

1. ARRIVALS

Randeep Sanghera stood in front of the green-and-blue map tacked to the wall. The map had come with the flat, and though it was big and wrinkled, and cigarette butts had once stubbed black islands into the mid Atlantic, he'd kept it, a reminder of the world outside. He was less sure about the flowers, guilty-looking things he'd spent too long choosing at the petrol station. Get rid of them, he decided, but then heard someone was parking up outside and the thought flew out of his head.

He went down the narrow staircase, step by nervous step, straightening his cuffs, swallowing hard. He could see a shape through the mottled glass. When he opened the door Narinder Kaur stood before him, brightly etched against the night, coat unbuttoned despite the cold. So, even in England she wore a kesri. A domed deep-green one that matched her salwaar kameez. A flank of hair had come loose from under it and curled about her ear. He'd forgotten how large, how clever, her eyes were. Behind her, the taxi made a U-turn and retreated down the hill. Narinder brought her hands together underneath her chin – 'Sat sri akal' – and Randeep nodded and took her suitcase and asked if she might follow him up the stairs.

He set her luggage in the middle of the room and, straightening right back up, knocked his head against the bald light bulb, the wire flexing like a snake disturbed from its tree. She was standing at the window clutching her handbag with both hands.

'It's very quiet,' Randeep said.

'It's very nice. Thank you.'

'You have been to Sheffield before?'

'My first time. What's the area called again?'

'Brightside,' he said.

She smiled, a little, and gazed around the room. She gestured towards the cooker.

‘We used to have one like that. Years ago.’

Randeep looked too: a white stand-alone thing with an overhanging grill pan. The stains on the hob hadn’t shifted no matter how hard he’d scrubbed. ‘There is a microwave, too,’ he said, pointing to the microwave. ‘And washing machine. And toaster also, and kettle and sofa-set . . . carpet . . .’ He trailed off, ridiculous to himself. ‘The heater works fine. It’s included in the rent. I’m sorry there’s no TV.’

‘I’m used to it.’ She looked to the wall. ‘Nice map.’

‘Oh. Thank you. I thought . . .’ What did he think? ‘I want to visit every continent of the world.’ She smiled politely, as if he’d said he wanted to visit the moons of Jupiter. ‘It’s one of my dreams.’

There were only two other rooms. The bathroom was tiny, and the pipes buffalo-groaned when he forced the taps. In the centre of the greenish tub the hand-held shower lay in a perfect coil of chrome, like an alien turd.

‘And this is your private room,’ he said, opening the second door.

She didn’t step inside. There wasn’t much to see: a double bed, a rail for her clothes, a few wire coat hangers. Some globs of Blu-Tack on damp, loose wallpaper. There was a long, hinged mirror straight ahead which they found themselves staring into, him standing behind her. She didn’t even reach his shoulders. It was cold and he noticed her nipples showing through her tunic. Frowning, she pulled her coat shut and he averted his eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘It’s too small. And dirty. I’ll look for something else tomorrow.’

‘It’s fine. Honestly. Thank you for finding it for me.’

‘Truly?’ He exhaled relief. ‘There is a bus from the bottom of the hill that can take you into town.’

‘And that hill will keep me in shape.’

‘And this isn’t an area with lots of apneh.’ Her lips parted, but she didn’t speak. ‘Like you asked,’ he reminded her. ‘And the gurdwara’s only a few stops away. In Burngreave. I can show you? If you like?’

‘We’ll see,’ she said. ‘It’s late. Can I call you tomorrow?’

‘Of course. But you should know that the flat downstairs is empty. So no disturbances.’ He smiled, pleased with himself. ‘Yes, this flat was a special find. Especially at this time of year, it is not easy. We were lucky.’ That ‘we’ was problematic and knocked him off balance. ‘But I should go,’ he said hastily. He took up his red tracksuit top and zipped it to his chin, pushing the short sleeves up to his elbows.

She walked him to the stairs, saying, ‘You should probably bring a few of your things and leave them here.’

He nearly blurted out that his suitcase was just outside, in the gennel. ‘I will bring some. But I will telephone you first.’ He wouldn’t be one of those boys who turned up at a girl’s house unannounced and unexpected. Then he remembered about the meter tokens. ‘The light.’ He pointed down the stairs. ‘There is a meter underneath. It takes the pink electric tokens. Not the white ones. The pink ones. There is a shop around the corner. The aunty there sells them.’

She looked confused. ‘Do I have to collect these tokens? Like vouchers?’

‘Collect them from the shop, yes. Only be careful you put the cards in straight. Would you like me to show you? The meter?’

She’d never heard of electricity being pink, or white for that matter, but she was tired from the journey and said she really did just want to sleep. ‘But thanks for everything, Randeep.’

She used his name, without ‘ji’ and to his face, which hurt him a little. But this was England. ‘No problem. And do not worry. You won’t need any for a while yet. I put lots in before you came.’

She thanked him again, then – perhaps out of nerves, needing her fingers occupied – retightened her chunni over her turban and under her chin. It made her eyes look bigger, somehow.

Randeep opened his wallet and held out some notes to her. ‘Next month’s.’ He was looking away. He hated doing it like this. At least when she lived in London it had gone by post. She too seemed embarrassed to take it.

He said goodbye. Halfway down the stairs he stopped, looked

round. 'I hope you don't mind, but is everything all right? You are not in any trouble?'

'Oh, I just need to rest. I'll be fine tomorrow. Can I call you?'

'Of course you may. Of course.' He smiled, then went down the remaining steps and opened the door. He nodded a final goodbye. She leaned forward out of the doorway, arms folded. She looked uncertain.

Randeep held his suitcase across his lap on the bus ride home. Of course she wasn't going to ask him to stay. It was stupid of him to have thought she might. If anything, he wondered now if she'd seemed eager for him to leave her alone. He spat coarsely into his hankie and worked out a bit of dirt on the brown leather of his case, which still gleamed, in spite of the coach to Delhi, the flight to London, and now three months spent wedged on the roof of that disgusting wardrobe.

He got off right outside the house and saw the grey-blue light of the TV flickering behind the closed curtains. He'd hoped they'd be asleep by now. He went the long way round the block, stopping off at the Londis for some of those fizzy cola-bottle sweets.

'You are leaving?' the Singh asked. The suitcase.

'I was helping a friend move only.'

The TV was still on when he got back. Randeep turned the key gradually, wincing at the loud final snap of the metal tongue, and went straight up to his room on the second floor. He sat there polishing his workboots with toilet roll and after that he changed the blanket on his mattress, taking care with the corner-folds. Then he lay down, the darkness roomy around him, and with no real enthusiasm reached for the toilet roll once more.

It was near midnight when the clanging of the gate woke him up. He hadn't meant to fall asleep afterwards and the scrunch of sticky toilet paper was still in his hand.

Downstairs, he went through the beaded curtain and found Avtar gulping straight from the tap. The back of his uniform read Crunchy Fried Chicken. Randeep stood in the doorway, weaving one of the long strings in and out of his fingers. There was a calen-

dar of tropically naked blonde women on the wall by the fridge. Someone would have to get a new one soon.

Avtar turned off the tap, though it continued to drip. 'Where is everyone?'

'Asleep.'

'Did someone do the milk run?'

'Don't think so.'

Avtar groaned. 'I can't do everything, yaar. Who's on the roti shift?'

Randeep shrugged. 'Not me.'

'I bet it's that new guy. Watch, they'll be bhanchod burnt again.'

Randeep nodded, sighed. Outside the window, the moon was full. There were no stars though, just an even pit of black, and if he altered the focus of his eyes, he saw his vague reflection. He wondered what his father would be doing.

'Do you think Gurpreet's right? About what he said this morning?'

'What did he say this morning?'

'You were there.'

'I was asleep.'

'He said it's not work that makes us leave home and come here. It's love. Love for our families.' Randeep turned to Avtar. 'Do you think that's true?'

'I think he's a sentimental creep. We come here for the same reason our people do anything. Duty. We're doing our duty. And it's shit.'

Randeep turned back to the window. 'Maybe.'

'And I asked bhaji, by the way, but there's nothing right now.'

The job, Randeep remembered. He was relieved. He'd only mentioned it during a low moment, needing solidarity. One job was enough. He didn't know how Avtar managed two.

'How'd the thing with the girl go?'

'Nothing special,' Randeep said.

'Told you,' and Avtar picked up his satchel from where it rested against the flour barrel. He took out his manila college folder and wriggled up onto the worktop.