

Her

Mira V Shah



First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

This paperback edition published in 2023

1

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN 978 1 399 70122 8
eBook ISBN 978 1 399 70123 5

Typeset in Sabon MT by Manipal Technologies Limited

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

Part One

The Arrival

Three months before

The house draws me in like a magnetic force. Standing tall and proud. Picture perfect. As if every single brick has been immaculately polished, emitting a warm orange glow that fizzes through my fingertips. I take my time walking towards it, easing myself into every step. Listening to the sound of my four-inch heels clicking on the pavement, my long cashmere coat brushing up against my bare legs. I tilt my head to the side, catching the scent of my freshly blow-dried hair, bursting with honeydew and coconut. Asda's finest.

He stands outside in a pressed navy suit stretched tightly over his stocky frame, with slicked-back hair, a touch too wet. He's younger than he sounded on the phone. This must be his first big-ticket sale. I bet he can almost taste that 2.5 per cent commission.

As I edge closer, he looks up, unable to stop himself from raising his eyebrows. I know what he must be thinking: *This can't be her, can it? I expected someone different.* 'Mrs Rhodes?' he asks quickly, before offering me a limp, clammy palm.

'Please, call me Serena. Paul?' I don't recognise my own voice. It seems different somehow, as if squeezed out through pursed lips. My palms start to itch and my cheeks flush red hot. What if he can see right through me? That I don't belong here – looking to buy this house, in this neighbourhood. I'm already five minutes late, and I notice the irritation crinkling his brow. I'm about to apologise, but manage to swallow it

down, because that's not what Serena would do. Instead, I pull myself together, standing a little taller.

'Great.' He nods, gesturing towards the building like a showman. 'So, this is it. Number 11. As you might expect, with the kerb appeal, space for three cars in the driveway and close to the sought-after Highgate School, we've had a lot of interest in this one.' He turns towards the house and struts down the pristine mosaic path that I already know so well.

As I follow him, my eyes hover over all three storeys of the stunning orange brick, before resting on the royal-blue front door with the chunky brass knocker.

'Properties like this don't come up that often, even in Highgate.' He continues his spiel, speaking at a hundred miles a minute, piling on the pressure. But I'm prepared for it. 'We had an open day on Saturday. Several offers close to the three-million mark. You're lucky they were all rejected.'

I detect a little frustration in his voice, but he offers up a playful wink, as if he's letting me in on a secret. As if we're in this together.

God. Now I get why people can't stand estate agents.

'How soon can you move? You said you were chain-free?'

My gaze lingers on that royal-blue door, and he clears his throat when I don't immediately respond.

'That's right,' I say quickly, remembering that today I'm Serena – millionaire, power woman, serious house-hunter. 'We're renting a penthouse near London Bridge,' I say deadpan, fiddling with my wedding band. 'Walking distance from the office.'

'Ah, it's *very* nice round there.' He pauses, studying my expression as if suddenly unsure of himself and seeking

guidance. ‘So, bigger house, quieter neighbourhood – you’re looking to start a family, then?’ I ignore him, taking in the immaculate driveway, from the twin lollipop-shaped bay trees framing the front door to the wrought-iron gate leading to the two-hundred-foot back garden. ‘Well,’ he rattles on, as though I’ve acknowledged his question, ‘you’re in for a real treat. The sellers have lived here for almost fifteen years, but only did it up last summer. They’ve been splitting their time between here and Cannes, but decided to settle out there permanently when the children started university. You know how it is,’ he says casually, as if everyone flies out to Cannes when their children start university.

I sigh deeply, almost choking on my impatience.

‘Sorry I have this tendency to ...’ he mumbles, lowering his gaze and clicking his tongue, before pulling out a key from his pocket and inserting it into the keyhole.

The entrance is even more perfect in real life. Natural light pours through the huge bay windows and down the white-washed hallway, bouncing off the Victorian covings. The ceiling is so high you could skydive from it. My eyes widen, and when I catch them in the mirror, I’m terrified that I’ve exposed myself.

As we continue inside, Paul taps my arm. ‘Sorry, Mrs Rhodes. The owners have respectfully asked that we take our shoes off ... if you don’t mind.’ He shuffles off his own shiny brogues awkwardly. ‘The parquet flooring is brand new.’

Reluctantly, I remove my heels, feeling my identity shrinking along with my height.

Paul guides me around every inch of the house’s two-thousand-plus square feet, rarely leaving my side, but remaining

Mira V Shah

silent for the most part, letting me take it all in. The spacious living room with a bespoke EcoSmart fireplace. The state-of-the-art kitchen with an enamelled lava countertop, high-spec and showroom-clean. The curved terrazzo staircase leading up to four grand double bedrooms, and a fifth en-suite bedroom in the loft. All dressed in luxurious shearling carpet and 100 per cent organic linen curtains, Paul revels in telling me; and designer light fixtures hang from the lofty ceilings that I'm sure wouldn't look out of place in a Soho gallery. I utter a soft, satisfied groan, picturing Serena living here amongst all this space and grandeur. Imagining her spending a leisurely Sunday morning lying in a grand king-sized bed, a cup of Earl Grey tea warming her palms as she ruffles through the weekend papers, or sitting at the kitchen island, gazing out onto her crisp, freshly cut lawn while planning her next adventure.

As we walk back into the hallway, Paul scurries ahead to use the downstairs toilet, and I make the most of these few moments alone. I pluck a single leaf from a giant ficus tree (even the plants are extravagant here) and place it in my pocket. I run my hands over the crystal-clear windows, pausing for a few moments to stare at my barely there fingerprints before wiping them away with the sleeve of my coat.

We reconvene outside, Paul rubbing his hands together, smelling like a meadow – of course, the owners wouldn't think twice about leaving posh hand cream out for house viewings. 'So ... what do you think?' he asks, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Stay non-committal, Rani. Non-committal. 'I like it,' I say casually, as though I visit houses like this all the time. 'But we have a couple more to see, and of course, my husband needs

to visit.' I stress the word 'husband' to convey that he's the key decision-maker, setting up an explanation as to why this viewing won't lead to an offer.

'Are the other places in Highgate as well?'

I shake my head. He probably has the local market imprinted on his brain.

'How well do you know the area?' he asks.

'A colleague moved here recently, but otherwise not very well.' I glance across the road, growing anxious, wondering if anyone will recognise me, dressed in an outfit I would never normally wear.

'Well, let me tell you, you won't find a better neighbourhood. A real village feel, but in Zone 3. People actually speak to each other. See that lady over there,' he says, waving in the direction of the street, 'she's said hello every time I've been here.'

I swivel round, making sure to keep my back to the street, pretending to take in the house one more time.

'Such a friendly place,' he continues, looking me up and down. 'Trust me. You'll fit right in.' But his eyes scamper away, betraying him.

I feel my jaw tighten. 'Right, I'd best shoot off,' I say, looking at my phone as if I have somewhere else to be. 'I'll be in touch.'

He moves to offer his hand again, but quickly decides against it. 'If you like it, you'll have to act fast,' he says. 'A house like this will be snapped up in no time.' Then he turns towards the street, and I do the same, keeping my head down. 'Nice to meet you, Mrs Rhodes,' he says hurriedly, before dashing off towards a lime-green Mini.

I head in the direction of the station, but continue to glance behind me. Paul is already tucking into a meal-deal

Mira V Shah

sandwich his eyes fixed on his phone, scrolling, a smile breaking across his face. When I'm sure he's not watching, I stop, remaining completely still for a few lingering breaths before turning round and walking briskly back towards the house. But instead of continuing down its tiled front path, I cross the road to the building opposite. It resembles number 11 in style, but the once-identical orange bricks have faded to a dull brown and the paintwork is chipped, spots of rust crusting at the edges.

I pull out a set of keys from my handbag and insert one into the lock, jerking it from side to side until eventually it fits. Then, stepping into the porch, I slam my back against the door and kick off my heels to lightly massage my ankles. It's been so long since I've worn shoes like this. With my spare hand, I pick up the pile of post, then hobble up the three flights of stairs to our top-floor flat. My heart sinks as I see the dirty plates piled high in the sink, the countertop smeared with dried pasta sauce, the laundry basket overflowing with crumpled shirts and school uniforms. I picture the pristine kitchen island at number 11, which now feels like a million miles away.

In our bedroom, I strip off the cashmere, silk and organic cotton I paid for on credit, careful not to rip the tags. I coax the cheap gold-plated band from my finger and toss it into a drawer, before collapsing on the chair by the window.

This is where I have the best view of the house.

Staring out onto the mosaic pathway, I notice that Paul is back. Hands in the air, a smile plastered on his face, going through the motions like a wind-up toy. My gaze flits to the couple next to him. I can only see their behinds, but the woman is tall and slender, with smooth golden hair and a classic Chanel bag hanging

Her

off her shoulder. The man is dressed all country chic in slim-fit navy jeans and a Barbour hunting jacket. *They* look like they belong here. As Paul leads them towards the house, I can see his smile is wider, his movements more expressive – he already knows that these two are the real deal.

When the front door shuts behind them, I stumble over to the bed, eyes growing heavy, about to close. And as I sink my body into it, curling tightly into a ball, the image of the house across the street follows me into my dreams.

Natalie

‘Here we are at last, Mrs Riley. I can’t stop saying it,’ he purrs at me, rubbing my bare shoulder as we turn into the driveway of our new home, the roof all the way down on his red Maserati, classic jazz bursting from the speakers. Charles always knows how to arrive in style.

I watch the removal men emptying the van of our boxes and furniture, huffing and puffing under the weight of them. I grip the handle, my fingers shaking with nervous excitement, taking in the royal-blue front door with the chunky brass knocker.

‘Where do you think you’re going, young lady?’ His warm breath tickles my ear. I smell whisky and oranges. But before I can say a word, he slides both our seats back, bends over and scoops me out of mine.

‘Charles! Stop!’ I giggle up at him, squealing with pleasure, lightly kicking my feet and slapping his arms playfully. ‘Put me down. Put me down. What will our neighbours think?’

‘Who cares! Let them look at you,’ he says, swinging me around before stepping triumphantly out of the car and carrying me down the mosaic path. ‘My *perfect* wife.’

The removal men stop to stare at us, nudging each other. One of them wolf-whistles loudly, and I feel my cheeks grow hot, but Charles’s eyes only widen with pride. ‘So, tell me ... what do you think? Is it just as you remember from the viewing?’ he asks, lowering me onto the smooth parquet flooring.




Her


I allow myself a moment to take it all in. Gasping in wonder at the majestic terrazzo staircase, the whitewashed walls, the bay windows flooding the house with light. I peer up at the ceiling, where shadows shimmer over the original Victorian cornices – and suddenly my body is ice cold as the rounded shapes morph into disfigured faces and the long, thin branches outside resemble witches' fingers. I can't explain how or why, but it feels as real to me as a memory.

It's nothing. Of course, it's nothing. I'm exhausted from work and my mind is playing tricks on me.

Focusing my attention back on Charles's handsome face, I pull him towards me, seeking stability and warmth. 'Thank you,' I whisper as the men pile our boxes up high. But I can still feel my pulse racing. What am I walking into?



We started house-hunting a few months ago, just the other side of Hampstead Heath in Belsize Park. Charles's best friend, Seth, lives there with his wife, Darcy, and their two children, so he knows the area well. But late one evening at work, I started playing around with the location field on Rightmove, just to see what else might be available in our price range, and saw the words that made my heart leap from my chest like an escape artist. *Priory Gardens, Highgate.*



I clicked on the entry and zoomed in on the profile of the house. There were so many features, from the striking orange brick to the mosaic footpath, that moved me in a way quite incomprehensible. It felt like I was looking into the eyes of someone whose face I recognised but was unable to place.

The next day, I left work early to view it on my own. I had no expectations – I just wanted to see where my instinct would

lead me. But as I followed the estate agent into the hallway and stared up at the enormous oak tree in the garden, I felt something awaken deep within my bones.

This was no ordinary house. This was my childhood home, a home from a past I'd long forgotten. It was fate – what else could it be? With Charles by my side, I was finally in a good place, loved and secure, and buying this house was a real possibility. My past and my present seemed to be joining full circle, and I felt excited – fuelled by a hopeful sense of belonging that I was ready to explore. Eventually, I would tell Charles the truth about this house; about my life. And I had faith that everything would be okay.

Charles directs the movers into the living room. I hear them laughing and joking around like they're the best of friends. I'm about to join them when I feel my phone buzzing in my trouser pocket. Work, probably. A disgruntled client? A demanding partner? It wouldn't be the first time on my day off.

I quickly answer it, barely looking at the screen. 'Natalie speaking,' I say, on autopilot, preparing myself for the worst, but it's a familiar high-pitched voice that greets me instead.

'Hello, darling. I just thought I would check in to see how moving day is going.'

Mum. Of course, she'd have today marked in her diary. She's been that way since I was a child. There for every match, every competition. Cheering me on from the front row, my greatest champion. She'd *never* forget today.

'Oh, hi, Luella,' I say, as enthusiastically as possible. The last time I called her Mum was before her fiftieth birthday. She went through a bit of a mid-life crisis, hiring a nutritionist, a dermatologist, and a personal trainer, demanding that I call

Her

her Luella from then on. She may feel old, but she certainly doesn't look it. Mum is one of those women who seem to bypass time, like a Hollywood sweetheart. A part of me thinks she's going to live forever.

'We've just arrived.' I sigh, walking away from the noise. 'Boxes everywhere. It's absolutely ...' I hesitate, remembering who I'm speaking to. 'It's fine. I'm sure we'll be unpacked and settled in a day or two.' Over the years, I've become so used to sugar-coating the truth, especially for her, and the last thing I want is for her to invite herself over. Just hearing her voice makes me realise that I need more time.

'Why don't I come and help anyway? It'll be fun. Where is it you've mov—'

Too late. 'No, no, we'll be okay,' I quickly interrupt her. 'Let's wait until all the furniture has arrived,' I add, raising my voice and pressing the phone against my ear, trying to block out the laughter from the next room.

'If you're sure, darling. Sounds like you have company, anyway.'

'It's just the movers. You know Charles ... always the life of the party.'

At the mention of his name, he pokes his head around the door, mouthing, *Who's that?* I see the frown lines creep up his forehead.

'Just a minute,' I say, holding the phone away from my ear. 'It's Luella.'

'Say hello from me.' He smiles, tight-lipped, before clearing his throat. 'Darling, the movers are leaving.' His tone is firm, purposeful.

'Charles says hi. I hope you don't mind, but I think I had better go.'

Mira V Shah

‘Don’t worry, sweetie, I’ve got to crack on with the salmon anyway. Gosh, first a wedding on the Italian Riviera, and now a house in London. Look how far you’ve come. I’m so proud of you, Natalie.’

I stare up at the ceiling, that same spot that sent my pulse running riot. Soon she’ll know: that I haven’t come far at all. That I’m merely at the beginning.

Rani

‘Steady on, Rani ... save some for the rest of us!’ Sasha grins at me with pearl-white teeth. Teasing what’s left of the Sicilian lemon gin out of my grasp before turning her back on me to swap corporate law war stories with Joel’s old flatmate, Aman.

I slump deeper into my seat, staring at the solitary drink in front of me while listening to the threads of conversation that I’m not part of: rants about slave-driving bosses and measly pay rises; summer holiday plans and the latest restaurant openings in town. Sasha’s pashmina snakes off her chair, falling into my lap. I run my fingers over the softness of it, remembering the way that cashmere coat brushed over my legs. How incredible it felt to possess something so luxurious, even with the tag digging into my shoulder blades, even knowing that it wasn’t really mine. But this feeling soon passes, crushed by reality – the rejection email I received this morning. *Thank you for your interest in our company, but after careful consideration, we have decided not to progress further.* A polite ‘fuck off’, just like all the rest. Why do I bother?

Taking one last gulp, I sit up straight and stare hard at Joel across the table. ‘Come on. Look at me,’ I mutter under my breath. ‘I need you.’ Just one glance to numb the sting of it. But he doesn’t see me. His pensive eyes are glued to Amber’s gorgeous face, their voices muffled by the alcohol. I watch

them, a little envy creeping up my throat. *They look good together, don't they? Much better matched than you and him.* Amber at the head of her reclaimed-elm dining table, holding court in a tropical-print maxi dress and blood-orange lips. Joel with his floppy dark-blond hair and golden skin. Ricardo the bodybuilder, Amber's current squeeze, sits beside her, curling his burly arm around her waist, dropping kisses on her tanned shoulder, which is turned away from him. I wonder if he notices it too.

Joel scratches the back of his head before adjusting his tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses. He does this when he's nervous. I prick up my ears, trying to catch their conversation. I hear my name just as the alcohol gushes into my bloodstream and my head starts to spin. 'What was that?' I exclaim, louder than I intended.

They all stop and stare at me.

'You just said my name, Joel?'

'Oh, it's nothing, Rani.' Amber giggles, answering for him. 'I was just reminiscing about our university days. I can't believe how much we've all changed!'

Not here. Not now. As if I need another reminder of what a disappointment I've become. Tears prick at my eyes, but I wipe them away with the back of my hand before standing up and throwing myself into the space between Sasha and Aman. 'Don't you just *love* this song? Come on, let's dance! You can talk shop any time.' Grabbing Sasha's hand, I try to hoist her up, but I do it with such force that I lose my balance and stumble into her lap.

'Jeez, Rani. What's got into you?' she chides, flicking her long, thin braids out of her face.

Her

‘Don’t be so boring, Sash! I can’t tell you the last time I was drunk enough to dance. Plus, don’t you want to impress what’s-her-name?’ I nod my head in the direction of the only stranger in the room: a petite flame-haired beauty who is clearly the result of Amber’s attempt at playing Cupid. ‘She’s hot. And just your type,’ I mouth.

Sasha breaks into a coy smile, placing a hand loosely over my lips. ‘Okay ... okay, I’m coming. But only if you keep shtum!’

I lead her out onto Amber’s spacious terrace, stumbling over terracotta pots of lemon and olive trees. Sasha collects Amber on the way out, and soon it’s just the three of us again, swinging our hips like there’s no tomorrow. My shoulders loosen as the memories come flooding back. How they found me lying on the sticky floor of the student union on our first night at Oxford, hoisted me up and stroked my hair as I cried hysterically in their arms. I’d just been told about Mum’s diagnosis. The odds weren’t great, and I could feel my world crumbling around me. But they supported me every step of the way, to the brutal end. Camping out in my room, feeding me spoonfuls of pesto pasta, washing my hair and singing me to sleep as the grief took hold. How quickly we became the best of friends. Rarely seen without each other.

Wild with bittersweet nostalgia, I shoot them a cheeky smile before opening my mouth wide and howling into the night sky. ‘Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah-oooooooooooooh!’

‘Rani!’ Amber’s voice is knife-edge sharp as she pulls me towards her, covering my mouth with the palm of her hand, her face dead serious. ‘Shh. You’re going to piss off my neighbours!’

I catch Sasha sighing loudly. Ignoring her, I nudge and wink at them both. ‘Ugh, don’t be such party poopers, guys.’

Come on! Why can't we have fun, like old times?' I ask, my words slurring out of me.

Sasha scoffs. 'Girl, this isn't you. What's going on?'

I grin, lunging towards her and wagging my finger in her face. 'Oh, I *can* be fun, Sash, if I want to be. Remember that house I told you about?'

'What house? Oh, you mean the one opposite you?' Amber looks at me, curious.

I nod my head to the music. A cool shiver dashes down my spine as I realise that I've caught her attention. 'Well, I didn't tell you at the time, but I went to see it.'

'What? How? Didn't they realise you live in the flat across the road?'

'Nope,' I say confidently. 'I made up a name. Went shopping in Reiss and pretended to be some hot rich chick.' I hold out my hand and fake-pout. '*Serena Rhodes*, pleased to meet you.'

'That's so intense, Rani,' Sasha exclaims, rolling her big Bambi eyes. 'Why didn't you just stalk it on Rightmove like everyone else?'

'Obviously I did that *first*. But it wasn't enough, Sash. I had to see it in person. Walk around it as if it were mine.' I'm beaming, looking at them, searching for understanding, intrigue, companionship in their faces. Something.

Amber's expression turns sour, and I feel my cheeks flush as I realise how she must see me. 'Yeah ... okay,' she says, sounding unconvinced. Her parents bought her this three-bedroom maisonette overlooking Clapham Common as a graduation present, because she couldn't possibly rent somewhere. I can barely imagine what it feels like to have disposable income, let alone a house that is all mine. 'But Reiss?

Rani, can you even afford that? Joel's worried about ...' She stops mid-sentence.

'What did Joel say?'

She grimaces, and I turn around, seeing Joel with my coat in his hands.

'Come on, my Bollywood Cinderella. It's almost midnight. I bet you the babysitter's already watching the clock.'

We say our hasty goodbyes, kissing cheeks and promising to catch up soon. Although with their hectic schedules, who knows when that will be. Joel wanders out of the door without me, towards Clapham Common station, and I sprint to catch up with him. 'Hey! Wait up!'

I follow him onto a waiting train and flop into an empty seat. I start to feel dizzy under the fluorescent lights, so I lean back and close my eyes, willing the carriage to stop spinning around me.

'That bad, is it?' He laughs. 'You're going to be paying for it tomorrow morning.'

'Ugh. Don't ever let me drink again.' I see the almost empty bottle in front of me, and Joel and Amber sitting across the table, whispering softly to each other. 'Hey,' I say, lightly patting his hand. 'Why were you talking about me?'

He turns his face towards mine. I notice faint bags under his hazy eyes. 'Oh, Rani. It was nothing. What Amber said, a passing comment about your uni days. How different you all are now,' he says, scratching the back of his head again.

But I can tell there's more. 'And ...?'

He nods slowly, clearing his throat. 'She's ... we're just worried about you.'

'What?' I snap, more loudly than I intend to. A man dozing opposite suddenly wakes up and glares at us. 'Ugh. Amber's

Mira V Shah

so dramatic.' I don't need their pity. I don't need anyone's pity. 'Look, Joel. Next time you feel the need to talk about me, just come straight to *me*, okay?'

'But Rani, I've tri—'

The man opposite groans angrily, but I don't care. I need Joel to understand. 'And another thing. You don't think it bothers me too that I'm almost thirty and unemployed, that I haven't made something of my life? I made that choice, Joel. You know how much I love our girls, how I'd do anything for them, but having them changed *me*. No one else. Only *I* have to live with that, only *I* have to accept that. I just wish people would stop going on about it.'

His forehead creases as I speak.

'Look, I'm sorry,' I mutter, swallowing the bitter taste in my mouth. I have to stop resenting him for a decision I made. 'I didn't mean to have a go at you. It's been a long week.'

'Rani, I get it,' he says, looking away. There's silence for a second, and all we can hear is the man's snores. 'How's the job hunt going? Any interviews yet?'

But he still doesn't understand. This is about so much more than a stupid job. Mum and Dad left India the day after they got married. They arrived here with nothing; they knew no one. People spat at them in the street, shopkeepers refused to serve them. But they stayed, they hustled, working sixteen-hour days scrubbing dirty toilets in seedy hotels in the hope of giving their children a brighter future.

Then I had to go and ruin it all.