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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows**

Written by Balli Kaur Jaswal

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BALLI  
KAUR JASWAL

**EROTIC  
STORIES  
FOR  
PUNJABI  
WIDOWS**



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For Paul

## Chapter One

Why did Mindi *want* an arranged marriage?

Nikki stared at the profile her sister had attached to the email. There was a list of relevant biographical details: name, age, height, religion, diet (vegetarian except for the occasional fish and chips). General preferences for a husband: intelligent, compassionate and kind, with strong values and a nice smile. Both clean-shaven and turban-wearing men were acceptable, provided beards and moustaches were neatly maintained. The ideal husband had a stable job and up to three hobbies which extended him mentally and physically. *In some ways*, she had written, *he should be just like me: modest* (a prude in Nikki's opinion), *practical with finances* (downright stingy) and *family-oriented* (wants babies immediately). Worst of all, the title of her blurb made her sound like a supermarket seasoning spice: Mindi Grewal, East-West Mix.

The narrow corridor connecting Nikki's bedroom to the kitchenette was not suitable for pacing, with uneven floorboards that creaked in various pitches under the slightest contact. She travelled up and down the corridor nonetheless, gathering her thoughts in tiny steps. What was her sister thinking? Sure, Mindi had always been more traditional – once, Nikki had caught her watching an internet video on how to roll perfectly round rotis – but advertising for a groom? It was so *extreme*.

Nikki called Mindi repeatedly and was connected to voicemail each

time. By the time she got through, the sunlight had leaked away into the dense evening fog and it was nearly time to leave for her shift at O'Reilly's.

'I know what you're going to say,' Mindi said.

'Can you see it, Mindi?' Nikki asked. 'Can you actually picture this happening?'

'Yes.'

'You're insane, then.'

'I've made this decision on my own. I want to find a husband the traditional way.'

'Why?'

'It's what I want.'

'Why?'

'It just is.'

'You need to come up with a better reason than that if you want me to edit your profile.'

'That's unfair. I supported you when you moved out.'

'You called me a selfish cow.'

'But then when you left, and when Mum wanted to go to your place and demand that you come home, who convinced her to let it go? If not for me, she would never have accepted your decision. She's over it now.'

'*Almost* over it,' Nikki reminded her. Time had worn on Mum's initial sense of outrage and stretched it threadbare. These days Mum was still deeply dissatisfied with Nikki's lifestyle, but she had given up lecturing Nikki about the perils of living on her own. 'My own mother would not have dreamt of allowing this,' Mum always said to prove her progressiveness, a balance of boastfulness and lament in her tone. *East-West Mix*.

'I'm embracing our culture,' Mindi said. 'I see my English friends meeting men online and in nightclubs and they don't seem to be finding anyone suitable. Why not try an arranged marriage? It worked for our parents.'

‘Those were different times,’ Nikki argued. ‘You’ve got more opportunities than Mum had at the same age.’

‘I’m educated, I’ve done my nursing degree, I’ve got a job – this is the next step.’

‘It shouldn’t be a step. Acquiring a husband, that’s what you’re doing.’

‘It’s not going to be like that. I just want a bit of help to find him, but it’s not like we’re going to meet for the first time on our wedding day. Couples are allowed more time to get to know each other these days.’

Nikki balked at the word ‘allowed’. Why did Mindi need permission from anyone to take liberties with dating? ‘Don’t just settle. Do some travelling. See the world.’

‘I’ve seen enough,’ Mindi sniffed – a girls’ trip to Tenerife last summer during which she had discovered her allergy to shellfish. ‘Besides, Kirti is looking for a suitable boy as well. It’s time for both of us to settle down.’

‘Kirti couldn’t spot a suitable boy if he came flying through her window,’ Nikki said. ‘I’d hardly consider her a serious competitor.’ There was no love lost between Nikki and her sister’s best friend, a make-up artist, or Facial Enhancing Practitioner, according to her name card. At Mindi’s twenty-fifth birthday party last year, Kirti had scrutinized Nikki’s outfit and concluded, ‘Being pretty is about making an effort though, innit?’

‘Mindi, maybe you’re bored.’

‘Is boredom not a valid reason to try to find a partner? You moved out because you wanted independence. I’m looking to marry someone because I want to be a *part* of something. I want a family. You don’t know it now, because you’re still young. I get home after a long day at work and it’s just Mum and me. I want to come home to *somebody*. I want to talk about my day and eat dinner and plan a life together.’

Nikki clicked open the email attachments. There were two close-ups of Mindi, her smile like a greeting, thick straight hair spilling past her

shoulders. Another photo featured the whole family: Mum, Dad, Mindi and Nikki on their last holiday together. It wasn't their best shot; they were all squinting and tiny against a wide landscape. Dad had died later that year, a heart attack snatching his breath at night like a thief. A pang of guilt seized Nikki's stomach. She closed the window.

'Don't use any family photos,' Nikki said. 'I don't want my image in any matchmaker's files.'

'So you'll help me?'

'It's against my principles.' Nikki typed: 'arguments against arranged marriage' into a search engine and clicked on the first result.

'You'll help me, though?'

'The arranged marriage is a flawed system which undermines a woman's right to choose her destiny,' Nikki read aloud.

'Just make the profile sound better. I'm not good with that sort of thing,' Mindi said.

'Did you hear what I said?'

'Some radical rubbish. I stopped listening after "undermines".'

Nikki clicked back to the profile and spotted a grammatical error: *I'm looking for my soulmate. Whose it going to be?* She sighed. Clearly, Mindi's mind was made up – it was a matter of whether Nikki wanted to be involved or not.

'Fine,' she said. 'But only because you're at risk of attracting idiots with this profile. Why have you described yourself as "fun-loving"? Who doesn't love fun?'

'And then could you post it on the marriage board for me?'

'What marriage board?'

'At the big temple in Southall. I'll text you the details.'

'Southall? You're joking.'

'It's much closer to where you live. I've got double shifts at the hospital all week.'

'I thought they had matrimonial websites for this sort of thing,' Nikki said.

'I considered SikhMate.com and PunjabPyaar.com. There are too

many men from India looking for an easy visa. If a man sees my profile on the temple board, at least I know he's in London. Southall's got the largest gurdwara in Europe. Better chances than posting on the noticeboard in Enfield,' Mindi explained.

'I'm very busy, you know.'

'Oh please, Nikki. You've got plenty more time than the rest of us.'

Nikki dismissed the hint of judgement. Mum and Mindi didn't consider her bartending work at O'Reilly's a full-time job. It was not worth explaining that she was still searching for her calling – a job where she could make a difference, stimulate her mind, be challenged, valued and rewarded. Such positions were disappointingly scarce and the recession had made things worse. Nikki had even been rejected from volunteer positions with three different women's non-profits, all apologetically explaining how overwhelmed they were with a record number of applications. What else was out there for a twenty-two-year-old with half a law degree? In the current economic climate (and possibly all other economic climates): nothing.

'I'll pay you for your time,' Mindi said.

'I'm not taking money from you,' Nikki said reflexively.

'Hang on. Mum wants to say something.' There were muffled instructions in the background. 'She says "remember to lock your windows". There was something on the news last night about break-ins.'

'Tell Mum that I've got nothing valuable to steal,' Nikki said.

'She'll say you have your decency to protect.'

'Too late. Already taken. Andrew Forrest's party after the year eleven prom.' Mindi said nothing in response but her disapproval crackled like static over the line.

Getting ready for work afterwards, Nikki considered Mindi's offer to pay her. A charitable gesture, but Nikki's burdens were not financial. Her flat was above the pub and the rental rate was subsidized by her availability to work extra shifts at the last minute. But bartending was meant to be temporary – she was supposed to be *doing something*

with her life by now. Each day brought a new reminder that she was sitting still while her peers moved forward. On a train platform last week, she had spotted a former classmate. How busy and purposeful she looked as she marched toward the station exit, briefcase in one hand and coffee cup in the other. Nikki had begun to dread the daytime, the hours when she was most aware of London outside, ticking and clicking into place.

The year before Nikki took her GCSEs, she had accompanied her parents on a trip to India where they made a point of visiting temples and consulting pundits to bestow upon Nikki the necessary guidance to excel. One pundit had asked her to visualize herself in the career she wanted while he chanted prayers to make her visions a reality. Her mind had gone blank, and this canvas of nothingness was the image sent up to the gods. As with all trips to the motherland, she had been given strict guidelines about what not to say in front of Dad's older brother who hosted them: no swearing; no mention of male friends; no talking back; speak Punjabi to show gratitude for all those summer lessons here that we hoped would nurture your cultural roots. Over dinner, when her uncle asked about the pundit visits, Nikki bit her tongue to keep from replying, 'Fraudulent bastards. I'd be better off asking my mates Mitch and Bazza to read my palm.'

Dad spoke up for her. 'Nikki will probably get into law.'

Her future was sealed then. Dad dismissed her uncertainties with reminders that she would enter a secure and respectable profession. These were only temporary assurances. The fluttering anxiety of sitting in the wrong lecture on her first day of university only multiplied throughout the year. After nearly failing a class in her second year, Nikki was summoned by a tutor who remarked, 'Perhaps this isn't for you.' He was referring to his subject, but she saw how the comment applied to everything: the tedium of lectures and tutorials, the exams and group projects and deadlines. They just weren't for her. She withdrew from university that afternoon.

Unable to tell her parents that she had dropped out, Nikki still left home each morning with her Camden Market vintage leather satchel. She walked through London, which provided the perfect backdrop to her misery with its soot-filled skies and ancient towers. Quitting university provided some relief but Nikki became plagued with anxieties about what she should be doing instead. After a week of aimless wandering, Nikki began filling her afternoons by attending protests with her best friend Olive, who volunteered for an organization called UK Fem Fighters. There was much to be indignant about. Topless models were still appearing on Page Three of the *Sun*. Government funding to women's crisis centres was being halved as part of new austerity measures. Female journalists were in danger of being harassed and assaulted while reporting in war zones overseas. Whales were being senselessly slaughtered in Japan (this was not a women's issue but Nikki felt sorry for the whales nonetheless and accosted strangers to sign her Greenpeace petition).

It was after Dad's friend tried to offer Nikki an internship that she had to admit that she had withdrawn from university. Yelling had never been Dad's style. Distance was his method of expressing disappointment. In the long argument that followed her confession, he and Nikki were rooted to separate rooms, territories that they had unwittingly staked out, while Mum and Mindi orbited in between. The closest they came to a shouting match was after Dad made a list of Nikki's suitable attributes for a law career. 'All of that potential, all of those opportunities, and you're wasting it on what? You were nearly halfway through. What's your plan now?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know?'

'I'm just not that passionate about law.'

'Not that passionate?'

'You're not even trying to understand. You're just repeating everything I say.'

*'REPEATING EVERYTHING YOU SAY?'*

‘Dad,’ Mindi said. ‘Calm down. Please.’

‘I will not—’

‘Mohan, your heart,’ Mum warned.

‘What’s wrong with his heart?’ Nikki asked. She looked at Dad with concern but he wouldn’t meet her eyes.

‘Dad’s been having some irregularities. Nothing serious, his EKGs are fine but the blood pressure reading was 140 over 90, which is a little alarming. Then again, there’s a family history of DVT so there are concerns . . .’ Mindi prattled on. One year into her nursing career and the novelty of using medical jargon at home still hadn’t worn off.

‘What does it mean?’ Nikki asked impatiently.

‘Nothing conclusive. He needs to go in for more tests next week,’ Mindi said.

‘Dad!’ Nikki rushed towards him but he held up his hand, stopping her mid-step.

‘You are ruining everything,’ he said. They were the last words Dad spoke to her. Days later, he and Mum had booked a trip to India even though they had visited only months before. Dad wanted to be with his family, Mum explained.

Gone were the days when Nikki’s parents threatened to send her back to India when she misbehaved; now they exiled themselves. ‘By the time we return, maybe you will have come to your senses,’ Mum said. The comment stung but Nikki was determined not to pick another fight. Her own bags were being discreetly packed. A pub near Olive’s flat in Shepherd’s Bush was looking for a bartender. By the time her parents returned, Nikki would be gone.

Then Dad died in India. The heart condition had been worse than anything the doctors had detected. In traditional Indian morality tales, wayward children were the primary cause of heart conditions, cancerous lumps, hair loss and other ailments in their aggrieved parents. While Nikki wasn’t naïve enough to be convinced that she had given Dad a heart attack, she believed he might have been saved by the follow-up visit in London, which he had postponed to take this hurried trip to

India. The guilt gnawed at her insides and made it impossible for Nikki to grieve. At the funeral, she willed for tears to arrive and provide some release but they never did.

Two years on, Nikki still wondered if she had made the right decision. Sometimes she secretly considered returning to her degree even though she couldn't bear the thought of poring through more case studies or sitting through another droning series of lectures. Perhaps passion and excitement were meant to be secondary to a stable adult life. After all, if arranged marriages could work out, maybe Nikki could muster enthusiasm for something she didn't love immediately, and then wait for that love to arrive.

In the morning, Nikki emerged from her building to receive a punishing spray of rain across her face. She pulled the faux-fur-lined hood of her jacket over her head and made the grim fifteen-minute march to the train station. Her beloved satchel thumped against her hip. While she was buying a pack of cigarettes at the newsagents, her phone buzzed in her pocket; a message from Olive.

*Job at a children's bookshop. Perfect for you! Saw in yesterday's paper.*

Nikki was touched. Olive had been scanning the job ads ever since Nikki confided that she wasn't sure if O'Reilly's would stay in business much longer. The pub already seemed to be on its last legs, its old décor too dingy to be considered hip and its menu no competitor for the trendy café that had opened up next door. Sam O'Reilly spent more time than ever in his small back office, surrounded by reams of receipts and invoices.

Nikki replied.

*I saw it too. They want min five yrs sales experience. Need a job to get experience, need experience to get a job – madness!*

Olive didn't reply. A trainee secondary teacher, her weekday communication was sporadic. Nikki had considered studying to be a teacher but each time she heard Olive talk about her rowdy students, she was thankful that she only had to manage the occasional swaying drunkard at O'Reilly's.

Nikki typed another message.

*Will see you at the pub tonight? You wouldn't believe where I'm off to – Southall!!*

She stubbed out her cigarette and joined the rush hour crowd to board the train.

During the journey, Nikki watched as London fell away, brick buildings replaced by stretches of scrapyards and industrial lots as the train rushed westwards. One of the final stations on the line, Southall's welcome sign was printed in both English and Punjabi. She was drawn to the Punjabi one first, surprised by the familiarity of those curls and twists. Those summer lessons in India had included learning to read and write Gurmukhi script, a useful party trick later in life when she wrote her English friends' names in Punjabi on bar napkins in exchange for free drinks.

Through the windows of the connecting bus to the temple, the sight of more bilingual signs on shop fronts gave Nikki a slight headache and the sensation of being split in two parts. British, Indian. There had been family day trips here in her early childhood – a wedding at the temple, or a shopping trip dedicated to finding fresh curry spices. Nikki recalled the confused conversations of these trips as Mum and Dad seemed to both love and loathe being amongst their country folk: wouldn't it be nice to have Punjabi neighbours? But what was the point of moving to England then? As North London had taken the shape of home to her parents, there were fewer reasons to visit Southall, which faded to their pasts along with India itself. Now a bhangra bass beat throbbed from the car in the next lane. In a textile

merchant's window, a row of glittering sari-clad mannequins smiled demurely at passers-by. Vegetable markets spilled out onto the pavement and hot steam rose from a samosa vendor's cart on the street corner. Nothing had changed.

At one stop, a group of secondary school girls boarded. They giggled and spoke over each other and when the bus lurched suddenly, they flew forwards with a collective shriek. 'Fuckin' hell!' one girl yelled. The other girls laughed but their noise faded quickly when they noticed the glares of two turbaned men sitting across from Nikki. The girls nudged each other to be quiet.

'Have some respect,' somebody hissed. Nikki turned to see an elderly woman giving the girls a withering look as they ducked past.

Most passengers alighted the bus with Nikki at the gurdwara. Its golden dome glinted against the stone-grey clouds and brilliant sapphire and orange curlicues filled the stained-glass windows on the second floor. The Victorian terraces that surrounded the temple looked like toys in comparison to this majestic white building. Nikki itched for a cigarette, but there were too many eyes here. She felt them on her back as she overtook a pack of white-haired women who slowly made their way from the bus stop to the temple's arched entrance. The ceilings in this vast building had seemed infinite when she was a child and they were still dizzily high. A faint echo of chanting floated from the prayer hall. Nikki took the scarf out of her bag and draped it over her head. This temple's foyer had been renovated since her last visit years ago and the location of the noticeboards was not immediately obvious. She wandered around for a while but avoided asking for directions. She had once entered a church in Islington looking for directions and made the mistake of telling the minister that she had lost her way. The ensuing conversation about locating her inner spirituality took forty-five minutes and did nothing to point her towards the Victoria line.

Finally, Nikki spotted the noticeboards near the entrance to the langar hall. There were two large boards taking up most of the wall:

MARRIAGE and COMMUNITY SERVICE. Whilst the community service board was woefully scant, the marriage board overflowed with flyers.

**HEy thEre, HoW U DoIN'? JUST KiDDInG! I'm A PrEtTy LAid BAck GuY bUT I cAn AsSuRE U, I AiN't The PLAyA tYpE. My GOAL IN LIFE is tO EnJoY iT, TaKE OnE DaY At A TiME and DoNT sweAT tHe SMALL StUFF. MoST ImpOrTantLY I WanT 2 FiND My PRINCESS aNd TrEAt hEr THE wAy sHe DeSeRves.**

*Sikh boy from Jat family of good lineage seeking Sikh girl from same background. Must have compatible likes and dislikes and same family values. We are open-minded about many things but will not accept non-vegetarians or short hair.*

**Bride for Sikh professional.**

**Amardeep has finished his BA in Accounting and is looking for the girl of his dreams to complete him. First in his graduating class to secure a top position at a top London accounting firm. Bride must be a professional as well, with BA preferably in one of the following areas: Finance, Marketing, Business Administration or Management. We are in the textile business.**

*My brother doesn't know I'm posting this here but I thought I'd give it a go! He's single, age 27, and available. He is clever (two Masters degress!!!), funny, kind and respectful. And best of all, he's HOTTT. I know it's a little weird to say this because I'm his sister but its true, promise! If you want to see his pic, send me an email.*

**Name: Sandeep Singh**

**Age: 24**

**Blood Type: O Positive**

**Education: BA Mechanical Engineering**

**Occupation: Mechanical Engineer**

**Hobbies: Some sports and games**

**Physical Appearance: Wheatish complexion, 5'8", easy-going smile. Also see picture.**

‘No way,’ Nikki muttered, turning away from the board. Mindi might be going the traditional route but she was too good for any of these men. Nikki’s modified version of the profile advertised a compassionate and confident single woman who struck the right balance between tradition and modernity.

*I am just as comfortable in a sari as in a pair of jeans. My ideal mate enjoys fine dining and can laugh out loud at himself. I’m a nurse by profession because I find true pleasure in caring for others, but I also want a husband who is self-reliant because I value my independence. I like the occasional Bollywood film but usually watch romantic comedies and action films. I’ve done a bit of travelling but I’ve put off seeing more of the world until I find The One to accompany me on the most important journey: life.*

Nikki cringed at the last line but it was the sort of thing her sister would consider profound. She surveyed the board again. If she walked away without posting this profile, Mindi would find out and pester her until she returned to finish the job. If she posted it, Mindi might end up settling for one of these men. Longing for a cigarette, Nikki chewed on her thumbnail. Finally she tacked the profile on the marriage board but on its farthest corner where it was virtually invisible, overlapping with the scant flyers on the

Community Notices board. Technically, she had carried out her task as instructed.

There was the sound of throat clearing. Nikki turned to find herself facing a wispy man. He shrugged awkwardly as if responding to a question. Nikki gave a polite nod and looked away but then he spoke.

‘So you’re looking for . . .’ He waved bashfully in the direction of the board. ‘A husband?’

‘No,’ Nikki said quickly. ‘Not me.’ She didn’t want to draw his attention to Mindi’s flyer. His arms were like toothpicks.

‘Oh,’ he said. He looked embarrassed.

‘I was just looking at the Community board,’ Nikki said. ‘Volunteer opportunities, that sort of thing.’ She turned her back on him and pretended for a moment to scan the board, nodding as she took in each advertisement. There were cars for sale and flat shares for rent. A few marriage notices had sneaked their way here as well, but these prospects were no better than the ones Nikki had already screened.

‘You’re into community service then,’ he ventured.

‘I really must be going,’ Nikki said. She rustled through her bag busily to avoid further conversation and turned towards the entrance. Then a flyer caught her eye. She stopped and read it quietly to herself, her eyes moving slowly over the words.

**Writing Classes: Register Now!**  
**Ever wanted to write? A new workshop on narrative techniques, character and voice. Tell your story!**  
**Workshops will culminate in an anthology of best work.**

A handwritten scrawl below the print read: *Class open to women only. Instructor needed. Paid position, two days weekly. Please contact Kulwinder Kaur at the Sikh Community Association.*

There was no mention of qualifications or prior experience, which was an encouraging sign. Nikki pulled out her phone and typed in the phone number to save it. She noticed the man’s curious gaze but

she ignored him and fell in step with a current of worshippers who had emerged from the langar hall.

Could she run a writing workshop? She had contributed a piece to the UK Fem Fighters' blog, comparing her experiences with catcalling in Delhi and London, which had enjoyed three days on the Most Read Posts list. Surely she could give writing tips to some temple women? Perhaps publish *An Anthology of Best Work*. Editorial credentials would sit well on her bare résumé. Hope fluttered in her chest. This could be a job she could actually enjoy and take pride in.

Light streamed into the temple through its wide windows, splashing the tiled floor with brief warmth before a patch of clouds rushed to conceal the sun. Just as Nikki was about to leave the building, she finally received a reply to her earlier message to Olive.

### *Where's Southall?*

The question surprised Nikki. Surely in their years of friendship, Nikki had mentioned Southall to Olive? Then again, she and Olive had met in secondary school, years after Nikki's parents had deemed these Punjabi day trips too much trouble, so Olive was spared Nikki's complaints about wasting a perfectly good Saturday on the hunt for high-quality coriander powder and mustard seeds.

Nikki stopped and looked around. She was surrounded by women with their heads covered – women hurrying after their toddlers, women giving each other sideways glances, women hunched over walking frames. Each one had a story. She could see herself addressing a room full of these Punjabi women. Her senses became overwhelmed with the colour of their kameezes, the sound of fabric rustling and pencils tapping, the smell of perfume and turmeric. Her purpose came into sharp focus. 'Some people don't even know about this place,' she would say. 'Let's change that.' Fiery-eyed and indignant, they would pen their stories for the whole world to read.

## *Chapter Two*

Twenty years ago, in her first and last attempt to be British, Kulwinder Kaur bought a bar of Yardley English Lavender Soap. It was a purchase she justified by noting that the family's regular bar of Neem soap had shrunk to a sliver from frequent use. When Sarab reminded her that they had a cupboard stocked with necessities from India (toothpaste, soap, hair oil, Brylcreem, turban starch and several bottles of feminine wash that he had mistaken for shampoo) Kulwinder reasoned that, eventually, their toiletries from the motherland would run out. She was only preparing for the inevitable.

The next morning she woke early and dressed Maya in woolly tights, a plaid skirt and a jumper. At breakfast, she anxiously reminded Maya to keep still, lest she spill food on her very first school uniform. Kulwinder's own roti was dipped in achar, a mango pickle that stained her fingers and left a lingering smell on her hands. She offered the achar to Maya whose nose crinkled at the sourness. After eating, Kulwinder used the new soap to scrub both her and Maya's hands – between fingers, under the nails, and especially in those fine palm lines that spelled out their futures. Scented like an English garden, the pair arrived at the primary school registration desk.

A young blonde woman introduced herself as Miss Teal and crouched

so her gaze could meet Maya's. 'Good morning,' she said with a smile, and Maya shyly smiled back. 'What's your name?'

'Maya Kaur,' Maya said.

'Oh, you must be Charanpreet Kaur's cousin. We've been expecting you,' Miss Teal said. Kulwinder felt a familiar tension. This was a common misunderstanding – that all people with the surname Kaur were related – and one that she could usually explain, but today the English words escaped her. She was already overwhelmed by this new world that Maya was about to enter. 'Tell her,' Kulwinder urged Maya in Punjabi, 'or she'll think I'm responsible for all the other Punjabi kids here.' She had a frightening image of dropping off Maya and returning home with a gaggle of new children.

'Charanpreet's not my cousin,' Maya said with a small sigh for her reluctant mother. 'In my religion, all girls are Kaur and all boys are Singhs.'

'All one big family, God's children,' Kulwinder added. 'Sikh religion.' For some stupid reason, she gave a thumbs-up, like she was recommending a brand of detergent.

'How interesting,' Miss Teal said. 'Maya, would you like to meet Miss Carney? She's the other teacher here.' Miss Carney walked over. 'Look at those lovely eyes,' she cooed. Kulwinder relaxed her grip on Maya's hand. These were kind people who would take care of her daughter. In the weeks leading up to this day, she had fretted over sending Maya to school. What if the other children teased Maya about her accent? What if somebody had to call Kulwinder about an emergency and she was unable to understand?

Miss Carney handed Kulwinder a folder of forms to fill out. Kulwinder drew a stack of forms from her bag. 'The same,' she explained. Sarab had filled them in the night before. His command of English was better than hers but it had still taken a long time. Watching him point to each word as he read, Kulwinder felt the smallness of being in this new country, learning the alphabet like children. 'Soon Maya will be translating everything for us,' Sarab had remarked.

Kulwinder wished he hadn't said this. Children shouldn't know more than their parents.

'You're very prepared,' Miss Teal said. Kulwinder was pleased to have impressed the teacher. Miss Teal flipped through the forms and then stopped. 'Now, over here, you forgot to write your home telephone number. Can you just tell me what it is?'

Kulwinder had memorized the digits in English so she could recite this combination of words whenever she was called to. 'Eight nine six . . .' She paused and grimaced. There was a tightness in her stomach. She started over. 'Eight nine six five . . .' She froze. The achar from that morning was bubbling in her chest.

'Eight nine six eight nine six five?' Miss Teal asked.

'No.' Kulwinder waved as if to wipe the woman's memory clean. 'Again.' Her throat felt full and hot. 'Eight nine six eight five five five five five five five.' There were fewer fives than this but she became a broken record as her concentration moved towards suppressing the rising burp.

Miss Teal frowned. 'There are too many numbers.'

'Again,' Kulwinder squeaked. She managed the first three digits before a fierce eruption rose from her throat, blaring a trumpet note across the registration table. The air smelled fetid and – at least to Kulwinder's exaggerated recollection – filled with warty brown bubbles.

After the air filled her lungs again, Kulwinder hastily rattled off the remaining digits. The teachers' eyes bulged with suppressed laughter (this, she did not imagine). 'Thank you,' Miss Teal said. She wrinkled her nose and tipped her face slightly above Kulwinder's. 'That will be all.'

Mortified, Kulwinder hurried away from the women. She reached for Maya's hand but then spotted her in the distance being pushed gently on the swings by a little girl wearing her curly red hair in pigtails.

A few years later, upon Kulwinder's announcement that they would be moving to Southall, Maya protested. 'What about all my friends?'

she wailed, meaning the red-haired girl, the blonde girl, the girl who wore overalls and cut her own hair ('Isn't it just awful,' her mother said in that adoring way that made one word have two meanings). 'You'll make better friends in our new area,' Kulwinder said. 'They will be more like us.'

These days, Kulwinder limited her achar intake to control her gastric reflux condition. Her English had improved somewhat, although she did not need to use it in Southall. As the recently appointed Community Development Director of the Sikh Community Association, she had her own office space in the Recreation Centre. It was dusty and full of neglected files that she had intended to throw out but kept because they gave the room an air of officiousness, with labels such as BUILDING REGULATIONS and MEETING MINUTES – COPIES. Such appearances were important for the occasional visitor, like the President of the Sikh Community Association, Mr Gurtaj Singh, who was standing in her office now, interrogating her about her flyers.

'Where did you post these?'

'On the temple noticeboard.'

'What sorts of classes are they?'

'Writing classes,' Kulwinder replied. 'For the women.'

She reminded herself to be patient. During their last budget meeting, Gurtaj Singh had rejected her funding requests. 'We have nothing in the budget for that,' he said. It wasn't like Kulwinder to put up a fight in the presence of so many respected Sikh men but Gurtaj Singh always took a certain pleasure in dismissing her. She had to remind Gurtaj Singh that the Sikh Community Association Centre was within temple property and a lie here bore the same weight as a lie in the temple. For that matter, both their heads were covered by turban and dupatta respectively, signifying God's hallowed presence. Gurtaj Singh had to relent. He slashed his pen across his written notes and muttered some figures and it occurred to Kulwinder that finding money for women was not so difficult in the first place.

Yet here he was, asking questions as if this was the first he ever

heard of it. He hadn't expected her to go out right away and begin advertising for instructors. Kulwinder presented a flyer. Gurtaj took time putting on his bifocals and clearing his throat. Between lines, he gave Kulwinder a sideways glance that made him resemble a crook in an old Hindi movie. 'Do you have any instructors?'

'I'm interviewing someone. She'll be here soon,' Kulwinder said. A girl named Nikki had called yesterday. She was supposed to have arrived fifteen minutes ago. If Kulwinder had other applicants she wouldn't be worried, but after a week of the flyer being posted, this Nikki had been the only one to respond.

Gurtaj assessed the flyer again. Kulwinder hoped he wouldn't ask her what all of the words meant. She had copied this flyer from another one she saw pinned up at a recreation centre off Queen Mary Road. The flyer had looked professional so she had taken it down, added a note below, and taken it to the photocopying shop where Munna Kaur's son worked. 'Make me a few of these,' she instructed the pimply boy. She thought to ask him to translate some words she didn't understand but if he was anything like that calculating Munna, he would not do a favour for free. Besides, the point was not to be accurate; she just wanted to get the class – any class – running immediately.

'Are there any interested students?' Gurtaj Singh asked.

'Yes,' Kulwinder said. She had gone around personally, informing women of these classes, telling them that they were twice a week and free, and therefore their attendance was expected. Her main targets: elderly widows who could use a more worthwhile pastime than gossiping in the langar hall. They were the most likely to turn up and make the classes appear successful. Then there would be more initiatives to occupy Kulwinder's time. 'Eventually, I hope we can offer much more to the women,' she couldn't resist saying.

Gurtaj Singh replaced the flyer on her desk. He was a short man who wore his khaki pants high on his waist as if altering their hems would be conceding to his lack of height. 'Kulwinder, everybody feels bad about what happened to Maya,' he said.

Kulwinder felt a stab that took her breath away. She recovered quickly and fixed Gurtaj Singh with a stare. *Nobody knows what really happened. Nobody will help me find out.* She wondered how he would react if she said those words aloud. 'I appreciate it,' she said. 'But this has nothing to do with my daughter. The women in this community want to learn – and as the only woman on the board, I should be representing them.' She began stacking the papers on her desk. 'If you'll excuse me, I have a very busy afternoon planned.'

Gurtaj Singh picked up the hint and left. His office, like the offices of the other men on the Board, was in the newly renovated wing of the temple. It had hardwood floors and wide windows that looked out onto the gardens of surrounding homes. Kulwinder was the only Board member who worked in this old two-storey building, and as she listened to Gurtaj Singh's fading footsteps, she wondered why men needed all that space when their answers to everything were always 'no'.

A draught passed through the cracked window and blew Kulwinder's papers askew. Searching her top drawer for a proper paperweight, she came across her old complimentary Barclays Bank diary. In the Notes section, she had a list of names and numbers – the local police station, the lawyers, even a private investigator that she never ended up calling. It had been nearly ten months and sometimes she still felt as breathlessly desperate as the moment she was told her daughter was dead. She shut the diary and pressed her hands to her teacup. The warmth radiated in her palms. Kulwinder maintained her grip. The burn burrowed through her layers of skin. *Maya.*

*'Sat sri akal.* Sorry I'm late.'

Kulwinder dropped her cup on the desk. A thick stream of spilled chai ran across the table and soaked her papers. In the doorway stood a young woman. 'You said 2 p.m.,' Kulwinder said as she rescued the papers.

'I meant to get here on time but there was a train delay.' She retrieved a serviette from her bag and helped Kulwinder to blot the

tea from the papers. Kulwinder stepped back and observed. Although she did not have a son, habit prompted a quick assessment of this girl for her suitability as a wife. Nikki had shoulder-length hair pulled back in a ponytail, revealing a wide forehead. Her beaky face was striking in its own way but she certainly could not afford to forgo wearing make-up like this. Her nails were bitten down, a disgusting habit, and hanging off her waist was a square bag that clearly belonged to a postal worker.

Nikki caught her looking. Kulwinder cleared her throat imperiously and began shuffling and stacking the dry papers on the other end of her desk. She expected Nikki to watch her. Instead she noticed the girl throwing a disdainful look at the crowded shelves and the cracked window.

‘Do you have your CV?’ Kulwinder asked.

Nikki produced a sheet from her postal worker bag. Kulwinder skimmed it. She could not afford to be fussy – at this point as long as the instructor was literate in English, she would be hired. But the sting of the girl’s look lingered and made Kulwinder feel less generous.

‘What teaching experience do you have?’ she asked in Punjabi.

The girl responded in hurried English. ‘I’ll admit, I don’t have much teaching experience but I’m really interested in—’

Kulwinder held up her hand. ‘Please answer me in Punjabi,’ she said. ‘Have you ever taught?’

‘No.’

‘Why do you want to teach this class then?’

‘I have a . . . umm . . . how do you say it? A passion for help the women,’ Nikki said.

‘Hmm,’ Kulwinder acknowledged coolly. On the CV, the longest list was under a header called Activism. Greenpeace Petitioner, Women’s Aid Volunteer, UK Fem Fighters Volunteer. Kulwinder did not know what all of it meant, but the last title – UK Fem Fighters – was familiar. A magnet bearing the same title had found its way into her home, courtesy of Maya. Kulwinder was vaguely aware that it had to

do with the rights of women. *Just my luck*, she thought. It was one thing to battle for funding against the likes of Gurtaj Singh behind closed doors but these British-born Indian girls who hollered publicly about women's rights were such a self-indulgent lot. Didn't they realize that they were only looking for trouble with that crass and demanding attitude? She felt a flash of anger at Maya, followed by a bewildering grief that momentarily shut out her senses. When she snapped back to reality, Nikki was still talking. She spoke Punjabi with less confidence, peppering her sentences with English words.

'. . . and it's my belief that everyone has the stories to telling. It would be such a *rewarding* experience to help Punjabi women to crafting their stories and *compile* them into a book.'

Kulwinder must have been nodding the girl along because now her rambling made little sense. 'You want to write a book?' she asked cautiously.

'The women's stories will forming a collection,' Nikki said. 'I don't have much experiencing in the arts but I do like to writing and I'm an avid reader. I think I'm to be able to help them *cultivate* their creativity. I'll have some hand in *guiding* the process, of course, and then perhaps do some editing as well.'

It dawned on Kulwinder that she had advertised for something she did not understand. She took another look at the flyer. *Anthology, narrative techniques*. Whatever these words meant, Nikki seemed to be counting on them. Kulwinder rustled through her drawer and took out a receipt of confirmed registrations. Scanning the list of names, Kulwinder thought she should warn Nikki. She looked up. 'The students will not be very advanced writers,' she said.

'Of course,' Nikki assured. 'That's understandable. I'll be there to help them.'

Her patronizing tone dissolved Kulwinder's sympathies. This girl was a child. She smiled but her eyes had a squinting quality, as if she was sizing up Kulwinder and her importance here. But was there a chance that a more traditional woman – not this haughty girl who

might as well be a *gori* with her jeans and her halting Punjabi – would walk in and ask for the job? It was unlikely. Never mind what Nikki expected to teach, the class had to start right away, or else Gurtaj Singh would strike it off his register and with it any future opportunity for Kulwinder to have a say in women’s matters.

‘The classes start on Thursday.’

‘This Thursday?’

‘Thursday evening, yes,’ Kulwinder said.

‘Sure,’ Nikki said. ‘What time do the classes starting?’

‘Whatever time works best for you,’ Kulwinder chirped in the crispest English she could manage, and when Nikki cocked her head in surprise, Kulwinder pretended not to notice.