine, her most prized possession. She picked up the unfinished sleeve and slid it between the presser foot and the throat plate, lowering the back lever to keep the fabric in place. "Yes, Sona, that Mohan. Don't act so surprised. You told me the boy has been mooning at you." She pulled the hand wheel toward her to start sewing two seams together. "His father came to ask for your hand in marriage."

The room spun. So when Mohan asked me to go to the pictures with him, he already thought—or hoped—I was going to be a part of his family. He'd never worked up the courage to ask me out before.

Blood was pounding in my ears, making its way to my brain, where I felt it would explode. I shook my head. "No, Mum. Definitely not."

She blinked. "Why the face, Sona? He's a good man. You've said so yourself. He makes a good salary. He's kind. What more do you want?"

I looked at her, aghast. "What more do I want? The same thing you wanted when you met my father."

Her body stiffened. "What does that mean?"

I sighed. "Mum, I'm tired." We never talked about my father, and I didn't want to start now.

She sat back in her chair, the unfinished sleeve forgotten. "I want to know, Sona." When she was upset about something, she rubbed a spot on her chest, right above her heart. She did so now.

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 33 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

"I don't want to marry Mohan and that's that." I got up from my chair and slid it against the table. "I'm going to get ready for bed." There was so much I could say. That if she hadn't settled for someone her parents picked out for her, why should I? If she wouldn't settle for someone with grease under their fingernails, why should I? If she had had her freedom to choose her husband, why couldn't I? She was a good woman. She didn't deserve my anger. She had loved a man. She'd borne him two children, and he'd left. End of!

I went to fetch my towel and toothbrush and walked into the shared privy on the landing, wondering: was I more my mother or my father? And if I hated my father, did that mean I hated the parts of me that were him? I studied my reflection in the mirror. My chestnut hair was still pinned up from work. I took the pins out and let it tumble down. Now, for the first time, I noticed my roots sprouted in a straight line across my forehead instead of following the curve of my temples. A gift from my mother. The line of my brows, which slanted downward, gave me a look of perpetual sadness—or was it disappointment? Resignation? Did I inherit that expression from my father? I tried for a different expression, widening my eyes, which raised my brows but made me resemble a startled animal. In my almond-shaped eyes, I saw my mother again. Was the color of my skin somewhere between my father's and my mother's? I would never be mistaken for British, but because of my accent and light skin, I might pass for a Parsi. My lips were neither thin nor plump. Those must be my father's. I tried a smile. It was crooked! Why had no one told me that before? Definitely not my mother's smile.

When I'd cleaned my teeth and washed my face, I went back to our flat. I kissed my mother's cheek, so soft and warm. She was only forty-one years old but looked older. I pressed my forehead to hers. "There will be others, Mum. Mohan isn't the only one." There had never been another proposal before, so the prospect seemed dim, but I was grateful that she didn't bring that up.

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 34 2024-10-08 5:10 PM

She pinched my cheek, the way she used to when I was a little girl and she wanted to hear me giggle. I complied.

Outside our door, there was the clang of milk bottles. It was five o'clock in the morning now. I opened it to see Anish, our *doodh-walla* setting two bottles on our doorstep.

"*Theek hai*, Anish?"

"*Hahn-ji.* I made the milk especially tasty for you today." He laughed. Anish was a cheerful sort, barely twenty years old, who had inherited this job when his father died.

"Has your sister found work yet?" Without a father, it was impossible for his family to provide the dowry they would need to find a suitable husband for his sister. Anish had told me his fourteen-year-old sister, Anu, had been looking for a job.

His smile was uneven when he said, "Bhagwan has been good to us. She found *naukaree* close to here."

"*Accha?* Where?"

He indicated with his chin that it was south of us. He didn't meet my eye when he said it was a *haveli* of women. "There are seven of us at home," he said quietly.

They needed the money. I understood. Anu would be working at a house of courtesans. I had seen the *kotha* on my way to work when the vegetables and fruits were being delivered to their kitchen for the evening's entertainment. The courtesans fed their patrons well and were reputed to have dishes comparable to Bombay's Café Leopold, a favorite of Britishers, Parsis, Muslims and Hindus, many of whom were also regulars at the *kotha*.

What could I say to Anish? On the one hand, his family were sure to be shunned by their relatives and neighbors for having a daughter who sang and danced for men. On the other hand, the courtesans ran a profitable business, which meant Anu could provide for her family more lavishly than they could ever have dreamed. She could fill their bellies with rich curries. I knew courtesans had been part of the royal court before the British Raj began dissolving the Mughal Empire. Now, the women of

Anu's *kotha* owned factories, jewels, buildings. Their children were tutored privately within the house. Anu's chances of an arranged marriage may have suffered, but she would have financial independence that might have alluded her in a traditional union. I wasn't about to judge her choice. She was doing what was best for her family.

I assured Anish, "I'll visit Anu one of these days when I'm headed that way, *accha*?"

His face broke into a smile and the dimple on his left cheek winked at me. He turned and delivered Fatima's milk across the landing before sprinting down the stairs.

Fatima opened her door. I greeted a good morning to her.

She responded with a smile. "How is your job at the hospital? You work so late."

I laughed. "That's because I start so late." I added with a whisper, "You were working late yourself, *ji*."

She giggled, raising her shoulders in a conspiratorial shrug, before picking up the bottles and closing her door. She would be a mother long before her twenty-third birthday.

Six Days i_9780778368533_RHC_txt_462587.indd 36 2024-10-08 5:10 PM