

April 1943
Lahore, British India

When Chhote Nanu fell in love with the woman from Heera Mandi, he did not know she was English, at least not right away. From across the tent at the wrestling arena, he saw the frills on her white dress fluttering like flower petals in the wind, even saw the tinkle of her tight English smile, and still he didn't guess her origins, saw she was off-limits. He fixated on her lush black hair done up in curls, her skin the same color as his, and his heart leapt off and away as swiftly as pigeons taking flight.

The tent was beastly hot. In the field before them two hefty men, one Indian one English rammed into each other like oxen, trying to take the other down. Dust rolled in giant swirls straight into their mouths, crunching under their teeth. His own wild hair blew about, and he wrapped his *gamchha* around his face, no doubt looking like a peasant in his white shirt and pajamas. It was hard enough to keep his eyes open. But when he spotted her, he couldn't look away.

He'd never seen anyone so beautiful. The rest of the women in the audience squatted on the mud floor with their heads and faces covered. But she, she was different. She sat on a raised dais wearing a straw hat brimmed with blue flowers. Her small brown hands played with the lace on her dress, which glowed so white, she seemed composed of light, in competition with the sun and winning. Even the way she sat, one foot crossed over the other, her skirt ending below the knees, her calves shiny, he thought, how bold, how unabashed. A maid brought her a child, a boy of no more than two, and she smothered it with kisses. How perfectly divine of her to parade in

English dress. She gave off the scent of Trafalgar Square and the real Charing Cross, places Chhote Nanu had only read about.

Who was she? What was her name? What was she doing in the vile, dusty block of men? Granted, she sat several paces away from the general audience with a group of women who could only have been her attendants. She wasn't accompanied by a man.

Whom could he ask? Alisatir and Tom, or Aaloo and Tinku as they liked to be called, were useless. Three years his junior, the twins knew nothing about the questions that had as of late begun to occur to him and keep him up at night. They still squirmed at the sight of the girls of St. Mary's Convent, didn't show interest in the movies. They were more Scottish and prudish than they admitted.

Tinku caught him staring and wrinkled his freckled nose. "She looks old."

"She's not that old." Chhote Nanu traced the curve of her bosom down to her long legs. Was she an actress? The famous Sulochana? "I've never seen an Indian girl in an English dress."

"That's not an Indian woman!" exclaimed Aaloo. "She's English!"