

**MONICA
ALI**

**LOVE
MARRIAGE**



virago

CHASTE

In the Ghorami household sex was never mentioned. If the television was on and a kissing-with-tongues scene threatened the chaste and cardamom-scented home, it was swiftly terminated by a flick of the black box. When Yasmin began her first period, her mother had slipped her a pack of Kotex Maxi pads and murmured instructions not to touch the Qu'ran. This was confusing because Yasmin never touched the Qu'ran anyway, except at the behest of her mother. But it also made sense because menstruation, as she had learned in a biology class, was linked to reproduction. And the dotted-line diagrams in the textbook were, surprisingly yet undeniably, linked to the actors who pushed their tongues into each other's mouths, thus ruining everyone's viewing pleasure.

Now, at the age of twenty-six, Yasmin knew all about sex. The human body had long since yielded its mysteries. She had slept with three men, and was engaged to be married to the third, Joe, a fellow doctor at St Barnabas hospital. Her parents, Shaokat and Anisah, liked Joe because as a doctor he was automatically suitable, and because everyone liked Joe, he was gifted that way. If Anisah longed for her daughter to marry a good Muslim boy it was an opinion she kept to herself.

Yasmin sat cross-legged on her bed, surrounded by medical texts, waiting to be called down for dinner. She should have been studying for yet another exam, but couldn't concentrate. Four books lay open to demonstrate a commitment that she was unable to put into effect. Instead, she leafed through a magazine she'd found discarded on the train. On the cover: Fake Split! Secret Reunion! She's a Wreck! The headlines referred to celebrities, all pictured, only one of whom Yasmin could identify. This dampened her enjoyment only marginally. She preferred, in any case, the stories about 'real people'. The one she had just finished was about a mother-of-three from Doncaster, who had recently discovered that her seven-year-old daughter was not her biological offspring, a mix-up having occurred at the hospital when she was born. The things people go through! And she, Yasmin, had nothing to worry about, and so much to be grateful for.

When tomorrow night was over she'd laugh at herself. It wouldn't be as bad as she imagined. Her parents would meet Joe's mother for the first time. They'd all eat dinner together at her house in Primrose Hill and discuss wedding plans and make polite conversation. Big deal.

The thought of her parents inside that discreetly sumptuous Georgian terrace induced a faint feeling of nausea. She swallowed it down.

Nothing embarrassing would happen. Fretting like this was stupid.

The bedroom door opened and Arif slid in. 'That is some bush,' he said, shaking his head.

She slipped the magazine under a book. 'Out,' she said. 'I'm working.'

His words slowly infiltrated. 'Out,' she said again.

Arif closed the door and leaned his boneless, insolent body against it. 'You know about it, yeah, the picture – like I was telling you, every article about her goes on about it – but I had

to dig bare deep to find it. Wanna see, Apa?’ He pulled his phone out of his jeans.

Yasmin had decided she wouldn’t react, no matter what provocations her maladjusted little brother attempted. In spite of herself she recoiled, shrinking back on the bed as Arif brandished the phone. The last thing in the world she wanted to see was Harriet Sangster’s private parts. She wondered, not for the first time, if Joe had seen the infamous photo of his mother, naked on her back with her legs split wide, head raised to stare, challenging and defiant, straight into the lens.

‘It’s a feminist photo,’ she said, and her voice remained even. ‘It was decades ago. You wouldn’t understand. Stick with your porn. Stick with your hairless porn.’ The photo was a rejoinder to the ‘ladette culture’ of the time. Yasmin hadn’t seen it but she had read about it. In an age that deemed itself post-feminist, post-ideological, post-ironic, post-everything, Harriet had written about the dangers of the ‘zero fucks’ mentality, the intellectual poverty of the end-of-history attitude, the oxymoronic idiocy of the belief that it was uncool to believe in anything. Most of all she had written about what she saw as ‘faux female empowerment’: the girls-gone-wild trope of hard drinking and waxed-and-plucked sexuality that, as Harriet saw it, served male fantasies by way of soft-porn imagery in what were known as ‘lads’ mags’. Harriet had her own version of female liberation, including sexual freedom. Her version went against the zeitgeist. It had brought her attention, some of it far from positive. Despite that, or perhaps because of it, she had risen to a position of some prominence, and the photo was ancient history.

Arif smiled. ‘What about Ma and Baba? Think they wanna see? Maybe they already saw. You know, Joe said I should come for the dinner tomorrow.’

‘Get out now!’ She picked the heaviest book off her bed.

Arif shrugged. ‘You can’t throw straight.’

'You little shit.' He'd probably seen the photo months ago. Since when did Arif have difficulty finding anything on the internet? He'd just been waiting, saving it up for maximum impact the day before the families met.

'Have you explained to Ma how it's, like, a feminist photo? She bought Harriet's book, right, the first one about all her lovers, all the men – and women – all very *feminist*. But I don't think Ma really got it. Because she was reading it, yeah, stood in the kitchen. Her face – you should've seen, Apa! She was stood over the bin, and her foot was on the pedal so the lid was open. And when she saw me, yeah, she let it drop. Into the rubbish. Like, well shamed and everything.'

He was laughing as she hurled the textbook, predictably badly, across the room, but he went out then and Yasmin jumped up and paced back and forth, trying to restore order to her thoughts.