TWO

Oops

It was four p.m. when Aru and her three classmates walked together into the Hall of the Gods.

Four p.m. is like a basement. Wholly innocent in theory. But if you really think about a basement, it is cement poured over restless earth. It has smelly, unfinished spaces, and wooden beams that cast too-sharp shadows. It is something that says *almost, but not quite*. Four p.m. feels that way, too. Almost, but not quite afternoon anymore. Almost, but not quite evening yet. And it is the way of magic and nightmares to choose those almost-but-not-quite moments and wait.

"Where's your mom, anyway?" asked Poppy.

"In France," said Aru, trying to hold her chin up. "I couldn't go with her because I had to take care of the museum."

"She's probably lying again," said Burton.

"She's *definitely* lying. That's the only thing she's good at," said Arielle.

Aru wrapped her arms around herself. She was good at lots of things, if only people would notice. She was good at memorizing facts she had heard just once. She was good at chess, too,

to the point where she might have gone to the state championship if Poppy and Arielle hadn't told her *Nobody joins chess, Aru. You can't do that.* And so Aru had quit the chess team. She used to be good at tests, too. But now, every time she sat down to take a test, all she could think of was how expensive the school was (it was costing her mom a fortune), and how everyone was judging her shoes, which were popular last year but not this year. Aru *wanted* to be noticed. But she kept getting noticed for all the wrong reasons.

"I thought you said you had a condo downtown, but this dump was the address in the school directory," sniffed Arielle. "So you actually live *in* a museum?"

Yep.

"No? Look around—do you see my room?"

It's upstairs. . . .

"If you don't live here, then why are you wearing pajamas?"

"Everyone wears pj's during the daytime in England," said Aru.

Maybe.

"It's what royalty does."

If I were royalty, I would.

"Whatever, Aru."

The four of them stood in the Hall of the Gods. Poppy wrinkled her nose. "Why do your gods have so many hands?"

The tops of Aru's ears turned red. "It's just how they are."

"Aren't there, like, a thousand gods?"

"I don't know," said Aru.

And this time she was telling the truth. Her mother had said that the Hindu gods were numerous, but they didn't stay as one person all the time. Sometimes they were reincarnated—their

soul was reborn in someone else. Aru liked this idea. Sometimes she wondered who she might have been in another life. Maybe that version of Aru would have known how to vanquish the beast that was the seventh grade.

Her classmates ran through the Hall of the Gods. Poppy jutted out her hip, flicked her hands in imitation of one of the statues, then started laughing. Arielle pointed at the full-bodied curves of the goddesses and rolled her eyes. Heat crawled through Aru's stomach.

She wanted all the statues to shatter on the spot. She wished they weren't so . . . naked. So different.

It reminded her of last year, when her mother had taken her to the sixth-grade honors banquet at her old school. Aru had worn what she thought was her prettiest outfit: a bright blue *salwar kameez* flecked with tiny star-shaped mirrors and embroidered with thousands of silver threads. Her mother had worn a deep red sari. Aru had felt like part of a fairy tale. At least until the moment they had entered the banquet hall, and every gaze had looked too much like pity. Or embarrassment. One of the girls had loudly whispered, *Doesn't she know it isn't Halloween?* Aru had faked a stomachache to leave early.

"Stop it!" she said now, when Burton started poking at Lord Shiva's trident.

"Why?"

"Because . . . Because there are cameras! And when my mom comes back, she'll tell the government of India and they'll come after you."

Lie, lie, lie. But it worked. Burton stepped back.

"So where's this lamp?" asked Arielle.

Aru marched to the back of the exhibit. The glass case

winked in the early evening light. Beneath it, the diya looked wrapped in shadows. Dusty and dull.

"That's *it*?" said Poppy. "That looks like something my brother made in kindergarten."

"The museum acquired the Diya of Bharata after 1947, when India gained its independence from Britain," Aru said in her best impression of her mother's voice. "It is believed that the Lamp of Bharata once resided in the temple of"—*donotmispronounceKurekshetra*—"Koo-rook-shet-ra—"

"*Kooroo* what? Weird name. Why was it there?" asked Burton.

"Because that is the site of the Mahabharata War."

"The *what* war?"

Aru cleared her throat and went into museum attendant mode.

"The Mahabharata is one of two ancient poems. It was written in Sanskrit, an ancient Indic language that is no longer spoken." Aru paused for effect. "The Mahabharata tells the story of a civil war between the five Pandava brothers and their one hundred cousins—"

"One *hundred* cousins?" said Arielle. "That's impossible."

Aru ignored her.

"Legend says that lighting the Lamp of Bharata awakens the Sleeper, a demon who will summon Lord Shiva, the fearsome Lord of Destruction, who will dance upon the world and bring an end to Time."

"A dance?" scoffed Burton.

"A cosmic dance," said Aru, trying to make it sound better.

When she thought of Lord Shiva dancing, she imagined someone stomping their feet on the sky. Cracks appearing in

the clouds like lightning. The whole world breaking and splintering apart.

But it was clear her classmates were picturing someone doing the Cotton-Eyed Joe.

"So if you light the lamp, the world ends?" asked Burton.

Aru glanced at the lamp, as if it might consider contributing a few words. But it stayed silent, as lamps are wont to do. "Yes."

Arielle's lip curled. "So do it. If you're telling the truth, then do it."

"If I'm telling the truth—which I am, by the way—then do you have any idea what it could do?"

"Don't try to get out of this. Just light it once. I dare you."

Burton held up his phone. Its red light taunted her.

Aru swallowed. If her mom were down here, she would drag her away by the ears. But she was upstairs getting ready to go away—yet again. Honestly, if the lamp was so dangerous, then why keep leaving her alone with it? Yeah, Sherrilyn was there. But Sherrilyn spent most of the time watching *Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

Maybe it wouldn't be a big deal. She could just light a small flame, then blow it out. Or, instead, maybe she could break the glass case and act like she'd been cursed. She could start zombie-walking. Or Spider-Man–crawling. They'd all be scared enough never to talk about what had happened.

Please, oh, please, I'll never lie again, I promise.

She repeated this in her head as she reached for the glass case and lifted it. As soon as the glass was removed, thin red beams of light hit the lamp. If a single strand of hair fell on any of those laser beams, a police car would come rushing to the museum.

Poppy, Arielle, and Burton inhaled sharply at the same time. Aru felt smug. *See? I told you it was important.* She wondered if she could just stop there. Maybe this would be enough. And then Poppy leaned forward.

"Get it over with," she said. "I'm bored."

Aru punched in the security code—her birthday—and watched as the red beams disappeared. The air mingled with the scent of the clay diya. It smelled like the inside of a temple: all burnt things and spices.

"Just tell the truth, Aru," said Arielle. "If you do, all you have to do is pay us ten dollars each and we won't post the video of you getting caught in your own stupid lie."

But Aru knew that wouldn't be the end of it. Between a demon that could end the world and a seventh-grade girl, Aru (and probably most people) would choose the demon any day.

Without the red beams on it, the lamp felt dangerous. As if it had somehow sensed there was one less barrier. Cold stitched up Aru's spine, and her fingers felt numb. The small metal dish in the middle of the lamp looked a lot like an unblinking eye. Staring straight at her.

"I—I don't have a match," said Aru, taking a step back.

"I do." Poppy held out a green lighter. "I got it from my brother's car."

Aru reached for the lighter. She flicked the little metal wheel, and a tiny flame erupted. Her breath caught. *Just a quick light.* Then she could enact Plan Melodramatic Aru and get herself out of this mess and *never ever ever* lie again.

As she brought the flame closer to the lamp, the Hall of the Gods grew dark, as if a switch had turned off all the natural

light. Poppy and Arielle moved closer. Burton tried to get closer, too, but Poppy shoved him away.

"Aru . . ."

A voice seemed to call out to her from *inside* the clay lamp.

She almost dropped the lighter, but her fist clenched around it just in time. She couldn't look away from the lamp. It seemed to pull her closer and closer.

"Aru, Aru, Aru—"

"Just get it over with, Shah!" screeched Arielle.

The red light on Burton's phone blinked in the corner of her vision. It promised a horrific year, cafeteria coleslaw in her locker, her mother's face crumpling in disappointment. But maybe if she did this, if by some stroke of luck she managed to trick Arielle and Poppy and Burton, maybe they'd let her sit beside them at lunch. Maybe she wouldn't have to hide behind her stories because her own life would finally be *enough*.

So she did it.

She brought the flame to the lip of the diya.

When her finger brushed the clay, a strange thought burst into Aru's head. She remembered watching a nature documentary about deep-sea creatures. How some of them used bait, like a glowing orb, to attract their prey. The moment a fish dared to swim toward the little light floating in the water, the sea creature would snatch it up with huge gaping jaws. That was how the lamp felt: a small halo of brightness held out by a monster crouching in the shadows. . . .

A trick.

The moment the flame caught, light exploded behind Aru's eyes. A shadow unfurled from the lamp, its spine arching and

reaching. It made a horrible sound—was that laughter? She couldn't shake the noise from her head. It clung to her thoughts like an oily residue. It was as if all the silence had been scraped off and thrown somewhere else.

Aru stumbled back as the shadow thing limped out of the lamp. Panic dug into her bones. She tried to blow out the candle, but the flame didn't budge. Slowly, the shadow grew into a nightmare. It was tall and spidery, horned and fanged and furred.

"Oh, Aru, Aru, Aru . . . what have you done?"