Born to a poor, landless farmer in the month of the monsoon rains, twins Zara and Tara grow up amongst the fields of wheat and cotton in a remote village in Pakistan. During an afternoon spree of games, Tara is kidnapped from the fields and raped. All seems to be resolved after her parents accept an unexpected marriage proposal for their "dishonoured" daughter. But the nightmare resurfaces when a newspaper clipping emerges, calling the union into question.

Determined to rescue her twin, Zara embarks on a harrowing quest for justice, battling keepers of a culture that upholds propriety above all else and braving the unknown dangers of an urban centre.

Set in the early 1980s against the backdrop of martial law and social turmoil, *Beyond the Fields* is a riveting, timely look at profound inequality, traditions that disempower women in our world, and survival as a dance to the beat of a different future.

"… absolutely gripping and edifying … an important read about an under-represented population in Western literature."

– Fran Lebowitz, literary consultant

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For my parents, Freeha and Baqir,
who gave me so much strength
and taught me to persevere

For Ali, Faiz, and Shariq
Thank you for your love and patience

And for the village women of Pakistan

Book One

JOURNEY

1

Two hundred and seven days since the rape. Two hundred and five days since my twin had been taken away. And miles of muck in between.

I sank into my seat and shut my eyes. Laugher burst out. Chatter hummed. Hawker boys screeched deals for sticky sweetmeats and icy colas. I inhaled and tasted dry grit. The horn bleated like a fidgety goat. Closing my eyes, I counted seconds, then went faster than seconds. When the engine growled, and the hollow metal body shuddered, I crouched on the seat. A dust cloud had swallowed my village.

"Down, jaahil!" roared the bus driver.

Flushing, I lowered myself into my seat. I wasn't a jaahil, ignorant. I could prove it. But I wasn't free yet. I was caged from the tip of my head to the soles of my slippers. Abba said I didn't have a choice. Amma said the burka gave me freedom. I could see others without being seen. But I wanted to be seen and heard. Like other girls. Like girls who went to school. Like girls who chased their dreams.

Without warning, the bus lurched to a stop. Dhum. Dhum. A feverish drumbeat led a wedding procession across the road. Starched like a puppet, the groom straddled a white horse, surrounded by a crowd of men whirling pink scarves. Behind him, the bride, swaddled in folds of tinselled red and gold, huddled on a mule, trying to inch forward within the pack of dark, veiled women and a troop of soulful pipers. The horn blared again, and childlike eyes

looked up from the folds of cloth.

I shivered. In a dark flicker, I became that bride, bound to a new family. Amma had declared I was old enough. I was fifteen or sixteen; she wasn't sure. She had no records or pictures of our birth, but claimed we had been born the year after the River Sutlej had flooded our village. She had shown me off to aunties wanting 'good girls' for their nephews and to wrinkled men seeking second wives. But they said I wasn't white enough. I made poor tea. And I didn't have much of a dowry.

I smoked a hookah too. But they didn't know that. They didn't know me.

I was caught in a tug of war. How many times had I played that game with my twin, using coils of jute from the charpais on which we slept? I was that twine now, being torn apart. Amma and Abba wanted me married. "The sooner the better," they said. But Tara's scent wrapped around me, and her warmth clung. Split from one cell, we had the same tiger-gold eyes. Her nose. My nose. And the same full mouth. They had forgotten her, but I hadn't. They were okay with the lies; I wasn't. Not anymore.

A tiny lie can push you down a slippery slope.

I jolted up upon hearing my grandmother's words, but Nani was nowhere near. How could she be? Abba had forbidden her from visiting us. The voice was in my head. Despite Nani's warning, I had slipped down the slippery slope and tumbled into a muck of lies. Alone. Without Tara. I cut off my thoughts. I wasn't going there. Not today.

The bus hurtled down the thin blade of a road that sliced through the boundless fields. Rows of cotton saplings swelled like armies of caterpillars on either side. I watched the wheels swallow the grey track. It was time. Holding my breath, I pulled back my veil and flinched. But no one lashed out or scolded. The steady whirr of

the engine soothed the clanking in my head. This was my journey. I hunted the truth. I studied warriors. Now, I had to become one.

When fields gave way to a broken line of rickety shacks and sheds, I turned back and met the unblinking stare of my fellow passenger, the only other woman on the bus. She was a narrow-jawed woman with kohl-lined eyes and crimson lips. We sat jammed together on the tiny seats in the women's section at the front of the bus. There was no other way to sit. The woman's thigh pressed against mine, and her elbow pinched my ribs.

"First time on the bus?" she probed. Without waiting for me to answer, she began to talk. Her lips swelled and narrowed like the mouth of a river fish. She was a professor and her husband was an engineer. They lived in different hostels and in different countries. He worked for a company in Saudi Arabia. There were no jobs for engineers in our country, she said. They were saving to be together. He had left her the day after their wedding, promising to return soon. When? She didn't know. But he would return. He had to. She had left everything to be with him. "What's your name, girl?"

"Zara," I answered after a missed beat. Amma had warned us against such women. Third class, she called them. Like they were bogies on a train. In Amma's world, there were three types of girls. First class girls married whom their parents chose, second class girls never married and third class girls married against their parents' wishes. I had believed Amma once. But I didn't believe her anymore. I didn't know what to believe.

"Travelling alone?" pressed the professor.

Her question exploded like a tomato in my head. Truth had a rotten core. No one could take too much of it. Seeing the flash of curiosity in the professor's kohl-lined eyes, I spun a half-truth. Floods had ruined our crop and Abba had fallen ill. The landlord was demanding his debt be settled, and as the eldest of five daughters, I

had to help. My uncle had found me a job as a housemaid in the city. Making a clucking sound, the professor lowered her hand to my fist.

I stared at the silver coins. It wasn't *all* lies. My brother, Omer, sat in the men's section of the bus because Abba had forbidden us to sit together. It wasn't safe anymore. Once we reached Lahore, Omer was going to start boarding school and I was going to start work as a maid. "Is the city safe now? Have the riots ended?" I asked, wanting news.

"Shush, they are everywhere." The professor's gaze flitted to the back.

"Who?"

"The wardi wallas. They're everywhere, spying."

"Spying on who?"

"Everyone and anyone who dares to protest. But how would you know?"

"I know enough."

"Enough to know of rape and loot?"

Shivering, I pushed back into the hard metal of the seat. What did she know about rape? The rattle of the engine faded. I heard a door crack and my brother's shouts.

"Are you all right?" The professor's hand skimmed over my arm.

Starting to shake my head, I nodded quickly. "What do you teach?"

"History."

"I know so little," I began. I knew my history textbook inside out but I had to keep her talking.

"You just said you knew enough." The professor narrowed her eyes.

I lowered my gaze and the silence stretched between us.

The professor shook her head. "You're too young and outspoken. How can your parents risk sending you to work in the city?" Seeing me protest, she held up her hand, "Fine, if what you say is true, then you better know something about the city before you get there."

Before I could say anything, she leaned forward. "I'll tell you what I tell my students. It will help you." She straightened up with her eyes still on me. "Lahore is a nymph with the soul of a dove and the temper of a tigress, caught between those who want her chained to the clergy and those who want to sell her to the highest bidder."

Her voice deepened, unfolding the city's history, from the rule of the Turks and Mongols to the intrigues of the Mughal emperors. Every conqueror had left his mark; Lahore was a city of forts, tombs, parks and palaces. The walls of these treasures were chipped and smudged with dirt and grime, but the foundations were strong and pure.

The Lahore Fort offered visitors a hallucinogenic view of the city, and the cries of tortured prisoners, long dead, still haunted the stone courtyard, across from which the muezzin's voice soared from the spiralling minarets of the red stone mosque, calling the believers to prayer. The Palace of Mirrors had been stripped of its jewels that now sparkled in foreign lands, much like the politicians. But lush rolling gardens soothed the eyes of pavement dwellers, pale alabaster water fountains calmed heated tempers, and ancient trees swooped down to shelter the common man without prejudice on sweltering summer days. In the maze of narrow lanes lined with grubby stalls, men, women and donkey carts jostled for space. Haggling over Chinese plastics and fried foods, veiled women swatted off the flocks of child beggars.

The professor murmured that after the night prayers, the narrow streets of the old city pulsed with the beat of drums and the tinkle of anklets. Dancing girls swayed and strutted on balconies, enticing beggars and businessmen. Drug dealers scurried through the backstreets of the fort like rats, sniffing out addicts. Others roamed the lanes hunting for more prey. I was to stay away from the old city after dark.

The professor shared stories of family inbreeding and of generations cursed with abnormalities as the bus rattled over the

gravel road. She whispered of intoxicating street drinks made up of milk and cannabis paste. Gradually her voice hardened and her eyes glimmered, or was it the changing light?

Modern Lahore was a playground for the rich. They built marble mansions with gilded turrets. They played with long sleek cars, sailing ships and private planes. Their factories ran on the blood and sweat of the workers. Their parties took off after midnight and crashed past sunrise: the nonstop parties, where the wealthy drank more than they ate, frolicked like chimps in the Lahore zoo and abandoned bottle-fed babies to foreign maids. But it was changing. The coup had struck, and it had strangled the city. Raids and strikes jammed the houses and roads. The dark paint on the professor's lips faded and cracked, and her voice sharpened. Finally, she paused, glanced outside and tightened her headscarf. "We've reached," she announced.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the professor. Words stuck in my throat like grit. "Thank you," I whispered. What did I have to do to be like her?

Digging into her bag, she looked up. "You should be in school, my child. I will worry about you. But here, if you ever need a friend, look me up at the hostel." She pressed her hand on mine, turned away and pulled out a string of beads to pray.

I looked down and curled my fingers around the card. I could never be like her. I hadn't prayed in a long time. The sun had dimmed and dipped into the murky horizon. Dark stone buildings loomed on either side of the double lanes. Had Tara crossed these roads? Horns boomed and blared. Trucks, buses, cars, tongas, rickshaws and motorcycles fought for space. Oncoming headlights reminded me of nocturnal beasts in search of prey.

The city wasn't my friend, but I wasn't here to make friends. I was here to take back.