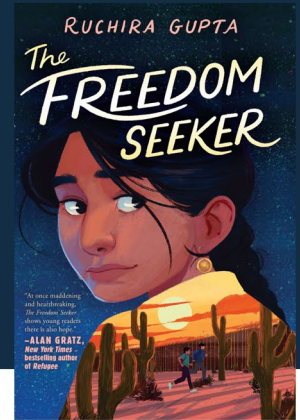


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Excerpts from The Freedom Seeker



Chapter Nine

Our family cannot thank all the gods enough for keeping Abbu safe.

Dadu and Dadi take us to the community kitchen langar of the beautiful Sikh Temple to make a donation as extra thanks. We all sit down cross-legged on the floor to eat with the rest of the congregation.

This is one of the traditions I love most about Sikhism. Everyone is fed free in the langar in the same way — regardless of caste, religion, social or class status. No one is turned away.

Later, we stop at the mosque on our way home. Ammi, Nana, Nani and I go inside and thank Allah.

Dadu jokes as we drive home:

“Simi is lucky. She has gods, goddesses, and prophets from three religions to look after her — more than most girls.”

We talk to Abbu every night — it’s morning for him in America. He’s started driving Kuldeep’s yellow cab at night and does odd jobs in the day — mowing lawns, painting fences, delivering boxes.

He tells Ammi he’s hired a lawyer in New York and that we’ll all be together again soon.

That night, I cuddle into bed beside Ammi. “Do you really think we’ll be with him soon?” I whisper.

She strokes my hair. “I think so.”

I close my eyes. Abbu’s voice echoes in my memory:

Once we’re together, wherever we are... we’ll be home.



Chapter Thirteen

In my dream, there are wolves after me. I am running, running, running. A hoarse voice whispers:

“STAY IN THE SHADOWS, STAY IN THE SHADOWS.”

But when I turn around, they are not wolves. They are coyotes.

And the shadow is too far. It's only 4 a.m. when Ammi wakes me.

“It's time to go, Simi,” she says.

It's dark and cold. I pull the sheets tighter around me. I take out the book that Nanaji gave me — THE LIFE OF MAHATMA GANDHI.

The leaf from Abbu's peepal tree is still snug between its pages.

I think of Abbu as I touch its delicate veins. I AM WALKING IN ABBU'S FOOTSTEPS, I tell myself again.

Chapter Sixteen

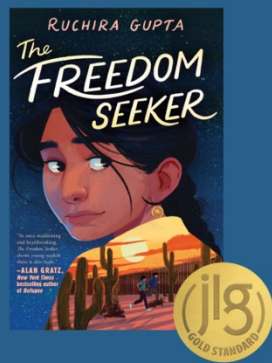
We line up and do exactly as we're told. There is a group of children just like us being unloaded from another van.

We shuffle across the shadowy dust, making our way into a shed like a flock of sheep.

Inside, men, women, and children look as if they too have just crossed the desert.

Their clothes are covered in dust, their faces caked with sand.

“Once we're
together, wherever
we are...we'll be
home.”



AMMI MUST BE HERE, I tell myself

It's close to midnight. We've been on this journey for almost twenty hours. My world has changed.

I have changed.

I have survived the desert.

But I have lost Ammi.

What is the point of any of this without her?

A woman takes my backpack and empties out just about everything — my extra shoes, silver belt, even Nani's rosary.

She finds the leaf. My heart plunges.

But then her eyes meet mine. And gently, she puts it back.