

Sister ^{of the}
Bollywood
Bride

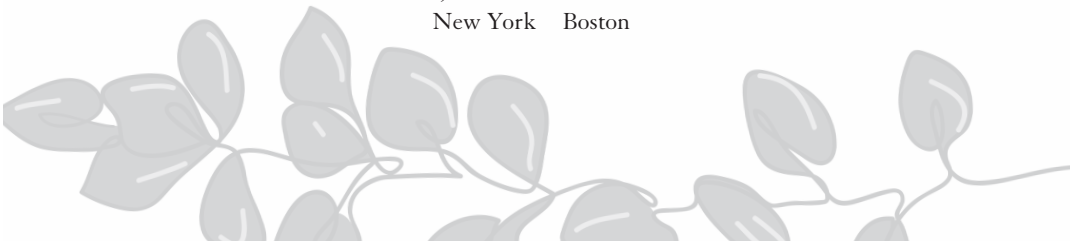


Nandini Bajpai



POPPY

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
New York Boston



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 by Nandini Bajpai

Cover art copyright © 2021 by Sanno Singh. Cover design by Jenny Kimura.

Cover copyright © 2021 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright.

The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com.

Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Poppy

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

Visit us at LBYR.com

Originally published in 2013 by Scholastic India Pvt. Ltd. in India

First U.S. Edition: May 2021

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Poppy is an imprint of Little, Brown and Company.

The Poppy name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bajpai, Nandini, author.

Title: Sister of the Bollywood bride / by Nandini Bajpai.

Description: First U.S. edition. | New York : Little, Brown and Company, 2021. | "Originally published in 2013 by Scholastic India Pvt. Ltd. in India." | Audience: Ages 12 & up. |

Summary: Seventeen-year-old Mini plans a magnificent Indian wedding—from their deceased mother's jewelry to a white wedding horse—for her older sister Vinnie, a medical resident, but a hurricane threatens to destroy it all.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020043604 | ISBN 9780316705424 (trade paperback) |

ISBN 9780316705431 (ebook) | ISBN 9780316705400 (ebook other)

Subjects: CYAC: Weddings—Fiction. | Sisters—Fiction. | East Indian Americans—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.B335 Sis 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020043604>

ISBNs: 978-0-316-70542-4 (pbk.), 978-0-316-70543-1 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

LSC-C

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Mum and Kiki.

I'm lucky to be the link between you two.



Chapter One

The silver key resting on my palm looked pretty ordinary, but what it unlocked was not. I dropped it back into a tiny envelope that read *CUSTOMER KEY, BOX NUMBER: 311* and handed it to the teller.

“You’d like to open your safe-deposit box?” The bank teller’s eyebrows shot up at my request—it clearly wasn’t every day a teenager asked for access to the bank vault.

“Yes, thanks.” I tucked a strand of hair behind one ear, acting casual, though my heart was pounding like a Punjabi dhol.

“Follow me, please.”

The teller came around the counter and led the way to the other end of the small lobby.

Who knew our little Bank of America branch in Westbury, Massachusetts, even had a proper bank vault like in a heist movie or something?

She unlocked two massive doors—one with steel bars, the other studded with gears and bolts—and let me into the strong room. It was insanely solid.

“Three-one-one,” she said under her breath, looking for the matching key in a metallic drawer, then read the numbers off the deposit boxes until she found mine. Both keys had to be inserted and turned simultaneously for the box to open. She pulled the box—long, metallic, coffinlike—out of the locker and handed it to me.

“You can open it in there.” The door she pointed to led into a private closet-sized room.

I shut the narrow door, deposit box clutched tight—and took a deep, deep breath in the tiny space. Probably exhausting its entire oxygen supply, for I was suddenly breathless.

I lifted the lid.

Oh. My. Three hundred and thirty million gods.

Jewelry boxes with clear lids stared back at me, the brilliant yellow of Indian gold gleaming richly through them.

Vinnie was never going to believe this!

Vinnie, my older sister, was the reason I was standing in that bank vault. Always the steady, serious type, Vinnie had recently lost her head, had fallen in love, and was getting married this summer. Also, she had just graduated from medical school and was starting a three-year emergency medicine residency at a hospital in Chicago—which meant she had no time to plan her wedding here in Boston.

Add to this the fact that our dad, still in shock over the whole thing, said he was not paying for a big fat wedding. His five-year

fiscal plan involved frugal living and aggressive saving in the year between Vinnie's graduation and me going off to college—spending lavishly on a wedding did not enter into it in any way, shape, or form.

But getting married she was, and whatever the budget, I was going to make sure that my sister looked fabulous—Indian style.

The only problem? There's one thing an Indian bride can't do without—gold. Twenty-two-karat gold. And a couple of ounces of that stuff probably cost more than my secondhand car.

Not to worry, Dad said—evidently Mom left us some jewelry, information no one bothered to share with *me* before—*just take the safe-deposit box key and check it out*.

I untied the strings of a deep blue velvet pouch and emptied its glittering contents into my cupped hand. More jewelry. I *knew* this stuff. Some of it was heirloom old—passed down from my nani. Some of it was new. Kind of. Mom had had it made for Vinnie and me.

I opened a box. A note with my name and a date in Mom's neat handwriting—strange how I recognized it instantly—was tucked under the necklace. I touched the dainty peacock with turquoise feathers and ruby eyes with one finger. Mom's design. The date was seven years ago. Only two months before Mom... My throat was suddenly tight.

This is for your wedding, Mini.

For something so delicate, it felt heavy. The price of gold back then was not astronomical, apparently. Talk about return on investment. Well played, Mom, well played.

I opened another box. Earrings with missing pairs. Broken chains. All gold, though. The note in it said matter-of-factly: *Junk, but it has value—sell it if you girls ever need money.* I had to smile. Mom was nothing if not practical.

I closed the lid on the broken jewelry and picked up the necklace Mom had designed for Vinnie. What would Mom think of a simple civil ceremony with twenty guests? The answer to that was staring me in the face. She wouldn't have saved and scraped for such fancy jewelry if she hadn't wanted a proper Punjabi wedding. That's what she would have liked. Lots of family, food, flowers, music. Vinnie in a gorgeous lehenga. Her groom in a red turban on a white horse, like in one of those Bollywood movies.

No way was that happening, the way things were.

I stroked the peacock pendant with one finger. Maybe...

I bundled the jewelry into my messenger bag and zipped it up carefully. Stepping out of the tiny room, I knocked on the glass pane between the teller station and the vault and gestured that I was done.

The younger teller, clearly Indian and recently married—going by her glass bangles and the red sindoor powder in her neat, straight-down-the-center parting—sized me up in one glance. Tall, by Indian standards—thanks to Dad's genes. Lean—thanks to cross-country running and the fact that neither Dad nor I could cook as well as Beeji, my grandmother, who had returned to India four years ago. Long dark hair, olive skin, brown eyes—pretty, I've been told. I've been mistaken for South American/North African/Middle Eastern, but not by other Indians.

I smiled back and wondered if she'd bring up region, caste, or marital prospects.

"You're Gujarati?" she asked. There it was.

"Punjabi," I said.

"Oh!" she said. "In senior year?"

"Starting in the fall," I acknowledged. Good guess.

"You're Mr. Kapoor's daughter!" She looked proud to have placed me. "Your sister is doing medical, I heard?"

"She just graduated in May," I said.

"Very good! You must be a good student too, like Winnie?" She looked to me for confirmation.

I smiled at how she pronounced *Vinnie* with a *W*, the way Beeji did. "I'm okay, I guess." Something made me add, "She's getting married. In two months!"

"That's great," the teller said, genuinely happy. "Is she marrying an Indian boy?"

"South Indian," I said.

She nodded in sympathy. Gujaratis and Punjabis, though different, are at least both not *South* Indian. "Well, it's better than, you know..." Her spread hands encompassed the plethora of humanity that is not Indian at all. "He's a doctor too?" she asked, and smiled her approval when I nodded. *That* is almost as good as being Gujarati!

"It would have made your mummy happy," she said. Apparently nothing is a secret from bank tellers at the intersection of Routes 30 and 27. "If there's anything I can do, only ask," she added, awkward yet sincere. "Okay?"

“Okay,” I promised, but automatically stuck her offer in the forget-about-it-zone of my brain.

They always meant well, the people who wanted to help because they knew about Mom—but they just totally embarrassed me instead. The extra weight in my bag dragged down more than my shoulder as I walked to the parking lot, but my mood lifted as I caught sight of what was waiting there like a faithful pup—my one-week-old pride and joy on wheels. One-week-old for me, that is. The car was actually a 2010 model—though Dad had made sure it had low mileage, no accidents, and only one owner—but it totally rocked.



“She was always so level-headed, you know?” Dad said. He was still grappling with the notion that Vinnie was getting married—whether he liked it or not. “No dating in high school or anything. I never expected her to rush into something like this. She should be thinking of her career. She’s much too young to get married!”

He looked like his hair had gained some extra gray since Vinnie had announced her engagement. That and the worry lines on his brow were the only physical changes in him in the last decade.

“Dad, she’s twenty-five!” I said. It was hard work being a Vinnie apologist.

Given that my parents’ loving marriage of twenty years was a match made in the *Times of India* matrimonial section, I didn’t expect Dad to understand about dating. Mom was a pretty and

popular good-girl type who only crushed on guys from afar. And Dad was seriously uncool in high school. I mean, dork-glasses, skinny-frame, peach-fuzz-mustache uncool. Let's face it. They needed the help. Vinnie did not.

But from sophomore year all Vinnie thought about was grades—and Mom. There was no time for dating when Mom, in the final stages of cancer, was fading away before her eyes. That was also the reason Vinnie didn't want to waste time now.

"I tried to explain it to her. And you know what she said?" Dad was still going on. "She said there will never be a good time. First she had seven years of medical school, now there's three years of residency, and then she'll probably do a subspecialty fellowship in pediatric emergency medicine. She said if she's old enough to help deliver a baby, she's old enough to get married."

"She's kind of right," I pointed out.

"I don't know..." He scowled at the picture of Vinnie and Manish that I had framed and set on the mantel: Vinnie in her graduation gown and Manish in a suit and tie with his arm around her—both glowing with happiness. "He's from *Bangalore*..." He paused. "They're...you know."

"What?" I asked, and watched with amusement as he tried to articulate his misgivings without coming off as insufferably North Indian. Funny how he was usually so openhearted but the tiny difference between Punjab and Tamil Nadu was too much for him.

"Th-they're..." he spluttered. "They're just..."

"Not Punjabi," I said. Yeah, that was it.

Dad nodded, worry lines etching deeper.

“She doesn’t care,” I said. “It’s not like we live in Punjab or something.”

“She got into the honors program in medical education at Northwestern,” Dad said, changing tactics. It was true. My sister, the genius, got accepted into the seven-year, straight-from-high-school medical program for gifted students—Mom had known before she passed away that Vinnie would be a doctor. “And he went to UMass.”

“*Dad!*” I said. “Not everyone can afford to go to private school. It’s not like he isn’t super smart—he got into Feinberg, didn’t he? The same school as Vinnie!”

They had met at medical school—Manish was a year ahead of Vinnie—and they clicked because they were both from the Boston area. Their first date was a baseball game where they were the only two people at Wrigley Field rooting for the Red Sox. I heard about him from Vinnie off and on, of course, but I had no idea how serious they were. When Dad and I went to Chicago for her graduation and Vinnie told us they were engaged, it was a seismic-level shock to our family—but I could see that Manish made her happy, and that was good enough for me. Dad, meanwhile, was still struggling to comprehend our new reality.

“She’s putting him before everything,” Dad said. “She was going to come back here, and now...”

We had always expected that Vinnie would come back to Boston for her residency—there are so many good hospitals here. But when she placed at University of Chicago’s emergency medicine residency program on match day, the same place where Manish was a second-year resident, it was clear that things had changed.

“Dad, it’s natural, isn’t it?” I said.

“And on top of everything, he’s allergic to dogs.” Dad played the trump card.

I sighed, my hand going instinctively to the furry head planted on my knee. Our dog, Yogi, was never more than five feet from me when I was home. I had to admit that Manish’s allergies were a horrible disappointment. Still, I racked my brain and made an attempt.

“Maybe he’ll try allergy shots?” I asked. Weak, I admit, but valiant. “They do work on some people.”

“Who knows what the family is like,” Dad mumbled ominously. “We haven’t met them even once.”

“I’m sure Vinnie has spoken to them plenty of times,” I said. She probably had. I pushed back my chair.

“Dad, we just have to deal with him,” I said. “He’s going to be family.”

“Well, I’m not paying for a lavish wedding out of *your* college fund,” Dad said.

“It doesn’t have to be lavish,” I said. “But we have to do *something* special, Dad—it’s Vinnie’s wedding!”

“It’s not just the money,” Dad said. “She doesn’t have time to plan it. I don’t have the bandwidth either—you know how things are at work!”

“I have time, Dad!” I said. Something about holding the jewelry Mom had left us made me want to make sure Vinnie had a rocking Punjabi wedding. One Mom would approve of. “*I* could do it.” It was true. I had over two months of summer vacation!

“Nonsense,” he said. “You might be taking the SAT again; that’s much more important. And you have math tutoring, college visits, the common app, and supplemental essays to draft and whatnot. You’re not responsible enough to plan a whole wedding—you’re seventeen!”

I bristled at the words, but it was no use arguing with him right now. Plus, thinking about getting my SAT score back in approximately two weeks actually made me feel ill.

“You’re not wrong,” I said, very calm. “But who knows, I might have gotten a good score on my first try, right?” I felt *okay* about it but definitely not 100 percent confident. “Can we just wait and see?”