



A rainy day,
a chance encounter—
sometimes that's
all it takes.

*Falling
into
Place*

Sheryn Munir



Note

While most of the places mentioned in this book do exist and the historical events referred to really happened, plenty of things in and around these places and events have been fictionalized. Thus, any attempt to look for historical accuracy will be futile.

Chapter 1

FORGET CATS AND DOGS—THIS WAS the stuff of elephants and hippos. The rain was coming down in sheets now, much faster than the drains could siphon off to mysterious depths. Sameen huddled under the bus stop shelter, cursing her luck for having worn her new white churidar today; the dress's lower half looked neither new nor white any more. She knew from her previous monsoons in Delhi that the drains would soon pack it in and the water level would start to rise. She hoped she would be home by then.

She stabbed at her phone, but the Uber app remained as stuck as it had been fifteen minutes ago. It was still showing no available taxis, not even a damned pool. She was considering rebooting the phone—again—when it vibrated in her hand and she nearly dropped it in alarm. It was Rohan.

“Have you got a cab yet?”

“No, yaar. And it's still pouring here.”

“Ah, damn it.”

“I'll be there soon, Ro. Gotta go now. My battery's dying.”

Poor Rohan—it was his birthday, after all. But her low-battery warning had been on for a while.

Stupid not to charge it in the office, Sameen thought. But she had been so caught up with checking the final proofs of that much-anticipated Loveleen Bing book and tussling with the cover designer on some teeny changes that would make all the difference, that she had completely forgotten. This book could make her career—which Sameen was acutely conscious of—and it had to be perfect. In fact, she'd become a bit obsessed about it.

Sameen gave herself a mental slap. What was wrong with her? It was almost nine o'clock, her boyfriend's birthday party was on, it was pouring with rain, no autorickshaws were around, and her cab apps had all simultaneously revolted. And here she was, daydreaming about some stupid book, Loveleen Bing or no Loveleen Bing. That said, even if she did manage to get a cab, she doubted she'd get anywhere soon—the traffic had barely moved in the last quarter hour.

Take that white WagonR, 1708—she'd noticed the number because it was today's date, 17 August. When she'd splashed her way out of her office and taken shelter here, it had been a couple of metres short of the bus stop. Now, it had advanced and was parallel to the bus stop. Bus number 413 had been standing at the T-junction to Sameen's left, gridlocked by the stream of cars turning at the light. From what Sameen could see, the bus was packed, but if she managed to squeeze herself in, she would at least be going homewards.

I'm not reaching home today, she groaned. She wondered if any of their friends heading towards Rohan's party would be passing this way.

As she waited for her phone to restart, she turned her attention back to cab 1708 and watched—with mounting resentment—the woman inside. She was typing away on her laptop. She had headphones on too, and if Sameen wasn't

mistaken, she was talking to someone. The light from the screen bathed her face in white-blue light. The woman brushed a strand of hair from her face and frowned in concentration as she nodded and typed. Sameen leaned forward.

Wasn't that...?

There was a cacophony of horns and a flurry of movement as some secret signal hailed the possibility of progress for the traffic. No time to think. Sameen launched herself off the footpath and ran. Horns blared and tyres screeched, but she paid them no heed. She wrenched open the door of cab 1708 and hurled herself inside.

* * *

“What the fuck!” Tara screamed.

“*O teri!*” the driver yelled. He braked, but since the car was hardly moving, it didn't really make much difference. The traffic seemed to have stalled again. He switched on the light inside the car.

Tara stared dumbfounded at the drenched woman by her side, who looked just as shocked as she felt. Tara's handbag was open by her feet and she knew she had a can of deodorant in it. She reached in and thumbed the cap off, readying herself to spray the hell out of this creature. She was *not* going to be mugged on a crowded main road.

Then the intruder started talking.

“I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to frighten you. Sorry, Driver-ji. It's just that, it's raining so hard and I haven't been able to get any transport and I saw you—we've met at the Safal store in Malviya Nagar, don't you remember? The one opposite the bank? Remember, the other day we both wanted a pack of frozen peas and there was only one left and you said I could have it?”

I'm really sorry about this, but I saw you and I was desperate and the traffic started moving, and there was nothing else to do but jump into the cab before I could explain anything. I'm so sorry. God, this is so embarrassing, but I would really, really appreciate it if you gave me a lift."

Tara's mouth fell open. She let the can of deodorant drop back inside her bag, relieved she hadn't maced this idiot. She did remember the frozen peas, and she was almost sure she'd seen this crazy fool around. She breathed and gestured to Prem that it was okay. "It's fine. She lives near my house."

"I'm so sorry," the stranger said contritely.

"It's...fine." The hammering in her chest was starting to abate. For some reason, the traffic had started to move again. "Where do you want to be dropped off?"

"Anywhere will do." She rummaged in her bag and produced her wallet. For a moment, Tara thought she was going to offer her money, but she only took out a card and handed it to her. "This was very rude of me, I know. Here's my card. My name is Sameen Siddiqi. I work in a publishing house. Oh, and here's something that can prove I'm who I say I am and not some random con artist." She produced a voter's ID that she thrust at Tara.

Tara took the card but waved away the ID. In any case, Prem had turned off the interior light and it was too dark to make out details. "It's okay, I remember you. But you did give me a heart attack."

"Sorry."

"My name is Tara Dixit."

They shook hands. "What do you do, Tara?"

"I'm a journalist."

"Oh nice. Must be an interesting job, producing what the rest of the world sees as news."

“Yeah, it’s fun.”

“What’s your opinion about the Syrian refugee crisis? It’s really heartbreaking, isn’t it, all those people, having to flee? Imagine having to run away, leaving everything you have ever known, your home, your friends, your money, your things. It’s quite disgusting, though, isn’t it, all these world leaders and even news channels calling them migrants? Disgusting.”

“Disgusting,” Tara agreed, though she wasn’t sure what was wrong about news channels calling them migrants. She needn’t have worried about adding intelligent content to the conversation, because Sameen Siddiqi was quite capable of doing all the talking.

“Al Jazeera is the only channel I have some respect for,” she went on. “It is the only one making a distinction.”

Tara decided to tune out as Sameen launched into the politics of refugees versus migrants. Whatever invisible barrier had held up the traffic seemed to have lifted and, within twenty minutes, Prem was turning into Malviya Nagar. Sameen asked to be dropped off at one corner, and, following another round of profuse apologies and thanks, she disappeared down a dark lane.

Tara leaned back into her seat and sighed in relief.

Chapter 2

TARA'S ALREADY IFFY MOOD TOOK a further dive the moment she stepped into the house. The hum of the air conditioner welcomed her like a long-lost friend. Otherwise, apart from a rustle of paper, there was silence. Then her mother's voice came through, low and serious. Before Tara could call out, she spotted her through the open doorway

Tara's mother sat at their large dining table, papers and notebooks spread all around her. She cradled a phone between her head and shoulder, nodding, making notes on a scrap of paper before her, speaking every now and again.

"Hi, Mama," Tara called, forcing her voice to remain neutral. Her mother looked up and waved a distracted hello.

Tara dumped her things on the table in the hall and walked through into the living-cum-dining room. Annoyance seared through her. The room was a mess. Dirty dishes were stacked at the other end of the dining table to make space for her mother's latest project. The jigsaw puzzle Tara had started last evening—a complicated 1,000-piece one of a *Casablanca* film poster—had been unassembled and the pieces put back into their box. This incensed Tara anew. Even more than the pile of damp washing

dumped on the sofa, clearly brought in hurriedly from the rain, or the empty, dirty glass and a half-eaten plate of snacks on the coffee table that had attracted a line of ants. Muddy slipper prints led in from the balcony. The window next to it had not been shut properly and had let the rain in—the sodden curtain hung limply and dripped on top of the wooden cabinet.

“Oh, Mama!” Tara said, running to close the window.

“Tara? You’re back?”

“No, this is a ghost!”

Tara went to her room, wishing she could bang the door like a sixteen-year-old. After a quick shower, she changed with some relief into a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. When she came out, she noticed her computer was on. Moving the mouse to rouse it from sleep, Tara found a spreadsheet maximized on the screen. She didn’t have to look too carefully to know what it was. Clenching her teeth, she quit the file and shut down the computer.

Yes, her mother had her crazy moments, but she was going too far this time. Really.

“Is there anything to eat?” Tara called as she went outside.

Her mother made an incomprehensible sound, busy organizing her papers in front of her into different piles.

The pressure cooker on the kitchen counter was still warm, which Tara took to be a good sign. A blue-checked cloth peeping out from a casserole was even better news. Tara twisted the lid open—parathas would be too much to expect, she supposed. It was. There were just plain old chapatis in there. She wrestled with the pressure-cooker lid, fingers crossed for something interesting. But there was only rice inside.

She poked her head around the dining room door. “Mama, why have you made rice and chapatis but nothing to eat with them?”

“Hmm? Have I?”

Tara went back into the kitchen and, with a lot more violence than necessary, measured out some dal to cook. She shoved the bowl under the sink and let the water run over the pulses as she pulled out a clean pressure cooker and banged it down on the burner. She sliced onions and garlic viciously.

She was still seething by the time she had set the dal to cook. It wasn't like she expected her mother to wait on her hand and foot, but she was the one who insisted they didn't need a cook. And it *was* nine forty-five—she'd been out of the house for over twelve hours.

To make a point—though it was debatable her mother would even notice—Tara went out into the living room and started banging things around as she cleaned up. The phone rang—the landline. It was lying on the table, next to her mother, who answered.

“Hello? Oh, it's you. Yes, yes, I got the details. He seems perfect.” She paused and glanced at Tara. “No, I haven't told her yet. She's just walked in.” Another pause, followed by a laugh. “Yes, so true, so true.”

Tara gritted her teeth. She wished her mother had picked a less annoying obsession this time. She wondered how long this one would last.

* * *

“Look who's back from the wars!”

A loud cheer went up. Sameen brushed sodden hair from her face and waved sheepishly at the modest crowd that was supposed to be the cavalry for Rohan's thirtieth-birthday bash. The lights had been dimmed and a homemade banner said, “Happy birthday Rohan! Welcome to the 30s!” There were also balloons and streamers. Their living room pulsed with the deep

bass from Rohan's eclectic music collection. A large bowl of chips and a smaller bowl with a dip were being passed around, and everyone had a drink.

"Sameeeeen!" Milind weaved between the cushions set on the floor for people to sit on and came to give her a hug. "Yuck, you're wet. Are those leaves in your hair?"

"Yeah, I've had to walk home while you've been warm and dry and eating my food."

The table groaned under the weight of the goodies Rohan had slaved to produce. He'd cooked for days. That had been no real hardship since he just needed an excuse to hit the kitchen, but the fact that only five people had turned up out of the twelve expected was a bit of a dampener.

"Just give me a moment to get into some dry clothes." Sameen stopped to give Rohan a peck on the cheek before slipping into the bedroom.

He followed her in. "Sent your book off?" he asked, plopping down on the bed that took up most of the room. She squeezed past him to the cupboard to get out the dress she'd been wanting to wear for this party.

She could tell he was a bit resentful. She didn't really blame him. "It wasn't the book. I couldn't get any transport. I had to gatecrash someone's cab in the end."

"What?"

"I'll tell you later. You get back to your party."

"Huh, some party."

As if on cue, the lights went out. Loud groans came from the other room.

"Hang on, people," Rohan called. A pale blueish light came on as he switched on his phone screen. "Don't panic. There are some emergency lights somewhere. Ow, sorry, Sid, didn't see you there."

By the time Sameen emerged, washed and as suitably dressed and coiffed as she could manage by candlelight, Rohan had managed to get some lights going. His laptop had taken over music duties, and people had started to drift towards the food.

Despite everything, the night was an unexpected success. There were chips and dips and sangria. There was music and dancing, and when the battery on Rohan's computer ran out, there was singing. The emergency lights gave out after a couple of hours and they sat around guttering candles, teasing Rohan about being over the hill and Sameen about hijacking cabs. Fortunately, the evening was quite cool, rare for August, so the absent electricity didn't seem to bother anyone that much.

Nobody showed any particular inclination to go home, and when things died down towards the early hours of the morning, everyone found sheets, pillows, and corners to stretch out in.

When the house was quiet again, Sameen leaned back in Rohan's arms and asked, "So how does thirty feel?"

He tilted his head as if he was thinking about it. "A little depressing, but I think it's going to be all right."

"Good to know. After all, I'll be joining you there soon."

"Mm-hmm," he said, his voice thick with sleep. "I still can't believe you hijacked a cab."

She smacked his chest half-heartedly. "I didn't hijack it." She closed her eyes. An image of Tara's face framed in the car window, the way the light from the computer screen etched shadows on her profile, flashed into her mind. She smiled. Actually, she *had* hijacked a cab. Sort of.

"Oh shit," Sameen said.

"Hmm?"

"I never even offered to pay for the cab."

But Rohan was already asleep.

Chapter 3

TARA RESISTED THE URGE TO shove the elbow-happy elderly gent into the crate of onions and forced herself to move sedately to the tomatoes section instead. She hated shopping at this time of the morning. She ended up jostling for space with a bunch of oddly aggressive seniors who hadn't seemed to have grasped the concept of lines or saying "Excuse me". Of course, she wouldn't be here at all if not for *another* not-quite-senior citizen—her mother—who had set out vegetable shopping but had come home with copious amounts of fruit instead.

Finding the counter empty, Tara rushed to have her stuff weighed and billed, wondering if her mother was actually, really losing her mind this time. She glanced at her watch to check if she was running late, then remembered it was her morning off. Maybe she would creep back into bed for another couple of hours. That was the best thing about her job—sometimes she didn't need to go into office till the afternoon.

"Tara?"

The first thing Tara noticed about the woman who had hailed her was her faded cotton drawstring skirt. It had a maroon-and-black zigzag design and was almost identical to

one Tara had owned a good decade or so ago. Faded or not, this woman carried it off pretty well. Tara glanced up to lock eyes with her cab-napping acquaintance from last week, who seemed to be waiting for Tara to say something.

What *was* her name?

“Sameen,” the woman offered brightly. “We shared a cab the other day, remember?”

Shared was one way of putting it. Tara smiled and said hello, abashed that she must have looked clueless.

“I must apologize,” Sameen continued, “again. Not just for jumping into your taxi, but also, I completely forgot to pay you.”

“That’s no problem,” Tara said, taking her change from the man behind the counter. “I didn’t have to go out of my way or anything.”

“No, but still. I must pay you. How much was the fare?”

“Really, it’s not a problem.”

“I insist!”

Tara looked around a little desperately. “My, er, office picks up the tab.” A little white lie, but surely justifiable in the circumstances.

“Oh.” Sameen, who had produced her wallet, appeared crestfallen. Then she brightened. “You must let me treat you to a coffee, then.”

“Oh, but you don’t have to.”

“I want to! Are you free right now?”

“Er...I...um, how about tomorrow?”

Sameen peered at her for a second. “After work, then? Around seven? At that new coffee place next to Rimpys?”

Tara realized there was no escape. “Sure.”

But that afternoon in her office, she did fret about it to her best friend and colleague, Barkha.

“I’m telling you,” Tara said, “I think she’s stalking me.”

Barkha looked her up and down. “Why?”

Tara put her hands on her hips. “What do you mean why? You don’t think I’m stalk-able?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Why would anyone want to be stalk-able?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“You said, ‘You don’t think I’m stalk-able?’” Barkha leaned across Tara’s desk to dip her hand into the packet of potato chips. She crunched noisily.

“That’s because of how you looked at me and what you said.”

“What did I say?”

“You said... Oho, stop it! You’re derailing the conversation.”

“You’re boring me.” Barkha picked the packet of chips out of Tara’s hand and studied its contents. “You’re obsessed with this woman.”

“I’m *not!*”

Barkha looked up at the ceiling, popping a large chip into her mouth. “Then why do you think someone you’ve met twice is stalking you?”

“It’s just that I get this really crazy vibe from her.”

“Oh Tara, you wouldn’t get a vibe if it came and sat in your lap,” Barkha said with a dismissive wave. “Remember what happened that time when we dropped so many hints about—”

Tara snatched the bag of chips back and got up. “Get your own snacks.”

“Nooo, don’t go.” Barkha got up to follow her. “Tell me more.”

“No!”

“Pleeeease.”

They went down the stairs, arguing all the way, and out to the narrow alley just round the corner where the tea stall was located. The makeshift structure consisted of a blue tarpaulin held up by thick bamboo sticks. The side of the office building made up the back of the stall, while the other three sides were open. One corner was occupied by a wobbly, run-down table whose front was an aluminium sheet with an ad for Pepsi on it. A large pan sat on the stove on the table, where Ramu, the proprietor, was making his special masala tea, which, according to Tara, was the best in the world. She took a deep breath, taking in the smell of ginger and cardamom. The table also held a few aluminium kettles, used and clean glasses, and a couple of trays strewn about. Two long wooden benches were placed in front of the stall, at right angles to the table.

Barkha plonked herself on one of the benches, which was unoccupied. An empty bench was a rare occurrence in this city of tea lovers. Tara ordered two glasses of masala tea, while Barkha lit up for a quick smoke.

“Okay, let’s review the situation. Who jumps into a stranger’s cab?” Tara said, trying to figure out which side of Barkha she should sit on to make sure the breeze wouldn’t blow smoke on her face. It was always tricky, because if she sat too far away, the noise from the traffic, the hammering of the cobbler on his anvil, and the azan from the mosque—which was going to start any minute now—would make conversation impossible.

“You said she knew you lived close by.”

“Still. Would you get in a stranger’s cab?”

Barkha narrowed her eyes as she took a long, slow drag.
“Well...”

“Don’t answer that,” Tara interjected, realizing something like that would be just up Barkha’s alley. “Don’t you think it’s a bit creepy that she knew me? Then she turned up yesterday at the vegetable shop too.”

The boy from the tea stall came over with their tiny glasses of tea. “No school today?” Tara asked him.

He grinned and shook his head. “Holiday.”

She handed him a fifty-rupee note.

“To be fair,” Barkha said as the boy counted out change, “she was trying to pay you for the ride. Which she should have done that day itself.”

“But she chose not to. Maybe so she could seek me out later.”

Barkha sighed. “You’re quite convinced she’s up to no good, right? Where did she say she worked?”

“Stone Apple Books.”

Barkha drank down her piping-hot tea at top speed and stubbed her cigarette out. “Come on,” she said and sped towards the office.

“Hey,” Tara called out, looking alternately at Barkha’s retreating back and the scalding glass of tea in her hand.

By the time she’d finished her tea and returned to her desk, there was no sign of Barkha. Since it was a slow day, she went down the corridor and into the large cubicle that comprised the HR department, and found her friend hunched over her computer. She looked up at Tara and beckoned her over.

“Look, I’ve found her—Sameen Siddiqi, commissioning editor, since 2013.”

“I can see you are taking your assistant-HR-managerly duties very seriously.”

Barkha switched to another tab. “And here’s her Facebook page—who’s that guy?”

Tara leaned forward, interested despite herself. “That must be the boyfriend whose birthday she said it was.”

They spent a silent few minutes checking out Sameen’s Facebook timeline.

“She looks pretty normal to me,” Barkha said.

“Having a boyfriend and a job, and being a weirdo are not mutually exclusive,” Tara reminded her.

“Okay, then, I give up.” Barkha threw up her hands. “Congratulations, you have a stalker.”

Tara rolled her eyes and went back to her desk, wondering what her next encounter with the crazy cab lady would bring.

* * *

Sameen opened the door to her house and walked in. The first thing she noticed was the new yellow tube light. She smiled. Rohan had replaced the harsh white light she hated with one of the “warm” light ones. She loved how it softened the edges of the room and turned the mishmash of furniture she and Rohan owned into one eclectic collection.

They were lucky to have landed this house. For Sameen it was definitely a step up from the poky little place she’d been in before. They even had an extra bedroom, albeit tiny, that Rohan could use as his workspace, and that balcony was great for parties.

The second thing she noticed was the delicious smell. She sniffed, intrigued, and called out, “Hey, I’m home.”

“In the kitchen,” Rohan said.

Of course. Where else would he be at this time of the day if he was home?

She dumped her bag on the sofa and went into the kitchen. Rohan was in front of the stove, dressed in a black T-shirt and

jeans, attire that always made him look irresistible. He had his “decent” apron wrapped around his middle, the one that didn’t have a rude message in Hindi on it. That meant he was cooking something exotic. She came closer and put her arms around his waist from behind.

“What’s cooking?” she asked.

Rohan turned in Sameen’s arms and planted a kiss on her lips. “It’s a surprise.”

“Won’t you even give me a hint?” She tried looking over his shoulder at the pan on the burner.

“Nope.” Rohan blocked her view. “Go freshen up while I make you a drink. What’s it going to be today? Wine or whisky?”

“It feels like a whisky day.”

“Right. Get out of here now.” He gently shoved her towards the door and turned back to the stove.

Sameen blew a raspberry at him.

By the time she’d changed, Rohan had finished cooking and was sitting on the sofa with his gin and tonic, flipping through one of his architecture books. Sameen sat next to him, resting her head against his shoulder. She took a sip of the whisky he handed her and put the glass on the table.

“What did you do today, apart from cooking me a mysterious meal?” she asked. “And when are we going to eat?”

“Soon, greedy pig. I got a new job, by the way. The client wants me to create a mini Stonehenge in his sprawling garden in Gurgaon.” Rohan shook his head. “I have the most bizarre job in the world.”

“After your Japan stint, I’m sure you’ll find better clients, and you can be well rid of the weird ones.”

“Speaking of weirdos, how did it go with the cover designer?”

“Ugh.” Sameen shuddered. “He refuses to make any changes regardless of whether it goes with the subject of the book. I spent the whole day negotiating with him. I swear, he has a pea-sized brain and a planet-sized ego. God, I’m so exhausted.”

Rohan put his arm around her and gently squeezed. They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, swigging their drinks.

This is the life, Sameen thought, feeling pleasantly drowsy. Idiot cover designers or not, she did love her job. And—no question about it—Rohan was the best boyfriend in the world.

Sameen was almost asleep when Rohan spoke. His voice seemed to be coming from a great distance. “Didn’t get a chance to scare anyone in a cab today?”

She roused herself. “Ha ha. Very funny. Speaking of which, I met Tara, the woman whose cab I shared, at Safal this morning. I’m taking her to coffee tomorrow evening.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I thought since I didn’t pay my share of the taxi fare...”

“Wow. Not only are you a cab-napper, but you’re also a freeloader. But then, I always knew that.”

Sameen lazily swatted Rohan’s chest with the back of her hand. “Shut up.”

They lay curled up on the sofa, chatting. Finally, Rohan pushed her off, saying he was going to lay the table and serve dinner.

Sameen put her head back and listened to Norah Jones crooning in the background. She closed her eyes to soak in the soothing tones.

“Sameen, come. Dinner’s ready.” Rohan’s voice pulled her out of the spell. She got up and went to the dinner table. Her eyes widened.

“What’s that?” Sameen asked, pointing at the big bowl of thick brown soup with noodles and vegetables, garnished with diced peanuts.

“It’s khao suey,” Rohan replied as he served them. “It’s a Burmese dish. I think you’ll like it.”

“This is delicious.” Sameen dug into the bowl for more. “This is exactly what I needed today—an old-fashioned romantic evening at home. How did you know?”

“I have magical powers,” said Rohan. “Now eat up, there’s also dessert.” He winked.

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FALLING INTO PLACE

BY SHERYN MUNIR

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