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Sujata Massey

A MURDER AT MALABAR HILL

‘Marvellously plotted,
richly detailed . . . This is
a first-rate performance.’

The Washington Post

PRAISE FOR
A MURDER AT MALABAR HILL

‘[*A Murder at Malabar Hill*], with its deft prose and well-wrought characters, is a splendid first installment in what promises to be a memorable series.’

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‘The multicultural, multi-faith milieu in which Perveen lives, works and attempts to find love both illuminates a bygone era and offers a thoughtful perspective relevant to today’s focus on women’s rights and equality.’

Los Angeles Times

‘Marvelously plotted, richly detailed . . . A first-rate performance.’

Washington Post

‘Perveen Mistry is a memorable and interesting character whom one hopes to meet again soon when she has yet another mystery to solve.’

The Hindu

‘Sujata Massey has created a wonderful character in Perveen Mistry . . . Delightful read. Highly recommended.’

Deccan Herald

‘Expertly combines the delights of Agatha Christie with the period charm of *Downton Abbey*.’

The Siasat Daily

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**A MURDER
AT MALABAR
HILL**



ALLEN & UNWIN
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

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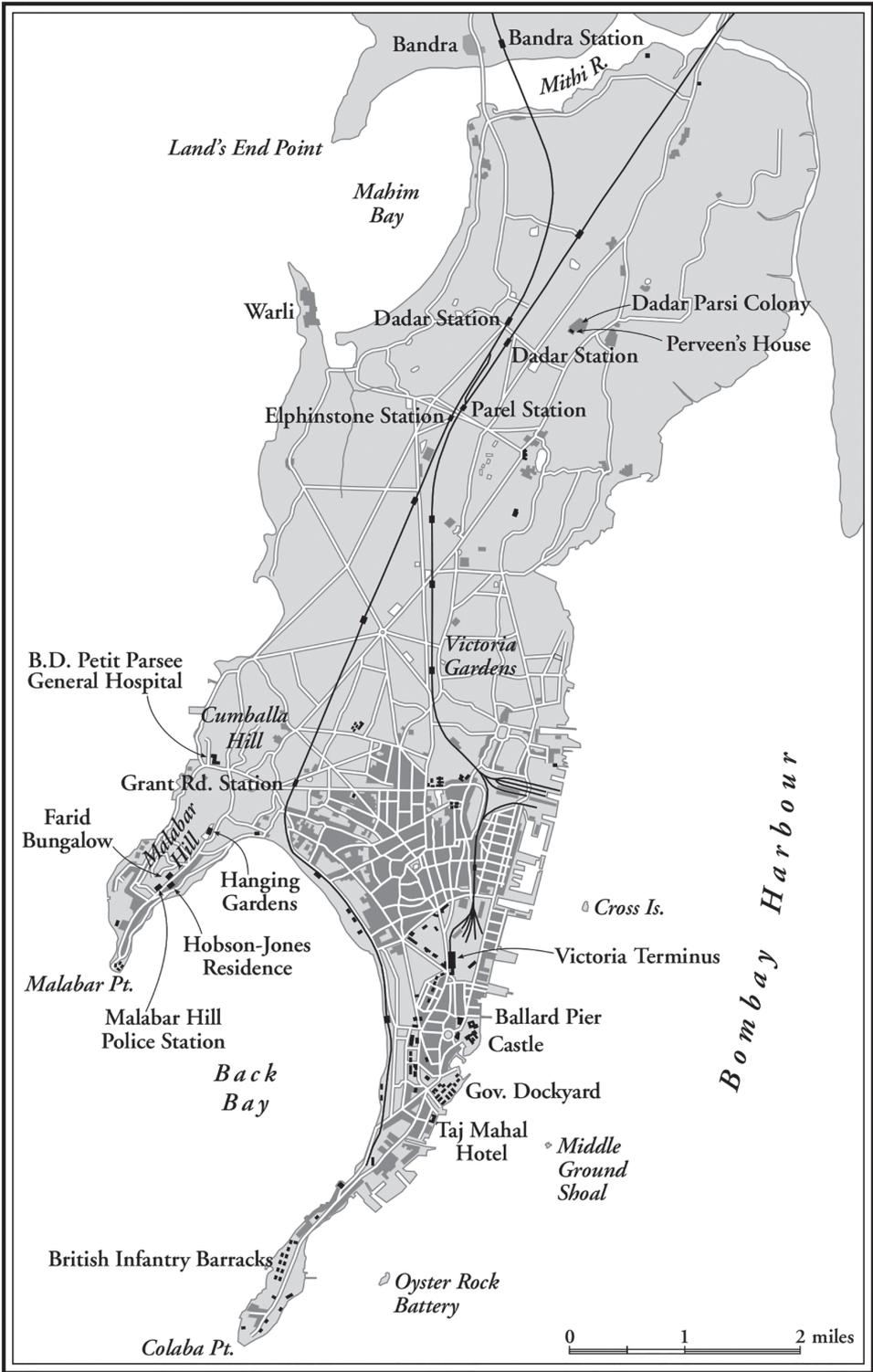
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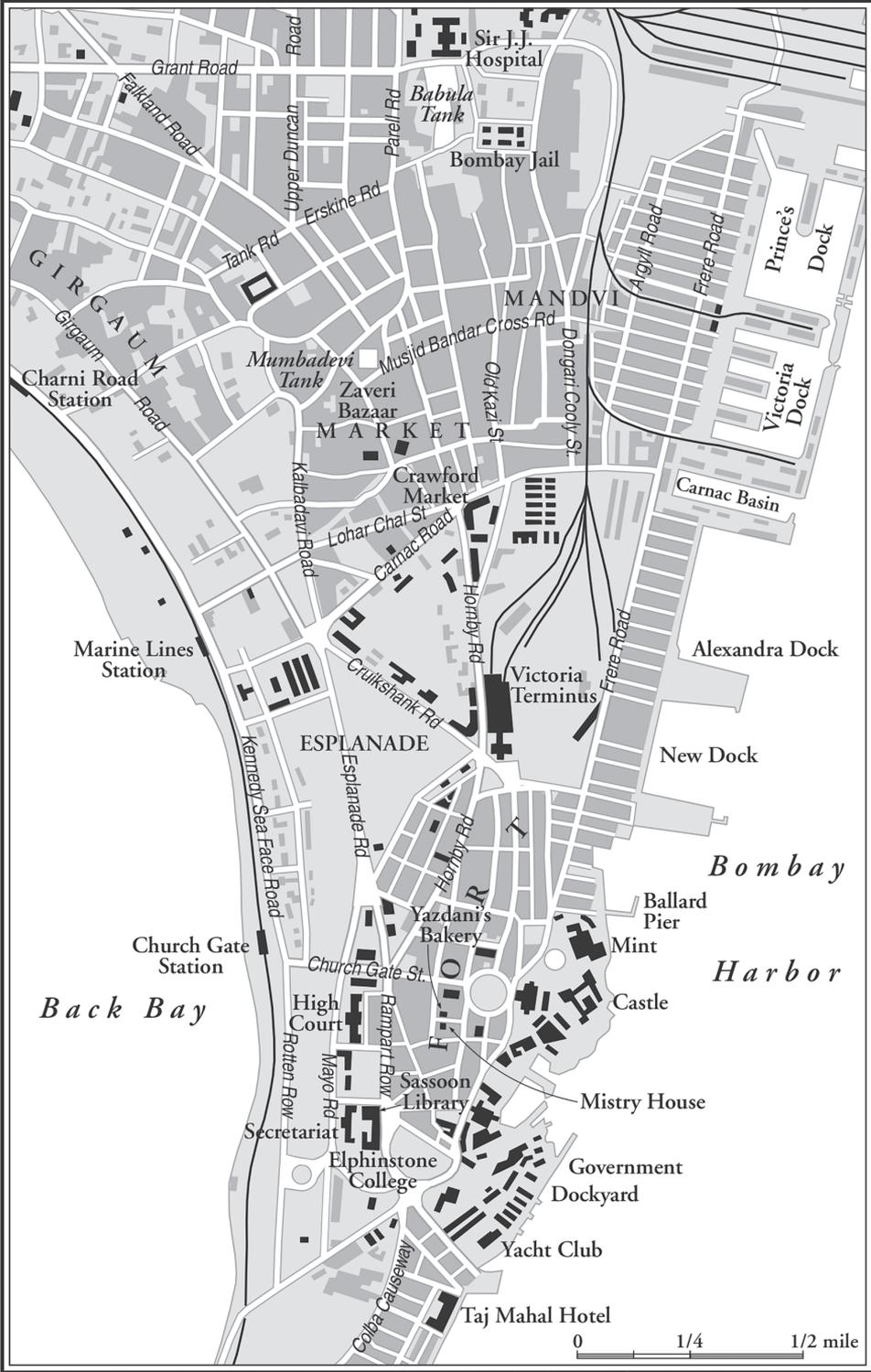
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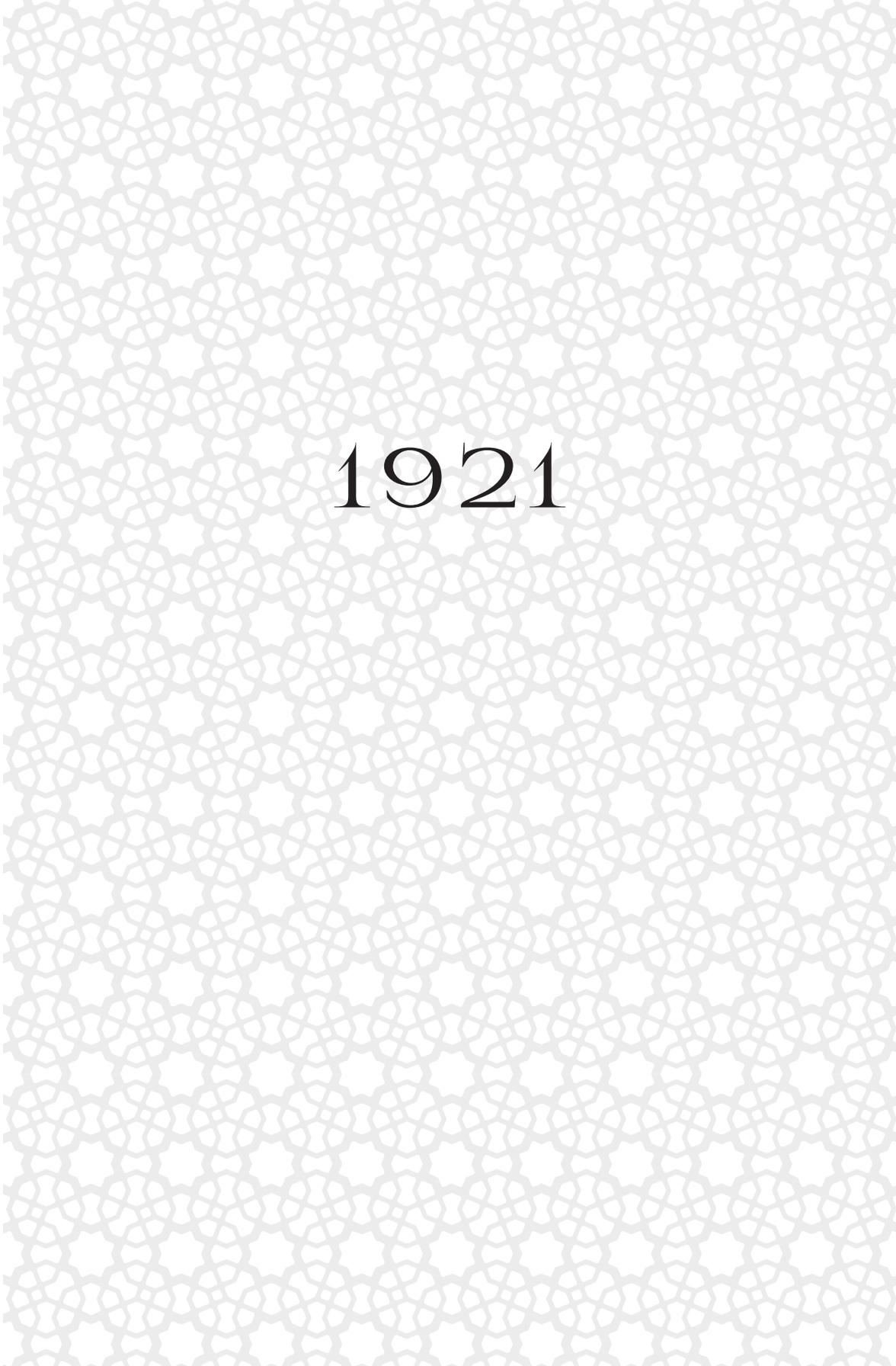
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A STRANGER'S GAZE

Bombay, February 1921

Con the morning Perveen saw the stranger, they'd almost collided. Perveen had come upon him half-hidden in the portico entrance to Mistry House. The unshaven, middle-aged man appeared as if he'd slept for several days and nights in his broadcloth shirt and the grimy cotton dhoti that hung in a thousand creases from his waist to his ankles. His small, squinting eyes were tired, and he exuded a rank odor of sweat mixed with betel nut.

A visitor to Mistry Law this early was rare. The firm was located in Fort, Bombay's first settlement. Although the old wall had been taken down, the district was still a fortress of law and banking, with most openings between nine and ten.

Assuming the man was a sad-sack client, Perveen glanced down, not wanting him to feel overly scrutinized. The idea of a woman solicitor was a shock to many. But when Perveen glanced down, she was disconcerted to see the man wasn't poor at all. His thin legs were covered by black stockings, and his feet were laced into scuffed black leather brogues.

The only place men wore British shoes and stockings with their dhotis was Calcutta, about twelve hundred miles away. Calcutta: the city that would always remind her of Cyrus.

As Perveen looked up, her alarm must have revealed itself. The man scuffled backward.

"Just a minute! Are you seeking Mistry Law?" she called as he rushed across the street.

Feeling perplexed, Perveen rapped on the door, which was opened moments later by Mustafa, the longtime butler in charge of Mistry House. The elderly man touched his heart and forehead in greeting

before taking the tiffin box she'd brought with the day's lunch. "Adab, Perveen-memsahib," he said. "And where is your honorable father this morning?"

"He's got Jayanth's trial at the High Court. Mustafa, did you know someone was waiting in our doorway?"

He looked past her into the now-empty portico. "No. Where has he gone?"

"Across the street—he's the man wearing the dhoti." Perveen saw that the man was now standing in the shadow of a building.

Mustafa squinted. "Although dirty, he isn't a beggar. Not with shoes."

"Shoes and stockings," Perveen pointed out.

"Had he knocked, I would have told him to come after ten. You are too busy first thing in the morning for such strangers—although I saw no appointments in the book today?"

Perveen noted the worry in his voice. Mustafa knew that it was a struggle for her to attract clients. "I didn't book any appointments today because an old friend is sailing in from England. I'll meet her when she arrives."

"SS *London*?"

Perveen smiled. "You must have checked today's paper for the listing."

The grizzled old man tilted his head downward, accepting the praise. "Yes, indeed. I'll inform you when the *London* is unloading. And tell me, will your English friend come to Mistry House? I could prepare a small tea."

"I think Alice will go to her parents' home in Malabar Hill first—but perhaps she'll visit soon." Perveen surveyed the marble foyer, which was softly lit by lamps in gilded sconces. She would relish showing the Bombay Gothic building to her friend, Alice Hobson-Jones. The twenty-foot ceilings were a design feature of which Abbas Kayam Mistry, her late grandfather, had been especially proud. It always seemed as if her grandfather were watching from the long portrait guarding the entryway. His eyes, as inky black as his flat-topped fetah, were all knowing but not warm.

“I’ve got a load of papers to work through upstairs. I hope Pappa’s back for lunch because I’ve brought a very good one today.”

“He must win at court, Insha’Allah,” Mustafa said piously, “or he won’t have an appetite.”

“He loses very rarely!” Perveen said, although that morning’s case would be a hard one. Both she and Jamshedji had been quiet in the car coming in: he looking over his notes, she gazing out the window, thinking of their young client in jail a few miles away, wondering if this would be the day he was freed.

“Your father wins with his God-given ability to know the thoughts behind people’s faces,” Mustafa told her. “Mistry-sahib can read the judge’s face like a newspaper.”

Perveen sighed, wishing she had the same talent. She had no idea if the stranger was a lost soul or harbinger of serious trouble.

Putting the awkward incident aside, she trudged upstairs to address a half-done property contract on her side of the big mahogany partners’ desk. Legal paperwork was sometimes numbing, but the subtlety of one word could mean the difference between a client’s success and his ruin. Three years of reading law had built her understanding, but a half year working under her father had taught her to inspect each line backward and forward.

As the morning grew sunnier, she switched on the small electric fan that sat in a central window. Mistry House had been the first building on the block to pay for electric service, and due to its high cost, she was supposed to use it sparingly.

Perveen glanced out the window and down to the street. Fort’s twenty square miles were once the East India Company’s original fortified settlement. Now the district was known for the High Court and the many law offices around it. Nestled alongside the British and Hindu and Muslim law offices were a significant number owned by members of her own religious community, the Indian-born Zoroastrians. Although Parsis accounted for just 6 percent of Bombay’s total inhabitants, they constituted one-third of its lawyers.

Iranis—the Zoroastrian immigrants who had come from the nineteenth century onward—prided themselves on running superlative

bakeries and cafés serving cuisine influenced by their ancient homeland of Persia. Such was Yazdani's, the bakery-café across the street. The shop drew more than two hundred customers every day. This morning, the customers going in and out were working their way around a solitary obstacle.

It was the Bengali stranger. He'd left the place where she'd seen him earlier and set himself up in the shadow of the restaurant's awning. This allowed him to face Mistry House without roasting in the sun.

Perveen felt a surge of apprehension and then reminded herself that she couldn't be seen inside the second floor of Mistry House. From her perch, she had a bird's-eye view.

In a corner of the office, a tall Godrej cabinet was Perveen's alone. It held umbrellas, extra clothing, and the *Bombay Samachar* article touting her as Bombay's first woman solicitor. She'd wanted to frame the news story and hang it on the downstairs wall along with Jamshedji Mistry's many accolades. Her father had thought it too much to throw in the faces of clients who needed a gentle introduction to the prospect of female representation.

Perveen rummaged in the cabinet until she found her mother-of-pearl opera glasses. Back at the window, she adjusted the focus until the man's sinister face appeared close up. He did not look like anyone she'd ever seen in Fort; nor could she remember seeing him in Calcutta.

Perveen laid down the opera glasses and turned to unopened letters from the previous day. A thick envelope engraved with a return address 22 Sea View Road topped the stack. An existing client was a priority. This client, Mr. Omar Farid, was a textile-mill owner who had succumbed to stomach cancer two months previously.

Perveen read the letter from the appointed estate trustee, Faisal Mukri. Mr. Mukri wanted her to make a change that would disrupt the estate settlement on which she'd been working. Mr. Farid had three widows, all of whom still lived together in his house, and a total of four children—a humble number of offspring for a polygynist, according to Jamshedji.

Mr. Mukri had written that all the widows wanted to give up

their assets as donations to the family's wakf, a charitable trust that provided funds each year to the needy while paying a dividend to specified relatives. While a man or woman certainly could donate wherever he or she desired, wakfs were assiduously monitored by the government in order to prevent fraud, and a sudden infusion of money might be cause for scrutiny. Perveen decided to speak with her father before responding to Mr. Mukri.

Perveen placed the offending letter on Jamshedji's side of the desk as Mustafa came in with a small silver tray holding a cup of tea with two Britannia biscuits perched jauntily on the saucer. After a tiny sip of the hot, milky brew, she asked Mustafa, "Have you been out to the street?"

"I haven't. Why?"

She couldn't express her deep-seated worry, so she only said, "The man who was blocking the doorway has stationed himself across the street."

"Lurking on Bruce Street!" From Mustafa's grim expression, she thought he looked ready to grab his old Punjabi regiment rifle that he kept in a kitchen cabinet. "Shall I toss him to the Esplanade?"

"There's probably no reason to. But if you want a look at him, try these." Perveen went to the window, where she picked up the opera glasses. It took her a few minutes to show the elderly man how to adjust the lenses to his needs.

"Ay, such magical spectacles! One can see all over with these!"

"Aim toward Yazdani's. Do you see him?"

"The man in the white dhoti." Mustafa sighed. "Now I'm remembering he was nearby when I went outside to buy milk."

"How early was that?"

"Usual time—twenty, thirty minutes before your arrival."

This meant the man had been staking out their building for three hours straight.

Legally, he had the right to stand where he wanted. But Bruce Street was Perveen's second home, and she felt anxious to know for whom the out-of-towner was waiting. Trying to sound matter-of-fact, she said, "I'll walk over and ask why he's there."

Mustafa put down the glasses and looked at her with alarm. “You are a young lady alone. I should be the one to send that badmash packing.”

Perveen regretted pulling Mustafa into her worries. “Please stay. There are so many people around that nothing could happen.”

Still grumbling about danger to young ladies, Mustafa followed her downstairs. He opened the heavy door with great ceremony. Scowling dramatically, he remained on the marble step after she went out.

A bullock cart rolled past, and Perveen took advantage of its cover to cross the street unnoticed. As she came up in front of the Bengali, he acknowledged her arrival with a sharp upward movement of his face. Then he pivoted away, as if meaning to hide himself.

“Good day to you, sahib. Do you work nearby?” Perveen asked politely in Hindi.

“Nah-ah-ah!” his answer came in the form of a raspy cough.

“Sahib, are you waiting for someone on Bruce Street?”

“Nah!” He responded fast this time and glared at her with his bloodshot eyes.

Striving to keep her voice steady, she spoke again: “Do you know Cyrus Sodawalla?”

His mouth opened, revealing crooked, paan-stained teeth. He stood still for a moment—and then he ran.

Perveen stared after him in dismay. She’d hoped he’d say no. She had anticipated a flat denial, not a departure.

“Huzzah!” Mustafa was waving his arms side to side, as if she’d bowled a perfect cricket score.

Perveen felt too shaken to return to Mustafa. She waved back at him and decided to venture inside Yazdani’s.

Lily Yazdani was working behind the counter. The fourteen-year-old’s long hair was tied up with a traditional mathabana cloth, and she wore a snowy apron over a pretty yellow sari. She beamed at the appearance of Perveen.

“Kem cho, Perveen!” Lily called out a greeting in Gujarati.

“Good morning to you, Lily! And why aren’t you in school?”

“A water pipe burst yesterday, so it’s closed.” Lily drew the corners of her lips down in an exaggerated frown. “I’m missing two tests.”

Perveen winced. “I hope Mistry Construction isn’t at fault. I believe the company built your school.”

“Who cares about the pipe? I’d rather be here baking cakes with my pappa.”

Perveen was sorry to hear this. She had a nagging anxiety that Lily would leave high school too early.

Firoze Yazdani emerged from the kitchen, his round face damp from heat. Wiping floury hands on his apron, he said, “What is your pleasure today, my dear Perveen? The dahitan were fried an hour ago and are soaking in sweet rose syrup. And of course, there are the cashew and almond fudges, and the pudding and custard cups.”

Because of her inward agitation, Perveen didn’t think she could force anything sweet down her throat without gagging. At the same time, she couldn’t walk away without a purchase. “I’m welcoming an old friend from England at Ballard Pier later on today, so I’d like you to pack me a small box of your prettiest dahitan.”

“Most beautiful and sweet. Just like you!” Firoze’s wide grin split his face like a cracked persimmon.

“By the way—did you serve a fellow from outside Bombay this morning?”

Firoze looked puzzled, but Lily spoke up. “We had a dark and grumpy customer with a funny accent. He bought a date-nut cake and some almond fudge. I told him he could sit at a table, but he went outside.”

“He stayed outside for a few hours,” Perveen said. “I asked him something, and he ran away as if I were a nasty British policeman!”

“Probably he arrived on the overnight train because he seemed quite tired,” Lily reflected. “He asked in the funniest accent what time law offices opened up in this area. I said nine o’clock for most firms and half nine if it’s the Mistrys.”

“What are you doing giving out such information about our esteemed neighbors?” Firoze wagged a reproving finger at his daughter.

Firoze knew things about Perveen that he'd blessedly never disclosed. She could have said the name Cyrus to him, and his eyes would have flared with recognition. But she would not parade her past mistakes in front of his impressionable daughter. "That accent is a Bengali one. Now that Lily's described him, do you recall him?" she asked him.

The baker shook his head. "My cardamom dough needed attention, so I was in back. It's good that you told off that *velgard!*"

"A wise woman can catch trouble before it starts," Lily said as she tied a fine bow around the box of sweets. "Pappa, would you let me run your business later on, just as Mistry-sahib is doing with Perveen?"

"My father has hardly done that! He'll work for many more years, and I still must prove my worth." Perveen spoke sincerely; it was a heavy responsibility to be the only woman solicitor in Bombay. She couldn't bring shame on Jamshedji Mistry. This was why the stranger's presence bothered her—and the reason she wasn't going to tell her father about it.

BEHIND A CURTAIN

Bombay, February 1921

Back at Mistry House, Perveen handed off the sweets to Mustafa for safekeeping and gave a brief summary of the words she'd exchanged with the stranger, not mentioning Cyrus. She didn't want the garrulous Mustafa to ask any more questions. She needed to work.

Upstairs she opened the file cabinets to search for any documents relating to the late Omar Farid. There was plenty to wade through: property deeds, maps of land holdings, contracts with the government for the production of khaki drill cloth. She was startled two hours later when Mustafa knocked on the door to say lunch was served. Her father had just come in and was washing his hands downstairs.

She put the papers aside. "Did my father tell you the outcome?"
"He said he's hungry."

Perveen hurried down to the dining room, where her father was seated at the long rosewood table. Jamshedji Mistry was a trim, good-looking man of fifty with a thick head of graying brown hair. His most dominant feature—which Perveen had inherited in a slightly reduced version—was a beaky nose. Outsiders joked about Parsi noses, but Perveen loved their shared trait.

The two bent their heads and recited their prayers. Then Mustafa served up the lunch sent by John, the Mistrys' Goan cook. John had worked hard preparing lamb koftas, a tamarind chicken curry, a thick yellow dal with mustard greens, and caramelized rice. He'd also sent tangy vegetable pickles, fragrant wheat rotlis, and a tin of almond-honey brittle large enough to last a week.

Mustafa looked disapproving when Perveen requested smaller servings than usual, but her nerves had affected her appetite.

“Pappa. I’m waiting with open ears. Did we win?”

After accepting a large serving of chicken curry, Jamshedji spoke. “Yes, but after a long deliberation. If only you’d seen the opposing counsel smiling, anticipating our ruin!”

“Did he call our client to the stand?” She’d expected it.

“That he did—and the boy was prepared for every question.”

The boy was Jayanth, a twenty-year-old stevedore who’d been charged with inciting unrest through the organization of other workers. Taking into consideration the British fear of Communists, Perveen had suggested Jayanth be cast as a hard worker with no political affiliations, just a strong desire for the safety of all the dockworkers. This concern would ultimately aid his employer, she had argued, because fewer accidents and deaths would allow for work without interruption.

“Good,” she said, relieved that her coaching had worked. “And what was the content of Judge Thorpe’s decision?”

“Innocent on all charges. Judge Thorpe ruled Jayanth must be offered his former position and be paid for every day since his sacking three months ago. That I wasn’t expecting.”

Perveen clapped. “Splendid! I wish I’d seen you plead the case.”

Jamshedji raised a finger, playing teacher. “Ah, but your work as a contract solicitor is what keeps Mistry Law profitable. Without contracts and wills, we could not take on pro bonos like Jayanth.”

This was the most praise Perveen had received in the six months she’d been working. She was performing not only the tasks of a solicitor but also those of law clerk, translator, and accountant, but who was she to complain? There was not another law firm in the city that would employ a female solicitor. “Pappa, were you expecting a visitor this morning?”

“Does this have to do with you spying on strangers through opera glasses?”

Perveen scooped rice into her mouth and chewed. Mustafa obviously had mentioned the morning’s excitement. She needed to tell the truth, but she also wanted to avoid making her father nervous.

“A Bengali man was lurking across the street for three hours.

Eventually I went across to inquire his reason. He ran off without explaining anything.”

Jamshedji shook his head. “Our beloved Fort is becoming overcrowded with all types. But a woman should never approach a man on the street.”

Perveen’s irritation swelled at her father’s judgmental tone. “It was hardly an approach—”

“You crossed the street and sought him out! Tell me, is that a European behavior you learned at Oxford?”

“No—I—” Perveen felt herself reddening. “I first thought he might be waiting for you. Either because he had an appointment or was angry about the outcome of a case.”

“I represent clients from all communities but no Bengalis in the last year,” Jamshedji said, his voice as grating as Mustafa’s serving spoon scraping the porcelain rice bowl. “Don’t worry about such matters. Concentrate on pushing forward the contracts.”

“Yes. One mustn’t lose the title of King of Contracts,” Perveen said sarcastically.

“Keep up your efforts, and you might become known as the Queen of Contracts.” Jamshedji chuckled.

“Speaking of contracts, we received a request from the Farid household. The cover note was from Mr. Mukri, the family’s agent. He wrote that Mr. Farid’s three widows want to give up their dowers to donate into the family’s wakf.” Perveen didn’t mask her apprehension that all the women, who no longer had income from a husband, were giving up their only assets to the charitable foundation.

But Jamshedji didn’t address the issue of wakfs. Stroking his chin, he said, “It sounds as if you are speaking of mahr.”

“Yes, I am.” Perveen sighed, knowing she should have used the word for the special two-part dower that Muslim women received from men’s families. The first gift symbolized the family’s welcome to a bride; the second part, given at either divorce or the husband’s death, was a material promise of fair treatment throughout her life.

“Bombay judges have been rather prickly about mahr these days. Let me look at the documents.”

After she'd fetched both letters from upstairs, her father pulled out his gold monocle to study the fine sheets of vellum. Then he shook his head. "Worthless!"

Perveen had been perched on the edge of her seat waiting for such a declaration. "Isn't it strange that all three women wish to make a change against their own interests—and that two of the signatures are almost identical? And how convenient for the judge that this letter from the women was written in English. Are they really all fluent in English?"

"I cannot answer the last question because I have never met the ladies. But we must not have immediate prejudices." Jamshedji gave her a reproving look.

Perveen didn't hide her surprise. "Are you telling me you've never spoken to the wives in all the years you represented Mr. Farid?"

"I have not," he said, signaling with his hand for Mustafa to bring tea. "The Farid widows live in strict seclusion. With my late client gone, the only male in the household is the baby son of the second wife."

"Purdahnashins don't speak with men," Mustafa said as he came around with the silver teapot. "My mother and sisters didn't close themselves in—but many of the wealthy do. Especially Hanafi Muslims."

Perveen always appreciated Mustafa's wisdom about areas where she knew little. Now her dismay at the women's situation was being replaced by interest. Secluded, wealthy Muslim women could become a subspecialty for her practice. "Mustafa, I believe 'purdah' means 'veil.' Does 'nashin' mean 'lady'?"

"You are supposed to be studying Urdu," her father interrupted. "'Nashin' means 'sitting' or 'dwelling.' Therefore, 'purdahnashins' means 'those who stay behind the veil.'"

Perveen took a long sip of Mustafa's delicious tea, a mixture of Darjeeling brewed with milk, cardamon, pepper, and plenty of sugar. "What do you think of the household agent, Mr. Mukri?" she asked her father. "I'm supposed to ask him to help sort out details for the estate, but he's not answered many of my letters."

“Mukri was one of Farid’s management officers at the fabric mill. He shifted to staying with Farid-sahib during his illness. I saw him when he came in to sign papers relating to his appointment as estate trustee and household agent. A young man—but he was most respectful toward our client.”

“As he should have been! But let’s talk about the letter he sent that’s signed by the widows. I think two of the signatures might come from the same hand.”

Jamshedji studied the paper and then handed it back to her. “The names signed by Sakina and Mumtaz do bear a resemblance. Razia’s name appears different.”

“Excuse me, sahib, but you should say ‘begum,’” Mustafa interjected from the corner, where he stood awaiting further command. “To address these married ladies of high birth respectfully, one must add ‘begum.’”

After nodding at Mustafa, Perveen said, “I am guessing Razia-begum signed for herself. What if the other two were signed for by someone else, perhaps Mr. Mukri?”

“Conspiracy theory!” Jamshedji said with a chuckle. “We have no way of knowing.”

“Shouldn’t we ask them?”

Jamshedji put his teacup down so hard it rattled the saucer. “I already mentioned that the ladies live in seclusion. I haven’t reviewed the mahr documents since I drafted them all those years ago. Remind me—are these dowers equivalent in value? That’s the best case when you’ve got multiple wives surviving a husband.”

“The mahr gifts are wildly different,” she answered, relieved that he’d asked the question. “Your client gave the first wife, Razia-begum, a dower of land: four acres in Girangaon, a plot that holds two mill buildings that went up in 1914.”

Jamshedji picked up his cup and took a long sip. “That sounds like quite a large gift, but in 1904, it was swampland. Are you saying the mills that made the company’s fortune are there now?”

She nodded, feeling pride that she’d caught something her father should have known. “I consulted the map of his holdings we have

on file. Part two of the mahr, to be awarded at time of husband's death or divorce, was listed as five thousand rupees." Perveen was glad to have the papers handy so she could keep the details of all the wives' arrangements straight. "Farid-sahib's second wife, Sakina Chivne, received a very different kind of mahr: a diamond and emerald jewelry set comprised of earrings, a necklace, and bangles. Her second mahr payment was also five thousand rupees."

"Mr. Farid was doing well by 1914 when he married his second wife," Jamshedji said. "I don't recall the cost of that jewelry, but we have the insurance papers for many of his valuables."

"Why did Mr. Farid decide to take a second wife?" Perveen asked. Despite what her father had said about the client's good character, she felt squeamish about polygyny, which was still practiced by many Muslims and a smaller number of elite Hindus. In truth, there was surely polygyny in her own parents' family histories. Parsis hadn't made it a crime until 1865.

"The obvious reason." Jamshedji raised his thick salt-and-pepper eyebrows. "Offspring."

"But the first wife, Razia-begum, had borne him a daughter—eleven years old now, I believe," Perveen said evenly. "He had his heir."

"But no son—he needed someone to work inside the mills. His parents were the ones who insisted and found Sakina Chivne. I tell you, it was quite a disappointment when she bore two daughters straightaway. Sakina-begum's son was born a year and a half ago. By then, the complaining parents had both passed."

"Like I said, he got his son." Perveen crossed her arms. "Why did he also need a third wife?"

"He met Mumtaz just last year and married her five months before his death. It was a legal choice freely made by him." Jamshedji shook his head. "Although I considered it rather strange."

Eagerly, Perveen picked up on his language. "What do you mean by that?"

Jamshedji toyed with a few leftover grains of rice. "She was a musician working in the entertainment district on Falkland Road."

“That’s the reason for her mahr: two sitars and one veena,” Perveen mused. “Did she know he hadn’t long to live?”

“Undoubtedly,” Jamshedji said. “He was very frail at that time of his life. But those musical instruments are a pittance compared to what the others received. I don’t think she did it for money.”

“Look at this!” Perveen said, studying Mumtaz’s marriage contract with new interest. “Mumtaz signed this document in July 1920 with an *X*. Yet her name is signed on the new letter. Did she learn to write in the last seven months? I’m interested to ask her about that discrepancy.”

Jamshedji blinked. “What do you mean, ask her?”

She’d gotten ahead of herself. Taking a deep breath, she asked, “Might secluded Muslim ladies be willing to meet with a female lawyer?”

He gave her a long look. “There’s a chance.”

“I’d like to speak to them directly rather than continue my one-way correspondence with Mr. Mukri.” Perveen tried to sound detached and professional.

Jamshedji sipped the last dregs of tea and put down his cup. “I’m not certain you’re ready to make a personal call to secluded women. You must use caution.”

Perveen felt wounded. “I’m always cautious!”

“No,” he said with a soft smile, “you are impatient and impetuous. I’ve overheard you speaking about the government.”

Perveen made a face at him. “In private circles only. I know Mistry Construction depends on government contracts.”

“You’ve also said more than most are ready to hear about women’s rights.”

“Other Parsi women are doing the same. Mamma’s groups are always working on women’s welfare and education.” She felt on firm ground because her father had donated generously to her mother’s causes.

“What you say will sound like Latin to these ladies who’ve been sheltered their whole lives. Your Urdu is less than rudimentary, and you haven’t studied enough Mohammedan law.”

Were these honest criticisms—or was he just trying to discern how motivated she'd be? Perveen did her best to answer coolly. "I've read Mr. Mulla's *Principles of Mahomedan Law*, which explains everything I need to know. I can speak with the ladies in Hindustani—surely they'll understand me."

"But they've very likely never met a Parsi," Jamshedji objected.

Perveen's frustration spilled over. "Pappa, you own the only law firm in Bombay with an employee who can communicate directly with secluded women. Why not take advantage of the greatly underused asset that is your daughter?"

Jamshedji closed his eyes for a long moment. When he opened them, he gave Perveen a serious look. "If you go, you must carry out the consultations with the same deference you employ with our male clients. Omar Farid would rise from the grave if he knew I didn't serve his family members with respect."

"He is not in the grave anymore. He is in heaven!" Mustafa objected from the corner.

"Mr. Farid will be smiling from the clouds once I've helped his family." Perveen said, leaning over to kiss her father's cheek.

After lunch, Jamshedji strolled off to the Ripon Club. Perveen knew he was headed for one of the Parsi social club's long-armed teak lounge chairs in which certain barristers were infamous for putting up their legs and snoring away. He probably wanted praise from his friends, a glass of port, and then a long nap.

Perveen went back upstairs to the cabinet where client files were stored. As the door swung open, she breathed in the cloying scent of camphor and surveyed stacks of cloth-, leather-, and cardboard folios.

After a few minutes, she located a slim folder of newspaper clippings. Although Omar Farid had died just the past year at the age of forty-five, the coverage of him spanned only the last five years of his life. There was an article from 1915 about Farid Fabrics creating a new section of mills to weave cotton drill cloth for Indian army uniforms. Another report, dated 1917, discussed Mr. Farid's charitable

donations to returning military casualties. Finally, she reviewed his December 1920 obituary, which included mention of the mills and his charity. The last line read: *Mr. Farid is survived by his family, including one son.*

The obituary didn't mention his wives and daughters. Had they been left out of the obituary because they were considered unimportant . . . or because the *Times* editor thought the details of a philanthropic Indian businessman's polygyny would cast a negative aspect?

Perveen scrutinized the small photograph accompanying the article about the mill owner's charitable donations. Omar Farid looked serious and respectable. A close-fitting cap drew attention to his narrow face, with hard-looking eyes and a prominent hooked nose. He wore a high-necked kurta and dark sherwani coat. His head was covered with a neat crocheted cap similar to the one that Mustafa wore.

His final marriage had occurred just five months before his death. How shocking this must have been for the existing wives—especially if the woman was a musician who'd once worked on Falkland Road, where sex was as widely available as opium.

Before he'd departed for the Ripon Club, Perveen had asked her father if he thought the last marriage was a sham.

"It is the easiest thing to believe," Jamshedji had told her. "But a dying man does not feel obligated to observe social norms. He needs no one's permission to take what he needs."

From her own experience, Perveen understood.