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Opening extract from
Spirit of the Jungle

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*To all our BGV team:
who encourage that kid-like spirit
in each other, love adventure
and always go that extra mile*



CHAPTER ONE

The telephone's chirping ring made Mak look up from the book he was reading on his bed. For whatever bizarre reason, his mother had changed the landline ringtone to mimic the trill of an exotic bird. She thought it was amusing, but it set Mak's nerves on edge. That, along with the abundance of plants his mother crammed in the house, had convinced him that nature had one place: *outside*. Not in his comfortable London home.

He was glad when he heard his dad finally answer the phone, and he settled back down on the bed. But as his father's voice rose with increasing anxiety, Mak sat up in alarm. He went out on to the landing, and crouched at the top of the stairs to listen. His father kept slipping into Hindi, a language he seldom used and one Mak had long forgotten, which made it hard for him to understand what was going on – but something was clearly wrong.

Mak skipped a coin through his knuckles nervously, part of a magic trick he had been perfecting. The coin would flow over each knuckle, falling downward, then,

with barely a waggle of the fingers, it would seem to roll back up. It was a distraction, one of the cardinal rules of magic. The viewer watched the coin while the other hand performed the trick unseen. It was something else his father disapproved of; he didn't understand why Mak wasted his time learning pointless tricks.

He heard the phone call finish and the hushed voices of his parents.



Then – ‘Makur!’ his father called from downstairs, surprising him and making him drop the coin. It was always a bad sign when Mak’s full name was used. ‘Makur, come down here a moment.’

Dragging his heels, Mak headed downstairs. The look on his parents’ faces when he reached the bottom set off alarm bells. His dad was rubbing his eyes, discreetly wiping away tears. This was particularly unsettling, as he’d never seen his father express any emotion, other than disappointment.

‘What’s happened?’ Mak asked, with a growing sense of dread. ‘Tell me.’



CHAPTER TWO

‘Your Uncle David has died,’ his mother said with a cracking voice.

Mak looked from one parent to the other and nodded. He vaguely recalled his Uncle David, his father’s brother, who lived somewhere in India. He had come over to England a few times on business and they had all been out to dinner, but Mak only had vague memories of the man. He certainly wouldn’t have been able to identify him in a police line-up. But he was his father’s brother and he knew they were close, so he did feel sorry for his father. He wished he could think of something to say.

‘It was a car accident,’ his mum continued when it was clear his dad wasn’t yet capable of speaking. ‘As he was coming out of his office.’ Mak’s uncle had owned a technology company in New Delhi.

Mak tried to picture where in India that was. It took a few seconds to actually peg the country with any accuracy on his mental globe, so he had no chance of locating the actual city.

‘We’ll have to go over for the funeral and to deal with his business affairs,’ his dad finally managed, clearing his throat as he did so. ‘He has no family out there . . .’ He trailed off.

Mak’s mind raced. He knew he should feel sad, but all he could think about was a blessed week, or maybe two, without his parents breathing down his neck. A break from his dad’s lectures about wasting his time on computer games or practising his conjuring tricks. ‘Well, I could stay with Grandma and—’

‘We will *all* be going,’ his father said firmly.

‘To India?’ Mak blurted. He had never been there and had absolutely no desire to either. Aside from the food, he couldn’t think of a single good reason to want to visit. He was quite happy where he was in London. ‘All of us? Even Anula?’ If his older sister was forced to come too, then perhaps it would be bearable.

His dad wagged a finger. ‘Your sister has university. It’s important she stays to continue her studies undisturbed.’

‘What about *my* studies?’ Mak exclaimed. ‘I have exams . . .’ As the words tumbled from his mouth he knew it sounded like a desperate plea not to go – he’d never been that bothered about his exams before.

His father’s face darkened. ‘You will come with us! We go to respect your uncle as a family.’ He turned and walked off into the living room without another word.

Mak knew he shouldn’t have said anything, especially

as his father had only just heard the bad news. If he had waited, then perhaps he could have come up with better, subtler reasons as to why he should remain at home. He felt his mother's gaze boring into him.

'Why do you always think of yourself, Mak?' she said quietly. 'Your father is upset. You should be supporting him, not arguing.'

Mak felt ashamed. He hung his head. 'I'm sorry. I'll go and put the kettle on.' He hurried to the kitchen hoping that some chai would help make amends, but knowing that he had a trip ahead of him that he had no interest in undertaking.

To Mak, India was a very big country a very long way from home.



CHAPTER THREE

So it was that three days later Mak found himself standing in the middle of a busy Heathrow Airport terminal. All around him crowds of people dashed past trying to make their departure gates on time, and there was an air of constant tension.

Conversations with his parents were short as he was worried that any unthoughtful comment might hurt his father's feelings, so he decided to say as little as possible. However, that didn't stop his father from chastising him at every opportunity.

'Stop running,' when Mak dashed along the terminal's travelator. 'Don't touch that, you'll break it,' when he dared pick something up in the gift shop. It was always either: 'stop', 'don't', or 'be quiet', but Mak decided arguing back wouldn't solve anything.

At least he received a smile from the waitress in the restaurant when he made a sugar cube vanish with a wave of his hand. Unfortunately that just led to his father muttering, 'Stop messing around, Makur.'

Mak hoped that New Delhi would at least be a little calmer.

It must be the law in India to drive while sounding your horn, Mak thought. There couldn't be any other explanation for the deafening cacophony rattling the streets of New Delhi.

Walking from the air-conditioned arrivals terminal of Indira Gandhi Airport into the suffocating and polluted humid heat had been unexpected, but the crush of humanity on the kerbside was even more of a shock. Mak had never seen so many people in one place, and each one appeared to be trying to sell them something – a taxi ride, some fruit, a drink, mobile phone or any number of other objects Mak couldn't yet identify. His father cut through them all with nothing more than a stern look and a stance that kept anybody from pestering him more than once.

Mak wasn't so lucky and several times the ranks of people closed around him, separating him from his parents. For a moment he felt claustrophobic as he was pressed between bodies.

He was spun around several times until he couldn't see where the terminal building was. Disoriented he shouted out in alarm, 'Mum! Mum!'

Then his mother's hand shot through the throng and gripped his elbow, pulling him towards the private car waiting just metres away. It had only taken seconds,

but in that instant Mak developed a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach; a momentary panic. *What if he lost his parents?* He didn't know his way around the city, spoke no Hindi and didn't even know the name of the hotel they were staying at. He fought the uncontrollable fear of being alone – alone in a city of twenty-one million people.



CHAPTER FOUR

In the safety of their private car, Mak peered out of the window at the constant wall of traffic and the pavements crammed with more people than he had ever seen in his whole life, all squashed together. He couldn't help but notice a wistful expression on his father's face: a hint of sorrow, but something else; perhaps a sliver of joy at being back in India.

The sharp cold of the car's air conditioning pricked Mak's skin. Too warm outside, too cold inside.

And then his stomach started rumbling.

Mak was pretty sure his food shouldn't slither like that. He poked it with a spoon. He'd had *rogan josh* before in England, but clearly they made it differently here. It didn't look quite the same, and the taste was unusual. It left him longing for fish and chips or apple crumble: something *normal*.

Despite his growing list of concerns, Mak kept silent. His parents spoke quietly as they ate, but didn't engage him in conversation, and he was feeling too jet-

lagged to care. It took a few moments of prodding his food before he realized his dad had spoken to him.

'Sorry Dad?'

'I said we should probably leave you here in the hotel tomorrow while we go to Uncle David's office to make a start on sorting through his business affairs.'

Due to the time it had taken to arrange their flights, they had missed Uncle David's funeral. Hindi funerals took place as quickly as possible, and Uncle David's had taken place just two days after they'd heard the bad news. Mak was kind of relieved; he had no desire to witness a cremation – but missing it had put his father in a fouler mood than usual.

'That's fine,' said Mak. 'I'm happy to stay here until you're back.'

'You're not to leave the hotel,' his father warned.

'There's a swimming pool,' his mother said, 'and you can eat in the restaurant if you're hungry. We shouldn't be too long.'

Mak had zero intention of leaving his room, never mind the hotel. The pool held no attraction. While he was a strong swimmer, he had nothing but bad memories of being teased during school swimming lessons.

'I'll be fine,' said Mak with relief. 'I have plenty to keep me busy.' Undisturbed time to hone a few more tricks from his book was top of his list. And maybe then to order some room service and eat it in bed whilst watching a movie. Bliss!



And that is exactly how Makur's initial experience of India unfolded, from within the safe four walls of his luxurious hotel room. Indian television wasn't exactly riveting if you didn't like musicals, cricket or current affairs, so instead he focused on his magic book, and logged on to the hotel's internet to watch a few YouTube videos on how to palm a coin to make it look as if it had vanished into thin air.

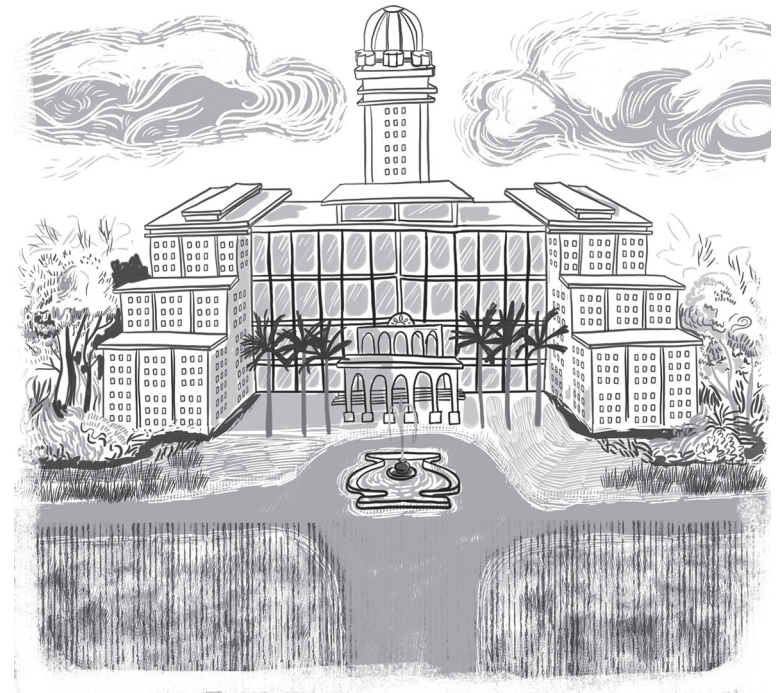
Mak began to grow bored, so he ventured out on to the balcony. The slice of humid air that slapped him in the face and the monotonous drone of traffic made him retreat back inside, quickly closing the door after him.

By late afternoon his parents still weren't back, so Mak ventured into the hotel lobby and peered through the impressive revolving doors at the manicured lawns, and for a fleeting second he felt the urge to go outside.

He took a step, but then a voice in his head whispered what lay beyond: heat, incessant flies, endless traffic and squadrons of beggars. It was a hostile and unfamiliar land, and not one Mak thought he should be a part of.

He accepted it was down to fear. Fear of the unknown, the cold tickle of the unfamiliar. Some people were cut out to be explorers and adventurers, but not Mak. He'd never really ventured beyond the outskirts of London.

If Mak was honest, the thing he feared most was living his whole life within a few cosy square kilometres



and never doing anything worthwhile. But what choice did he have? He just wasn't cut out for adventure. And as for risk? He wouldn't know what to do if he was faced with it head on.

No – magic was simpler – he could control that and hide behind it.

And disappear.



CHAPTER FIVE

Later that evening his parents arrived back and the three of them had dinner together. Mak's father spent most of the meal poring over paper files, all adorned with the GeoTek logo of his uncle's company, while his mother flicked worried glances at Mak. Eventually she spoke up.

'Would you like me to stay with you tomorrow?'

'It's fine. You do what you need to do. I'm happy here. Really,' Mak replied, although part of him felt he could do with the company.

'We could explore New Delhi together. It is rather marvellous,' his mum insisted. 'There's the Gurudwara Bangla Sahib. It's a temple,' she added when Mak frowned. 'Very beautiful. Or Humayun's Tomb is supposed to be impressive.'

'Aren't they just a bunch of old buildings?' Mak asked.

'Leave him,' said his father without looking up. 'You know how he is. He has no interest in anything – except magic.'

The words stung Mak and he spent the rest of the meal in silence, slowly eating the chips on his plate which, like everything else in the hotel, didn't taste like they did back home.

So it was a surprise the next day when his father bounded into the room and clapped his hands together in excitement. For the first time since they'd arrived on the subcontinent, he was smiling broadly.

'Come on, Makur, get an overnight bag together. We're going on a trip!'

'Where to?' Mak's spirits began to rise – was this an opportunity to start heading home?

'David's business has operations in the jungle, so we're going to see how they run. I need to get a measure of things if I'm going to take over.'

Mak felt his skin prickle with fear. *If I'm going to take over.* Could his dad be thinking of staying in India? Mak felt sick at the thought. Until he registered what else his dad had said. 'We're going to the j-jungle?'

'Yes!' His dad's eyes widened with delight. 'The wild, untouched jungle! I have always wanted to go.'

That was news to Mak. The most adventurous place he'd ever seen his father go was to the golf course. 'But there are insects in the jungle. You hate insects.'

'We have bug spray.'

'And lions, and zebras and giraffes . . .' Mak was beginning to struggle with his natural history knowledge.