

DREAM  
HUNTERS



## Praise For **DREAM HUNTERS**

‘A glorious debut, packed with a spellbinding magic system, characters you’ll be rooting for from the very beginning, and an adventure that will have readers at the edge of their seats.

I couldn’t put it down!’ – Natasha Hastings,  
author of *The Miraculous Sweetmakers*

‘*Dream Hunters* is a thrilling adventure, threaded through with intricate magic, beautiful storytelling prose and characters you’ll want to run away with. I was drawn immediately into her world and didn’t want to leave!’ – Zohra Nabi,



author of *The Kingdom Over the Sea*



‘Captivating storytelling’ – Abi Elphinstone  
author of the Ember Spark series

‘An immersive and breathtaking adventure with dreams and nightmares at its heart. I adored the skilfully imagined magic – I can’t stop thinking about it!’ – A.F. Steadman, author of the Skandar series

‘A story sure to capture and inspire the imaginations of young readers.’ – Alex Foulkes,  
author of *Rules for Vampires*

‘*Dream Hunters* is accomplished fantasy adventure set in a magical world of dreams and betrayal. All the right ingredients for a wonderful story.’ – Maisie Chan,  
author of *Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths*







‘The most imaginative and riveting interpretation of dreams and nightmares for children since Roald Dahl’s *The BFG*, a gripping quest of wonder and endless invention that shimmers with magic from the very first page, as tender as it is thrilling.’  
– Piers Torday, author of *The Last Wild*

‘Step into the dream-lit alleys of Mumbai with Nazima Pathan’s magical debut where each page twinkles like a star in the night sky, and dreams are not just visions of sleep but doorways to fantastic adventures. Nazima’s vivid imagination and lush storytelling will keep readers wide-eyed long into the night, dreaming of their next adventure.’ – David Solomons, author of *My Brother is a Superhero*

‘I was completely swept away by this vivid, immersive fantasy. Dream hunter Mimi is an endearing young protagonist, caught up in the clandestine Citadel’s struggle for power over healing dreams – and deadly nightmares. A stunningly original debut.’ – Gita Ralleigh, author of *The Destiny of Minou Moonshine*

‘*Dream Hunters* is ENCHANTING. Set in a reimaged India, it’s a gripping tale of dream magic and treachery, friendship and courage.’ – Rashmi Sirdeshpande, author of *Amazing Asia*







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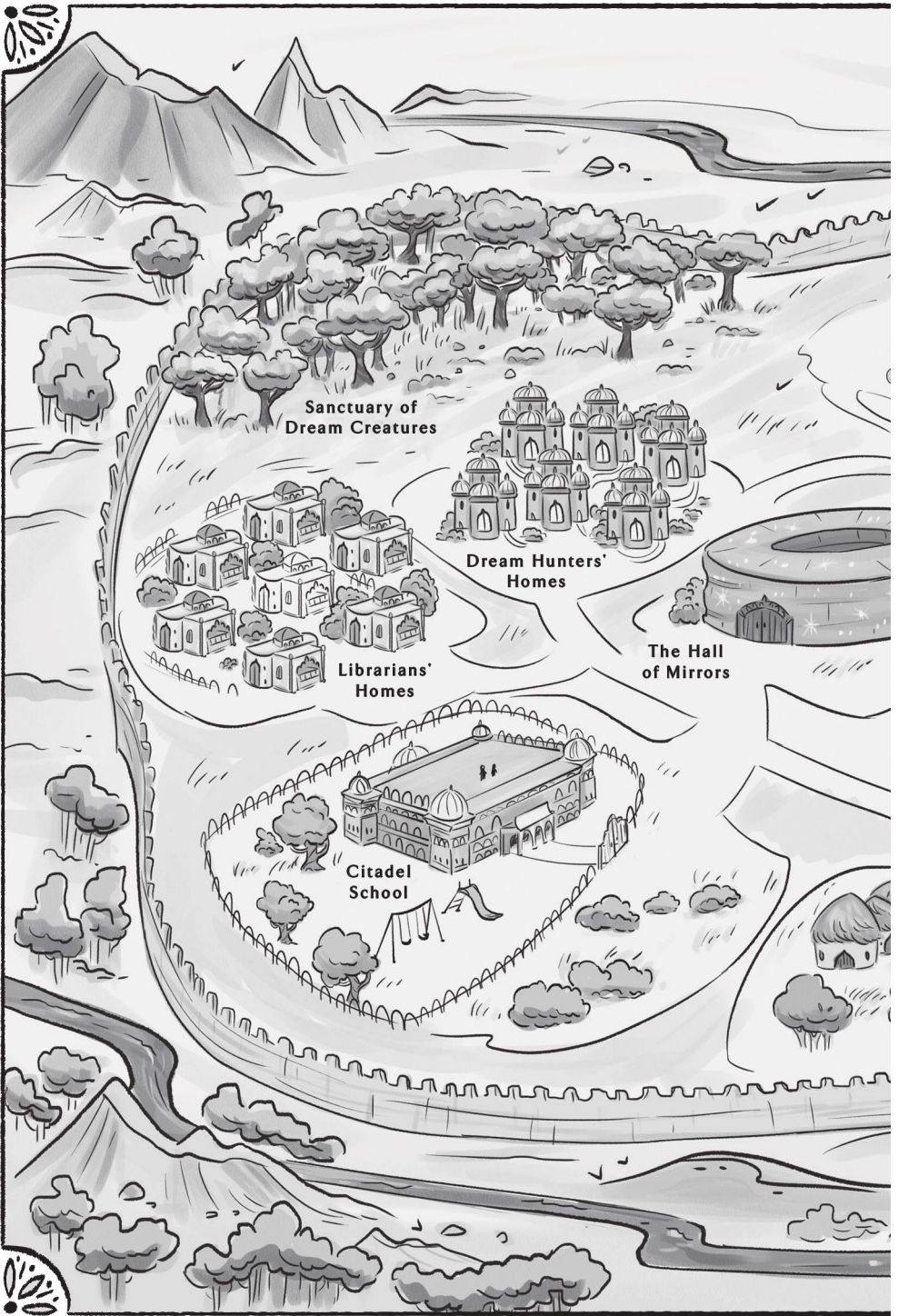
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For my father.  
For all you gave me,  
thank you.



Sanctuary of  
Dream Creatures

Dream Hunters'  
Homes

Librarians'  
Homes

The Hall  
of Mirrors

Citadel  
School



# THE CITADEL

Market  
Square

Citadel  
Entrance

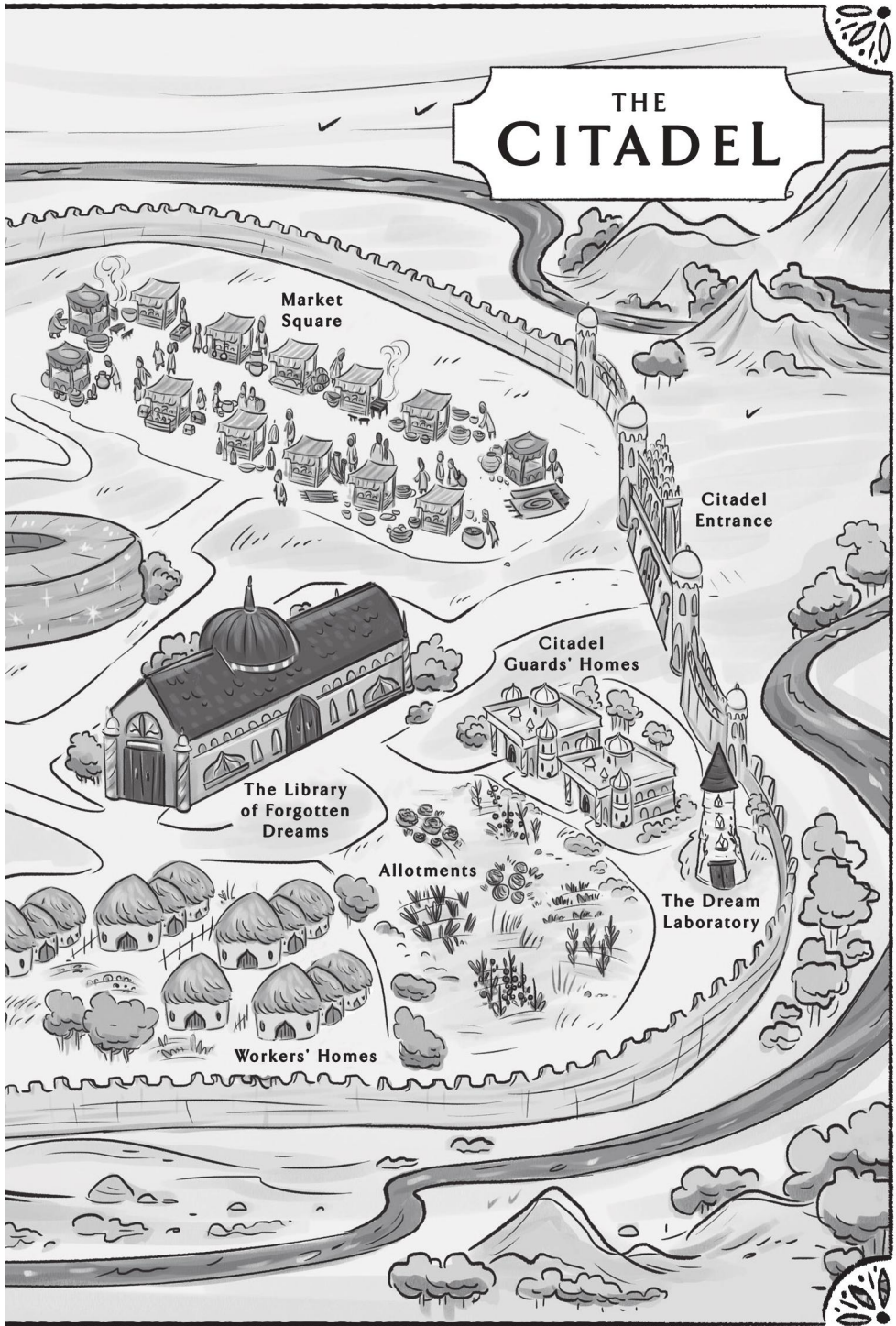
Citadel  
Guards' Homes

The Library  
of Forgotten  
Dreams

Allotments

The Dream  
Laboratory

Workers' Homes





*Open your eyes,  
For this world is only a dream.*

Rumi





## Prologue

It was midnight when they found him.

Whirling, churning, simmering. The angry dream threads raged against their confinement in the glass that contained them.

Hidden in the shadows, the intruder uncapped and inverted the vial, unleashing a cascade of nightmares. Expertly distilled, and angry as bears, they slithered over each other, fighting their way out of the dirty, grey bottle. Hissing and cursing, they dripped like an oil slick onto the soft rug at the foot of a wide mahogany bed. They crawled and curled across the tufted wool. Coiling snake-like around the carved wooden legs of

the bed frame, they closed in on the sleeping form of Ganipal the Third, king of Ratnagar, loved by his people and feared by his enemies.

These were fierce dream threads, and they sought their target hungrily, lifting their tips to sense their way. Soon enough they reached the sleeping form of the king, huddled on his soft, silk-lined mattress in fitful slumber.

Above the door a clock chimed twelve times, its hands coming together in a fateful embrace and, as they did, a dark shadow of nightmares enveloped the king. The ghostly-green threads melted into his mind, whispering threats of pain, suffering and death.

Submerged in the sudden terror of a thousand spectres, the king was powerless to escape, powerless to wake. All he could do was toss and moan.

The intruder crept to a mirror behind the door and took out a long, thin object. The dark, ebony stem was tipped by a weather-worn metal hook. It sparked as it was swept in a circle across the looking glass, transforming the mirror into a rippling liquid through which a hidden world came into view. After a glance towards the sleeping, struggling king, the intruder softly stepped through the mirror and out of the room.

The old king's breath came fast as distorted visions of his past and present taunted him. The nightmares clawed in, crushing his hope, flaying his mind and squeezing his soul. Weak as a hare in the grip of a fox's closing jaw, the king readied himself for the end.

But this time, the nightmare was not dosed to kill. Next time, they would finish the job.







## CHAPTER ONE

### The Dream Hunt

In the Citadel, we hunt.

Dreams are our prey. If we catch them before they melt into moonlight, they can be recycled and sold for great profit. My family has been hunting dreams for generations. Capturing them as they slip away, and storing them in a soaring, magnificent library. Blue glass bottles on bulging shelves glint with promise, their precious contents conserved and classified, ready to be cast in a new story, for a new mind. The dreamers dream and the sleepers pay us well.

As much as the Library of Forgotten Dreams is the brains of the Citadel, the Hall of Mirrors is its beating heart. A circular, windowless building where we work

in shifts, scouring the globe for forgotten dreams. We hunt in pairs. One to navigate the hunt, the other to catch our prey, snaring dream threads on long-stemmed hooks and bottling them away.

I jostle through the queue to reach my fellow hunter, Rafi. Street urchin, pickpocket, fighter were all labels he had in his former life, but here in the Citadel he is just one of many students making their way from hunters to curators and designers of dreams.

The librarian gazes at me over the top of her glasses. She has soft eyes, clouded by dreams she has gathered and sorted over many years, but her brief nod betrays a flash of recognition. Behind her there is a rack of keys, ready to unlock gateways to the dreams we will hunt tonight.

‘Name?’ She taps her manicured fingers on the desk.

‘Malou, Mimi.’ She knows who I am, but I play the game. I’ve attended night hunts since before I could even walk.

The old woman sniffs, slipping one of the keys across the desk. The tag has co-ordinates scratched on it in golden ink.

*Latitude 27° 28' 10". Longitude 70° 37' 18".*

I close my hand around the cold metal. The key is heavier than it looks and is inscribed with charms. Rafi paces ahead of me, diving into the atlas when we reach our station, while I insert the key into a lock crafted into the frame of our looking glass. As I turn the key a series of *clunks* signals our destination is set and the portal is ready. Our reflection fades and shifting shadows come into view.



On the other side of the mirror, the sky is a dark pool of ink smattered with a shimmering belt of stars. It is perfectly cloudless, perfectly clear, perfect for dream hunting. Rafi sinks the lever controlling our looking glass, and our viewpoint drops closer to the ground. Waves of sand dunes drift across a desolate landscape.

My dream creature, Lalu, flutters around my head. Excited and anxious, her hummingbird wings are a rich azure blue; she has flecks of gold and pink at the nape of her tiny neck.

‘It’s a desert,’ says Rafi.

‘The sand’s a clue, I suppose.’

‘So smart.’ He rotates the lever and we pan across the scene on the other side of the looking glass, ‘The Thar Desert. It’s in the north of India.’

‘You’ve been?’

He shakes his head. ‘This is about as far from Mumbai as you can get,’ he says.

As we scour across the sand, I wonder how we will find any living creature, let alone a dream.

‘There!’ Rafi zooms our looking glass down towards a clump of red and orange in the distance, the dying embers of a campfire. In its dim light I spy a cluster of tents and slumbering camels. A guard rests his head

against a dusty stack of travelling bags. He is motionless, but now and then his sleepy head slips to one side and he stirs.

‘Him?’ I ask, but Rafi shakes his head.

‘The camel?’ I snigger and he punches my arm.

‘Look.’ He points to the bottom-right corner of the looking glass.

All I see is a tent swathed in darkness. ‘You sure?’

Rafi bites his lip as he steers our looking glass across the camp, the amber firelight fading into darkness. He’s not done so well the last couple of times. While he has a real skill for spotting dreams, he isn’t so good at reeling them in. It needs a delicate touch and losing one is worse than never finding it. Three failed hunts mean being kicked out of the programme.

‘See it now?’ Rafi points to a wisp of light slithering out of the tent. It’s a soft, speckled, golden colour and undulates, coiling around on itself. Its tip wiggles playfully as if it’s sniffing the night air. I know that dreams start to unfurl as the memory of them fades, but this one is still a perfect helix, as if it has only just slipped out of the dreamer’s mind.

I run my finger across the classification table in my copy of *A Beginner’s Guide to Dream Hunting*.

*Colour: gold . . . Shape: helical . . . Movement: playful . . .*

‘Fresh grade one dream fragment,’ I say. ‘Rare as flying horses.’

Lalu watches from my shoulder, her wings quivering every now and then in excitement. Rafi’s dream creature is a chiffchaff. Like her human, Mithi is good-natured, often hungry and chatters constantly. She settles on the top of our looking glass, warbling and wagging her tail while I uncap a bottle to trap the dream thread once we reel it in. As we steer towards it, a drift of wind puffs the thread further away from us. It quivers, threatening to unfurl.

‘I’m on it, Mimi!’ Rafi moves the lever but forces it too hard. The glass jerks and we lose sight of the camp.

‘Nice and slow.’ I grab the controls, trying to re-centre. I zoom up and guide the portal back to the original co-ordinates. Nothing.

Then I spot it—

*Yes! We can fix this.*

We move in fast. This time, I steer. The dream sparkles as it senses the mirror, and my insides turn into a spray of butterflies. Rafi holds his dream hook close to the glass and sweeps a circle across the surface, transforming

it into a rippling silver liquid. As we move close to the portal, the chill night air in the desert makes goosebumps spring up on my arms.

‘Move like a ghost,’ I say.

I hold my breath as the wisp floats towards us. Rafi slides his dream-weaving hook through the mirror, twists his hand and catches a loop of dream onto it.

‘Great, now pull it through,’ I say. ‘Nice and slow . . . you’ve got this.’

‘I have?’

I nod and smile at him.

‘Yes, I’ve got this,’ he says.

*He hasn’t.*

His hand shakes as a dream technician passes by.

*He’s nervous.*

The dream quivers . . . Mithi flits around the mirror and I shoo her away. Now is not the time for distraction, but it’s too late. The golden dream thread slivers and shivers. My heart sinks as it unwinds and slips away, fluttering down through the sky on the other side of the looking glass. Down, unravelling and splintering into countless pieces until, *poof*, it’s gone.

As if it never existed.

Sensing the dream has disappeared, the mirror portal

starts to reset and solid glass closes in on Rafi's dream hook. By the time he tries to pull it out, the end of it is stuck, captured like the branch of a tree in a frozen lake.

He turns to me wide-eyed. 'It won't come out!'

I wipe my forehead. If we can find another dream, the portal will open and free the hook, but before I can reset the lock Rafi panics and pulls the stem of his hook.

'No, don't, it can't just . . .' The rest of my words melt into a horrified gasp as a crack appears in the mirror. Then another. Hundreds more appear, flourishing web-like across the surface of the mirror. Pieces of glass start to slip and fall away from the frame, clattering in thunderous symphony onto the stone floor of the Hall of Mirrors.

Children around us pause their hunts. The room burns with their whispered questions and their pitying, wondering gaze.

My face flushes red. 'Quick, let's clear this up.' I start to pick at the larger mirror fragments, but I know it's futile. The technicians monitor all our activity, and it won't be long before word reaches the top.

I clench my fists as I spot some of the other students, Deena Dilsay and her pig-headed friends, sniggering as



Rafi looks for a brush to sweep away the glass, but we all stiffen when we hear her.

*Click, clack.*

She's coming.

*Click, clack.*

The other children jump back into their hunts and try to look busy, their attention focused on their own mirrors, not the fallen fragments of ours.

The footsteps get louder, and Aunt Moyna bustles in, trailed by her troop of dream technicians and a fluttering flock of dream creatures circling above them, ravens and rooks with an affinity for harsh dreams and cold feelings. They make a beeline for our station.

'I'll say it was me,' I say and clear my throat.

'No way,' Rafi whispers. 'I won't let you.'

I shake my head and push myself in front of him. Luckily, I'm half a head taller.

'*Hmmm . . .*' Aunt Moyna arrives at our station, kicking at broken shards of glass. She has her hair pulled into a tight bun, which makes her sharp, chiselled features even more severe.

'It's not what you think—' I start but Aunt Moyna raises her hand, and my stomach rolls over itself.

She leans over to pick up Rafi's fallen dream hook and, as she stands up, adjusts her glasses and reads the name at the end of the hook.

'Well, it comes as no surprise, Rafi. You've been trouble since I invited you into the Citadel.'

My aunt has always said orphans handle dreams better because they have no hopes or dreams of their own. That's why she has brought many in from beyond the Citadel, promising them a home and good food, but it comes with a liberal dose of discipline and fear. To be fair, most of them are as good at hunting as the older hunters born and bred here.

'It was my fault,' I say.

My aunt purses her lips and Rafi opens his mouth to say something, but I shake my head. Aunt Moyna took over from my father as head of the Library of Forgotten Dreams when my parents were imprisoned, so she's my guardian as well as my boss.

'You know very well, Mimi, that because you have no blood link to Rafi his hook would not respond to you.' She circles her hand across the scene before us. 'This incompetence is all the doing of your fellow dream hunter.'

'He's new. I should have taken control.'

Aunt Moyna ignores me and bends down, bringing her face level with Rafi's. Undeterred, he gives her a defiant stare. I touch his shoulder in warning, but he shrugs me off.

'Maybe being a common thief is all you were ever good for.'

Rafi scowls. 'I took care of myself.'

I reach out to calm him as one of the technicians grabs his arm. She has a distinctive white streak in her hair, like someone has run some chalk along it, but I take a step back when I see her badge:

*Senior Supervisory Technician, Suri Ganatry.*

Technicians are the supervisors of sadness, the harbingers of hate. Even Deena's smirk has stiffened to worry.

'Let me go!' Rafi wriggles and winces at the tightness of the grip on his arm, but Suri maintains her lobster-tight hold. Her raven shrieks with amusement.

'That's enough, Carab.' Aunt Moyna swipes at Suri's dream creature. As he flaps away, she turns her attention back to Rafi. 'Maybe you need a trip to the dream laboratory.'

A ripple of dread spreads through the hall. No one comes back the same after a trip to the dream laboratory.

‘Aunt Moyna, please . . .’ My throat is so dry I can barely speak.

I like Rafi. He is a little clumsy, but he tries his best, and even though he’s smaller than me he fights back when some of the other kids call me a traitor like my parents.

My aunt lifts her hand up. ‘You may release him, Suri.’

The woman relaxes her grip and Rafi pulls away, rubbing his shoulder and shooting dagger eyes at the technician.

‘Now look,’ says Aunt Moyna, ‘the looking glass is a precious tool. A portal is not a toy to roam the world.’ She turns to Rafi, eyebrows furrowed. ‘Take this as a final warning. No more chances, no more excuses.’ She takes out her notebook and scribbles a note in her tally. Dream hunts are scored, and we just failed.

‘Can I just say—’ starts Rafi, but she holds up her hand to silence him.

‘This looking glass will take months to repair.’ Aunt Moyna steps on a fragment of broken glass and crushes it with her heel. ‘We will find a spare, but you have quite a debt of dreams to repay.’

Lalu takes refuge in the nest of moss and leaves in my pocket. I stroke the soft feathers on the back of her neck to calm her down.

‘You are better than this, Mimi,’ says Aunt Moyna. ‘Perhaps you should work with someone more accomplished?’ She turns her head towards Deena then back to me and gives a slight nod.

I growl and shake my head, looking down as she *click-clacks* away with her retinue of technicians behind her. I’m no traitor, and there is no way I would give up on my best friend. Suri looks back and, as she catches my eye, her thin smile prickles my anger.

Trouble is closing in on Rafi, and where trouble goes, danger follows.