

## HAUNTING JASMINE

### Chapter One

Copyright © 2010 by Anjali Banerjee

I didn't see this turn of events coming, or going. My ex-husband, Rob, used his charm like a weapon, and ultimately he didn't care whose heart he broke—or whose life he ruined. Neither did he care whose bed he woke up in. My mother would say, *Well, Jasmine, that's an American penis for you.* You should've married a Bengali. Faithful, good, and true to his culture. Her words conjure an image of the royal Bengali penis decked out in a traditional *churidar kurta*, its head peeking from the gold embroidered white silk outfit at our traditional Indian wedding. But my mother won't get her wish—I won't marry again.

Now that the divorce is final, I need a break from L.A., from the errant ex-husband whom I once thought was perfect. I'm alone on the ferry to Shelter Island, a green dot of rain-soaked darkness in the middle of Puget Sound. Out on the boat's breezeway, the wind whips my hair, reminding me that I'm still alive, that I can still feel the cold. Robert's number pops up on my cell phone screen – the green digits that I have come to loathe. I ignore the call and send him into the barren wasteland of Voice Mail. Let him deal with the real estate agent and the vultures descending on the condo. I've made my temporary escape into solitude.

As we approach the island, the eastern shoreline emerges from a wall of fog. Madrone and fir trees tumble down to wild rocky beaches; forested hillsides rise into pewter skies; and the town of Fairport hugs the harbor in a density of antique buildings and twinkling lights. My heartbeat thuds. What am I doing here? Soon the moss will grow between my fingers, in the creases of my nose, and in the pockets of my thin raincoat, where I keep Auntie's letter, her urgent request that summoned me home.

In the age of e-mail, she prefers to write the old-fashioned way. I pull her note from its hiding place and sniff the paper – a faint scent of rose. Each time I unfold the letter, the fragrance changes. Yesterday it was sandalwood, the day before, jasmine. But the words remain the same, written in Auntie's slanted golden script:

*I must go to India. I need you to run the bookstore while I'm away. Only you will do.*

When I called her to ask, *Why me?* she mentioned “fixing her health” in Kolkata. She wouldn't say more, but how could I deny my fragile old auntie? She promised me refuge among the classics, although I haven't had time to read a novel in years. The evidence hides in my oversized handbag – a rolled-up copy of Forbes magazine and a cell phone, a BlackBerry, and a netbook. The weight of technology pulls on the shoulder strap. I barely have room for the usual supplies – compact, lipstick, tissue, aspirin, allergy pills, charge cards, receipts, and a bundle of keys, including one that opens the exercise room at the office. Not a single novel, and yet, what do I have to lose? How hard can it be to sell the latest Nora Roberts or Mary Higgins Clark?

A month on the island, sitting in the bookstore, is a small enough sacrifice for my beloved auntie. I brought work to keep me occupied, including a roll of green bar reports that I haven't had time to review.

As the ferry docks, a gust of wind snatches Auntie's letter from my hand. The pink paper flutters into the water, and for a moment her handwriting glows in the evening light, then dissolves into sparkles as the letter sinks. I consider diving in after it – drowning would be a welcome release from sorrow. But a seagull calls out, admonishing me to keep my chin up, to defy Rob.

I square my shoulders and join the herd of passengers shuffling down the ramp to Harborside Road. Lined with cast-iron lampposts and giant old poplar trees, the street meanders along the waterfront and disappears into a silver mist. I imagine entering that mist and emerging in a new world where men don't have affairs, where two people can rewind time, fall in love again and not hurt each other, but I know this is impossible. Time moves in one direction. I must keep up the pace toward Auntie's Bookstore, although my heels were not made for brick sidewalks and my coat is too thin for the weather.

The town hasn't changed in the year since I last visited. Classic Cycle, Fairport Chiropractic, Island Eye Care. One token business for each human need. If you want a selection from which to choose, you're out of luck. A handwritten Rotary Bake Sale sign flaps in the window of the Fairport Café, where neighbors gather to share gossip and recipes.

I can't remember when I last had time to crack open a cookbook. In L.A., Rob and I subsisted on take-out, a secret that would annoy my mother. She believes every good Bengali daughter should be like my sister, Gita, who excels at preparing curried fish. I barely remember how to boil water. Now that I'll be staying with my parents, I'll have a harder time hiding my flaws.

I set off toward Auntie's Bookstore, six blocks north at the water's edge – a three-story Queen Anne Victorian painted in burnt umber and white. As I approach the house, a little girl runs out the front door, crying, followed by her mother.

"But I wanted Curious George!" the little girl wails.

"...next time," her mother says and bundles her into a Volkswagen Beetle.

I stop at the curb in front of the bookstore, my heartbeat kicking up. I'm not prepared for screaming children. And I forgot how large the house is, and how complex—a pattern of bay windows, turrets, and a wrap-around porch. Close up, patches of disrepair come into stark relief. The paint is peeling on the railing; a few shingles have come loose on the roof. Auntie should renovate, repaint, and place a neon sign in the window.

I take a deep breath and drag my suitcase up the narrow steps to the back door, which is now the main entrance to the bookstore. A well-worn path leads around the house to the ornate front door facing the waterfront, recalling a bygone era when important guests arrived by sea. Now I doubt anyone important ever crosses the threshold.

As I push open the back door, soft voices float toward me. The words coalesce, then change their minds and drift away. Inside the foyer, I'm submerged in dimness, save the faint orange glow from a Tiffany lamp. I'll add a few bright lights to this entryway.

The heavy door slams behind me, shutting out the world. The lemon scent of furniture polish rises through the dust; the air hangs heavy with the smell of mothballs. I can't survive a month in this stuffiness, among useless antiques and out-of-print titles.

And the clutter. Auntie leaves no surface uncovered. To my left, a dusty Kashmiri carpet hangs on the wall, depicting the tree of life in subtle shades of red and gold. As I step closer, the colors shift to green and yellow. Perhaps the light has changed, or perhaps the Hindu elephant-headed god, Ganesh, is playing a trick on me. He sits to my right, a brass statue waiting to frighten customers away. Auntie should display bestsellers here, not statues.

But before I can stop myself, I reach out to rub Ganesh's enormous belly. He will curse me for not kneeling to touch his feet. After all, he is powerful, temperamental, and unpredictable.

"Maybe you could curse Rob, make his penis fall off," I whisper to Ganesh. He does not reply.

I leave my luggage next to him and nearly bump into a man who seems to have materialized from nowhere. I look up into a rugged face, shadowed eyes, dark windswept hair. A faint blue glow shines behind him, accentuating his silhouette. He's dressed for leisure in a hooded travel jacket, brown cargo pants and hiking boots. He's carrying a pile of books under one arm. Apparently he has a lot of time for reading.

"That would hurt," he says. His voice resonates—a deep baritone that ripples across my skin. He gives off the scents of pine trees and fresh air.

"What would hurt?" I can't get past him. He's in my way, and he shows no signs of moving.

"Losing the family jewels."

"Oh, you heard what I said." The blood rises in my cheeks.

"Glad I'm not this Rob guy." A ghost of a smile touches his lips. He's mocking me.

"Believe me, if you were Robert, you'd be dead." I try to slip past him and nearly stumble on a snag in the carpet.

He steps aside. "You're in such a hurry."

"I move at regular speed. I'm not on island time."

His gaze is steady, unabashed. "Where are you from?"

"L.A. I'm here to help my aunt... temporarily." I need a hot shower, a cup of espresso.

“Your aunt. That lovely lady in the sari.”

“One and the same.” So she still attracts the attention of younger men. And she still wears saris.

“Beauty must run in the family,” he says.

My ears heat up. I’m glad they’re hiding beneath my hair. I haven’t felt beautiful in a long time.

“You’re bold, aren’t you, Mr.—?”

“Hunt. Connor Hunt. And you must be Jasmine.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I heard your aunt talking about you. She made you sound intriguing.”

Me, intriguing? I’ve never been intriguing. “You heard my aunt gossiping about me? What did she say? I need to have a word with her.”

“She said you’ll be working for her.”

“That’s it? That’s not intriguing.”

“She said you were running away.”

“Me, running?” My voice rises, and a knot is forming in the back of my neck. “That’s none of your business, and I’m not running. Just to set the record straight.”

He raises his hand. “No problem there.”

“I have a lot of work to catch up on, so if you don’t mind, I should find my aunt.”

“Do you have time for coffee? Or tea?”

I can’t believe this guy. “I won’t have time for dating while I’m here.” *Especially not with men like you.* Men who come on to strangers. Men like Robert.

“Who said anything about a date?” He steps closer, and I step back.

“What would you call it then? Do you always come on to women in bookstores?”

“Only to you. I can’t change your mind?”

“Not a chance.” I want to shove him out the front door. He’s exactly like Robert, who probably flirted with every female he encountered. I’m not going this route again. I’ve become the fortified castle of Jasmine.

He rubs his forefinger across his eyebrow. "I can't lie. I'm disappointed. But I hope to see you later." He slips out the door and disappears into the blustery evening.