



Daughters of India

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Prologue

'You are a good girl, Asha, and a brave one.' His voice fell to a whisper. *'You have your part to play. An important part. I know you will make your baba proud. And make me proud also.'*

She couldn't speak. She wanted to blurt out: already I have betrayed you and my baba both; I am serving that man, who condemned him to death. She stood, silent and ashamed.

He nodded as if he understood everything, as if he saw not just through the thick door but right into her soul. Her body ached from straining to reach to the peephole. It was hot and airless in the corridor. There was so much she needed to say, to confess to him, but she couldn't find the words.

He said then: 'Your madam. You are knowing who she is?'

She blinked. 'Isabel Madam. Her husband sentenced my . . .' Her voice faltered.

'Her husband made your baba a martyr. That is true. But she herself, you know her?'

He lifted his hand. She couldn't see but it seemed to her that he placed it flat against the wood of the door between them. She lifted her own and placed it too, flat against the worn wood on her own side, imagining that they could touch.

He began to whisper to her.

'Do you remember that day, long ago, when you were a little girl only and your baba brought you to my uncle's house? Rahul was there, my good friend, and he told you about the Britishers' house with the mango and jamun trees where you and he were children? They cast out your baba and sent him to the slum, accused him falsely of being a thief.'

Of course she remembered. Her poor baba bore it all and never spoke of it.

'That was your madam's house. It was her people who destroyed your baba's reputation. They set him on the long path that led him to a cell here and to death.'

Her hand shook on the wood. 'Her people?'

He nodded. His eyes fixed on the peephole as if he could see her.

'They are snakes, these people. Full of kind words but also of poison.'

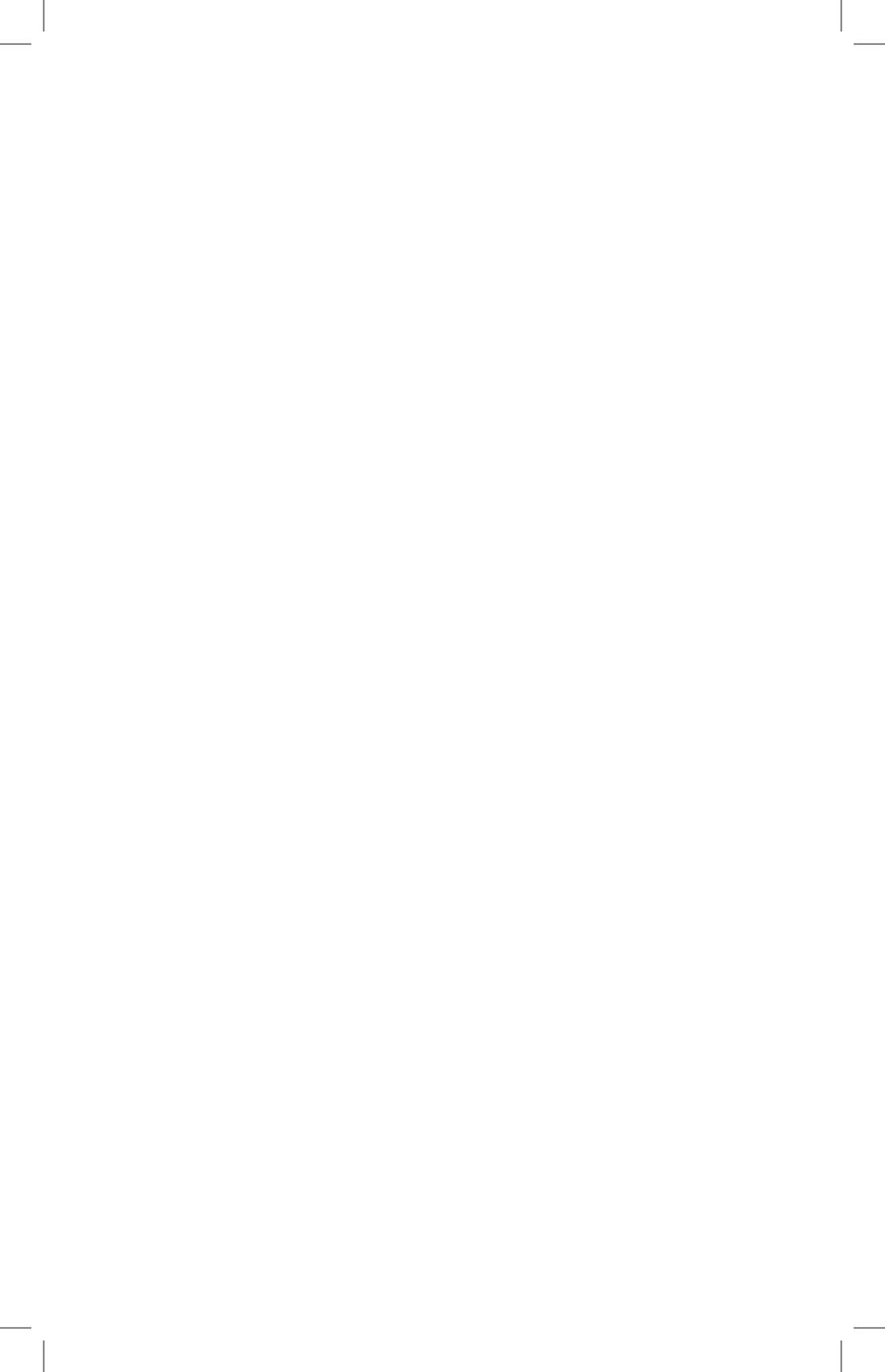
The wood swam. She felt a sudden wave of sickness and leant her cheek against it.

He said: 'Harden your heart against her.'

She took a deep breath. 'I will leave her. Amit-ji will protect me. I'll clean pans and cook for him.'

On the other side of the door, he let out a low sigh. 'No, little sister. They are snakes but we are tigers. Be strong. Be fierce. And have faith. The day of the tiger is almost come.'

Part One



Chapter One

Delhi, 1919

The magnolia tree was too high. Its branches thinned and weakened and, now Isabel was near the top, they bowed where she placed a foot. She tilted her head and looked down through the falling shiver of leaves to the ground. The earth rose rushing towards her. Her stomach tightened and breath stuck in her throat.

‘Here.’ Rahul twisted back to her, stretched down a warm, safe hand.

She couldn’t move. Her knuckles whitened as she grasped the trunk.

‘Look up only.’ Rahul climbed down to her, a shield against the dropping empty air.

She gathered a bunch of thin branches in her hands like reins, steadied her breath and pulled herself higher.

They emerged, at the top, into another world and sat, pressed together, breathing hard, trembling. Leaves stirred all around. Far below, the ground swam. The compound lay mapped out, the buildings shrivelled and unfamiliar. Fear and glory knotted into one as she lifted her eyes and looked out across India, across the world.

Rahul pointed behind them, over the angled roof of the bungalow and far beyond.

‘That’s backwards.’ His voice was solemn. ‘Into the past.’

When she screwed her eyes and stared, she saw past generations, the darkness of the ancients.

He pointed forward then, over the garden’s boundary walls, out across the brown mud and lush vegetation of unclaimed land, of the jungle.

‘That’s forwards,’ he said. ‘Into the future.’

That evening, the light in the servants’ shack was dim, pooled round the lamp, which was too weak to reach the corners. She kept close to Rahul as he sat, cross-legged, among his brothers and sisters on the dirt floor. Dark heads hunched forward over food. Daal, rice and subzi sat on leaves on the ground. They balled it deftly to eat and she felt her own clumsiness as daal ran down her wrist and onto her knees.

The women whispered. The sweeper-wallah was in trouble. He was a shy man with a sad face. Isabel hardly knew him.

‘Where will he go?’ Mrs Chaudhary said. ‘His daughter’s just a baby.’

Isabel looked round. There was chilli in the subzi and her lips smarted.

The wooden door creaked open. The new houseboy, Abdul, wide-eyed.

‘Memsahib, at the door, calling Missy Isabel.’

She held herself so still that her body shook. She wouldn’t go.

‘Miss Isabel.’ Mrs Chaudhary spoke to her in English now. The boys lifted their heads. ‘Please be going.’

Isabel hesitated.

Rahul said: ‘But her food, Mama.’

Mrs Chaudhary shook her head, repeated. ‘Please, Miss Isabel. Please.’

* * *

Isabel was summoned the following day.

‘Where were you?’

Her mother sat at her desk in the sitting room, one long-fingered hand stretched across an open writing case and the other clasping the gold chain around her neck, gathering it into folds and kneading it. The mid-morning sun was already strong. It reached through the French windows and made the moving necklace sparkle.

‘Ayah says you ate with the servants. Is that true?’

Isabel’s round-toed sandals cut red half-moons in the wooden floor. She stood two, maybe three, steps from the fringe of the rug. She could jump it in one bound if she had a run-up.

‘Well?’

She shrugged. ‘I was hungry.’

Her mother sighed. ‘It won’t do, you know.’ The gold links of the chain scraped together as she bunched, then rolled them between her fingers. ‘Your father and I have decided it’s time for you to go Home. There’s a small school that’s supposed to be awfully good, just like a family, really.’

Outside, Cook Chaudhary hollered from the side of the house. Angry. The houseboy was for it.

‘Are you even listening?’

She forced her eyes to meet her mother’s and nodded. A bicycle bell rang down by the gate and someone whistled. It wasn’t Rahul, she knew his whistle anywhere. A delivery boy, perhaps. From town. Her toes clenched in her sandals, bursting to run outside to see.

‘If it hadn’t been for the war, you should have gone long ago. It’s a big change but you’ll soon settle.’

A thought struck her. The whispers last night. ‘Is the sweeper-wallah leaving?’

Her mother looked surprised, then frowned. ‘Where did you hear that?’

It was true, then. ‘Where will he go?’

‘I really don’t think—’ Her mother let her necklace fall. It bounced against her blouse, then swayed and settled. ‘He let us down very badly. That’s all.’ She turned back to her desk. ‘Your father’s quite right, Isabel. It’s time you went Home.’