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A Scandalous Secret

Written by Jaishree Misra

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JAISHREE MISRA

A Scandalous Secret

AVON

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For AM

Chapter One

Neha stood at the door to her spacious living room in Delhi, surveying the party that was now in full flow. It hadn't yet reached that freewheeling stage when people, mellowed by the fine wines and Scotches on offer, would start drifting around unreservedly, chatting without embarrassment or restraint to relative strangers. At the moment, most of her guests were gathered in small knots around the room, sticking to the people they knew, but loud bursts of laughter indicated that a good time was already being had. Waiters hired for the night were working the room with trays of drinks and canapés, and some kind of nondescript piano music was tinkling through the eight-speaker Bose system, Sharat's proud new acquisition. It would need to be turned off for the Divakar Brothers' live performance that would take place a little later on in the garden, but experience had taught Neha to keep things subtle at the start.

Virtually everyone invited had already come, even the customary stragglers who made it a point to arrive close to midnight, complaining about receiving three party invites for the same night. Whatever they said, Neha knew with quiet confidence that people did not usually turn down invitations to her famously lavish and elegant soirées

but, given the status of many of her guests, she was nevertheless touched when she saw such busy and eminent people turn up at her place so unfailingly.

Although smaller, more intimate dinner parties were a regular feature of the Chaturvedi household, Sharat and Neha held two large parties every year; one sometime before Diwali and the other a lunch in the garden at the start of spring. The hundred-odd invitations issued were carefully considered affairs, sent – everyone knew – only to the very influential or very well connected. The very point of them, Sharat sometimes said, was to allow people to relax and meet each other without the fear of journalists or paparazzi lurking around the corner. Yellow journalism had been the bane of many of their famous friends' lives and, horrifyingly, Neha had recently been hearing of parties where – without any warning – the press pack would descend, secretly invited by publicity-hungry hosts who wanted to be mentioned on the party pages of *The Times of India*.

At the Chaturvedis' parties, however, guests came safe in the knowledge that there would be no press presence – if one did not count people like Girish, that is: a golfing buddy of Sharat's who happened to be the head of India's biggest television channel. What the couple generally aimed to do with their list of invitees was ensure that guests were either among their own kind or thrown together with people it would be advantageous for them to meet. Both Neha and Sharat liked to be generous in this matter and, partially due to the understated and tranquil atmosphere of the Chaturvedi home, their guests' guards were often let down in ways that invariably led to the most exciting meeting of minds. Not everyone saw it like this, of course; and once, when a nasty piece appeared in a gossip magazine accusing Sharat of what the journalist

referred to as 'control freakery', Neha was tempted to ring up the editor to give him a piece of her mind. Sharat eventually dissuaded her from making that call but Neha had felt terribly hurt on behalf of her gentle husband, knowing as she did that the really gratifying part of the whole exercise for Sharat was when people he had helped called up later to thank him for the part he had played in their good fortune. 'Completely inadvertent and pure chance,' was the modest manner in which Sharat generally responded, although this too wasn't entirely true. He gave away far too often, and in often unsubtle ways, his total delight at having been involved in transactions that were important enough to make it to the national papers. Sharat's pleasure in the parties they threw was really very simple: he genuinely liked putting people together in fortuitous circumstances, hoping that some mutual good would come of their meeting, even if there was no particular or immediate advantage to him. He sometimes joked that he had probably been a marriage broker in his previous life.

Only this morning, Sharat had appeared on the veranda while Neha was overseeing the decoration of the garden shrubs with fairy lights. He had looked with pride at the pair of massive bottle palms that straddled the entrance to the sweeping driveway.

'Remember their names?' he enquired with a laugh.

'Of course,' Neha had replied absently, her attention now on the marigold flower chains that were being looped around the pillars running the length of the veranda. She had earlier tried explaining to the man on the ladder that the two faux Doric columns flanking the front entrance had to be exact mirror images of each other, the flower garland on the left spiralling clockwise

while the one on the right went anticlockwise. It was the kind of feature no one would probably notice, but attention paid to such seemingly insignificant detail was what made for a perfect evening, in Neha's opinion. It was also what led Sharat to call her 'OCD' but he would be just as quick to admit how much he relied on her exacting standards.

'Zurich and Americana,' Sharat grinned, still looking at the palms with his arms crossed over his chest and rocking on his heels, obviously continuing to enjoy the memory from five years ago.

The palms had acquired their names because they were a present from Arul Sinha, the head of global investments at Zurich Bank, who had sent them after a lunch party where he had struck a lucrative deal with American Steels. Neha remembered the glee with which Arul – a schoolmate of Sharat's youngest uncle – had greeted the news that Doug Fairbanks III was going to be at their lunch too. ('You know *Doug*? Hey, you guys know everyone, *yaar*,' he had said, only pretending to be jealous given the vast spread of his own network of contacts.)

Neha cast a glance at the elegant palms whose fronds were a lush green in the morning sunshine. 'I'm always astonished that these two giants didn't just survive, but even thrived in the heat of that summer,' she said. 'Do you remember how they arrived in the middle of May, Sharat? Ten feet tall, and with such massive root balls, in the back of a truck? I used to expect every morning to wake up and find them all dead and shrivelled up in the garden. But just look at them now – and they're probably not even fully grown yet!'

Sharat laughed at the memory of that chaotic morning. 'Typical Arul, that kind of attention to detail. Sending not

just a pair of palms but a complete team of labourers and gardeners who set to work planting them with some kind of crazy Swiss efficiency. I bet he even ensured that they would grow to identical width and height before shipping them over from China!'

'Well, whatever he did, it worked – our Delhi heat notwithstanding. If anything, they've grown a bit too big now, towering over everything else in the garden,' Neha said, turning her attention back to the flower wallah who was perched on his ladder awaiting his next instructions.

'I've always wanted to ask Arul if his business deal enjoyed as swift a growth as the trees, but that would be prying, I guess,' Sharat continued.

Neha smiled. She had no doubt that the deal would have been hugely successful, not just because of Arul Sinha's business skills but also Sharat's famed Midas touch. But he would be embarrassed if she said that, and now she was distracted by the large roll of black insulation tape that the flower wallah was using to tape the end of the garland to the pillar. '*Ooffo, yeh kya leke aaye ho?*' she asked, her voice exasperated as she turned to call for her own roll of imported extra-strong and, more importantly, colourless sticking tape.

It was Sharat's turn to grin. Neha was a fine one to joke about Arul's attention to detail. She was at least as finicky as the best Swiss bankers, and on the morning of their big parties, Sharat generally made it a point to stay well out of her way. He put an arm around his wife's shoulder and dropped a discreet kiss on her neck. 'Going to go have a shave. Got that meeting with Prasad, remember?' Sharat explained as he turned to go indoors, although Neha was by now too preoccupied to even register his departure.

He was still smiling as he walked down the corridor, thinking of Arul's typically flamboyant present. Generally, the gifts he and Neha received took more veiled forms, people's gratitude for useful introductions coming in subtle ways, via favours and preferential treatment and, quite simply, the kind of magical opening of doors without which life in India could be very difficult. Sharat recognized this and, in his customary pragmatic way, knew that the goodwill caused by his generous networking would do no harm when the time came for return favours to be called upon. Neha did not get this, though, remaining always a little discomfited by what she considered a mild form of nepotism even though she quietly indulged him whenever necessary. In a strange way, that was what Sharat loved most about his wife: she was exactly as she seemed. With Neha, what you saw was what you got. There was no hidden agenda, no gossip, never any secret deal-making, nothing underhand at all.

Neha surveyed the crowded drawing room again and flicked her eyes at a passing waiter, signalling that the Home Minister's wine glass required topping up. She couldn't help noticing as she walked on that the dapper politician was deep in conversation with V. Kaushalya, the rather comely head of the Indian Institute of Arts whom Neha regularly met for lunches at the Museum of Modern Art café and who was beautifully turned out tonight in the most gorgeous cream silk Kancheepuram sari. Now, what interesting transaction could be brewing there, Neha wondered. It could just as easily be personal as professional, given the minister's reputation for enjoying the company of beautiful women and Kaushalya, an ex-Bharatanatyam dancer, still cut a stunning figure, even in her fifties.

Neha continued to weave her way through the room that was now full of the rustle of silk and organza, stopping to enquire after one elderly guest's health before steering someone else across the floor in order to make a mutually useful introduction. She had long grown practised at spotting pairs of guests who looked like they had got 'stuck' and needed to be moved along. Although she had at first resisted Sharat's fondness for parties and gathering dozens of people around himself, Neha had to admit that, over the years, she too had gradually grown to enjoy the business of playing hostess and using her elegant home to its fullest advantage. Why, an art collection like hers was meant to be shared and admired, not stashed away. Not that she wished to draw attention to her wealth at all – God forbid! – but, in recent times, Neha had learnt to derive amusement from seeing herself referred to in the society pages as 'the legendary hostess' or 'famous socialite Neha Chaturvedi'. She, Neha Chaturvedi, who had been the class bluestocking with her nose firmly stuck between the pages of a book all through her school days! She wasn't even much of a cook but, luckily, she had never had to worry a jot about the catering arrangements, seeing that Jasmeet, her old school chum and best friend, was one of Delhi's best known food consultants and took able charge of all arrangements weeks before any party, making numerous trips to INA market to buy spices and condiments and sourcing the best fish that would be brought to Delhi in a huge refrigerator van from the Orissa coast.

Tonight, however – and perhaps for the very first time – Neha was having immense difficulty facing up to her hostessing duties. She had been nursing a headache all afternoon, despite popping two paracetamols with her

evening cup of tea, and was now feeling both nauseous and dizzy. As she recalled the reason for her distress, that now familiar cold hand squeezed at her heart again, robbing her of breath. This had been happening at regular intervals all day, sometimes at intervals of ten minutes, only disappearing briefly when the caterers had arrived, their purposeful colonization of her kitchen providing a temporary distraction from her unease. Even the arrival of her guests had not been diversion enough as Neha found herself listening to all the usual social inanities regarding Delhi's traffic and how long it was since they had all seen each other. She had listened and murmured assent and nodded politely but all conversation, even her own, seemed to be coming from a tunnel somewhere far away. Her mind, normally capable of focusing in calm and orderly fashion on the welfare of her guests, had behaved like a trapped bird all day today, flapping and darting frantically about inside her head. Once again, Neha felt her insides go deathly still as she remembered the reason. She could not help coming to an abrupt standstill in the middle of her drawing room, feeling for a milli-second like she might drown in the sea of conversation that was swirling around her. Was this what a panic attack felt like, Neha wondered, wrapping the *pallav* of her mauve Chanderi sari around her shoulders and trying to steady herself. Try as she might, Neha simply could not get on with the job at hand. She was only just about managing to keep the smile plastered on her face because, every so often, something would remind her of the letter and she would feel close to collapsing again.

It was incredible – the kind of thing that happened only in movies – but there, upstairs in her *Godrej almirah*, locked away in the secret compartment that housed her

diamond jewellery, was a letter with a British stamp that had arrived in the post that very morning. Luckily the maid had brought it in only after Sharat had left for an early meeting and so he had not been around to see her open it. He would surely have noticed her shock, for – however adept Neha had grown at masking her feelings behind an inscrutable smile, even from such a beloved husband – she simply would not have been able to cover up the sudden paling of her skin and lips, the trembling of her fingers as she read the scribbled lines and the dizziness that had finally caused her to crumple in a heap onto one of the armchairs on the veranda.

'*Dear Neha . . .*' the letter had started, in a scrawly, childish hand that was nothing like her own neat and precise handwriting.

Dear Neha Chaturvedi,

You will no doubt be very surprised to receive this letter. I will not beat about the bush as there is no easy way to say these things. You see, I am the daughter you gave away for adoption in 1993. You may well question my motives, but this is of far less concern to me than the explanation that I believe it is my right to ask you for.

I am planning to make a trip to India because I have a few things to set straight before starting university this autumn. Please let me know when and where we can meet. And please do not ignore this letter, as you have ignored me all these years.

My postal and email addresses are in the letterhead at the top, as is my mobile phone number, so you have several ways to contact me. I hope you do, but as I have your address, you should know that I will not think twice before coming straight to your house in

Delhi unless you offer me an alternative place to meet. This will, I warn you, be regardless of your own circumstances, seeing how little you have cared for mine all these years.

However, I hope that will be unnecessary and I am in anticipation of a speedy reply,

Sonya Shaw.

Chapter Two

Sonya lay under her duvet and looked around the bedroom of her house in Orpington, memorising its every familiar and comforting detail. She tried to assess if this was another lump-in-the-throat moment, the likes of which there had been many since her plans had formed: plans not just for college but the fast-approaching trip to India too.

While there was still no response to the letter she had sent to Delhi, there was nothing that could be employed to dredge up much emotion on a peaceful morning like this. The room was awash with cheery sunshine, Mum was clattering about in the kitchen downstairs and Sonya had to admit, all was well in her world. Nevertheless, as had happened yesterday, and the day before, virtually the very first thought to assail her as she opened her eyes was that frigging letter. It was probably too early to be expecting a reply from Neha Chaturvedi just yet, as Sonya's Indian friend, Priyal, had told her the Indian postal system was nothing like Britain's. But what if her letter had never made it to its destination? It was entirely possible, of course, as getting the address had been no more than a series of stabs in the dark. But how annoying if Sonya would never even know if the lack of response was due

to Neha Chaturvedi's indifference or just an abysmal foreign postal system!

Trying to quell a sudden attack of butterflies in her stomach at the thought of India, Sonya decided to get up and abruptly swung her legs out from under the bedclothes. She stretched hard before getting up and padding her way across to her en-suite bathroom. Her eyes were not fully opened yet but she often said she could traverse her room blindfolded, this having been her designated space since she was a baby. It had, of course, been converted over the years from a bright yellow nursery that Sonya still had a fuzzy memory of, to a very pink girl's room that was probably its longest incarnation until it metamorphosed into its present deliberately dark and somewhat gothic teenage space some years ago. Sonya sometimes thought of the room as being almost like a relative because of the way in which it had grown up alongside her. Suddenly, the thought of leaving it was quite unbearable and, yes – there it was – that great big lump forming in her throat yet again as she splashed her face with water in the sink and looked at herself in the mirror. Her skin, typically quick to turn golden-brown in the summer, was glowing with good health but she remembered, with a quick small flash of sadness, how she had scrubbed her face raw one summer many years ago, desperate to be less brown than she was so she could blend in better with her very pale-skinned cousins who were visiting from Canada. Luckily she had soon got over that phase with some help from a school counsellor but – even now – it didn't take much for some small thing to rear its head up like a little devil and remind her of how little she was like the parents who had adopted her. In the way she looked, the way she spoke, even the way she thought about things. Much as

she adored her mum and dad, they really were chalk to her cheese. But now she was actually planning on separating from them, the thought of it was unbearable.

Of course, it was right and proper to be sentimental at times like this, even though Estella had always scoffed at her ready propensity for tears. How on earth Sonya had ever become best friends with such a hard nut was inexplicable but Estella's toughness came – by her own admission – from the procession of formidable old Italian matriarchs on her mother's side of the family. Sonya pulled her toothbrush out of the mug. Well, she certainly wasn't going to be apologetic about her current heightened emotional state, she thought as she squeezed toothpaste onto the bristles and started to brush.

The trip to India was nearly upon them now but, strangely, Sonya hadn't got around to doing her packing yet. She, who was usually so OCD her packing was done weeks before a holiday. It was two weeks before their departure for Lanzarote a few summers ago that her dad had discovered Sonya was getting her toothbrush out of her suitcase every morning. She wasn't that bad anymore, but, with only a few days to go now for India, she had not even got her case out of the loft. She wasn't sure she could explain it but a strange kind of malaise had crept over her a few weeks ago. Perhaps she could blame Mum and Dad for being so negative about her going off to India. Or perhaps it was that at some level Sonya was herself terrified of what she would find when she got there. But she really ought to get packed today, given that she and Estella were due to fly next week . . .

Sonya wandered back into her bedroom and sat with a thump on her cushioned window seat instead. She looked out of the bay window and saw a clutch of children

wearing uniforms at the bus stop down the road while an empty milk float trundled past her gate. It was obviously much earlier than she'd thought, and so Sonya lay back against the cushions and put her feet up, enjoying the feel of the sun on her toes. Distractions were aplenty as most of the clutter that was visible from Sonya's present perch held – as her mum sometimes said – 'a memory or three'. Half the things in the room were presents from Mum and Dad anyway, all kinds of mementos and photographs that marked birthdays and special events. But that clay cat, grinning from atop the dresser, was a present from Estella given to mark the day they left junior school. And around its neck were two pendants: one a red plastic heart that Tim had given her on Valentine's Day along with a bronze skull pendant that Sonya had bought at a Limp Bizkit heavy metal concert last year. Nestled between the cat's legs was a glass vial filled with various different types of sand, a memento from their family holiday in Lanzarote five years ago. Being a sentimental sort, Sonya found it hard to throw anything away and, among the vast collection of hairbands that hung colourfully from a mug-tree, were a few tiny ones decorated with plastic flowers that dated all the way back to her childhood when she had first heard of art collections and declared herself to be a Hairband Collector instead.

All in all, the style of her room was what Estella – who had herself gone all Scandinavian minimalist in design taste – once tartly described as 'Terence Conran's worst nightmare'. It was true that, every time the look and style of her room was revamped, Sonya had determinedly hung on to some of its previous features – her 'Higgledy-Piggledy House' Mum had called it, but she wasn't going to have it any other way.

Sonya grinned, remembering shooing Dad away when he had got into one of his redecorating fits recently, demanding that her room be kept exactly as it was when she left for uni. It had taken some convincing because there had been six rolls of expensive Farrow & Ball wallpaper left over from the study room – smart stripes in maroon and gold – that Dad was convinced would be a centre piece if used on the eastern wall, while the rest of her bedroom remained its existing plummy purple. But she couldn't get rid of her purple walls – this grown-up look had been carefully chosen as a treat for her sixteenth birthday two years ago. She'd gone with her father to the huge out-of-town B&Q to choose the colour and they had come back with not just brushes and cans of paint, but a set of mirrored black wardrobes that Dad had spent the whole weekend putting together just so that it would be ready for her party. And what a party that had been; with a marquee erected in the back garden to accommodate the sixty-odd guests who had been invited, plus a live band. The planning had gone on for weeks and poor Mum had suffered terribly from varicose veins afterwards – the main reason why Sonya had insisted they didn't go down the same route for her recent eighteenth which had consequently been a much quieter and more intimate affair. She'd spent the morning with Granny Shaw and later taken the train up to London with Mum and Dad to have dinner at their favourite Indian restaurant: Rasa on Charlotte Street, whose fish curries Dad described as 'divine' even as he went red in the face, his brow breaking out into a sweat because of the chillies that, despite all his protestations, he had never really grown accustomed to. Dinner had been followed by the new Alan Bennett play at the National Theatre and later, walking with arms

linked, across Waterloo Bridge, all three of them had declared it one of Sonya's best birthday celebrations ever.

Sonya's musings were interrupted by the ring of her mobile phone and the sight of Estella's smiling face flashing on the screen. The customary half a dozen phone calls they exchanged every day had suddenly doubled because of the forthcoming party at Estella's this weekend. It wasn't quite a joint eighteenth birthday party as their birthdays were six months apart; the celebration was more about both of them getting into the colleges of their choice. The downer was that, with Sonya heading off to Oxford and Estella to Bristol, they were going to be physically separated for the first time in thirteen years. The trip around India was a last hurrah to all the years they had spent, if Sonya's mum was to be believed, behaving like twins conjoined at the heart.

Sonya pressed her thumb on the green talk button and put the phone to her ear. 'Wassup?' she queried, sitting up against her cushions and propping her feet up on the window frame.

'I think I'm suffering from party nerves,' Estella said, in a loud hammed-up moan. 'Nothing normally wakes me this early. Must be the nerves.'

'Nerves? What are you blethering on about, you don't own any nerves, Stel! Even your mum says she's never seen you lose your head over anything.'

'Not true! There must be something I agitate over,' Estella replied, not sounding very sure of her capacity to agitate.

'Nope. Not a hint of a nerve. Or heart for that matter. Totally cold-hearted and unfazed, for instance by the fact that you and I are shortly due to be torn asunder for the first time in thirteen years.'

'Oh that! No cause for distress, Sonya darling. Oxford and Bristol are hardly at opposite ends of the earth, are they? And we'll both be back home for Christmas before you know it!'

Sonya briefly considered feeling hurt by Estella's seeming lack of concern but it was typical of her best friend to face life-changing moments without so much as batting an eyelid. But she had to admit, Estella's customary breezy insouciance had been oddly comforting on occasion. It sure was difficult to get too stressed around someone who was so laid-back she was almost horizontal. 'You're right, I guess,' Sonya replied. 'But don't pretend to have nerves just because it's what you think you should be having on the eve of a party. Everything's well under control from what I can see.'

'It's a bit weird, though, that everything's been delegated and there's no more to be done. Now I just want it to go well and for everyone to enjoy themselves.'

'Of course they'll enjoy themselves, silly. I have to admit, though, that the party's hardly topmost in my mind, given the holiday in India coming so soon after. Perhaps we should have spaced them out by a week so we could have planned both things properly. I can't seem to get too excited about India at the moment.'

'You're daft. I'm so excited I can hardly stand still! Don't forget there wasn't the time to space things out. Not with us having to get back to England in time for the start of uni.'

'Yeah, shame really that the visas took so long or we could even have managed an extra week in India. Maybe I'll start getting excited once this party's out of the way.'

'Fuck me sideways with a broomstick, Sonya!' Estella squawked. 'The party's nothing compared to this India holiday. It's once-in-a-lifetime kinda stuff!'

'Well, it sure solved a lot of people's questions about eighteenth birthday presents,' Sonya laughed.

'Personally, I think both our parents have got off rather lightly with buying just the air tickets, especially seeing what troupers the extended families have been,' Estella joked.

'Too right. Your Uncle Gianni insisting we go all the way down south to Kerala was just the best. Imagine insisting on getting my ticket too!'

'My Uncle G's the sweetest. Helps that he's loaded, of course. By the way, I'm off tomorrow to buy the backpack that Auntie Maria's given me money for.'

'Listen, we should make a date soon to investigate that travel shop in Soho too,' Sonya reminded.

'Which? Oh the one Toby told us about that specializes in tropical stuff? But I thought your mum's already kitted us out with tubes of insect repellent and various other forms of goo?'

'No, no, not that kind of thing. This shop does clothing and equipment and stuff.'

'You make it sound like we're headed off into the jungle, ready to hack our way through tropical undergrowth! I hardly think Delhi and Kerala require special clothing, Sonya.'

'Well, we have to get shots down at the GP's surgery so it's not exactly a trip down the road to Bromley, is it?'

Estella laughed. 'It certainly ain't that. I can't wait to be off. Just need to get this damned party out of the way first. Oh fuck, I just remembered, Mum asked me to call Alberto's deli for some salami. Gotta go!'

After her friend had hung up, Sonya continued to lie stretched in her bay window, sunning her propped-up legs. She had fitted perfectly into this space until she was

about ten but now, at a lanky five foot eight, she had to fold herself up in all sorts of ingenious ways in order to tuck herself in. She picked up a cushion and clutched it against her chest, trying to quell another flutter of anticipation. This trip – till recently some kind of distant and unlikely endeavour – had suddenly become a lot more real. Before anyone knew it, she would be off, flying into the unknown . . . an unknown past, by any measure, a curious concept. Finding out about a whole new family . . .

Sonya tried to infuse herself with determination and pulled herself back into a sitting position. She plumped up the pillows in the bay window, instructing herself to get on with the task at hand. But instead she stayed where she was, scrolling through the apps on her phone to inspect her calendar. It had been five days since she'd sent that letter and she hadn't mentioned it to either Estella or her parents yet. Only Priyal knew and that was only because Sonya had needed a source of information on all matters related to India. Priyal had suggested that a letter to Delhi could take anything from five days to two weeks to arrive.

What would Neha Chaturvedi's response be when it did finally get to her, Sonya wondered. Not that she *cared*, or anything, but if she *did*, she'd have given an arm and a leg to be a fly on the wall when that letter got opened. She had written three different versions and had eventually gone for the hard-hitting one because no other tone had seemed quite appropriate; certainly not namby-pamby politeness! Besides, pussy-footing about and avoiding tackling important issues just wasn't her style.

Sonya rolled to one side and slipped a sheet of paper out from under the mattress in her bay window. She'd kept a photocopy of the letter she had sent as writing it had been such a momentous task, she felt it important to

keep a record of it. However, over subsequent examinings, Sonya had doodled absent-mindedly on the margins which were now covered in pictures of stubby little aeroplanes and, for some odd reason, the repetitive image of a spiralling tornado.

Had she been overly melodramatic, Sonya wondered as she cast her eye over her scrawly writing. Perhaps the tone she'd adopted had turned just a tad too aggressive? It wasn't entirely made up of course, because Sonya did feel genuinely hurt and angry with all that she now knew of her adoption. In her more logical moments, she knew it was crazy to feel so angry, especially given what an ace set of cards life had dealt her since she was adopted by Mum and Dad. But that didn't take away from the fact that life could have been dire, thanks to the actions of the woman who had given birth to her.

To prevent her runaway thoughts from messing up her head again, Sonya got up and turned on the radio. She did a few energetic toe-touches and stretches to Michael Bublé and sang along, trying to lighten her mood. She smiled at her reflection in the mirrored wardrobe. By working herself up into such a tizz over India, perhaps she was merely living up to the name her father had given her when she was six: Drama Diva. He often had a little dig at Mum as well while he was at it, dubbing her Drama Queen and calling them both his Deeply Dramatic Duo. He was a fine one to talk, given how teary he had been of late; almost as bad as Mum. Of course it was all due to the India plan, and poor Dad wasn't as expert at masking his feelings as he seemed to think. With a mere five days to go before Sonya's departure, both her parents had taken to behaving as though they were acting in a Ken Loach weepie, welling up at the silliest of things and

quickly blinking away tears that they thought Sonya hadn't seen. Of course, Sonya understood all the reasons for which her darling mum felt threatened by her going off in search of her real mother but it was really so unnecessary, given how poorly Sonya thought of the woman who had given her away.

Sonya danced her way to the photograph that hung above the writing bureau, taken on her sixth birthday. She looked at her six-year-old self, standing before a Smarties-encrusted chocolate cake, flanked by her parents, both of whom were wearing silly paper hats. They looked so happy. As though that smiling threesome, caught in the camera lens, was the only thing of any importance in the whole wide world. Sonya's heart did another guilty flip. She hated the thought of causing her parents distress. She had been quite shocked when she had overheard Mum remark to Dad that what they were going through was about the most painful thing that had happened to her since the string of miscarriages she had endured in her twenties.

It was an instantly sobering thought and Sonya stopped dancing to return to the window seat. After another last glance at the photocopied letter, she slipped it back under the mattress. She had also kept a copy, imagining – perhaps dramatically – the kind of events it could set off; legal proceedings even! If that was the case, she certainly didn't want to be caught out, unable to remember what she had written. Not that she was frightened or anything – after all UK laws did actively encourage people to rediscover the details of their birth. But in the end, the final draft had been secretly photocopied on Dad's scanner in his den before she had stuffed it into an envelope. She had sealed it before she could stop herself and then cycled like the clappers down to the post office on the High Street

to make sure she did not change her mind. But, although it had been sent in haste, Sonya knew – hand on heart – that she had thought long and hard about the possible consequences of taking this step of contacting her birth mother. It was quite honestly the most difficult decision she had ever made in her life but Sonya had eventually made it, comforted by the sheer numbers of other adoptees who had done the same thing. All the information on the internet (and there was lots of it) had strengthened her, and left her with a strange sense of entitlement. There were so many blogs and websites that told her it was her right to know what had happened in her past. That past was hers and no one else's but, at the moment, all she had was a great gaping hole in her head and in her heart. When she was small, Mum and Dad had tried to tell her everything they knew about her adoption, but everything they knew was in fact pitifully little. They had, for instance, told her that she had an Indian mother but had no idea why she had given her up, or what had happened to her since. They knew that her father was white, English or Scottish, but there was absolutely no more information on him, not even a name. There were times when Sonya had wanted to scream in frustration and other times when, rather dramatically, she wondered if perhaps Mum and Dad were deliberately covering up her story because it was either really sordid or really exciting. And then, sometime around the age of thirteen, Sonya had simply stopped asking. All her questions had ended at the same old cipher and so there was little point. Especially when there were so many other things to focus her mind on at the time: bodily changes and intense crushes, a whole host of new areas to feel messed up about!

Now that Sonya was eighteen, however, and given more

right by law to investigate her past, everyone else simply had to understand that this trip to India was something she had no choice about. She had to discover the circumstances of her birth and it was now almost as though forces stronger than her had taken over, compelling her to embark on this treacherous path.