

## PROLOGUE

Fremont, California  
June 2005

You never know when and where your life is going to take a sudden turn. You never know when the past will call your name.

For Divya, it was a Tuesday morning standing in front of a shelf filled with jars of *Patak's achar*, the pickles her husband loved. She was planning a special meal for the family, a meal that included his favorite dish, *kadhi* – hot chickpea yogurt soup and rice – their first home cooking in the ten days since their move from Queens, New York. Their belongings had not fit the small townhouse her husband's boyhood friend, Gopi, had found for them.

They'd had to store an oversized couch and an overstuffed suitcase in the guest bedroom of their only living relative in California, Aunty Vimla, her mother's first cousin, an aging spinster. Aunty was not too happy about it; Divya could see it in her disapproving face and pursed lips.

Divya kept saying, "Thank you, Aunty" over and over again. "It's only until we get our own place." She crossed her fingers, hoping that their luck was going to change.

The move had not been smooth. Her husband Sham had been encouraged to migrate west by his friend. Gopi had promised Sham a managerial role in his trucking business, but now the stake he was demanding was almost twice what he'd initially asked for. Their daughters too were unhappy. Gloom shadowed their faces as they trudged home from the bus stop.

"I hate being the new kid in class," seven year-old Serena had shouted at her

when she'd mildly asked, "How was school?"

Divya sighed loudly, feeling the fatigue that had settled on her skin like a rash. The family had been making do with take-out from their neighborhood Safeway and even the kids were tired of deli sandwiches. Food was a problem Divya could fix. She'd anticipated this visit with pleasure. She pulled open the door of *Bharat Bazaar*, touted as the premier Indian store in the East Bay.

A string of brass bells over the door jangled, making her blink in surprise. She was used to the mega-markets of Queens, with endless shelves, arranged in neat rows, holding everything from stainless-steel cookware to plaster Hindu deities to jars of ghee and glass cases filled with trays of fudgy, syrupy sweets.

This brightly-lit spice bazaar took her back to the bustling activity of shopping in New Delhi. The heady aromas of cardamom, black pepper, perfumed incense and rose-scented sweets filled the air. Wicker baskets overflowed with slender gourds, plump eggplants, finger-shaped okra and snowy cauliflower heads. The strains of a *sitar* resonated from a far corner.

There was a rustle of a *saree* as the storeowner's wife emerged from the aisle, to greet her. "*Namaste*. Welcome."

"*Namaste*," said Divya a little shyly, feeling self-conscious at being caught gawking.

Divya hadn't bothered writing a list; she kept her list of ingredients in her head. Thoughts of the special meal ahead followed Divya into the Indian store. Next to the neat rows of spice blends for everything from *dal* to *chai*, she found what she was looking for

*Patak's pickles.* She was jubilant.

The tiny aisle was crowded, and when she reached up to pluck the mango pickle off the shelf her outstretched arm accidentally brushed against another shopper.

“Oops, sorry,” she blurted, but broke off abruptly. The woman turned toward her, a short, homely-looking woman in jeans and a loose *kurti*.

*Oh, shit. I didn't want them to know yet. Just my luck – the one time I come to the Indian store.*

“Divya? Divya Sharma? Is it really you?” the woman’s questioning tone interrupted Divya’s thoughts.

“Priya?” Divya stumbled backwards, exclaiming louder than she intended.

“Yes!” Priya said excitedly, clutching Divya’s upper arm and enveloping her in a characteristic bear hug, as generously and lovingly as she always had. She squeezed Divya’s forearm so hard it would make a bruise.

“It’s been so many years,” said Divya. She pulled back and wiped the sudden tears that gathered at the corner of her eyes.

“Yes. Yes. How are you? The last I heard you were in New York.”

“Um, yes. Fine, fine. We moved here ten days ago.”

“Hey, we have to catch up. We’ve all been here for years. You knew that, didn’t you?” Priya studied her face, her tone accusatory.

“Yes,” said Divya guiltily, as she felt her face get hot, “but, but...I was planning to call when we get settled. But you don’t live in Fremont, do you? Do you shop here all the time?”

“Actually, I haven’t been here for ages. There’s no Indian store in Danville,

where I live, and the one in Pleasanton doesn't carry this brand of coconut oil."

Priya held up a tin of *Amla* coconut oil in her nubby fingers.

"But listen, we have to catch up. Look, I gotta run to pick up Anya, my daughter, but Alka's having a party on Saturday. You gotta come. Call me, so that I can send you the details."

Priya fished out a dry cleaner's receipt from her massive shoulder bag and hastily scribbled her phone number and Alka's address on it. She thrust it into the palm of Divya's hand and hurried out towards her car.

Divya looked down at the crumpled sheet of paper. She put her grocery basket gingerly on the floor and smoothed out the stained edges of the paper. She studied the address carefully, *Alka! 824 Park Avenue, Piedmont, California.*

Her mom's overbright voice reverberated in her head.

"Divya, you must call Alka when you reach California. She lives in a huge house, I ahm told. Virry, virry rich. Your other friends are there too – Mini and Priya, all virry, virry happy, they are."

*Oh God. I can't let them see that terrible townhouse!* She wriggled her toes inside her black patent Tory Burch flats. She was glad she'd put on her skinny jeans. She knew she looked good, younger than her thirty-eight years. *At least I have that going for me,* she thought with a sigh.

The dazzling colors and fragrances of India, of home, swirled about her – mounds of spices, piles of nuts and wafting smells of ripe fruit and curry. The last time she'd seen them, the last time they'd all four been together, had been at Alka's wedding reception at the Taj Mahal hotel, arguably New Delhi's most prestigious address. The

wedding, an extravagant, over-the-top affair that had left her awed for weeks afterwards.

Before the sickly familiar embrace of jealousy could envelop her, Divya suppressed it. She sighed again. Priya, Mini, and Alka—her best friends in high school and after. She could see them now in her mind's eye, teenagers sprawled over the bed in Alka's dorm room, piles of coins jingling every time someone moved during one of their endless games of Rummy.

Divya shook her head. Jesus and Mary Girls' High School—another time, another world.

## CHAPTER 1.

Dehradun, India

1985

“It’s like a dream come true,” Divya’s mother said for the tenth time. “Yes,” said Divya, for the tenth time, even though it wasn’t her dream that was coming true.

It was her mother who had always dreamed of being a boarder at a posh school in the Himalayan foothill city of Dehradun, home of many venerated schools of the great Anglo-Indian tradition. It was too late for her, of course, but with her husband’s recent affluence, Mrs. Bhatia had turned to her youngest daughter. Divya was just the right age to enroll in the last two years of high school, if any spaces were available.

Divya’s dream had been different, to continue hanging out with her girlfriends from the local school she’d been at since kindergarten and to continue practicing flirting and maybe a little kissing with Rishi, the boy next door, a Gujarati boy whom her mother disliked and distrusted. He was the reason Mrs. Bhatia gave to Mr. Bhatia for the additional expense that, thank the gods, they could now afford after many years of making do.

Divya had argued with her mother at first, but it was not much use when her mother made up her mind. So Divya reluctantly took entrance exams for four different schools. The day the letter arrived announcing her acceptance at Jesus and Mary Girls’ High School, her mother held her and kissed her and looked at her like she was seeing her for the first time.

Now here they were, cocooned in the luxurious feel and smell of the leather back seat of the family's brand new car, a sleek, black-as-kohl Ambassador, driven smoothly and silently by the brand new family driver. Divya's brand new suitcases packed with brand new clothes and other paraphernalia filled the trunk.

And her mother was wearing one of her many brand new saris, a deep maroon color that set off her tawny complexion. Divya thought she looked more beautiful than ever, so happy at that moment that she was glowing, like a saint or guru, light seeming to come from inside her.

And she held Divya's hand the whole way out of Delhi, only relinquishing it when they stopped for a wash and a *nimbu-pani* or lemonade halfway through the 150-mile journey. Divya was not used to such prolonged attention from her mother, being the fifth of six children. The sixth child was the first and only longed-for son, who soaked up whatever was left of their parents' energy after all that trying.

Moving away from her spoiled brother, Ram, who each year became more intolerable in his manners and arrogance, was the appealing part of boarding school. But Divya worried about friends. At home in Delhi she had so many friends—from school and from her dancing, not to mention her many cousins and their friends. Now she was going to be the new girl in a place where friends had known each other, had actually been living together for years.

She didn't dare talk about this worry to her mother, though. Her mother had this idea, maybe you would have to even call it an obsession, that Divya was destined to become best friends with the daughter of Somnath, or Som Aggarwal, as everyone called

him, brother of the publisher of the *Delhi Times* and one of the wealthiest men in India.

On the very day the acceptance letter came Mrs. Bhatia had been on the phone all afternoon with friends and family to spread the good news about her youngest daughter, and she had picked up some information. As soon as Divya walked in the door that evening her mother burst out with a question:

“Do you know who also boards at Jesus and Mary?” In the moment it took Divya to figure out what this question meant, her mother answered.

“Som Aggarwal’s daughter, what is her name?” Mrs. Bhatia’s beamed. “The Aggarwal girl. The one you had such a nice conversation with. What is her name, Divya?”

Divya suddenly remembered what her mother was talking about. “I didn’t have a conversation with her, she was complaining about how loud the music was, and we talked about loud music for one minute out of politeness.”

“But what is her name?” her mother asked again. Sometimes her mother’s insistence made Divya want to scream.

“Alka.” Divya said through clenched teeth.

“Yes, that’s it. Well, it turns out that she is Class of ’87 at Jesus and Mary, just like you, even though she is actually one year younger in age. But she is brilliant, a brilliant student, she will take over her father’s publishing empire. And you already know her!”

Divya had never lacked for friends, boys and girls. She was cute and funny, and, with four older sisters, she knew a lot about clothes and love. She worked hard in school for her A's and B's, and she favorite thing in the world was dancing, both traditional *Kathak* dance, which she'd been taught since she was six years old, and Bollywood dancing, as well. But she'd never hung out with a brilliant student and didn't know that she wanted to.

“Mom, please, I'm not going to be friends with Alka Aggarwal. We were standing in line at a buffet for her uncle's wedding and we talked about how loud the music is at weddings, and that was it.”

It was as if Divya hadn't even spoken. “But think how nice for you to know someone already established at your new school. It will be such an advantage to you.”

Divya decided it was a lost cause to try to talk her mother out of this obsession. Every time Mrs. Bhatia brought up the brilliant Alka Aggarwal, Divya just tuned her mother out. She could only hope Alka and her mother never came face to face.

It was mid-afternoon when they reached the quiet neighborhood where her new school was located. They drove past large houses set back from wide, shaded streets and several other schools behind various kinds of iron gates. Finally they turned into a driveway paved in brick. A high wall that shielded the school from street view was covered with magenta bougainvillea. The car stopped in front of a one-story white stucco building. *Jesus and Mary Girls' High School* read the oval brass plaque above the painted green French doors. *Est. 1922*

Divya couldn't help herself. She could feel a tightening in her chest. She was both scared and excited. Just from the outside it was so different from her familiar Mater Dei school near Connaught Place in south Delhi.

Between the car and the front door Mrs. Bhatia stopped and grabbed Divya's arm. She straightened the new maroon school blazer Divya had just finished buttoning. She smoothed Divya's sweaty curls back from her forehead. She looked deep into her daughter's eyes.

"I am so happy for you, *beti*. Your life is about to change." Her own eyes were filled with tears.

Divya was touched and embarrassed at the same time. All her feelings jumbled together, and she didn't know what to say. Just at that moment, a young woman pushed open one of the green-painted doors and stepped down from the veranda to greet them. At first, Divya thought she was a student, but she turned out to be Miss Prema D'souza, the very young-looking Assistant Registrar, who had been keeping an eye out for them, as the other five new junior class girls had already checked in.

Mrs. Bhatia apologized profusely as they followed Miss Prema into the building. Miss Prema assured them that they were not late, only the last to arrive. She led them into the Registrar's Office, past an oak counter and seated them in front of her desk. She handed each of them a large manila envelope. Divya's contained the School Handbook, a list of classes, a list of available clubs, a calendar of term dates, a health form.

Miss Prema said, "You'll have time to look at all that later. You'll be eating today

and tonight at Rosewood, and tomorrow is New Girl Orientation. All will be explained at that time.” She laughed, and that made Divya feel a little better. Her mom was reading through her copy of the School Handbook, nodding and smiling.

“We’re just waiting for Mini Ahuja, who has been assigned as your Friendly Guide. It’s a tradition here at Jesus and Mary that every new girl, whenever she starts here, has an old girl to give her a helping hand. Being a Friendly Guide is one of the service projects you can volunteer for as part of your curriculum.”

Divya’s mother looked up at the word curriculum. For some reason, Divya had the strongest feeling that the next words out of her mother’s mouth were going to be “Alka Aggarwal”. Sure enough, her mother waited only a moment after the woman had stopped speaking before she invoked the name of Alka Aggarwal and her illustrious father. Divya’s face burned.

“My husband does business with Mr. Som Aggarwal, you see,” her mother explained.

“All the girls of the Class of ’87 live in Rosewood Hall,” Miss Prema said. She stepped behind her desk and opened up a loose-leaf notebook. “You will be in Rosewood 219, Miss Bhatia, and Miss Aggarwal is in—” She turned a couple of pages and found what she was looking for. “Miss Aggarwal is in 221, so you will actually be next door to her.”

Divya’s mother beamed. Divya prayed her mother wouldn’t babble on to this woman about how her daughter and Alka were fated to be friends. Luckily, the Friendly

Guide showed up and Divya was spared that particular embarrassment.

“Hello,” the girl said, “I’m Mini.” Mini Ahuja was slim and pretty, dressed in tight black jeans, penny loafers and a boxy jacket with oversized shoulder pads. Her straight black hair was drawn back from her face in a French braid; bangs poufed out over her forehead like a tiny awning. She smiled broadly at Divya and Divya immediately felt at ease.

Mini led Divya and Mrs. Bhatia out through a different door and brought them to a lushly shaded green area. “The Quad,” Mini announced. “You’ll see in term time, the benches and lawns are covered with girls.”

Divya was sticking close to Mini, partly so she could hear her better, but also to keep her mother from engaging in another conversation about Alka Aggarwal. Mini led them through the Mess Hall, pointing out the tables assigned to their class, rolling her eyes when Divya asked about the food.

“We like to hang out at the Madras Cafe down the hill. They have pretty good veggie *cutlets*,” Mini said in her soft, melodious voice. Divya wondered who the *we* were.

After wending their way across the broad campus they finally arrived at Rosewood 219. Divya felt her heart lurch as she turned the key to open the room. Aside from the deep blue rug next to the bed, the room was unadorned and stark, one bed, one desk, one chair, one dresser, and one narrow bookcase. From the single window she could see a high vine-covered wall. Her suitcases and boxes were lined up neatly in front

of an open closet door. The room smelled of disinfectant and furniture wax.

*It's so empty,* Divya thought.

“And I’m right across the hall,” Mini said.

“Oh,” Divya’s mother said, “then you must know Alka Aggarwal.” She had a 1000-watt smile on her face.

“You know Alka?” Mini asked. “Oh, yes,” said Divya’s mother, “my husband and Mr. Aggarwal do business together.”

Divya imagined herself pushing her mother out of her room and slamming the door shut, anything to stop her from going on and on about the Aggarwals. The last thing she wanted was for Alka herself to hear her mother’s completely exaggerated version of reality. Alka had not shown much interest in their brief chat at her uncle’s wedding. What would her reaction be to Mrs. Bhatia’s simpering claims of family friendship?

Luckily, Alka and most of the rest of the Class of ’87 weren’t due at school for two more days. Only the half-dozen new girls and their Friendly Guides were present before classes started for real. Still, by the time they had finished their tea in the downstairs Commons Room, Divya felt she knew all there was to know about Alka Aggarwal, who turned out to be Mini the Friendly Guide’s best friend—or rather, Alka and Mini and another girl named Priya were all three best friends, all three lived on the same small stretch of the second floor of Rosewood Hall, all three did everything together for the past two years.

Divya made herself as small as possible in her chair, curled up with embarrassment. Her beautiful, charming mother could have been a hostess on an interview talk show, the way she pumped Mini for information. Divya felt sick inside. She could just see Mini repeating all this to Alka Aggarwal and this girl Priya, all three of them laughing their heads off about the gauche mother of the gauche new girl.

Her ears perked up, though, when her mother asked, “And what happened to the girl who lived previously in Divya’s room?”

“Oh, that was Gita, her family moved to Boston, Massachusetts, in the US. Her father got a top job there.”

“So sad for you, to lose your friend, even for such a nice reason,” her mother said.

Mini’s face showed no signs of sadness. Her lovely smile continued unabated. “I think the field hockey team will miss Gita most of all. She was their star something—I don’t know, is there a forward for hockey? I think that’s what she was.”

Divya breathed a silent sigh. At least she wasn’t replacing a beloved fourth musketeer in Mini’s group.

Finally, finally, it was time for her mother to leave. Mini accompanied them back to the long brick driveway. The bougainvillea glowed purple in the late sunlight. The driver sprang out of the car and opened the back door. Her mother hugged her and whispered a blessing in her ear. Divya felt actual tears fill her eyes.

The moment was spoiled, however, when her mother enveloped tiny Mini in her

embrace and practically lifted her off the ground. “I’m so glad my daughter has found a friend like you, Mini *beti*. Please take care of her!”

Divya thought she would die. The moment the car door slammed and sealed her mother away from her, she turned and strode away. She did not want to have to face Mini. Calling Mini her friend! Asking her to take care of Divya, as if she was some idiot child!

Mini caught up with her in no time. “Hey, slow down,” she said. Divya couldn’t look her in the eye. “My mother!”

Mini laughed. She had a pretty laugh, too. “Don’t worry about it. I liked your mom. And you’re not going to see her again for a long time, so just relax.”

Divya allowed herself to glance at Mini, and then she couldn’t help but smile. Mini was relaxed. She was smiling. She didn’t seem to have been upset by Mrs. Bhatia’s intrusive manner. She seemed to be one of the nicest people Divya had ever met.

As if she could read Divya’s mind, just at that moment Mini said, “Why don’t you come across to my room later? I mean, I know you’ll want to clean up.”

Divya wondered if Mini was trying to tell her something, and it must have showed in her face, because Mini laughed that pretty laugh again.

“You don’t stink, don’t worry,” Mini said. “It’s been a long day, a long ride from Delhi, no? Just knock on my door whenever, even just to tell me you’re too tired to hang out.”

Divya reminded herself that Mini was her Friendly Guide, that she had two best friends already, and took the invitation for what it was. Later, when she was freshly showered and her hair gleamed, she knocked timidly on Mini's door and was greeted warmly. Mini had brought some *bhujiya* and Parle glucose biscuits from home and spread them on a plate she must have snuck up from the Mess.

She asked Mini about the school dance troupe. "I want to keep my dancing going," she said, and Mini enthusiastically agreed. It turned out she was a singer, and she had a lot to say about the dance and music program and Jesus and Mary, most of it good, some of it gossip.

"We performed at the Grand Maratha Hotel in Bombay last year!" Mini said. "Not everyone, just three singers and three dancers. Some rich alum paid for us to perform at some kind of political thing. It was amazing!"

She jumped up and grabbed something that turned out to be a CD player of a kind Divya hadn't seen before. She pushed a button and George Michael blared out. Mini began to sing along, dancing around her room, shoving a half-empty suitcase out her way with her foot. She pulled Divya up from where she was seated on Mini's bed, and the two of them danced and sang and clowned for the entire length of the CD. Then they collapsed, sweaty and laughing.

Lying in her own bed later that night Divya couldn't shut her mind off. Such a long, full day. Tomorrow, too, they'd be walking all over the school, filling out forms, meeting with the Principal. She had been introduced to the other new girls at tea. Maybe tomorrow she would connect with someone, start a New Girls' clique. The image came to

her of Mini belting out ‘Wake me Up Before You, Go Go’ into her hairbrush microphone. She was really nice, thought Divya, and then she fell asleep.

The next morning Mini knocked on her door at seven to walk her down to breakfast. The new ninth grade girls filled up three long tables on the far side of the Mess Hall. Mini and Divya joined the five other eleventh graders and their guides at the one other table that was set with dishes and cutlery. A girl named Reena, long braids and cute red glasses, called out Divya’s name, so she sat down next to her, Mini on the other side. Ms. Prema had introduced Reena to Divya when Reena had popped into the office, to pick up a form, the day before.

Reena was nice, from a small town between Dehradun and Delhi. The four of them, Divya, Mini, Reena, and Reena’s Friendly Guide, stuck together the rest of the day. Reena was set on being a doctor, like both her parents and her grandfather.

“Jesus and Mary has the best science program,” she told Divya. “A brand new chemistry lab. I could have gone to Welham, but their science doesn’t compare.”

The lab was spectacular, air-conditioned, filled with filtered natural light and gleaming equipment. Divya’s stomach sank. She barely made B’s in science, and here it was so important. Reena was examining something Divya didn’t know the name of, and she didn’t ask.

That evening Mini knocked on Divya’s door again. Divya thought it might be Reena, though they hadn’t made any plans, but it was Mini. Divya couldn’t believe how glad she was to see her.

“I’m just checking to see how you’re doing,” Mini said. She was wearing a t-shirt that said ‘Save the Indian Tiger’ and flowery pajama pants.

“I’m fine, you don’t have to keep checking on me,” Divya said.

Mini looked at her strangely. “I don’t do anything I don’t want to do if I can help it,” she said. She held up a bag of chips. “Do you want some?”

Divya stepped back and let her in. “I have to get everything in order before classes start,” she said. “I can’t stand chaos. I’ve never had a room to myself, and my sister closest to me in age is kind of a slob, so I’m really excited to fix my room the way I want it.”

That led Mini to tell Divya about her older sister, Anu, and their love/hate relationship. And then, while she was helping Divya put her books on a shelf, she told her about the trip to Singapore she had taken with her sister over vacation, how angry Anu had been, but to have her tagging along to the travel professionals’ seminar.

“And then I met this boy,” Mini said, her voice even lower than usual. She had met him while waiting to pay for some postcards at Archie’s Gift Shop. They had spent two afternoons together before Anu ran into them in the hotel coffee shop.

“A Malaysian Muslim!” her sister had screeched at her when they were alone in the elevator. “You want to kill me? You want to kill your parents?” Mini was crying as she told this part.

Divya grabbed Mini’s hand in silence.

“Nobody knows, I couldn’t write it to Priya and Alka, I didn’t want to talk on the phone about it.”

Divya was silent for a long time. Then she told Mini about the Gajurati neighbor boy, about the afternoon her mother wasn’t home and his was never around anyway and that’s how she wound up at boarding school, because someone had told her mother, even though nothing had happened that couldn’t have happened with a million people around. Mini squeezed Divya’s hand in understanding.

By the end of the evening, Divya’s room was pretty much in order and, if you had asked her, she would have said she had a new best friend.

Priya liked the new girl right away, partly because Mini had told her she would. Divya was adorable, a little shy at the outset, but then she smiled and flashed that dimple. And it was obvious she was comfortable with Mini, maybe even had a friend-crush.

Priya called Mini the resident romantic—boys, boys, boys, what she will name her first son, where she will have her vacation house, because of course she would be a singing star of Bollywood and marry the handsomest man singing star. She did have a gorgeous singing voice and she was pretty and vivacious. As Mini liked to say, “Someone has to be the next big star.”

Priya had no such ambitions. She was content with her average grades in most subjects. She took naturally to math but it didn’t interest her. She was a tall girl, towering over Mini and Divya by five or six inches. She looked five or six years older than them, too, her superbly rounded figure like a full-grown woman, while their bodies were just

pushing out of girlhood.

“You two are almost the same size,” Priya said as she trailed them down to the Mess Hall for breakfast. She was always aware of people’s sizes.

They were waiting for her at the door. “When Alka comes,” she said, “you’ll be a set of three almost the same size.” Mini laughed and pinched the firm flesh of Priya’s arm. Divya said nothing.

Breakfast was unbelievably noisy, with over 300 girls shrieking and calling out and clattering their forks and spoons and dishes and chairs. Divya’s face looked pained.

“This is the loudest day,” Priya told her, “everybody has to tell everybody else how good they look, and where they went during vacation, and whatever gossip they haven’t heard for months.” She took a bite of the *aloo parantha* and made a face.

“I’ve been cooking all summer with Sheela,” she told Mini.

“Sheela is the *amah* - nanny who practically raised her,” Mini explained to Divya.

“And my *chicken biryani* is definitely better than hers now,” Priya said. “In fact, when I went to stay with Alka’s family in Simla, I made *biryani* one night and Aggarwal Uncle said it was the best he’d ever tasted.”

Again Mini turned to Divya and explained. “Priya loves to cook. And to eat.”

Priya poked her friend. “I am not a bird, so I don’t eat like one.”

“When is Alka getting here?” Mini asked.

“Tonight or tomorrow,” Priya said. This time she was the one who explained to Divya. “Alka has been in California for the last week for her father’s magazine.”

“For *Savvy*?” Divya asked. “My mother subscribes to *Savvy*.”

“She’s writing a big piece on the India-to-California brain drain. I mean,” said Priya, correcting herself, “her mother is writing the article and Alka went as her intern.”

“Tough life,” said Mini, smiling and shaking her head. “You’ll get used to it,” Priya told Divya. “Alka lives in a different world from the rest of us.” “Divya knows Alka,” Mini said.

“No, no, I don’t know her. I talked to her at her uncle’s daughter’s wedding. There were about a million people, and we happened to be standing next to each other. That’s it.” Divya spoke fast and her smooth cheeks went through several changes of color.

“Her uncle’s daughter’s wedding, her cousin Rita?” Priya was well-acquainted with most of Alka’s family.

“Yes, and I don’t even know her either, but my parents brought me and my sister to the wedding because, I don’t even know why they brought us. My father does business with Alka’s brother, I mean, father, but I don’t know any of them.”

Priya felt there was something going on she couldn’t understand. Later when she and Mini were alone, she asked her why Divya acted so strangely when she was talking about Alka.

“I don’t exactly know. It’s something to do with her mother wanting Divya to be friends with Alka.”

“Don’t tell Alka,” said Priya. “She’s been surrounded by people like that all her life, social climbers.”

“It’s not Divya, it’s her mother,” Mini said. “But I won’t tell Alka anyway. She’s always looking for reasons not to like people.”

Priya had to agree. She and Alka had been friends since the age of six, but she knew all too well how prickly her friend could be.

As it turned out, Alka and Divya finally met at breakfast on the third day of classes. Divya was sitting between Priya and Reena, with Mini and another girl across the table. Mini was filling the new girls in on the upcoming social mixer with the boys from St Joseph, their brother school, what kinds of clothes were allowed and what kind of clothes girls tried to get away with, which boys in their year and the senior class to absolutely avoid, which boys (only a couple to be sure) might offer something that looked like punch but might be spiked.

And then Alka staggered in, exhausted and jet-lagged. She had arrived in the middle of the night, whisked straight to Dehradun from Delhi airport. It was the first anyone had seen of her. Her usually golden-toned skin looked sallow and blotchy. Her naked amber eyes drooped. Her impeccable style was missing.

Priya jumped up and enveloped Alka in an enormous hug, but Alka quickly backed away.

“My head! My head!” she moaned. She dropped her black nylon Prada handbag on the table and collapsed into a chair.

Mini reached across the table and patted Alka’s hand. “Hello, *saheli*. Do you want some tea?”

“Oh, yes, my *saheli*, I would love some tea.” Mini stood up quickly and went to fetch a fresh cup.

“It was a nightmare,” Alka said. She rested her forehead on her hand, elbow braced against the table. “Our layover in Seoul lasted seven hours. There was nothing to eat except kimchee. I don’t know how I’m going to go to classes today.”

Priya saw that the new girls were watching Alka the way they’d watch a soap opera. “She’s not usually like this,” Priya told them. Divya snapped her mouth shut and started stacking her breakfast dishes. Reena tried so hard not to laugh that she sputtered.

Immediately Alka looked up. “Who is this?” she asked.

Priya started to introduce them, but Reena spoke louder. “I’m Reena Chaudhury. I’m one of the new juniors.” She put her hand out to shake but Alka didn’t take it. She moved her attention to Divya as if Reena didn’t exist.

“But who is this?” Alka asked again. Divya looked up then, her dark eyes wide and liquid.

“I’m Divya,” she said, and she smiled that adorable dimpled smile.

“I know you,” said Alka. “You were at Rita’s wedding.”

Divya's face went through its display of colors. "Yes," Divya said. "Rita's wedding."

"Well, welcome to Jesus and Mary. What room are you in?" she asked, ignoring Reena completely.

By the time Reena rose to stack her dishes Alka had invited Divya and Priya to a little party in her room that evening.

"I have so many things to show you," she said. "I went to the authentic Levi's headquarters in San Francisco and I had jeans made to order. And," she lowered her voice to indicate a secret, "I had a pair made for Mini. We're almost the same size, I just had to make the waist and the boobs a little bigger."

"Divya," said Reena, "I'll see you in chem."

"Okay," said Divya, only halfway looking up at her. When Mini arrived with a cup of chamomile and a biscuit, Divya too stood up. "I'd better go," she said.

"Come at nine," Alka said. "I have food." Divya dimpled at her and started to walk away, but Alka called her name.

"You know," she said, "I bought four of those Levi's. Now that I see you full length, I'm sure one of them will fit you perfectly."

"Oh, thank you, Alka," Divya said. She looked blissful.

"What was that all about?" Mini asked.

“Isn’t that the most amazing coincidence?” Alka said. “That new girl, Divya, I knew her already. She was at my cousin Rita’s wedding at the Taj Mansingh Hotel.”

Mini looked questioningly at Priya, who shrugged.

“I invited her to hang out with us tonight. She seems like a sweet girl.”

“I like her,” Mini said. She gave Priya a meaningful look.

“She’s adorable,” Priya said. She reached over and took the untouched biscuit from the plate in front of Alka.

“She’s a dancer,” Mini said, and she proceeded to tell them a little bit of what Divya had told her, leaving out for now the Gujarati neighbor boy and, of course, the overly-enthusiastic mother.

Alka’s room looked like a marketplace that night, clothes on hangers swaying from the doorknob, the bookcase, the top of the closet door. From a tall pile of books she’d brought back from the US Alka pulled out one to give to Priya.

“Chez Panisse?” Priya asked.

Alka corrected her French and said, “Mother and I ate there. It’s supposed to be the biggest thing in America. Maybe not for vegetarians. This guy from Delhi, his name is Raj Bajaj who’s making millions of dollars in Silicon Valley took us there with eight other people. My mother couldn’t believe how much this meal cost.”

“Was he good-looking?” Mini asked. “Oh very handsome,” Alka said, “if your taste runs to frogs.”

“Alka!” Mini said, but she giggled too, and Divya joined right in. The Levi’s did fit Divya. She wore them all evening. Alka gave her some sunglasses from Hollywood, too, and an unused postcard from Beverly Hills.

She handed Priya a box with a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge on it. It was two decks of cards, one with the Golden Gate Bridge, one with the Hollywood Sign. Priya took the cards out and started shuffling them.

“Let’s play Rummy,” she said. The cards ticked and clicked in her capable hands. “Do you play, Divya?”

Divya hesitated a second, then a mischievous look appeared in her eye. Rummy was the one activity where she regularly trounced her younger brother, Ram. “Yes,” she said, “I do.”

They played hand after hand, staying up way too late, eating up all the snacks plus a chocolate bar Mini retrieved from her room. Finally Priya had the winning hand, with four valid combinations and was declared the winner. Alka fell asleep on top of the covers still wearing her custom Levi’s, clothes still decorating her room like a bazaar. Out in the hallway Priya hugged the other two and they whispered good night, good night, see you in the morning.

They didn’t know it then, but the seeds for the Rummy Club had just been planted.

## CHAPTER 2.

New Delhi, India  
May 1991

MRS. RANI AGGARWAL

Requests the pleasure of your company  
At the wedding of her Grand-daughter

ALKA AGGARWAL  
(Daughter of Padmini and the late Som Aggarwal)

To

RAJ BAJAJ  
(Son of Kavita and Kamal Bajaj)

On Saturday, 27<sup>th</sup> May  
AT HOTEL TAJ MAHAL  
Venue: DIWAN-I-AM Banquet Hall

The chauffeur driven black Mercedes slithered to halt outside. Mini waiting in her parents' rarely-used front living room, jumped up, her pink organza sari rustling and ran to the window, peering out into the semi-darkness that covered the city.

"Inder," she shouted, "they're here."

Inder emerged from the guest bedroom sheathed in a navy pinstriped suit. He moved closer. Mini's nostrils flared.

*Brut*, she guessed. She smiled. To her he personified the NRI, the non-resident Indian, in his appearance, even in the way he smelled.

He held out his hand to her. He was carrying the gold purse she'd left behind in the bedroom.

“Yours, I believe,” he said, American smooth at its best. Their eyes met, and her smile widened.

*Not bad for an arranged match.* Mini puffed up with uxorial pride. She tucked the purse in the crook of her elbow. She’d been living in California with Inder for three months now and this was her first visit back. They were here to attend Alka’s wedding, but she wasn’t above showing off her CPA husband to her friends.

Mini and Priya squealed in delight and hugged tightly at seeing each other. It had, after all, been a full three months since Mini’s wedding.

But the mood in the car speeding towards Number One Mansingh Road was somber. Priya fiddled with the pleats of her *Kanjeevaram* sari. Inder stared impassively in front of him. Mini seated between them in the rear of the car played with her diamond pin, watching the light from the street lamps glint off its reflective surfaces.

It felt as if they were going to visit a sick friend, rather than what should have been the happiest day in Alka’s life. Vivid Bharati, India’s most popular entertainment radio station, was playing a sorrowful love ballad, that seemed appropriate to the moment.

In the front seat Vik Sharma swiped his face with a handkerchief. In spite of the air-conditioner going full throttle, the heat came in waves through the driver’s half-open window – the humidity typical of late May in Delhi. Rumbblings of approaching thunder were audible in the distance, and the smell of a brewing storm filled the air. That, too, was typical of the town’s weather. The heat could only be dispelled by a fierce, cleansing rainstorm.

“Close the damn window,” Vik snarled to the driver.

Vik turned sideways in his seat to look at his three companions in the rear. Mini lowered her eyes, embarrassed for Priya.

“Hell of a time to hold a wedding,” he complained. The nasal twang was prominent in his whine.

“Hmmmph,” Inder grunted in possible agreement.

“I don’t think that Alka knows what she’s doing,” Priya said quietly. She continued to play with her sari.

“So, is it really true then? Alka’s sacrificing herself to save the family fortune?”

Mini’s question conjured up the headlines they had all read, splashed across every daily, reported by every major T.V. news channel, fodder of almost all talk-show hosts. Som Aggarwal’s sudden and fatal heart attack, followed by the disclosure that the publishing houses he and his brother owned were not only bankrupt, but mortgaged to the hilt.

Even in California, the news reached them. Priya had been the first to call and tell Mini. Then Anu, Mini’s older sister had phoned, her disembodied voice confirming and expanding on what Priya had already said. The distressing news had even made it to ‘Namaste America’, the Indian program on a local network; that Mini watched avidly every Saturday for one hour.

“All I know is that Alka refuses to discuss it...”

“Did you talk to her after...after?” Mini stopped, not willing to bring up the media circus that had surrounded the family after Som Aggarwal’s death.

“Yes, yes, I did,” Priya said, sounding defensive. “I called her so many times to speak with her. I even went by her house. She wasn’t home - or that’s what the maidservant told me. I left a note. But, I heard nothing back.

And then, this. The wedding invitation.” She swallowed, thinking back to the shock she had gotten when the invitation arrived in the mail three weeks before. Along with the elaborate gilded invitation was a note in Alka’s familiar handwriting: “Please come.”

“I was shocked too,” Mini responded. “It was difficult for us to drop everything and fly here on such short notice, but how could I ignore her message?”

She leaned back against the seat and let her eyes close. The jet-lag was getting to her, but even worse was her confusion, her inability to make sense of this incomprehensible turn of events in her friend’s life.

The car lurched through the traffic. Rush hour in Delhi. Cars, scooters, motorcycles, black taxis, jostling for space on the road. The putt putt of auto-rickshaws inserting themselves between vehicles, the drone of large green buses, the constant honking, both familiar yet strange.

She sat up then, and said to Priya in a quiet voice, “There’s got to be more to this whole situation. What’s the real story?”

Priya seemed to hesitate. “I was going to tell you this later, not here in the car,” she said. “My aunt, who’s friends with Padmini Aunty – you know, Alka’s mom?”

Priya turned sideways in her seat to look at Mini directly. It was as if she thought living in America might have addled her memory.

Mini nodded, not wanting to interrupt.

“Anyway, my aunt told my mom,” Priya’s voice dropped to a whisper, “that they had actually done all the paperwork to put their house and the businesses on the auction block, when Alka got a proposal. This Silicon Valley multi millionaire. This Raj Bajaj...some kind of computer chip genius.”

“His name sounds so familiar,” Mini said.

“He made the offer directly to Alka, then he met with Padmini Aunty and Alka’s uncle. He agreed to pay off all their outstanding debts. Everything. And in exchange, all he wanted was to marry Alka.”

“Ya, your precious Alka, sold to the highest bidder,” sneered Vik from the front.

Priya shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Both she and Mini fell silent. The notion of Alka being served up as the sacrificial lamb at the altar seemed a preposterous one. In the old days, in high school, she had been the shining star among the four friends. Her physical and intellectual accomplishments were so obvious that the others didn’t even bother getting jealous of her; she had the most money, the best figure, the highest grades, the coolest clothes. There was no competition.

Back then Divya, Priya and Mini couldn’t help but speculate about Alka’s future, to what heights would she ascend in Indian society, which literary genius or entrepreneurial magnate would sweep her off her feet?

The crash of the Aggarwal family fortune ended all that. The year Alka turned twenty-two, her life as she had always known it came to dead halt.

Even so, Priya couldn’t bring herself to believe that Alka, their brilliant Alka would agree to marry a stranger just to save her family from ruin.

*Bloody not likely*, as Alka would have said. But, Alka’s silence was damning.

“*Chalo, chalo,*” The driver rolled down his window and shouted to a young man shuffling his ice-cream cart across the road. The poor man obliged, walking faster. The driver put the indicator light on, and began his ascent of the two hundred meter ramp in to the driveway of Delhi’s premier social hotel.

A long winding pathway beneath the Mughal-inspired decorative domes of the hotel’s sprawling marble lobby led to the spacious and grand hall where Alka’s wedding was venued – the Diwan-i-Am. Hundreds of red roses adorned the façade and were prettily fashioned in a sign of welcome. Live *ghazal* singers added to the mood of extravagant celebration. Liveried waiters glided by with flutes of Moët-and-Chandon while others offered silver salvers of oysters nestled in beds of crushed ice. The aroma of food in the air was tantalizing. Chefs at open air counters cooked fresh tandoori *kebabs*, chicken and veggie *biryani* as well as Italian staples such as fettucine with Alfredo sauce.

Priya and Mini stayed close together as they wound their way through this maze of gastronomic delights. Then Mini heard her name being called. From across the wide crowded room a beaming Divya, hair flying, was charging towards them, followed closely by her parents, Bhatia Aunty and Uncle.

Divya practically screeched to a halt in front of them and flung her arms around Mini’s neck. She then turned to Priya and pulled her into the embrace, all three of them savoring for a moment, their togetherness. Mini felt tears pricking her eyelids. The familiar scent of Priya’s baby powder fragrance reminded her of what she’d been missing in her contented new life in California.

And the relief of seeing that Divya had pulled herself together after her tragic love story. Her beloved Rishi, the Gujarati neighbor boy whom Divya dated for three years, from right after high school through college, ended up jilting her. Poor Divya had believed with all her naïve heart that her marriage to him was a foregone conclusion but his mother had had other plans for her Rishi baby, as it turned out.

Mini gave her friend another squeeze, then stepped back to take a good look at her. “You look adorable,” she said, “like your old self again.”

“Have either of you spoken to Alka?” Divya’s anxious tone interrupted Mini’s compliment.

Priya sighed heavily, nervously crossing and uncrossing her fingers. She was upset with herself for letting this go, for not badgering Alka enough.

“I tried,” she said to Divya, listing all the phone calls, the visit, the note.

Divya shook her head. “And now it’s late to do anything,” she said.

Mini was astonished. “What could we possibly have done?”

“At least we could be there for her, whatever is happening,” Priya said with some vehemence. “At the very least, we need to sit Alka down and get some answers before we let her out of our sight,” she announced. For a moment, it was almost as though they were back in the dorm at Jesus and Mary again.

“Divya *beti*, look.” Bhatia Aunty had joined the three of them. She pointed to the podium erected at the end of the hall, where a very dark man was standing, the mysterious Raj Bajaj, the obviously happy groom in a gold *sherwani*. In his hand was a

garland of flowers in preparation for the traditional *Jaimala* ceremony, the exchange of wedding garlands.

The chattering crowd fell suddenly silent, then began to part, two waves of people somehow finding space to open up a path for the bride.

As Alka came into view Priya gasped loudly. Mini put a hand up to her mouth to stifle a sob. Divya bit her lip savagely. None of them could hide their shock at Alka's ashen face, the skin as thin and colorless as skimmed milk. Her movements were slow and ponderous. She put one leaden foot in front of the other.

Stumbling, halting, Alka made her way to the podium. The distance seemed interminable. She was flanked on each side by her cousin sisters. This was customary. But in this case, it appeared to Mini that they were literally propping her up, each girl holding Alka's elbow carefully as they led her forward.

Alka lifted her eyes slightly and faced Raj as she arrived at her place near the podium. Before she had even taken a breath, Raj placed the garland around Alka's neck. His eyes shone, his hands were steady.

Her cousin handed Alka the ceremonial flower garland for the groom. Alka flinched and Mini could see her hands tremble. In the background the live band played some haunting film music.

Everyone waited for Alka to take a step forward and complete the ceremony by garlanding Raj. Alka stood motionless, a glass-eyed dummy in a wax museum. The moments ticked away. Mini could see the family members exchanging nervous glances. The Aunties in the back of the grand room started to titter.

Finally, Alka's mom, Padmini Aggarwal stepped forward. She placed her hand on Alka's shoulder.

“Alka, *beti*. Raj is waiting.” Her tone was clipped, authoritative, loud enough to be heard by most of the crowd.

Alka blinked. She glanced at her mother. There was grim determination in Mrs. Aggarwal's expression.

Alka's eyes flashed momentarily. The she turned slowly forward, her gaze downcast as expected from an Indian bride. She put the garland around Raj's neck, withdrawing her fingers quickly as if burnt.

A relieved cheer rippled through the family members surrounding the couple. Raj's friends encircled him, clapping him on the back thunderously.

“Good job, man” “Well done!”

Not much later Priya led Mini and Divya through the crowd to where Alka stood surrounded by people, yet somehow alone. Priya stepped forward and grasped Alka's wrist. Alka looked at her mutely, as if emerging from a stupor.

“Alka, come with us to the ladies' room, please,” whispered Priya urgently.

Alka took a shaky breath and nodded. She followed the three of them. They navigated their way back through the crowd.

In the ladies' room, Priya locked the door behind them and faced Alka.

“Why are you doing this?” cried Mini. She hadn't meant to be so blunt, but the sight of her beloved friend in this state of suspended animation was too much for her. She buried her face in the *pallu* of her sari and started to sob.

Alka stared at the floor for a moment before replying.

“I had no choice,” she said finally.

Alka’s defeated tone shocked her friends into silence. Priya was the first to revive. She drew Alka into an embrace, “Shh, Alka, it’ll be okay.” Mini pulled herself together enough to pat Alka’s hand in an awkward fashion. Divya looked on unhappily, wringing her hands.

There were no words for what they felt. It was as though this loss – Alka’s future, her dreams and all their dreams for her – were so enormous as to be literally unspeakable.

Priya folded her arms across her chest and tried again. “It will pass,” she said to Alka gently. Alka said nothing, her dull eyes betraying her pain.

Across Alka’s bent head the others exchanged a look. Without saying a word they understood the pretense Alka expected of them – don’t feel sorry for her, don’t ever talk about what she has given up, don’t mention that she’s marrying someone she looks down upon, don’t ask about her dreams of being chief editor of Savvy, don’t, don’t, don’t.

The vibrations of conspiracy were palpable among them. They watched Alka slowly unlock the door, slowly disappear back into the throngs in the wedding hall.

Later that night, lying beside her sleeping husband, Mini felt it again, a sense that they had all made a vow of silence. *We will never talk about this again*, she thought, and then, she too, fell asleep.

### CHAPTER 3.

Piedmont, Oakland, California  
2005

Coming up the tree-lined driveway of 824 Park Avenue, in their 1999 Honda Accord, Divya felt overwhelmed at the majesty of the view that opened up before her. The personal residence of Silicon Valley entrepreneur, Raj Bajaj, and his wife, the gracious hostess, Alka Bajaj, was surrounded by a landscaped array of massive live oak trees, each tree precisely planted throughout the entire residential lawn acreage surrounding the enormous estate.

Before them rose a palatial Greek revival home two stories in height, adorned with six white columns extending the breadth of the entire main structure, A balcony extended the full width of the second floor facade. Divya reached for the brass door-knocker ring, pausing to admire the commanding and impressive façade.

“Wow,” her husband, Sham, murmured appreciatively as they walked up to the imposing Honduran mahogany front doors. “These have got to be ten feet tall!”

Divya briskly walked up to the doors, her right hand clutching five year- old Anika’s and her left hand dragging the squirming seven year- old Serena behind her. She had been filled with a giddy sense of excitement in the days since she ran into Priya at the market. But now, faced with the perfectly polished pair of brass lions’ heads guarding the entrance to what seemed like another world, Divya suddenly felt an old, familiar lump in her throat.

Just then, the door swung open.

“Divya! Is that really you?” Divya’s memory banks struggled to match the familiar, boisterous voices with the two women beaming at her from the doorway.

“Mini!” Divya exclaimed, filled with true joy at seeing her sweet friend. “You look beautiful!”

Mini was dressed in an emerald chiffon blouse with a low-cut V neckline, sheer tight sleeves, paired with a cream, pleated skirt which fell to mid-calf, leaving her slender ankles and sexily shod feet in black stilettos in full view.

Divya wrapped Mini in a tight embrace. Stepping back, she looked at Mini again, and said, “What a cool new do!”

“Why, thank you,” said Mini.

With a hand she propped up a mop of curls, cropped into a chin-length bob that suited her buoyant personality. Her eyes still danced when she smiled.

Divya turned to the tall, slim woman standing next to Mini.

“Alka?” she asked wonderingly.

While Mini had shortened her hairstyle, Alka had lengthened hers, so that it fell an inch below her shoulders. Sleek and flat-ironed, it hung like a black curtain around her still perfect features, her beauty sobered by time. Her hair had thinned and was colored to cover the stray greys. Crow’s feet fanned out from the outer corners of her eyes, which seemed tinged with an inner sadness.

She was impeccable in tailored beige pants and a ruffled cream colored blouse. Huge solitaire diamonds twinkled in her earlobes and a heavy diamond and ruby bracelet adorned her left wrist. Divya, her turquoise and white silk *kurti* – tunic, paired with white pants and a chunky gold pendant dangling from long strings of black-and-gold

beads on her *mangal sutra* – Hindu wedding necklace, suddenly felt underdressed and out of place by comparison.

“Always the last one,” Alka said, drawing her inside and giving her a hug with a well-cared hand.

Divya bit her lip, annoyed at Alka’s jab but not wanting to show it.

Mini grabbed her next and took a good look at her, appraising the shoulder length pixie-cut hairstyle, with keen eyes.

“You look just the same,” Mini enthused. She was breathless and beaming.

They had not seen each other for fourteen years, not since Alka’s wedding to Raj in May 1991, but when Divya reminded them of their last meeting, she was greeted with silence.

Sham standing behind Divya, coughed discreetly, breaking the spell.

“Oh, oh, this is my husband, Sham.” Divya shifted her weight to reveal the pleasant-looking man of athletic build, standing behind her. Next to him stood Serena dressed in a striped fuchsia top and bright fuchsia leggings, with her hair in pigtails. She was looking at the grand interior wondrously.

*So much like me*, reflected Divya, with a sidelong glance at Serena’s wide-eyes.

Anika, dressed in a Rajasthani ankle length skirt and matching blouse with tiny bells sewn on the sleeves was peeping out shyly from behind Sham’s back.

“Come, girls,” Divya beckoned her daughters forward and made the introductions.

Everyone said hello and smiled. Priya came charging out into the hallway where they were still standing. She was dressed in a green *kurti* scattered with white dots. Her sweet, youthful face exuded good cheer.

Divya relaxed as she saw Priya.

“Well, hello you. I see you found the house,” said Priya. Divya nodded happily.

An hour later they were sitting on Alka and Raj’s deck, sipping Margaritas and enjoying the panoramic view of the bay. The Golden Gate Bridge was visible in the distance, looming bright in all its grandeur. *She’s wound up with the life we all predicted*, thought Divya with a sneer. She settled back in the comfortable patio lounge.

“So, what brings you and Sham to California?” Mini broke into her reverie.

“Well, after Sham and I got married...I sent you all a wedding card – but you’d left Delhi by then,” began Divya. She said it off-handedly, but their absence had hurt at the time.

“Sham’s work visa to the U.S. came through in 1995, and we landed in Queens, New York,” she said, wrinkling her nose in distaste. She wasn’t about to describe to them the modest apartment in the dirty, noisy neighborhood they’d lived in, or how Sham had tried hard to make a go of it in the auto sales industry. But after a nasty Worker’s Compensation claim by an erstwhile employee had left them bankrupt, they’d closed shop and, at the urging of Sham’s buddy Gopi, decided to head west.

“Sham’s starting a new venture here. We’d also heard so much about the sunny climate of California; we wanted to give it a try.” Divya gave her stock answer, glossing over the messy details.

Mini clucked her tongue in agreement. “Yes, it the best place to live,” she assured Divya, patting her hand warmly.

Divya turned to look at Priya. “What about you, Priya? We never really got a chance to talk at the Indian store.”

“Oh, you know, Vik and I got married in 1991...” Priya looked over to where Vik was standing. She stared openly at him as he reached into his blue-and-white checked shirt pocket and pulled out a cigarette and a bright red, plastic lighter. With practiced ease he lit the cigarette and pocketed the lighter. Priya felt something flutter inside her breast as she watched him draw the smoke deep into his lungs, then exhale very slowly, like it was the most heady experience he’d ever had.

*Still so good-looking*, she reflected, willing him to turn around and look at her. But Vik was engrossed in conversation with Raj and Inder.

“We have two kids, Anil and Anya.” Priya lit up at the thought of her children. They were the joy of her life. “They’re here, probably playing those interminable computer games in Alka’s basement.”

A white-haired, elderly man approached them with a tray full of *keema samosas* – deep fried turnovers stuffed with spicy meat and *paneer pakoras*. He was dressed in a crisply starched white *kurta pajama* – a knee-length flowing shirt worn with a pair of drawstring trousers. The fine eyelet embroidery on his *kurta* complemented the embroidery on his fine, white cotton cap. Hi shoes – slip on *jutis* of soft leather, pointed at the toe –were also white.

“I’m Kakaji.” He placed the tray on a side table and folded his hands in a namaste to Divya. Then he lifted the tray toward her and indicated she should help herself.

“Oh, thank you, Kakaji.” Divya stumbled over the words, not knowing how to address this graceful old man. *The Bajajs’ actually have an Indian servant?* She wondered.

“Where are you living now?” asked Mini, resuming the conversation as Kakaji moved away.

“Oh, we’re renting a house in Fremont,” said Divya, “while Sham sets up his business. I’ve applied at some of the local schools for a teacher’s position. Let’s see what happens.” She clasped her hands together over one knee, enjoying the cool breeze that lifted her glossy, black hair.

“And, what’s new with you, Mini Singh nee` Ahuja?” Divya asked Mini companionably.

“Not much, really,” Mini’s tone was carefree. “I work as a paralegal in downtown San Francisco. Two girls – Rani and Sophie. Sophie’s just finishing middle school, Rani’s in elementary. Inder owns an accountancy practice with a partner. We live in Pleasanton – must have you all over. The guys should get to know each other.”

Her gaze drifted over to where the men were clustered around the bar – Inder, Raj, Sham and Vik, all huddled together as Inder recounted one of his famous *Santa Singh Banta Singh* jokes. The men broke apart, guffawing loudly.

“Alcohol makes everything funnier,” observed Mini with a laugh. “And, Alka, you’re such a good hostess, as usual. Your parties are so well-catered and the

service...muuaah.” Mini puckered up her lips and blew Alka a kiss. Alka sat across her. She sipped her tea serenely, her be-ringed fingers clasping the fine china cup.

Divya nodded in agreement. “Yes, yes, so right.”

“No, no,” Alka waved a hand dismissively, “It’s all Kakaji. I’m so glad you were able to make it today, Divya. When Priya told me she bumped into you – literally,” this with an amused glance at Priya, who was seated next to Mini, “I couldn’t believe it. The four of us – meet again in the U.S. What are the odds of that?” she asked brightly.

“I wish Shiv had been here, though,” Alka said. “I so wanted you to meet him, but he was busy with a school event. He’s at Head-Royce middle school. Such a good boy. Gets all straight A’s. He’s on debate team, undefeated in his league. In the school choir as well. His Dad’s genes, I’m sure,” she said flatly, with a bark of laughter.

“Well, you were always the brilliant one in high school,” Divya said kindly. She’d seen Mini and Priya exchange a look while Alka was bragging about Shiv, but didn’t know what to make of it.

“I don’t know about that,” Alka said testily. It was almost as if she didn’t want to talk about their high school days.

The giant clock in the hallway chimed 11 p.m. The grown-ups stayed around the table as the party wound down. Only Mini, Divya, Priya and their respective families were left. The kids were gathered in the family room, watching a video on the Bajajs’ 60 foot screen. The temperature drop in the June evening had brought everyone indoors.

Vik wandered in, a tumbler full of Scotch in his hand. He pulled out a chair next to Divya.

“So, how are you, Divya?” he enquired, his words slurring a little. “I haven’t seen you since Alka’s wedding,” he said, his eyes raking Divya in one slow, easy pass.

Divya bit her lower lip and tried to ignore the warmth rushing to her face. Any fool could see he was drunk.

“Yes, Vik. We met at the wedding.”

Divya shuddered inwardly. Vik sat so close she got a whiff of his aftershave combined with cigarette smoke. She moved away slightly. From the corner of her eye she observed Priya, seated in a chair across from her, shake her head, halfway amused.

It was a comforting sight; the last thing she wanted to do was alienate the amiable Priya. Divya turned deliberately in her chair so that she was facing Mini.

“Remember how we used to play Rummy?” she asked her. Vik reluctantly got up from the table and sauntered away. Alka plopped down into the chair Vik had vacated and said, “Yes! You know what we should do...we should start a Rummy group.” The others joined in, discussing the details noisily.

“Yes! Maybe, we can meet once a week,” said Mini.

“We can take turns hosting,” said Priya. Divya craned her neck, looking to see how Sham was faring. She saw that he was deep in conversation with Inder at the other end of the table. Pieces of their conversation drifted over to where she sat. Sham seemed delighted – Inder had offered to introduce him to a couple of business possibilities.

Divya smiled contentedly; the evening had gone well.

Alka tapped Divya on the shoulder, breaking into her thoughts. “Let me show you the house, Divya.”

Sham followed Alka and Divya down the cavernous white marble hallway that extended from the front to the rear of the house in one continuous and immense foyer. Along the sides of the hallway, illuminated by museum quality lighting, hung numerous paintings by the renowned artist, M.F. Hussain, who was called the Picasso of India.

Twin stairwells on opposing walls arched upward and inward to form an elegant one story balcony landing at the back of the edifice. The balcony landing was adorned by waist high white balusters, trimmed by a polished teak handrail extending across the landing from one stairwell to the other.

“Just like the old Shangri-La hotel in Connaught Place,” an awed Divya said under her breath.

Divya oohed and aahed over every detail. Alka showed them the upstairs bedrooms. Sham kept up a measured pace, but didn’t say much.

Returning downstairs, Divya was quiet as she tried to take in the size and luxury of Alka’s home. Everybody was waiting for them in the foyer, ready to leave.

“Bye, you guys,” Inder waved to them and nudged Mini towards the exit. “It was great meeting you.”

Priya’s children were bundled up in their jackets. They stood tiredly by the front door, sleepily rubbing their eyes, as the adults said their good-byes.

Anika was sound asleep, stretched out on the sofa. She squirmed and wailed as Divya picked her up. “Shsh, *chup*, honey,” Divya said, shushing her. Her head lolled against her mother’s shoulder and she fell asleep again, drooling a little from the corner of her mouth.

Sham gathered up the exhausted Serena from the couch. The two of them followed the Sharmas out into the fresh, clean air, thick with the scent of the pink and white roses growing on both sides of the stoop. The valet service had brought their cars up to the front door.

Divya settled both girls in the back, then opened the front passenger door.

Priya called out, “Don’t forget. Next Friday, 7 p.m. at my house. First meeting of the Rummy club.” She waved from the doorstep, and Divya waved back until they were too far down the long driveway and she disappeared from sight.