





## CHAPTER 37

Mercy was grateful that Aunt Mary did not question her about why she'd lingered in the classroom that evening or who could have hidden the money in the Gandhi section of the library. It was as if those things just didn't interest her. Or maybe she had bigger things to worry about.

The next morning, she overheard Aunt Mary on the phone with the school: "Mercy is feeling delicate and will not be attending school today. Thank you and goodbye." And she put the phone down.

It was, Mercy knew, an important day to be at home: Aunt Flora was moving into the Old Age Home and Mr. de Wet was coming with his son to move the swarm of bees which was still hanging like a big bronze balloon in the pride-of-India-tree. The two events were not unrelated.

Mercy dreaded going back to school after the events of the previous day but what would happen if Mrs. Naidoo came and found her absent? Mercy felt as if the hole she'd been digging for herself at school had got even deeper. Could she ever get out of it?

But the sight of Aunt Flora's small pale blue cardboard suitcase packed and standing by the front door tied up with



string made up her mind. The problem with school would have to wait.

Mercy helped Aunt Mary to collect a small pile of thread-bare linen: two lumpy feather pillows, some thin sheets, and a couple of blue wool blankets edged with satin trim. Aunt Mary took down the photo of their parents' wedding and propped it against the suitcase to go.

"Don't make a big fuss about saying goodbye when Flora goes, my dear," Aunt Mary told her. "We will see her every day where she is going and the calmer we are, the more she will trust us."

"Doesn't she need to know what's happening?" Mercy whispered, thinking that if she was the one being taken away, she would rather know.

"Sometimes it is more loving to keep difficult information to yourself," said Aunt Mary. "We have to bear the weight of this for her; she doesn't have the strength."

Mercy worried what other difficult information Aunt Mary might be holding back. Were there things Aunt Mary might think she, Mercy, would not be able to bear?

When Aunt Mary drove off with Aunt Flora, Mercy was not there to watch. She and Mr. Singh had gone next door to the plot to cut away the kikuyu grass that had grown over the old bee hive that stood quietly rotting under the wild pear tree. The hive consisted of two boxes stacked on top of each other: a big brood box at the bottom and a smaller box called a super that sat under the lid. Mr. de Wet was going to move the swarm from the pride-of-India tree into the brood box.

Mr. Singh inspected the boxes by tipping them upside down. The wood had perished on the outside but there



were no holes where the bees could escape. He cleaned the boxes with a soft brush while Mercy found four bricks hidden in the long grass. Then they set the brood box right on its new feet and stacked the super above it. Wooden frames that Mr. de Wet had dropped off that morning slotted into the boxes. The frames were to support the honeycomb that the bees would make. Finally they replaced the lid.

They heard the car reversing out of the driveway and Mercy stood on tiptoe to see the old yellow car turn the corner of Hodson Road and disappear. Mr. Singh took off his sunhat and held it in both hands as if they were attending a funeral, which in a way, they were. Mercy fought back tears.

Soon after, Mr. de Wet called them from the fence. "It's safe to start. We better get going."

Mr. de Wet and his son Clive looked like astronauts in their big white overalls, white gloves, white gumboots and hats with veils to protect their faces. Mr. Singh explained that bees are more bothered by dark colors. "If you wear black clothes, they might think you are a honey badger and attack you," he said.

"Can I watch?" asked Mercy.

"OK. But I want you behind a closed window inside the house," said Mr. de Wet. "And you better take that hen with you. You don't want to play silly buggers with a swarm of bees."

Mercy scooped up Lemon and hugged her close. They went into her bedroom and looked out of the window. She stroked Lemon's silky head with one finger while she watched. Mr. Singh stood beside them.

"If you want to capture a swarm, you have to get the



queen bee, Mercy. All the bees follow the queen bee. She'll be right there in the middle."

Mr. de Wet and Clive had positioned a cardboard box on a white sheet under the swarm. Using clippers, they cut through the branch where the bees were hanging and dangled the bee-heavy branch over the box. Mercy held her breath. Clive gave the branch a shake and the ball of bees fell into the box. They closed the flaps and folded the box up into the sheet. Mr. de Wet carried the whole white bundle to the fence and handed it to his son. They disappeared, followed by a few stray bees that had missed the capture.

"Did you know that a single bee working all its life will only make one twelfth of a teaspoon of honey?" said Mr. Singh.

"One twelfth of a teaspoon? That's like...nothing." Mercy thought there was something a bit depressing about that; just the teeniest tip of a teaspoon, for your life's work.

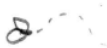
"Well, the tiny drips of honey add up so that eventually you get liters of honey from one hive. And, do you know what would happen if the bees didn't do their work?"

"No honey?"

"Yes, but also no apples, no nuts, no oranges, berries, peaches, avocados or tomatoes either...so much of fruit and vegetables need bees. Because while they are doing this busy work collecting nectar, bees are also doing for the world a great kindness—which is pollination. Do you remember that poem that Shakespeare wrote? About mercy?"

"About the blessing?"

"Yes, mercy blesses him that gives and him that takes. It's the same thing with flowers and bees; give and take. It enriches both. It's a little act of mercy and a miracle. A beautiful arrangement."



Mercy was quiet thinking about that.

"It's in the tiny little circles of life, Mercy, where the sweetness lives. Not always in the big noisy things."

And then, right on cue, there was a big noisy banging on the front door.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

Mercy, Lemon, and Mr. Singh went to investigate and found Mr. Craven leaning his sweaty body against the doorframe as if he already owned the place.

