

# Care For Me



*Farah Cook*

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*To Chris, Ben and Noah  
because of you, I am*



## PROLOGUE

She comes down the hallway, leaving the front door open. I stand poised and watch her throw her bag onto the floor. Jennifer Rush crooning from the radio in the kitchen. She walks right past me. She doesn't meet my gaze. I'm not sure she even knows I exist. The pressure cooker whistles and a starchy smell of rice moistens the air.

'Where were you?'

No answer.

I catch a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror at the other end of the hall. I catch my own gaze in it as I stride in her direction.

'Answer me. Where did you go?' She turns into the dining room, pulls back a chair and sits at the table set with empty plates and glasses. Her fingers toy with the table cloth, twisting it into a tight knot.

'Don't pretend you don't know where I went.' The candle flickers, casting a shade on her face, which has turned pink. 'You've known all along, haven't you?'

'Badtameez ladki. That's not the way to speak to your mother. Didn't I tell you I don't want you to—' I fall silent and watch her watch me.

'Don't you tell me what to do.' Anger lingers like phantom threads between us.

'What did you say?' I loom over her, but she stands up and pushes the chair away with her foot. The table shakes, knocking over the candle. Thick smoke is coming from the kitchen. The smell of burning rice. But that's not all. Something else is burning. I look down. Small ribbons of flames rise from the table top.

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‘From now on, you don’t have to worry about me.’ She’s at the window looking out. The hazy summer light slips through the shutters, leaving shadows on the floor.

‘Why did you have to go with her?’ I go to stand beside her and place my hand on her shoulder. It feels warm, smouldering. Hot air begins to envelop us, makes its way into our lungs.

‘Tell me, why?’ I adjust my wool kameez.

‘Because,’ her beady eyes look directly into mine. ‘You stopped loving me.’



PART ONE

Mother

Daughter



# 1

## AMIRA

*Thursday, 25 April 2019*

It's a dull day, rainy and wet. I park the car outside the local church, who are lending their room to the Carers Support Group. The woman at the Alzheimer's Society office scrawled the address on a piece of paper when I went to see her. I crease it up and throw it inside my handbag.

I don't even know why I am here. That's a lie. I am here because Sana suggested I speak to a care group. It's done wonders for her. I should turn around, it doesn't feel right. Neither did chatting to strangers in online discussion forums. But being anonymous comes with its perks, and strange friendships can be found, like the one I formed with Sana. I don't know her, but I instantly connected with her online and even gave out my real name, instead of holding onto my identity as *Nursemira*. It just seemed so impersonal. Now we chat every week and have become so close through exchanging daily episodes about our parents. I tell her personal things about Mum I never dreamed of telling anyone. She trusts me with things about her father. Sometimes I think that without Sana I'd have been lost.

When we last spoke, Sana encouraged me to contact the Alzheimer's Society. 'Do it for your own wellbeing,' she said. 'Or you will go insane.'

She has been a great support, and I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found her in the forum for carers. Two words lit up my screen, brightening my day: 'Hello lovely.' I'd know it was her – *TheLonelymouse* – and would proceed to pour my heart out, tell her things only another carer would understand. I realise

burdening one person with the same issue is unhealthy. I need to talk to somebody other than Sana, who is going through what I am. Somebody who understands my situation. That's why I need to attend the Carers Support Group.

I head through an arched corridor, gently knock on the door to my left and enter. Five people are sitting in a circle of chairs. An older man in a shirt, bow tie and trousers introduces himself to me as John Buchanan. He immediately pulls out another chair as if he's been expecting me. It's a cosy room, lit with bright fairy lights that fill the space like shimmering glitter. There's a table in the corner with tea, coffee, water and biscuits. I make myself a cup of tea, take a seat and listen to the man in his mid-forties talk about his mum. He scratches at his beard the entire time, looks down at the floor. When he's done, a woman, perhaps younger than me, starts talking about her dad. She dabs her eyes and blows her nose with a Kleenex. Tells the strangers in the room how much she loves him, but that she simply can't care for him all by herself anymore.

'It's just so hard, d'ya know what I mean? I'm so drained most days – physically and emotionally. I hardly have any contact with my friends. Dad needs constant attention. I worry that he'll hurt himself, d'ya know what I mean?' she pauses and looks at John, who nods understandingly. 'I'll never be able to forgive myself if anything were to happen to Dad. Never.'

'What are you going to do?' asks the man sitting next to her. He reveals a forehead full of deep creases as he pushes back his hair. A woman with a short crop leans in and asks the same question.

'My brother has agreed to move in with us. He wants to help care for Dad.'

'Good for you, Susan,' says John. 'You're finally getting the support you need.'

Susan wants to go on. But now John looks over at me. He expects me to introduce myself, and confess the thoughts that I carry around like a bag of bricks.

I inhale the stale air and take a good look at the unfamiliar faces. They suddenly don't seem so unfamiliar anymore. They must feel the same way I do, otherwise they wouldn't be here. I get an *it's OK* nod from John. I clear my throat

'Hello, my name is Amira Khan.' I pause. I always forget to use my maiden name. 'Malik. I'm Amira Malik and I'm thirty-eight. I have been caring for my mum for about seven years since she was diagnosed with dementia. I have lived with her ever since my dad died.' I pause again, feeling the relief easing from my chest. I don't mention the time I lived with Haroon. That time is a distant memory.

'When she was diagnosed, they said she might have had dementia for longer, but the signs could have just been related to her age. Mum turns seventy-six this year. I don't have siblings or relatives. We are alone and have been ever since my teenage son decided to move in with my husband. Ex-husband, I mean.'

'What was the reason your son—' John furrows his brows. 'What I mean to ask, is did he move because of your mother? Teenagers can be quite sensitive to people with dementia.'

'No, I don't believe him going had anything to do with Mum. Nothing like that,' I hear myself lie. Shafi *was* annoyed. He was devastated that Nano was becoming forgetful. *She's stopped recognising me*, he used to say.

'It was getting too cramped for us all living under the same roof in a small, two-bedroom house. He's a typical thirteen-year-old and needed space, a room of his own. I'm sure you all understand—'

'Aye, I get that,' says Susan. 'My boy lives with his dad, too. And I was never married. Tony is my ex and—' Susan pauses, catching herself. 'I'm sorry, Amira, you were talking,' she gestures for me to continue, her face screwed up in apology.

'It's OK,' I need a break. But really, I want to go home. I feel guilty for being here. Sana told me not to let my guilt get to me. Haroon said that too. I can't help it. Talking about Mum in a support group makes me feel I am doing something terribly wrong. 'Actually . . . where is the loo?'

‘To the left in the hallway,’ says John.

As I leave, an echo of Mum’s voice rings in my ears.

‘Where is Shafi? And who is that boy?’ She’d point a sharp finger at him. ‘Don’t want him in the house. Tell him to leave.’

She started to forget that Shafi had grown up. She never grasped the concept that he was no longer the sweet little boy stuck in her memory. Shafi started to spend more and more time away, making excuses not to come home and staying at Haroon’s place more often. And whenever I’d ask him what was going on, he ignored me. But I knew he was frustrated with Mum who had started to treat him like a stranger.

‘Get out,’ she’d say when he’d come home. ‘Out of our house.’

‘Make Nano stop, please,’ he would plead. How could I? The only thing I know how to do is making sure Mum is alright. I never saw that Shafi wasn’t. And neither am I.

The corridor out of the room is dark, and the tube bulb in the ceiling is flickering. At the far end of the exit a shadow stands watching. Then I hear the clacking of heels start to echo down the corridor. The shadowy figure is getting closer. I spot a dark grey door to my left pressed into the whitewashed walls. I jerk on the handle and rush into a storeroom, full of boxes and cartons. A statue of Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus sits on the floor.

My heart pounds faster. The clacking stops. I place my ear on the door and hear a loud, heavy breath coming from the other side. Like something is out to swallow me. The air catches in my lungs. Beads of sweat trickle down my face. I step away from the door and manage to grab hold of Mary’s head with the tip of my finger before as it tips over. The sound of footsteps fade and somewhere a door slams shut.

I twist the handle open. The hallway is empty and the light from the ceiling no longer flickers, but illuminates down the long corridor. Did I imagine somebody was here? Whenever I am alone and in dark places, I tend to imagine things that aren’t real. It started when I was little, alone in my bed. I used to scream and

Mum would come running. I used to think spiders crawled all over my bed.

I gather myself together, pulling back my hair, breathing deeply. I decide to go back to the room, even though my heart is still racing. I take a seat back in my chair and feel John's gaze deepening. He takes a sip from his cup and encourages me to go on. I hesitate. Can I trust that what I say will stay sealed between these walls? John assures me that everything we choose to share is confidential.

'How's your social life?' he asks. 'Do you see your friends much?'

'When I told my friends that Mum was diagnosed,' I say, wringing my hands, 'they felt sorry for me – said it's going to be hard caring for her full-time. I don't speak to any of them anymore.'

'That's just like my friends. D'ya know what I mean?' John stares at Susan. He signals that she should let me continue. 'Sorry, go on Mira or is it A-mira?' she glares at me with wide eyes.

'Amira,' I smile.

'Sorry.' Heat flashes to Susan's cheeks.

'Lately, I feel more and more frustrated. Mum's condition worsened. She won't let me help her in the bathroom. She doesn't want my help showering. She shuts the door right in my face when I try to.' I am trying to follow Sana's advice, I'm trying to open up. It does feel cathartic. 'She often walks around wearing her nightgown. Sometimes for days because she refuses to get changed. Drawers are left open, clothes will be on the floor. She stopped wearing underwear, says she can't find any. But I always find them stuffed underneath her pillow.' I stop myself from saying more. Looking around, I realise I don't need to reveal the reasons why Mum does what she does. They understand. They've been down that road.

'How are you helping your mum overcome some of these issues?' asks John.

'I smile when I speak. I try to remain calm. But it's not easy.'

Sana says *Smile and the world smiles with you*. I'd heard this quote before. I can't remember how it feels to be truly happy, or

the last time I *really* smiled. I don't know if Mum and I feel anything for one another. Love, hate, disgust even.

'And what are some of the things you do that could improve her memory?'

'I'm helping her do Life Story Work, which helps her recognise her past. I've hung pictures of us in her bedroom. I plan to put up more. Perhaps a picture of my dad and my son. Mum doesn't remember them. I also want to write down her favourite foods and music. Perhaps familiar places she feels connected to. Anything to evoke her memories from the past. She can't remember what happens day to day. Isn't able to grasp time, as in, when things have happened. Mum refers to today and yesterday as *the other day*. And any *the other day* is the same. I want to give her a journal. She likes to write things down. Likes reading. I want Mum to use it so that she doesn't have to repeat everything. Even the smallest things she writes on her hand.'

'What does she like reading?' asks John.

I pause, blow at the surface of my tea before I take a sip. He offers me a biscuit, which I take.

'The newspaper. She is obsessed with reading it. Mum doesn't watch the news on telly, and I know it's because she can't recall anything she sees blinking on the screen. But I can't drive to town to get her the daily newspaper, I simply don't have the time for it. The *Inverness Courier* is bi-weekly. She'll read it and highlight all the headlines in yellow marker, often, she's searching for a fictional story about a young girl she says went missing—'

'Me dad cuts papers,' the heavy man sitting on the far left of the room says. 'Newspapers, letters, cards. You name it, he keeps all the scraps and bits.' He coughs. 'He don't live with me and me family no more. It's his carer who tells me he wont stop cutting things.'

'Anything else you want to share with us Amira?' John rolls the 'r' in my name as if he knows me well already. I feel like he's giving me special attention. Perhaps it's because I am new.

'Mum likes food. She used to be a wonderful cook, but I can't let her do the grocery shopping. She forgets things and buys too



much, and it goes to waste. We've also had incidents where she picked food up from the store and started eating it right there and then. So I try to go during her afternoon naps. That's the only time I have to get things done around the house. She always wants to know what we're eating. Refuses to eat takeaway. Insists she has to do the cooking herself. We've had some minor accidents in the kitchen. Nothing serious. I wouldn't allow her in there cooking on her own.'

'I try not to leave Mother alone anywhere around the house,' says the woman with short blonde hair. 'She empties Nutella out of the jar with a spoon and then there's the honey pot—'

'Thank you, Bridget,' says John. 'For sharing that with us. Shall we, uhm, let Amira continue where she left off?' he sends me an approving nod.

'I no longer ask Mum what she wants for her meals. I give her what I know she needs, even when she refuses to eat what I plate in front of her. It doesn't always work. Sometimes I find that she makes her own meals when I am not around. She goes to the shop without my knowledge. Once, she left the shopping in the back of the car. I've had to throw meat away several times because she leaves it out for too long. I want to stop buying it. I want Mum to eat more vegetables.'

'She's forgotten how to cook, hasn't she?' asks Susan.

I nod. 'Yes, she no longer remembers the recipes.'

'My mum does something similar,' says the man I took to be in his forties. 'Once, she woke up early, took all the meat out from the freezer and left it on the counter where it sat for the whole day. She said she wanted to prepare Christmas dinner for the family. I said to her, Christmas isn't due for another six months. She didn't believe me. I get that a lot and—'

'Thank you, Tom, for sharing your insights.' John looks back over at me.

I go quiet. Look down at my thumbs and twirl them round and round.

‘I appreciate coming here today to share my experiences. Caring for Mum the past couple of years have been hard. And it’s getting harder. I’m not sure how long I can manage to look after her. I’m terrified that some day something will go wrong.’

‘What do you think might happen?’ John grabs a biscuit for himself. ‘If you were to leave your mother all by herself, is there a risk of danger?’

‘The house is secure. I’ve had fire alarms installed. But I worry she’ll forget what she’s cooking and burn things.’

‘Me dad’s carer makes what he likes. Neeps and tatties. Boiled eggs and toast,’ says the heavy man. ‘But he burns the food when she’s gone and eats all the black bits. He says it’s delicious. I told him it’s dangerous and that he’ll end up causing a fire.’

‘Mum is terrified of causing a fire,’ I say. ‘She’s always been worried about it, ever since I can remember. I contacted her doctor, and spoke to a memory loss clinic that was recommended to me. I told them about Mum’s condition. She should be due for an assessment soon, and one of the nurses said she might be better off living in a care home. I’m not sure I agree with them.’

‘And why is that?’

I shrug. I don’t tell him that in Pakistani culture the children are obliged to care for their parents. That we simply do not put our elders in a care home. It’s considered amoral.

‘My neighbour told me she doesn’t like Mum wandering about the neighbourhood peering into people’s houses. She said, ‘Why don’t you place her in a care home? It’s where she belongs.’ I think she called the social services. They almost took Mum away because she was shouting at pedestrians passing by our house to help put out the fire. People thought she was crazy. Our house has never been on fire. Mum has a phobia of lots of things. Loneliness, losing her jewellery. Fire is also one of them.’

John makes a note in his book of what I’ve just said. ‘Go on, Amira.’ He rolls the ‘r’ again.

‘Earlier this year, I felt more tired than usual. I started to sleep

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in for an extra hour in the morning. Some days, I could barely get out of bed, let alone take care of Mum. I don't want her to go into a care home. I can't afford to put her into one. But I also have to think of what's best for her. I have to think about her safety.' I look over at Susan. 'I would never be able to forgive myself should anything happen to her.' She nods.

John thanks me, says I shouldn't worry. There's help if I need it. And I can tell by the look on his face that he thinks I need help.

I fold my hands and place them in my lap. I can't finish my tea. It's cold anyway. So is the room. Everyone is staring at me. No one says a word. I don't think they expected me to say this much on day one.

Before I go, John pulls me aside. He gives me what looks like a leaflet. Ravenswood Lodge Care Home. 'Speak to them. They are like no other facility. They might be able to help you.'

'How?' I ask.

'They offer grants for special cases.' he says, before he leaves.

I look at the glossy brochure in my hand. There's a picture with tall trees and a Victorian house on a cliff top, sleeping like a silent tomb.

I recognise this place. I've driven the long route to the rural Highlands, with its curved lanes bouncing over ruts and channels. The loose gravel spraying from beneath the tyres and wearing them out. And the deer, there must be thousands of deer out there in the wilderness roaming free. One misty morning I remember driving past these large gates and the twisted driveway that leads up to the old manor.

Beyond the hedgerows, I caught a glimpse of the sea. There was something beautiful and dangerous about the way the house stood there swallowed by dark woods and quiet hills facing the ocean. Powerful, and with a real presence marked by two tall turrets, it seemed out of my reach. I wondered who could live in a place like this. I imagined a wealthy family, or someone who wanted to live off-grid, undisturbed and in peace.

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But now I know it's just some fancy care home I would never be able to afford to put Mum into, and Mum is not a special case. Just an old woman with dementia.

I flick through the brochure. Happy faces of elderly people selling false hope. Mum wouldn't be happy living in a care home anyway. I throw it into the bin and walk out of the building. I don't look back. I feel the guilt creep under my skin.

It was a mistake coming here.

## 2

# AFRAH

*Monday, 5 August 2019*

It's a raw, stinging pain I feel each time I bite my nail to the nub. When there's nothing left to chew, I move on to the next and start all over till I see pink flesh. I spread out my hands and stare for a moment. Wiggle my fingers once, twice. I don't like what I'm looking at. The faint blue veins pattern my hands like fish scales.

Gold bracelets rub against my wrist. I used to have six, now I have four. One is elegant – ladylike, says Nisha – but I know she likes it when I wear four, two on each wrist, the way she does. She's one of those friends who'd never truly express what she really thinks. Nisha wouldn't want to hurt my feelings. Unlike my daughter, Amira, who says (often in a serious tone) that I shouldn't wear any of my jewellery because I'll end up losing it. She may be right. I hate to admit it, but she is so often right. At times, Amira wears the two gold bracelets I gave her. Mostly, though, she doesn't.

I open the bedside drawer. What I am looking for is not in there. My reading glasses, my diary – I must have left them by the wash basin. I fold back the cover and sit on the edge of the bed staring at the blank wall. I push my feet into a pair of velvety slippers. They envelop my mottled skin that stretches over lumps that have deformed my knobbly feet. Shoulders slumped, I go into the bathroom, unable to straighten my hunched back, with its sore, pained muscles. I use the toilet, flush and pull off my stained underwear.

I halt on seeing my own reflection. The face in the mirror doesn't look too well. I suppose I am not. I am a frail woman with bony

shoulders. Pretty, perhaps, in my youth, I now feel washed out and hollow. Stone-grey eyes, with swollen lids sitting in pink crests, glare back at me. Snowy hair with no volume nests over a messy head, giving it the appearance of a sack. I try to keep it neat, braiding it tight. The strands spindle loose and smudge like ashes against my forehead. Coconut oil is rubbed into my scalp, the fragrance slightly bitter and helping to tie my hair in a knot the size of a walnut. A birthmark speckles my neck, ringed with lines. In the dim evening light, I memorise the features of my face. The fair skin on my cheeks and under my chin jiggle. Lips dry and thin. A proud looking nose. Several milia dot the dark circles under my eyes, which appear darker each day. Bright are the gold studs that glint in my saggy earlobes. I'm not a young girl. I am fifty-five years old.

What am I doing in the bathroom? Was I looking for something?

Sometimes I leave the house and forget what I went out for, or I switch on the television with no recollection of what programme I've just seen. Of course, I can't admit any of that to Amira, who has noticed that I am forgetting things more frequently now. No longer just misplacing my jewellery and my reading glasses. Once, I left grocery bags at the back of the car for hours.

The milk had turned sour, the ice cream had melted. I didn't say a word when the thick veins in her neck pulled hard like wires. I don't remember going to the supermarket. I don't remember buying anything. I wanted to cook korma, the way Amira likes it with coconut and poppy seeds. The raw chicken sitting on the counter for too long had turned bad. A feast for flies, and a little bit for the stray cat that's moved in with us.

I pinch the dirty underwear between the tips of my fingers and go back to the bedroom and hide them behind my pillow. On the wall, there is a string with clothes pegs holding photographs. Some of them are curving at the edges. I pick one at random of me and Amira. We look so happy sitting in the kitchen eating breakfast. I have trouble remembering that we ever were so care-free. Next to the pictures the board says Life Story Work. It shows different range of foods, music, literature and locations. I go

through the list of dishes. Korma, saag aloo, tandoori chicken. Titled tracks of Qawwali songs, Urdu books and poetry, Bollywood films. Lahore, it says in big letters. The name of the city in Pakistan in which I was born followed by a map of Inverness with an arrow pointing to the Highlands. I read the collage again. The props are familiar, filled with forgotten memories. Is this my life, my story? I don't know. I feel as if I am floating, lost from the existence that belongs to me. My mind settles on the memories that sum up *my* life the way it used to be. Some I know, others flutter away like butterflies.

Edging closer, I glance at the pictures again. Looking back at me is the face of a child. Chestnut brown eyes. I recognise the Kashmiri features: aquiline nose, high cheekbones. Could this be Amira? Riding a bicycle, strolling along the windswept beach collecting broken seashells. Playing in the garden with sticks and rocks wearing wellies and a yellow raincoat. I remember a pair of wellies leaving a trail of sand and mud over our kitchen tiles. I don't remember the raincoat. There's another picture of a dashing looking man. I feel like I ought to know him. With a thick moustache and jet-black hair, he is leaning against an apple tree, in an orchard. What's that handsome Hollywood actor called again, Daniel Day-Lewis? That's him.

The moon throws shafts of silver through the gap in the curtains into the gloomy world that surrounds me. The curtains ripple and a draft of the summer breeze slips through. The wind howls over the trees in our garden, the trees sway over the pond. I don't like these awful sounds, they keep me awake. Howling like screams from a grave. It reminds me of something bad, very bad. I mustn't think about that. It's the one thing I must forget and yet I cannot. Grief latches onto me. My chest feels heavy. I step back, feel the wall against the knobs of my spine. I know I shouldn't chew at my nails. Amira stopped asking about the pink flesh visible around my nubs and replaced her questions with sighs. I can't tell her the reason I bite my nails.

\* \* \*

The bed squeaks each time I turn from one side to the other. My skin is clammy with sweat. I look at the digital clock. The bright red colour shows 02:38. After a while, I look again. 03:06. I try to go back to sleep, but I can't. I roll onto my side, then my back, then to the other side.

The dream I just had twists like worms inside my head. I need to jot it down so I don't forget. From the desk drawer, I take out my reading glasses and my diary, the black leather smooth against my dry palms. I push on my glasses and turn the pages at random. I use coloured bookmarks in my diary to jump back and forth in time. The yellow bookmark placement marks a lot of joyful memories, reminding me of my summers spent at sea, walking along the shoreline. The blue bookmark section mentions numerous arguments I had with Amira. There's a lot of sorrow and a lot of pain in the pages. We disagree. We never agree to disagree. I turn to a grey bookmark. I have a lot of grey bookmarks in my diary among which I've written down the web of dreams troubling me.

In my dream a distant, familiar voice calls for me. Leaving the house barefoot, I go outside and pass the rose bush in the garden. A sharp sensation prickles my skin, holding me back. The spine of a stem is outgrowing like tusks. It's clutched onto my leg and I shake it off, leaving behind withered leaves. I push open the gate and enter a mossy track that leads me straight to the misty graveyard where a tombstone sleeps beneath a yew tree, its branches stretched out like claws. They reach for me with their hooks. Grab and pull me towards the open grave. I do not want to look and yet I do. A blackened corpse rises from the dirt, eyes hollow, hair thinned and flaring in the wind. It is rotten and has been dead for decades, but still it comes to life most nights in my dreams. It looks at me and cackles, saying the same thing over and over. *Now look. Look what you did to me.*



Wednesday, 21 August 2019

An echo crawls through my bedroom. It sounds like laughter coming from downstairs. I'm fully awake now and look for my reading glasses. They are not on my desk, not on the shelf, or on the stand next to the chair. Without them I can't read the newspaper strewn across my bed. I need to go through the headlines. I don't want to miss anything that's been written about her in the papers. It was front page news for a long time. It screamed at me from every street corner. Everyone wanted to know how it happened, who did it. It was unexpected and sudden. A '*tragic accident*.' I still keep some of the old news clippings in the box in my wardrobe.

Tossed into the bin basket is the journal Amira gave me. She asked me to keep track of what I do every day. *What do I do every day?* Every day is becoming more unfamiliar.

The journal is for taking note of the amount of fluids I drink in a day.

No, it's for drawing.

Or perhaps it is to record the number of times I visit the bathroom in a day. That's what Nisha uses her journal for, under doctor's orders.

I'd ask Amira again what the journal is for, but I try to avoid confrontation. Nisha says that's because being confrontational is inappropriate in Asian culture. She avoids it with her own daughter, too. But I remember an ill-mannered skinny girl with dark skin and button-black eyes calling Nisha silly and careless in front of others without showing trace of guilt or shame. If I am to believe the blue bookmark of my diary, my own daughter is no different.

Wasn't I looking for something . . . ? What could it be? I walk around searching the room.

'—Ouch.'

I feel a stinging in my foot.

I look down. Caught between the knots of the rug is a small metal screw. I pick it up and place it on the bedside table. Could

this belong to the hinges of my glasses? Where *are* my glasses? I look across the desk, open the drawers and empty the contents of my handbag onto the bed. I move the coins, receipts and scrawled pieces of paper, among which I find a set of keys. No, that's not it.

My glasses are sitting next to a pile of books on the bedside table. The lenses are dirty. I clean them against my nightgown. The left temple is slightly bent and the hinges are loose. Where is the screw? I had it a second ago. I am sure I did.

Never mind.

I adjust it so that it fits snugly behind my ears. Now I can read the headlines of *The Inverness Courier* scattered on my bed. One of the headlines is highlighted in bright yellow marker.

*Woman killed in a hit and run. A 52-year-old Scottish woman was struck and killed while crossing a road near Beauly.*

That's not far from where we live.

Amira doesn't like it when I highlight articles in the papers. She wants me to stop worrying about the terrible things happening in the world. But I can't. What if something were to happen to her? The fear of losing her terrifies me. On my left palm I write, *get today's paper*. I must jot this down so that I don't forget to ask Amira.

I need to know if they have caught the killer.

I look up and see Amira standing in the hallway, letters from the post in one hand. She stares at me as if I were a ghost.

'Are you alone?' I say. 'Who's there with you? I heard laughter. Voices.' I try to look past her, but she blocks my view. Now beside me, her hand rests on my arm.

Her expression turns into a cloud of confusion. 'No one is here.' She looks over her shoulder. To assure me that she is right and I am wrong. 'Are you hearing strange sounds again?' She raises her voice even though she's right next to me.

'I am not.' I look at her, but she is busy examining the post. 'Anything for me?' I notice my name on one of the envelopes.

'No, nothing,' she says while opening a letter.

'Are you sure? Because that one has my name on it, see, it says Afrah Malik. That's for me.' I point at it.

‘It’s nothing.’ Amira opens another addressed to Amira Khan. I don’t think she has noticed her surname is wrong. ‘You can’t go about looking the way you do,’ she glimpses at me and smiles. ‘I’ll iron your shalwar kameez.’

‘What’s wrong with what I’m wearing now?’

‘Ami, you are still in your nightgown.’

‘And, so?’

‘Well,’ she smiles again. ‘I thought that today I could help you to a shower.’

She knows how much I hate taking showers with her hovering over me, telling me how to apply soap and water on my skin. I don’t want an argument. It makes me feel disoriented. Too often, I lose my words.

‘Are we going somewhere?’ I ask, and suddenly feel as if I’m the child here. ‘Because if we are I’d like to make a stop at the supermarket first.’

‘No Ami, we’re not!’ She puts the sheaf of mail on the table without a glance. ‘You’ve got to stop buying things and ordering Tesco Clubcards. It’s the third in a month.’ She waves the white sheet of paper with my name on it.

‘There *is* a letter for me then.’ I say. Amira’s cheeks flush, she doesn’t reply. I look at it closely. ‘I’ve never ordered any Clubcards from Tesco.’

‘Never mind, I’ll prepare your breakfast and—’

‘What did you want me to do again?’ I ask.

Amira’s nostrils flare. I smile tentatively, wishing I could wipe away the cold line between us. Too much time has passed to know when it began to form or if it was always there to begin with.

‘Ami, perhaps you should go to the stimulation therapy group.’

‘What sort of group?’ I feel my face shrivel up like a raisin.

‘I told you before, it’s a special treatment that will improve your memory.’

‘Mimi, there’s nothing wrong with my memory, thank you very much.’ She cringes. She hates it when I call her by her nickname.

‘You are forgetful.’

‘No, I’m not.’ Silly ladki, why does she tell me I am forgetful when I am not. She thinks I am senile. That I am losing it.

‘You don’t remember things the way you used to. You need to exercise your memory. Write things down much more.’

‘Says who?’ I remember things, I remember them fine. ‘You need to exercise yours.’

‘Ami, sometimes medicine isn’t always enough. Give the therapy a go.’

‘If Pakistanis heard I was going to therapy, they would think I have failed. They’d think I’m mentally ill or, even worse, they’d say I’ve gone pagal – mad.’

Amira frowns.

‘It will be our secret,’ she says in a low whisper. ‘Promise.’

‘What secret, Mimi?’

‘No one will ever need to know you’re getting treated for your condition.’ The tone of her voice remains adamant. Why does she insist I should go into therapy and what does she mean by my *condition*? Does Amira think I am pagal? Being a little forgetful is normal and doesn’t mean I should expose it to the world. The next thing she’ll suggest is that someone else should start to care for me or that I should be sent away like Nisha to one of those places far, far away that no one ever visits.

‘Therapy isn’t for people like us, Mimi.’ I know of no immigrants who are in therapy. ‘It’s what the goreh do. White people! Why else did that woman report me to the social services? She thinks I’m pagal. Wants me gone. I’m telling you.’ I’ve seen that woman watching me. She lives across the road. What’s her name again? She used to look after Amira when she was little. Now she never speaks to me.

‘Ami, you were wandering around the neighbourhood in your nightgown at six in the morning pulling on other people’s door handles. Mrs Nesbit came out because she thought you were acting shifty. She was trying to help. And besides, we don’t know if she was the one who called the social services. It could have been anyone living on the street.’

‘I wouldn’t have gone out if you weren’t keeping me locked inside the house all day.’ I don’t think I’ve been out in months. ‘I’m not pagal, Mimi. Do you hear me? I’m not pagal.’

I’m facing Amira’s back. Her hair is twisted into a rope, black strands falling loose. She walks, her posture rigid, breath heavy, and without turning around she motions for me to follow her into the kitchen where I take a seat at the table. Feeling exhausted, I glance at the clock on the wall. It’s nearly eleven-thirty. What was I doing until now?

A crusty slice pops up from the toaster. Amira puts it on a plate in front of me, slicks it with butter and cheese. But I never asked for it. The cupboard opens, cups clink and teabags release a dense herbal smell. Nothing fragrant. Amira wouldn’t want to make me Kashmiri chai. She says it takes too long.

‘No, it doesn’t,’ I say. ‘Just add milk, pink tea leaves and cardamom seeds.’

‘What’s that?’ she puts on the kettle, doesn’t meet my eyes.

I shake my head. A plate of jalebi would be nice. Chewy and sticky, and dunked into cold milk. The other day, Amira bought mithai. I can’t remember what the occasion was, only that it was special, and that I strictly wasn’t allowed to eat it. But I did. I’ll never forget the feeling of shame and humiliation when she caught me picking barfi from the box like a child.

She swivels around, conducting a culinary orchestra. The pan is crackling and plates are rattling. It smells buttery. She’s making herself fried eggs and baked beans. Licks her fingers while eating it hot from the pan, and moves her hand to pour hot water into two cups, one she places on a coaster in front of me. I don’t touch the toast she’s prepared me. Instead I take out a peeler and knife from the drawer and reach for fruit from the basket.

Sticky apple skin scatters onto the table. I smack my lips, drying the sweet juice from my mouth, wondering if it’s Pink Lady, Gala or Honeycrisp.

Amira turns towards me with her hands on her hips. ‘What’s this now?’

‘Try one, it’s delicious.’ I say giving her a piece. ‘It’s definitely a Pink Lady.’

She glares down at me, doesn’t take the apple. Heat rises to my face and I feel stricken into shame. What did I do wrong?

‘Please don’t do that.’ She cleans the table with a cloth. ‘How many times have I said not to leave a mess when you eat. Yesterday you left sticky mango peel everywhere. That’s the reason those flies keep coming back into the house.’ She moves the plate closer, which I stare at with distaste.

‘I don’t want cheese on toast.’ I push it away. ‘I want to eat fruit.’ Or dried fruit from the jar she keeps hidden from me. I take whatever I can get from the basket. Green and red grapes, purple plums, and pile them in front of me. ‘Silly ladki.’

Her arms cross over her chest and something tells me that we’ve done this many times over. I think her patience is running out.

‘Ami!’ Her voice is laden, shoulders broad. ‘I know you have a sweet tooth, but . . .’

Do I have a sweet tooth? I am not sure.

Her mouth is still moving, lips twisting into a curl, but the sound muffles in my ears. She’s waiting for me to say something, but all I can think of are the ripe bananas sitting in the fruit basket with brown patches on their skin, perfect for a fruit chaat. I wonder if we still have the sauce from the Asian market? Amira must have put it away. Where I can’t see it. ‘Where’s that sauce for chaat? I had it the other day.’

‘What?’ Her pupils go wide. ‘Did you actually hear what I just said?’

I adjust the glasses sitting on the tip of my nose. ‘Say that again?’

‘I’m not going to repeat myself.’ She steadies her breath, maybe to calm herself down. Why is she so upset? Her face swells. Now I feel upset.

My palms flatten against the table. The veins under my skin bulging. Wiggle once, wiggle twice. She’s shaking her head, looking down at my fingers. Heavy blows of sigh.

‘If you carry on like this I’ll have you wear gloves.’

‘White ones like the Victorians?’ I smile.

She doesn’t return my smile. ‘Such a bad habit. It needs to stop, OK?’

‘You make me feel so bad,’ I say.

‘Me?’ her forehead crinkles.

‘Who else?’ I look around. It’s just the two of us.

‘I don’t, Ami.’ Her eyes are bright. She shakes her head lightly. She seems sure.

‘You make me feel awful, like I am a bad person.’

She makes me feel like shit.

I pull back my left hand and notice the words written in blue colour on my palm.

‘Mimi, when you go out can you get me the newspaper?’ I eat a handful of grapes and peer out the window. A bird with white cheeks is sitting on the branch of the tree in our garden, craning its rufous neck.

‘I bought it last week and it is still in your bedroom, remember?’ she says the last word slowly, as though I have difficulty understanding it. But I don’t.

‘I want to read *today’s* paper.’ I say and rub out the ink smearing my palm. ‘Get it.’

‘I told you many times. What you get is the bi-weekly newspaper.’ She brings the cup to her lips and slurps the tea slowly. Curls of steam dampen the air. ‘Should be enough.’

‘But,’ I pause and draw in a deep sharp breath. ‘I need to know if anything has been written about the young girl. The one who went missing after that terrible accident.’

The incident still has an effect on me. A part of me is screaming out to forget, to let go. Another part of me needs to know what happened to her.

Amira’s face turns dark red. ‘I will not be going out to get the newspaper. I have so much to do. Laundry, hoovering, dusting. Scrubbing the bathrooms.’ Her tone is clipped. ‘I do everything around here. And your bedroom, Ami . . .’

‘What about it?’ my feeling of shame surges once again.

‘It smells,’ she creases her forehead. ‘And needs airing.’

Badtameez ladki. That’s not the way to speak to your mother. ‘That’s not necessary.’

I remind myself that Amira cleans the house often, too often. I told her to leave my bedroom the way it is and not to move anything around. I don’t want her in there going through my personal belongings. Removing my clothes. I’d be ashamed if she finds my underwear. I don’t want her to know they’re stained with pee.

‘Spring cleaning is overdue,’ she says. ‘I was hoping to go through all that clutter you’ve been hoarding. I want to clear the boxes in your cupboard. They have been in there for years. What do you keep in them anyway?’

‘Nothing,’ I coil my hand into a fist and stare at her. ‘Nothing that should concern you.’ But she never listens and urgently speeds around with that noisy Hoover, up and down the stairs, plastic bag in one hand. God knows what things of mine she’s thrown out.

‘You must keep precious things in there since you insist on holding onto them.’

‘It’s no business of yours, do you hear me? Stay away from *my* personal belongings. You have no right to toss anything of mine away.’

Face towards me, she watches me with caution, as though she’s a child about to get smacked by its mother. Her arms fold over her chest. She seems a little hesitant to be asking me the question. ‘I have been meaning to ask, the stack of newspapers in your room . . .’

‘What about it?’ I furrow my brows.

‘Can I get rid of it, please? You’ve marked every single headline in yellow. It’s rubbish.’

Amira’s own bedroom is neat and tidy. Books in alphabetic order. Folders and pens properly arranged. A colour-coordinated wardrobe of clothes, sliding the hangers along one by one. White shirts, followed by grey then black. No wonder she thinks my room is a mess.



‘What? No,’ my words come out in a mumble. ‘Did you know a speedy driver ran that poor woman down? Did you? She was around my age, fifty-five, and it happened right by our neighbourhood.’ What was the name of the town again?

Amira laughs, shakes her head.

‘What’s so funny, Mimi?’

‘You are not fifty-five, Ami. You are seventy-five. It’s your birthday

soon. I’ve booked your favourite restaurant, Anaya. Shafi said he’ll be there.’

What is she talking about? ‘I’m not seventy-five, silly ladki. Get me the newspaper.’

‘Are you still playing detective,’ she looks at me with a careless glint in her eyes.

‘Searching for a fictional story about the young girl that went missing?’

Fictional. It’s not fictional. ‘Yes, I am.’

‘Don’t know where you read it. I’ve still not heard a thing in the news about it.’

My mind goes blank and I forget what I was saying. I look at my daughter for some kind of clue, but her expression is cold. ‘Say that again?’

‘Why do you keep newspapers? Her voice has risen louder than I have ever heard it.

‘Because I want to.’

‘You must have had them for years. All stupid little stories highlighted in your stupid little yellow marker,’ she mutters.

‘So what, Mimi?’ I wring my hands. I’m not entirely sure why we’re having this discussion. ‘What’s so bad about it?’ It is clear to me that she is the mother and I the child.

‘I don’t see the point! The articles feature people dying a horrible death.’

‘No, they don’t.’ She detects the trace of anger in my voice. ‘I need to know if there’s news about the young girl. She was only fourteen. It was a terrible accident.’

‘Yes Ami,’ she rolls her eyes as if what I said makes no sense. ‘Don’t get why you even read such a load of rubbish.’ Amira’s words begin to slur like a pearly white line of froth on a windy beach. Time stands still, dissolves my current existence as waves wash up old memories. I dive into them, swim through the lost ocean of my mind where I discover another version of myself. Back then I was different. I was respected, a woman with integrity.

*Sunday, 8 September 2019*

Today I will cook Amira’s favourite dish, korma, which I haven’t made in a while. I’ll also prepare some tandoori masala and then go buy the chicken fresh from the butcher. Where to begin? Where are the canned tomatoes and all the fresh herbs? I need garlic, ginger and turmeric. Rice – I need basmati chawal.

The room spins. I’ve lost my way. Why am I in the kitchen? What could I possibly be looking for?

‘Mimi, where are you?’ No answer. Where could that silly ladki have gone again? I open the cupboards. My fingers push the plates, glasses and cups around. Where has she put all the masalas? She always puts things away where I can’t find them. My head goes dizzy, my vision blurs. I bend over and turn to the freezer, yank out the drawers. Thick pieces of ice scatter across the floor.

‘Where are the samosas I made and filled with mincemeat and peas?’ A loud beeping sound disturbs me. I lean against the door to the freezer, it shuts, kills the annoying sound. ‘Why are there none left? I am certain I made a whole batch the other day. Teacher Sahib, are you listening?’ Of course he isn’t. I laugh. Silly me. My husband is not here. Nadeem has been gone for decades.

I take out the vegetables from the fridge and begin to chop them with a sharp knife. Steam rises in the large pot simmering with water. How did it get there, and what should I do with it? I turn around to find something to toss into the pot, anything to keep the water busy. What’s this, dhal? I fidget hesitantly before

turning back to the gas hob. The blue flames rise. How do I switch it off? My hand shake violently as I turn all the knobs from one side to the other. How do I turn the oven back off? Never mind. I'll leave it for the tandoori chicken to roast.

I cup the vegetables, chunky, not fine, and throw them into the pot, keeping my distance. Half get wasted on the floor. I wave my arm and something breaks, the sound of shattering. It's the tea mug. I squat to pick it up, a piece of sharp glass cuts my finger. Blood streams down my wrist. I pull out the shard stuck in my finger and suck the tip, which leaves a taste of bitter metal in my mouth. I hear a noise coming from the hallway. Keys rattle in the lock.

'It's only me, you OK?' The front door slams shut and I jump, my heart racing inside my chest.

'No, I'm not OK. Who is in my house?' Before I get to it, the kitchen door swings open. A woman with a horrified face comes in holding net bags filled with groceries. She drops one, then the other.

'Ami, what on earth have you been doing?' She yanks a plaster out of the first aid box.

'Who are you?' I say. 'And where is my daughter?' I push her, she stumbles and looks taken aback.

'What are you saying? 'I am your daughter.' She peels the two sheets of paper away and attempts to seal my wound.

'No, you're not,' I pull back my hand. 'My daughter is five years old and not a grown-up woman.' Blood splatters onto the floor. The cut on my finger is deep, but I feel no pain. There's an awful metallic stink. I feel nauseated.

'Ami, why don't you sit down,' This woman places her hand on my shoulder. 'How many times have I asked you not to cook anything? It's dangerous.' She switches the gas hob off and removes the pot of simmering vegetables. 'What if—'

'I didn't do anything.' The walls appear blackened and close in on me. I inhale the smell of burnt wood and shiver. There's smoke everywhere. 'It was an accident, an accident!'

*Farah Cook*

A hot stream of tears run down my cheeks. She regards me with a tilted head.

‘Ami, calm down. Nothing happened.’

‘How do you know? You’re just a silly ladki.’

I begin to bite my nails. I taste raw and tender flesh. And warm blood. She says nothing. Just stares at me, her expression blank.

## About the Author

Farah Cook is a Danish writer of Pakistani descent. She grew up in Copenhagen with a creative and explorative childhood spent mostly outdoors. At the age of twelve, she began writing several short stories to fuel her passion for storytelling. Later, Farah graduated with a BA in Social Science from Sweden, an MA in Arts from London and an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Surrey. Farah has lived in many countries, including Germany and New Zealand, but settled in London where she worked as a Marketing Manager for a large financial conglomerate. Her passion for storytelling remained, and at night she started to write all the things she'd imagine.

An alumna of the Faber Academy in London, Farah now lives in Bad Homburg, just outside Frankfurt, with her husband and two sons. She speaks six languages fluently including Danish, Swedish and German, and writes full-time.