'Vibrant, vital,
deeply moving, and brimming
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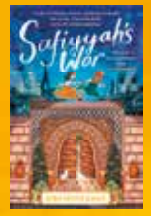
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Three best friends are born on the same day under miraculous circumstances. But by their twelfth birthday, Jahan, Ravi and Lakshmi's lives are about to change for ever. The British announce Indian independence and draw lines of Partition that tear apart the country, and the friends. One of them flees, one of them disappears, and the other is left wondering, could another miracle bring them back together?



From the author of
Safiyyah's War, winner of the:
JHALAK PRIZE
INDIE BOOK AWARD
WEEK JUNIOR BOOK AWARD

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THE LINE THEY DREW THROUGH US

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FROM THE MULTI-AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *SAFIYYAH'S WAR*

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PRAISE FOR *SAFIYYAH'S WAR*

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'A beautiful and sensitively written story which will stay with me for a very long time'
A M HOWELL

'I adored this book in all its intricacies. I cheered for and cried with Safiyyah – a testament to Khan's talent for storytelling – and enjoyed every word. *Safiyyah's War* has the makings of a classic'
AISHA BUSHBY

THE LINE THEY DREW THROUGH US

HIBA NOOR KHAN

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For Nani and Nana.



For everyone who lost a piece of themselves
when India was wrenched apart.


KAZAKHSTAN
UZBEKISTAN
TURKMENISTAN
AFGHANISTAN
CHINA
PAKISTAN
NEPAL
BHUTAN
BANGLADESH
INDIA
SRI LANKA
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LAHORE
AMRITSAR
HIMACHAL PRADESH
PUNJAB
PUNJAB
PAKISTAN
UTTARAKHAND
HARYANA
INDIA
UTTAR PRADESH
MAP OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT
Key
• • • The lines of Partition

Author's Note

Indian history is British history. British history is Indian history.

The British forcibly established their rule over India in 1858, after many years of preparing for this takeover. Because of her thriving economy, wealth of resources and immense natural richness – including gold, rubies, emeralds, pearls, spices, and iron – India was known as the 'jewel in the crown' of the British Empire, which stretched its authority across more than one quarter of the entire population of planet earth.

Before India was colonised by the British, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Parsis and Jains, lived together across the subcontinent in regions known as Princely States. The British used 'divide and conquer' tactics, completely changing how people lived in India. They sowed seeds of mistrust between religious groups, and only allowed Indians to vote for politicians of their own faith.

When the British finally agreed to Indian independence in 1947, there was great unrest as each of the major religious groups wanted their interests to be protected and

to have some authority. In a feeble attempt to address this, the British drew two lines on a map, and the Indian subcontinent was torn into three new countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This is known as the Partition of India.

My own ethnic heritage trails historically back to both India and Afghanistan. After Partition, each of my ancestral regions became part of Pakistan. The very reason that I find myself in England right now, traces back to the British colonisation of India.

The quiet scratching of a pen on a map may as well have shifted tectonic plates, for the lines drawn uprooted eighteen million Indians, leaving between one and two million dead. The reverberations of Partition are still audible now and will continue to be, for a very, very long time.

Each one of those millions had a name, loved ones, and a heart full of dreams. The only way a people can begin to heal is by witnessing their pain. We cannot understand ourselves without understanding our shared histories. We must sit with them, until something of them sinks in.

This book is a love letter of sorts, to the vast subcontinent that is my motherland. A mother from whom I have felt disconnected from and conflicted about for much of my life. Yet her vibrant colours and rich soils and unheard stories run deeply within me.

Hiba Noor Khan 2024

Kismat

India, 1935

Three children were born into the world on the same day. They would later become best friends, and argue about whose birth was the most miraculous.

Jahan's parents had longed for a baby for ten years. When the birth of their child finally drew near, things took an unexpected turn for the worst. The doctor who had rushed to the house told Jahan's father, Amir, 'I'm sorry, but there's nothing at all that can be done for them. Your wife and child will soon pass.'

Amir clenched his jaw and shook his head, and refused to give up. Ignoring the doctor, he took them to hospital in Lahore with the stubborn flame of hope in his heart.

After three long days and nights spent with his forehead pressed to the cold hospital floor in desperate prayer to Allah, a nurse came to Amir with a surprised smile and glorious news. By some miracle, both mother and child had survived against all odds. Baby Jahan was carried around the hospital by the doctor like a trophy.

*

Ravi's parents, Nisha and Rahul, were on their way to the midwife, their baby due any moment, when the route was blocked by an angry mob marching with flames. Tensions between small groups of Hindus and Muslims had bubbled over angrily, and their peaceful neighbourhood in Mumbai had been swallowed by the fires and smoke of riots. The Hindu temple that they frequently prayed at was surrounded by angry men and the local mosque had almost gone up in flames. Fear enveloped the pair.

A tiny old lady, who looked to be two hundred years old, appeared from an alley and beckoned to them urgently. She ushered them into her shack, its ceiling covered in bundles of dried flowers and herbs, and safely delivered baby Ravi into the world.

In the quiet that followed, the wizened, mysterious woman reassured them in her lilting voice, she spoke with them about their kismat, fate, and what they wanted for their new-born son. Nisha believed deeply in kismat, as her own mother had always advised her to find and follow her path. With a knowing smile, the old woman told the family of a small unnamed village near Lahore, where they would find their new home. She scribbled directions onto a scrap of parchment, and warned them that they would never find the place marked on any map.

Moments before Aisha was born, her uncle's body was about to be buried in the village graveyard. The cotton

cloth he was shrouded in glowed as white as the egret who stood watching silently from the river. As Aisha's first new-born cry broke the sombre silence from her family's nearby hut, her uncle stirred and opened his eyes.

Her father fell to the ground in shock and gratitude to Allah, the mouths and eyes of the funeral procession opened wide in wonder.

Aisha was declared a miracle baby and given the affectionate nickname of Lakshmi by one of the village elders, after the Hindu goddess of good fortune.

By their twelfth birthday, one of the children had disappeared, one of them had fled, and the last was left only with their memories and a belief in miracles.

Chapter 1

Lahore, October 1946

Jahan felt inside the crumpled paper bag for another puri. There was only one crispy shell left. Pulling it out slowly, he gave his best friend a serious look. This was *not* a snack that could be shared. Ravi immediately shifted his position on the pink sandstone step and Jahan mirrored his movements. The boys both bent forward, leaning their elbows on the ground and locking their hands and gazes.

'*Aik . . . do . . . TEEN!*'

They remained almost stationary for half a minute, each boy pushing with equal force. But then Ravi, whose cheeks were turning slightly pink, began to gain the upper hand. When it came to physical abilities, though Ravi was thinner and a little lanky compared to Jahan's heavier build, they were usually neck and neck. Now, Jahan realised he was close to losing the last bite of pani-puri. He focused all his energy into his bicep and forearm and roared. He slammed Ravi's hand down, and was about to roar again, this time in triumph, when he realised his friend was laughing hysterically.

‘I thought your eyes were going to pop out of your head!’ Ravi managed, before collapsing into another fit of giggles. Whenever he laughed hard, he went completely silent and tears would roll down his cheeks. ‘Your face was too funny, you only won because I couldn’t help but laugh!’

Jahan cracked a hole in the top of the flaky puri with his thumb, before tipping some of the dark pani mix into its shell until it nearly overflowed. ‘Lame excuse, my friend. You sound like a sore loser to me . . .’

‘I swear!’ chuckled Ravi. ‘I’d have beaten you if you hadn’t looked like a strangled monkey!’

Unfazed, Jahan popped the whole puri into his mouth, crunching open the crispy shell and savouring the explosion of tastes on his tongue. Tangy tamarind sauce, creamy potatoes and buttery chickpeas: it was like a flavour party inside his mouth. Sweet, sour and spicy all at once. ‘Sorry, I can’t hear you over the deliciousness of my prize, Ravi!’ Jahan thought happily about how he would add this to his recipe book when he got home. One day he planned to open his own restaurant with his uncle, Chacha.

Three graceful white doves landed close to where the boys sat on the steps overlooking the vast courtyard of the Badshahi Mosque. Ravi tipped the paper bag upside down, and the cooing doves congregated quickly, pecking at the puri flakes now scattered on the ground. The boys watched the birds in companionable silence,

tired after racing each other under the blazing sun. They had come up with their own circuit system around the mosque years ago, making it longer and more complicated as they'd got older.

They had first met in the village, nine years ago. The pair were just about able to waddle around on their chubby legs, and little Jahan had offered Ravi one of the potato patties he'd been munching on. Everyone who witnessed this knew that a very special bond was about to unfold between the boys; Jahan *hated* sharing his food. To the delight of the boys, Ravi's family relocated to Jahan's neighbourhood in Lahore just a year later.

Now they were in the largest mosque on the entire planet. To the boys, it felt more like a majestic palace than anything else. The first challenge was always the many steps up to the entrance. Ravi usually took the lead here: thanks to his long legs, he'd leap up three steps at a time. They'd zip under the enormous sandstone archways that seemed to glow a colour somewhere between ruby and flame.

Then came the magnificent open courtyard, so huge you could barely make out someone standing on the opposite side. This was a real test of endurance, and by the time they reached the grand prayer hall under the three imposing domes, they'd both be sweaty and out of breath. Jahan and Ravi would collapse in the cool shade, often arguing over who had crossed the finish line first.

Over the years they'd imagined themselves running from hungry tigers, or a deadly avalanche hurtling towards them. Other times they were racing for long-lost treasure chests or to claim the last remaining magical bird on earth. Whatever the mission was, it was *always* followed by a search to find their favourite lassi vendor nearby. This was usually at the insistence of Jahan, whose stomach was somehow always rumbling. The cool thick yoghurt drink was the perfect thirst-quencher. There was nothing quite like the smooth lassi that Lakshmi's mother made in the village, but this was the next best thing. Ravi's choice was sweet with mango, while Jahan liked his salty.

The boys would sip from their terracotta clay cups, laughing at each other's milky moustaches. The lassi vendor would roll his eyes at them and, with a smile, call them the troublesome twins. Despite Ravi's paler skin and extra inches of height, the pair were often mistaken for brothers, which made both boys feel warm inside, though they'd never admit it!

Jahan's uncle and auntie, Chacha and Chachi, were visiting as they would all be going to their family friend Kavita's wedding in the village the next day. Chacha and Chachi had just arrived from their latest travels in the mountainous northern Kashmir. They lived in Mumbai with their son, but were always exploring different regions. Chacha was much older than Jahan's abu, but

still got called 'Chacha', meaning 'Father's younger brother', because of his unending energy and thirst for life.

They were his favourite uncle and aunt, and as always, they came bearing gifts. Intricately embroidered shawls that were as light as gossamer, but warm like a thick blanket when draped around your shoulders, baskets of sweet dried apricots and cherries, and papier-mâché animals and figures for Jahan. That morning, Jahan's chachi had given him a shiny silver rupee, and so today lassi had been replaced with the special treat of pani-puri.

'Thank your chachi for me, Jahan.' The end of Ravi's last word was lost to a loud burp.

Jahan thumped Ravi's arm. 'Well, I'm glad you're not thanking her yourself, or she'd tell you to mind your manners!' he teased. 'And besides, what even was that? If you're going to burp, do it properly.' Jahan let out a long fake belch and both of them cracked up.

Ravi pulled out a shiny new cricket ball from his pocket – his gift from Jahan and his family for Diwali last week – and bounced it to Jahan. As Jahan caught the ball he remembered the excitement of the celebrations; the old city had been strung with Diwali decorations, temples softly glowed with the candle light of thousands of diyas, and firecrackers illuminated the night sky. Jahan reckoned he had only just finished digesting the feasts he'd

managed across the five-day festival. He rubbed his belly contentedly and bowled the ball back to Ravi.

Before Ravi could reach for it, the ball was intercepted. A man in a pristine red turban and starched white kameez charged past the boys, grabbing the ball before shushing them rudely. The man thumped the cricket ball into Ravi's outstretched palm, to the relief of the boys, before gesturing at them to leave quickly. He wore the unmistakeable attire of servants of the British Raj, and sure enough, within a minute, a small crowd appeared in his wake from around the corner. Three more turbaned men held parasols above the heads of a group of British officers and a couple of British women as they walked.

Jahan and Ravi had ignored the man and stayed where they were, both irritated at the intrusion. One of the women lifted the skirts of her dress and turned up her nose in a look of disgust as she stepped past the boys. Jahan felt horribly self-conscious all of a sudden, the intensity of her glare made him want to be as small as the ant beside his shoe. One of the Englishmen's elbows knocked Ravi's shoulder as he passed, and Ravi dropped the cricket ball by accident. It bounced and then rolled through the legs of the British entourage.

The entire group turned to stare in outrage, and before Jahan even understood what was going on, he felt a hard *thwack* around his head. He steadied himself, his ear thumping, shock pulsing through his body. From the

mortified expression on Ravi's face, it appeared he too had been violently shoved aside. Jahan grabbed Ravi's arm and led him quickly away, their heads lowered in a combination of humiliation and fear. Angry voices followed them.

'Clumsy boys!'

'Idiots!'

'No respect at all!'

The cricket ball had rolled behind one of the great marble pillars. Jahan grabbed it, and stopped to lean against the cool stone. The boys were just out of sight of the horrid group now, but could still hear them in the background. Ravi whispered, 'I only dropped the ball because one of the men jogged my arm . . .'

Jahan felt a swell of rage, his ear was still hot. 'And it didn't even touch them! They acted like you dropped a grenade not a cricket ball!'

Ravi looked a little reassured by Jahan's words. '*They're* the ones with "no respect at all"!'

The pair leaned around the pillar to sneak a look. Now another Englishman stood in front of the officers, pointing up at the intricate architecture and explaining it to them. One of the women ordered a servant to fan her immediately. As the turbaned man bowed and rushed to begin waving a colourfully embellished fan to cool her, Jahan looked sideways at Ravi, rolling his eyes.

'So DRAMATIC . . .' Ravi mouthed back at him. Both

boys hated how rudely most British people treated Indians, as if they were less human than them.

The guide wiped sweat from his temple and continued his tour. The boys strained to pay attention to what he was saying, as he spoke in English. 'It was originally built by Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in the seventeenth century, using pink sandstone brought all the way from the "pink city" of Jaipur. You can see the white designs carved from marble and laid into the stone over there.'

Jahan looked up at the ornate ceiling above them: it was rather exquisite. Not a single patch was left plain, every piece of plasterwork was filled with motifs and patterns. Despite having visited more than once a week for his whole life, he'd never really taken it all in before. To the side was a grand series of carved archways stretching into the distance, interrupted only by chandeliers. Just as he began to wonder how many people it must have taken to build such a magnificent place, his thoughts were interrupted by a voice.

One of the women asked in a clipped accent, 'Was the Koh-i-Noor diamond found around here?'

The guide hesitated uncertainly. 'No, madam, I believe the diamond was discovered somewhere in the south-east of the subcontinent. It was of course gifted to Queen Victoria in the year eighteen-fifty.'

Ravi grimaced. 'GIFTED?! It wasn't *gifted*, it was

practically stolen! How can they say that?!' he hissed to Jahan.

'Shhhhhh! They'll hear you!'

'They should!' Ravi was furious, and Jahan knew he needed to calm him down. Ravi's mother was a historian, his father an archaeologist. They'd first met while working at Mohenjo-daro, the ancient ruins of one of the world's oldest cities. Both now worked at the University of the Punjab, in Lahore, and had done ever since moving to the city, from the remote village where they had gone after Ravi's birth. His bedtime stories were real-life accounts of emperors and bygone kingdoms. He learned about classical legends over breakfast, and former civilisations at dinner. And right now, he was outraged.

Jahan scrambled for words that might calm his friend down. Ravi was usually the quieter, mellower one of the pair, Jahan tended to get into trouble for being boisterous and silly. But when it came to incorrect histories, it was as if a lion came to life within Ravi. 'The British are rewriting Indian history to suit themselves,' Ravi raged. He loved history and lost himself in Indian history books at the library at the university when his parents were working there.

'Ravi, Ravi – you told me the truth: Maharaja Duleep Singh was only eleven, the same age as us, when he was *forced* to surrender the Koh-i-Noor, as well as this very country, to the British. It's hardly surprising that these

people don't tell the true version of events, is it? You've heard from my amma that the Urdu word *loot* was one of the first ones to enter the English language!'

Ravi muttered *'Plunder'* under his breath, glaring at the group as they walked away.

Jahan continued, smirking now: 'We all know there's only one reason that the pyramids are still in Egypt . . .'

'Why?'

'Because they're too heavy for the British to steal them away!'

Ravi couldn't help but laugh a little, and Jahan was grateful to see it. He teased again: 'I didn't realise when I got the pani-puri that its chilli would light such a fire in your belly! Come, let's walk, my chachi and amma will be back from the bazaar soon. Remember, we're going to the village for Kavita's wedding tomorrow! We'll need to help with the preparations.'

The pair got to their feet, stretching their arms and legs.

Jahan added, 'It's a good thing Lakshmi wasn't here, she'd have thrown her shoe at that guide!'

'You're the one who always says "Speak the truth, even if it is bitter!"' Ravi said.

Jahan raised his eyebrows, impressed that Ravi remembered the Islamic saying.

Ravi was Hindu, but instead of calling his father Pita, as their other Hindu friends called their fathers, Ravi used

Abu, the same name as Jahan, who was Muslim. They had grown up closer than brothers; the differences in their religions felt normal and natural, a cause for celebration. Marking both Diwali *and* Eid meant double the parties, gifts, and delicious food, and both mosques and temples across the city felt familiar and safe.

'Anyway, did you know that the Koh-i-Noor diamond is cursed? Any man who owns it will own the world, but also know all of its misfortunes . . .' Ravi was definitely back to his lively self now, and had started on his favourite topic. And so, as the boys headed towards their neighbourhood, dodging colourful rickshaws and donkeys pulling carts laden high with juicy guavas and bright mangoes, their minds were filled with tales of precious jewels carried on the backs of elephants and camels, bloody battles, and ancient kings.