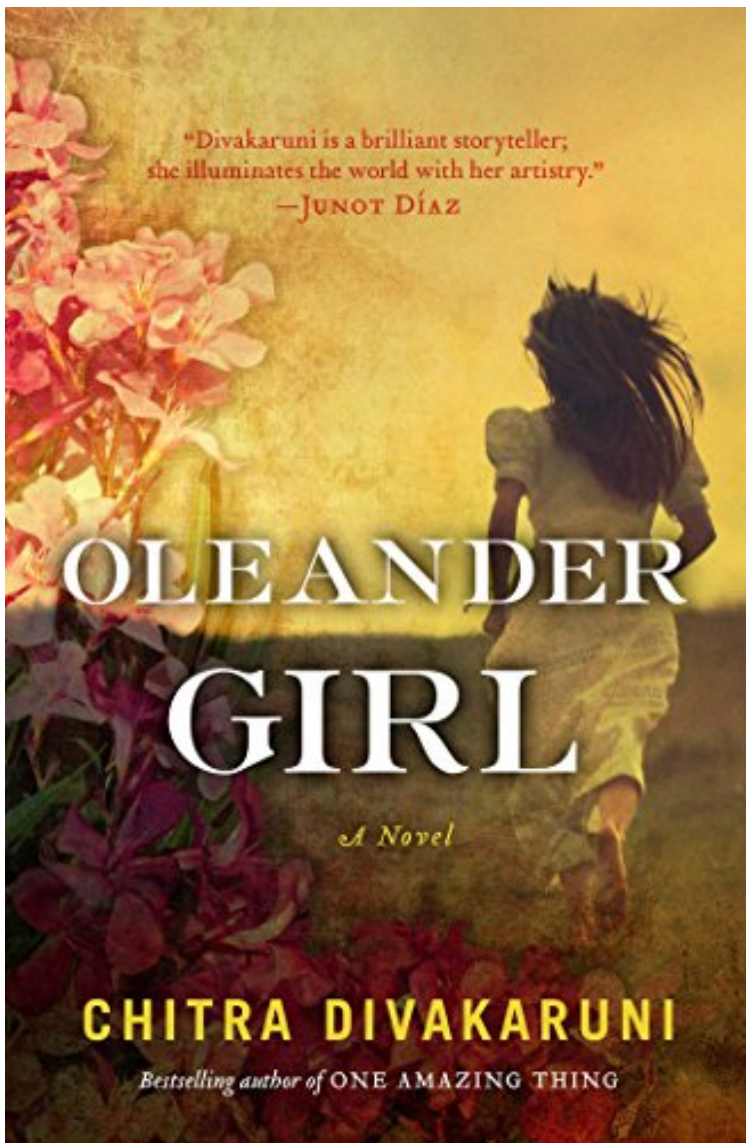


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Oleander Girl: A Novel (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBeloved bestselling author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been hailed by Abraham Verghese as a gifted storyteller and by People magazine as a skilled cartographer of the heart. Now, Divakaruni returns with her most gripping novel yet, a sweeping, suspenseful coming-of-age tale about a young woman who leaves India for America on a search that will transform her life. **THOUGH SHE WAS ORPHANED AT BIRTH**, the wild and headstrong Korobi Roy has enjoyed a privileged childhood with her adoring grandparents, spending her first seventeen years sheltered in a beautiful, crumbling old mansion in Kolkata. But despite all that her grandparents have done for her, she is troubled by the silence that surrounds the circumstances of her parents death and clings fiercely to her only inheritance from them: the love note she found, years ago, hidden in a book of poetry that had belonged to her mother. As she grows, Korobi

dreams of one day finding a love as powerful as her parents, and it seems her wish has finally come true when she meets the charming Rajat, the only son of a high-profile business family. Shortly after their engagement, however, a sudden heart attack kills Korobis grandfather, revealing serious financial problems and a devastating secret about Korobis past. Shattered by this discovery and by her grandparents betrayal, Korobi decides to undertake a courageous search across post-9/11 America to find her true identity. Her dramatic, often startling journey will ultimately thrust her into the most difficult decision of her life. With flawless narrative instinct and a boundless sympathy for her irrepressible characters, in *Oleander Girl* Divakaruni brings us a perfect treat of a novel moving, wise, and unforgettable. As *The Wall Street Journal* raves, Divakaruni emphasizes the cathartic force of storytelling with sumptuous prose. . . . She defies categorization.

Extrait *Oleander Girl*

ONE Im swimming through a long, underwater cavern flecked with blue light, the cavern of love, with Rajat close behind me. Were in a race, and so far Im winning because this is my dream. Sometimes when Im dreaming, I dont know it, but tonight I do. Sometimes when Im awake, I wonder if Im dreaming. That, however, is another story. I smile and feel my mouth filling with cool, silver bubbles. Rajats fingers brush the backs of my knees. Even in my dream I know that if I slow down just a bit, hell grab my waist and pull me to him for a mischievous kiss. Imagining that kiss sends a shudder of pleasure through me. But I dont want it yet. The chase is too much fun. I surge away with a splashy kick. Hey! he calls out in spluttering protest, and I grin wider. Competitive, he slices through the water with his fierce butterfly stroke and lunges for my ankle. I wait for his strong, electric grip to send a current through my veins. My mouth floods with anticipation of our kiss. Then out of nowhere a wave breaks over me. Salt and sand are on my tongue. I try to spit them out, but they fill my mouth, choking me. Wheres Rajat when I need his help? Gasping, I thrash about and wake in my bed, tangled in my bedsheets. In my mothers bed, I should say. The bed I used every year when I came home from boarding school for the holidays. The bed thats made with the same sheets she covered herself with as a girl. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I know at once that someone is in the room. My heart flails around. Its impossible. I always lock the door before going to sleep, and the window is barred. But there it is, in the armchair in the corner of the bedroom: a still female form, black against the darkness of the room, looking toward me. Mother? I whisper, my fear replaced by a yearning thats as old and illogical as anything I can remember. I know so little about my mother, only that she died eighteen years ago, giving birth to me a few months after my father, an ambitious law student, had passed away in a car accident. Perhaps she died of a broken heart. I never knew for sure because no one would speak to me of them. My grandparents had to put aside their own broken hearts to care for me, and Im grateful: they did it well. Still, all through my years growing up, I longed for a visitation from my mother. The girls in my boarding school whispered stories about such occurrences, deceased parents appearing to save their offspring from calamity. I prayed for it in secret and, when that didnt work, tried to put myself in calamitys way, figuring either my mother or father might appear. But I only ended up with bruises, sprains, a case of the whooping cough, and, finally, a broken ankle. My adventures led to detentions, confiscation of pocket money, and a somewhat exaggerated reputation as a daredevil. They also resulted in numerous tongue-lashings from our harried principal, which didnt matter to me, and, finally, a long-distance phone call from my grandfather, which did. Korobi, Grandfather said in that stern, grainy voice that I had adored from babyhood, Im too old for this. Besides, why would a smart girl like you do a stupid thing like walking on the upstairs window ledge? The canny old rascal. He knew me well enough to appeal to my three major weaknesses: my vanity, my guilt, and, most of all, my love for him. He was, to me, father and mother rolled into one, and the thought that I had distressed and disappointed him made me burst into tears. Thus ended my attempts at forcing my parents into making an appearance. Now, years after I had armored my heart and accepted that my mother was gone from my life, here she is. How can I be sure it is her? There are some things we know, in our breath, in our bones. It makes a certain sense that she should visit me now. Tomorrow I am to take my first real step into adulthood: I will be engaged to Rajat and thus begin the journey away from this family into another one. Perhaps my mother has come to say good-bye, to give me her blessing? Is she concerned? A strange tension seems to emanate from her. Perhaps she cant go to her final rest until shes certain that I am loved. I think I know why. Some years back, during one of my vacations, Id been going through Grandfathers library looking for something to read. I finally chose an old book of poems, its pages thumbed soft with loving use. As I flipped through it, a thin sheet of blue paper fell to the floor. Someone had left a half-finished letter inside. As I read it, my heart beat so hard I thought it would break through my chest. Dearest, You are in my thoughts every minute. I cant believe that only three months have passed since the last time I held you in my arms to say good-bye. I thought I could handle this

separation, but I cant. Each day I ache for your touch. Each night I think of the way I felt complete in your arms. I talk to the baby inside meIm sure it will be a girlabout you all the time. I want to make sure our child knows how your love surrounds her even though you are so impossibly far away, in a whole different world. It was beautiful and heartbreaking, this note from my mother to my dead father. It brought them close to me, made them real in a way none of my imaginings had. I couldnt share it with either of my grandparents, but I

memorized every word on the page. I hid the note carefully in the bottom of my trunkmy first, cherished secretand took it back to boarding school with me. Nights when I couldnt sleep, I would hold it in my hand and wish that someday I might find a love like theirs. Rajat is a wonderful man, Mother, I say, throwing off the bedsheets and sitting up straight in my excitement. How I wish you could have met him, and Father, too. Then youd have no doubts that Im making the right choice. Hes smart, funny, and caringnot only to me but to my grandparents. Ive loved him from the moment I met himit sounds silly, Mother, but its true. At first I didnt think it would work. He comes from such a different kind of family. Theyre so rich and modern and fashionable that its a little scary. And you know Grandfatherproud to bursting of our heritage, of the old ways. But I was amazed at how well they got along from the first. Maybe its because Grandfather saw that

Rajat loves me just the way I am, that he never wants me to change. And I feel complete in his arms, Mother, just like youd written in your letter. Why, I love him so much, I could die for him! My mother makes a small, agitated movement, as though distressed at something Ive said. She turns toward the window. Is she leaving? Desperate to recapture her attention, I blurt out something I havent confessed to anyone else.

The real reason I love him isnt his good looks or charmsits because underneath it, I can sense a secret sadness. No one else can see it. No one else can cure it. But Im going to find out what it is, and Im going to make him happy! Im breathless from my confession, but still the air in the room hangs uncertain, incomplete. My mother continues to look out the window. Why will she not speak to me? Where is the blessing kiss Ive wanted all my life, cool as a dew-drenched breeze on my forehead? A terrible thought strikes me: Has she come, like ghosts in tales, to warn me of an impending disaster? I struggle to get to my feet, but my body is suddenly too heavy. I will go to her. I will find out what she isnt telling me. Suddenly the window behind her is filled with light. Outside I see an ocean, over which a sun is setting. Have I fallen, then, from one dream into another? She points over the ocean, leaning toward it with such sad longing that sorrow twists my heart. I understand. She hasnt come to learn about me. All the things I said to her she probably knew them already, being dead. She has appeared now, instead, to tell me something. But what?

Talk to me, Mother. This time when she turns to me, I notice that my dream mother has no mouth. She points again. Theres something out there you want? Beyond the ocean? She nods. Her face is glowing because Ive finally understood. Now she points at me. You want me to go and get it? She nods. Where must I go? What am I to look for? My mothers frame shivers with effort as though she longs to speak. She begins to dissolve. I can glimpse the ocean through her tattered body, waves breaking apart on rocks. An urgent sorrow radiates from her disappearing form. Then she is gone, and I am finally awake, blinking in the first

rays of the sun entering the room through the bars. I need someone to interpret this dream. It means something, Im sure of that, coming at this crucial moment in my life. I cant go to Grandfather. When my mother died, he destroyed all her photographs because he couldnt bear to look at them. When I was six, he told me never to bring her up. It was too painful. I imagined it at night when I lay in bed, alone with my longing: that sharp, silver word, mother, like a chisel, chipping away at Grandfathers heart. Perhaps I can tell my dream to Grandmother. She, too, is reluctant to speak of my motherbut she can be cajoled. The

household at 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road has been abustle since daybreak, preparing for the engagement. The maid has ground the spices for the celebratory lunch and chopped a mountain of vegetables. The yawning cook has cut up the rui fish and marinated it in salt and turmeric. In the Durga mandir, the family temple established over a hundred years ago, old Bahadur yells threats at the gardener boy until the cracked marble floor is mopped to his satisfaction. There Sarojini hurries to arrange lamps, camphor holders, incense, sandalwood powder, marigolds, large copper platters, fruit, milk sweets, rice grains, gold coins, and multicolored pictures depicting a pantheon of gods. Is she forgetting anything? She loves the temple, but it also makes her nervous. Too many memories lurk in its sooty alcoves. On one side she has unrolled mats for the priest and for her husband, Bimal Prasad Roy, retired barrister and proud grandfather of the bride-to-be; on the other she has placed four low chairs. The chairs, which have been the cause of some contention, are for the Boses, family of the groom-to-be, because they are modern and elegant and thus unused to sitting cross-legged on the ground. Bimal had been dead set against such westernized nonsense. For generations weve been praying on the floor. They cant do it for one day? Sacrifice a little comfort for the goddess

blessing? But ultimately Sarojini, who has had ample opportunity over fifty-five years of marriage to perfect her cajoling, had prevailed. Reentering the house, Sarojini is swept into a sea of commotion. The milkman is rattling the side door; the phone rings; on the Akashbani Kalikata radio station, the newscaster announces the date: February 27, 2002; Cook berates the neighbors striped cat for attempting to filch a piece of fish. Bimal summons Cook in querulous tones. Where on earth is his morning tea? His Parle-G biscuits? Cook replies (but not loud enough for Bimal to hear) that she doesn't have ten arms like the goddess. The commentator on Akashbani, who is discussing the growing tension between India and Pakistan since the testing of the Agni missile, is interrupted by a news bulletin: over fifty people dead in a train fire in Gujarat. So many disasters in the world, Sarojini thinks as she climbs the stairs to Korobi's bedroom. A pity that one had to happen today, a day of more happiness than their family has seen in a long time. She opens the door to Korobi's room to help her granddaughter get ready for the ceremony. There's the girl, dawdling on the veranda in her thin nightgown for all the world to gawk at! Sarojini is about to scold her, but, leaning over the rail toward the row of oleanders that Anu had loved, Korobi looks so like her dead mother that the words die in Sarojini's throat. Not her face or fair skin in those Korobi resembles Sarojini herself, but that posture, that troublesome yearning toward the world, that radiant smile as she turns toward Sarojini. In any case, Sarojini is no good at scolding. Bimal has always complained that she spoiled the girl's first Anu and then little Korobi and thus did them a disservice. Sarojini admits he has a point; girls have to be toughened so they can survive a world that presses harder on women, and surely Bimal does a good job of that. But deep in a hidden place inside her that is stubborn as a mudfish, Sarojini knows she is right, too. Being loved a little more than necessary arms a girl in a different way. Come on now, Korobi, bathwaters getting cold. Not that Sarojini had much of an opportunity to spoil Korobi. As soon as the girl was five, Bimal made arrangements with that boarding school in the freezing mountains. Sarojini begged to keep the child at home. She even wept, which was uncommon for her, and mortifying. After Anu's death she had vowed to keep her griefs to herself. Look what happened the last time I listened to you, Bimal said. A rejoinder shot up to her tongue. Whose fault is it that my daughters dead? At the last moment she pulled it back into herself. If the words had crystallized into being, she couldn't have continued living with Bimal, she couldn't have borne it. But she didn't know any other way of being. Also this: she loved him. His suffering stung her. Yes, he suffered for Anu's death, though he would not speak of it. Even now he startles awake at night with a groan, and lying next to him, Sarojini hears sometimes for an hour the ragged, sleepless thread of his breathing. But this is no time for morbid thoughts. Luncheon smells rise from the kitchen: chichuri made with golden mung and gopal bhog rice from their ancestral village, sautéed brinjals, cabbage curry cooked with pure ghee and cardamoms. Sarojini will have to supervise the fish fry. Last time Cook, who is getting old, scorched the fillets and collapsed into tears. But first Sarojini must get Korobi dressed. The child is always dreaming. Listen to her now, singing with abandon in the bathroom as though it were a holiday. Sarojini knocks on the bathroom door. Hurry, hurry, so much to be done. Sari, hair, makeup, jewelry. The mustard-seed ceremony to avert the evil eye. If you're not ready by the time Rajat's party arrives, your grandfather will have a fit. While Korobi was away at school, all year Sarojini would hunger for winter break, when icicles hung from the eaves of the old school buildings and the children were sent down to the plains. But somehow when Korobi came home, the two of them never got to do the things Sarojini had planned. To share the special recipes that she was famed for, to pass down secrets her own mother had given her. It seemed that whenever she tried to teach Korobi how to make singaras stuffed with cauliflower, or layer the woolens with camphor balls to save them from moths, Bimal called the girl away to play chess or accompany him to the book fair. In between, armies of tutors invaded the house, dinning the next year's curriculum into Korobi so she could be the top student in her class. Korobi didn't complain; she adored her grandfather and wanted him to be proud of her. When Sarojini ventured to suggest that Korobi needed time to be a child, Bimal said, You want to ruin her brain quite completely? Only at bedtime did Sarojini get her granddaughter to herself. Tell me about Ma, the girl would whisper in the dark, the forbidden request forging a bond between them. Sarojini would swallow the ache in her throat and offer Korobi something innocuous: a childhood escapade, a favorite color, a half-remembered line from a poem that Anu liked to recite. Why did she name me Korobi? Because she loved oleanders so much, shona. But they're poisonous! You told me so. Why would she name me after something so dangerous? Sarojini didn't know the answer to that. Now Korobi is getting married, leaving Sarojini struggling under the weight of unsaid things, things she had promised Bimal she would never speak of. She pushes the thought away, unfolding the stiff pink silk sari she had bought, so many years ago, for Anu. She tucks it around her granddaughter's slender waist, admonishing the girl when she fidgets, making sure the

pleats are straight and show off the gold-embroidered border. When Sarojini is satisfied, she starts on the jewelry her beloved dowry jewelry, which she made Bimal get out of the bank vault, even though he had fussed and said it was quite unnecessary. She pins the gold disk in the shape of a sunburst to Korobis braid and stands back to evaluate. The girl has lovely hair, not that she takes care of it. Mostly its left untied, a mass of tangled curls cascading down her back. Where she got those curls, Sarojini cant figure out.

Everyone else in the family has stick-straight hair. The long necklace with a crescent-shaped diamond pendant, the earrings so solid they have to be supported by little chains that hook to Korobis hair. The two-headed-snake armband fits perfectly around her upper arm. Sarojini had hoped to do this for Anuradha at her wedding. But Anu had married in America, and Sarojinis going there had been out of the question. Each piece has its name: mantasha, chandra chur, makar bala. Not many people know them anymore. Sarojini had tried to teach Korobi, but the girl wasnt interested. Rajat, though, surprised Sarojini. Last week he had come to take Korobi for a ride in his new BMW, but he ended up sitting on Sarojinis bed for a half hour, touching each piece, listening to its story. That disk belonged to my widow aunt, who left it behind when she ran away. My father gave this necklace to my mother when my oldest brother was born. My great-grandfather the gambler won the snake band from a neighboring landowner while playing pasha. That evening when Korobi returned from the ride, Sarojini said, Youre lucky to get him for a husband. He cares about history and tradition, about spending time with an old lady. Excuse me, I thought he was the lucky one! Sarojini laughed along with her granddaughter, but secretly she hoped Rajat would cancel out all the tragedies that had piled up in the girls life already. Asif Ali maneuvers the gleaming Mercedes down the labyrinthine lanes of Old Kolkata with consummate skill, but his passengers, occupied as they are with the days engagement festivities, do not notice how smoothly he avoids potholes, cows, and beggars, how skillfully he sails through aging yellow lights to get the Bose family to their destination on time. This disappoints Asif only a little; in his six years of chauffeuring the rich and callous, he has realized that to them, servants are invisible. Until they make a mistake, that is. Let Asif jerk to a halt because a brainless pedestrian has suddenly stepped in front of his car, and he would hear plenty from Memsaab right away. Not that Asif is complaining. The

Boses are a definite improvement from his previous employers. For one, they arent stingy. (It is an unceasing wonder to Asif how ingeniously tightfisted the rich can be toward servants.) He gets overtime if Barasaab comes back from a business trip at night, or if Memsaab stays late at a party, both of which happen with heartening regularity. They might grumble a bit, but they never cut his pay when he asks for time off on Muslim holy days, and they tip handsomely when theyre pleased about something. Especially Rajat-saab, though since he acquired his BMW, Asif hasnt seen much of him. Rajat-saab gave him five hundred rupees the night he proposed to Korobi-madam. She said yes, Asif! How about that! Even in the cars subdued interior light, Rajats eyes had a naked shine to them. It made Asif feel ancient, though he is at most five or six years older than Rajat. Congratulations, Saab. I am wishing you two will be very happy together. He meant it, too. He liked Rajat-saab, who was always kind and considerate, even in his wild days, before meeting Korobi-madam, when he used to go clubbing every night with his crazy friends and that Sonia woman, who was the craziest of them all. But Asif didnt blame him. If Asif had that kind of money, he would be doing a few crazy things, too, instead of spending his off-evenings playing teen patti with the other drivers in the building, watching them get drunk on cheap beer. But Asifs favorite person in the family is Pia-missy, whom he drives to and from school each day, and who reminds him though its illogical of him to think this way, and perhaps presumptuous of his younger sister. Although no one will ever know, Pia is the reason he refused when, last year, Sheikh Rehman's men tried to lure him away with the offer of a higher salary and the opportunity to drive a Rolls-Royce. For a moment, he had weakened; more than the money, it was the car; and more than the car, it was the sheikh's reputation. Sheikh Rehman is a legend in the Muslim community. Hes known for hiring young Mussulmans of promise and taking an active interest in their welfare. Hes generous with bonuses and overtime pay. He houses them in staff quarters that are downright luxurious. They eat for free, delicious halal meals prepared in a communal kitchen in the back of the sheikh's own mansion. Last year, when some of them told him that they wanted to visit Mecca, he paid all their expenses and gave them extra vacation time. It is said no servant has ever quit his service, though several because the sheikh is a stickler have been fired. But then Asif thought of the way Pia-missy would look if she found out he was leaving, and he said no. Pia-missy has a secret name for him, which she only uses when no one else is within earshot: A.A. Its a name with style. A.A., do you want some Wrigleys Doublemint? Can you go faster, A.A? Tell me again who you have at home in your village, A.A. Turn up the volume, A.A. More! She likes American music, earsplittingly raucous; it mystifies him, but he has

decided it is his favorite, too. When they are alone in the car, Pia-missy holds up an imaginary mike as though she were a rock star and shakes her shoulders as she sings. Asif hums under his breath, accompanying her. Being invisible, Asif knows things. For instance, the argument Rajat-saab and his parents had had after their first visit to Korobi-madam and her grandparents. Memsaab wondered if Korobi wasnt too young, only in her first year of college. Plus shed been tucked away in that boarding school all her life.

Rajat insisted she was more mature than most of his friends a statement with which Asif silently agreed. Arent you rushing into this too soon after Sonia? This has nothing to do with Sonia, Rajat said coldly, but Asif thought he detected a slight tremor in Rajats voice. Barasaab was worried that Korobi didnt have enough in common with Rajat. She came from such a different background. Rajat insisted that he found those very differences fascinating. The culture and history that surrounded her every moment in that wonderful old house. How much he learned every time he visited her there. Her upbringing is quite unique, Memsaab admitted. But would that be enough for you? I just dont want you to be unhappy and bored in a couple of years. Mother, if you knew Korobi better, youd know that I could never get bored with her. I havent ever been able to talk to any woman the way I talk to her. She understands me, sometimes even without my having to say anything. I love her more than I ever thought Id love anyone. Memsaab had sighed. In that case, Son, well support you. They arrive at the Roys house right on time, though no one commends Asif for it. He pulls the car into the tamarind-shaded driveway of 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road, steps out smartly, and opens the door with a flourish. Pia-missy is the last to get down. A deep blue georgette zip-up sari is pinned to her shoulder with a brooch. Solemn and formal, she inclines her head regally. Thank you, A.A., she whispers. But then she cant stand the excitement. She grins at him and rushes ahead of her parents, pulling the sari up to her knees, swinging her new Kodak camera by its strap.

Yesterday she explained to Asif how special that camera is. It just came out, A.A.! Dada asked one of his friends who went to America to get it for me. See, its digital. You can view the photo as soon as you take it. If you dont like it, you can erase it and take it again. After the engagement, Im going to take a photo of you.

Maybe standing against the car, what do you think? That would be very nice, Missy, he said, touched. No one had ever thought to take a photograph of him. Asifs sister had been the same age as Pia the year he left the village. She had cried when she learned he was going away. In spite of the difference in their ages, theyd been close. Asif would listen tolerantly as she prattled on about things girls were interested in, and if none of her friends were around, he would allow her to cajole him into playing five stones or ekka-duka. A few years

later, she was married off to a man in Ghaziabad. Asif had been upset when he was informed of it. He thought she wasnt old enough to take on a wifes duties, but it was too late to do anything. The marriage had already been arranged. Afterward, he had gotten her address from his mother and written to her several times, even sending her some money, but she had never written back. Probably her in-laws kept the rupees hed enclosed and didnt give her the letters. He wanted to call her, but the in-laws didnt have a phone. He thought of asking Barasaab for some time off so he could visit her, but the days passed, as days tend to do.

Then last year his mother wrote that his sister had died of pneumonia. Reading the letter with its crooked lines and misspellings, Asif had felt sorrow and guilt tear through his heart. He remembered how his sister had looked at the wedding, bowed unhappily under a heavy bridal veil. She had died of neglect, he was sure of it, and he had done nothing to help her. Now he tenses as he watches Pia wobble on her high heels. Allah,

he finds himself praying, dont let her fall. I am trying not to fidget against the itchy, heavy silk that Grandmother is draping me in, or the even heavier jewelry shes attaching to various parts of my body. I dont like the scented oil she rubbed into my hair before she imprisoned it in a braid, or the large bindi shes painted on my forehead, like an astonished third eye. But I can tell it makes her happy. Maybe it brings back memories of my mothers wedding day my mother, whose visit I need to ask Grandmother about as soon as I can find an opportune moment. So I summon as much patience as possible. Anyway, Ill get to shampoo out my hair before the engagement reception this evening. And tonight Ill get to wear my perfect outfit, the one hidden in the back of my almirah, which only Rajat has so far seen. The reception will be held at the Oberoi

Grand, fanciest of the Kolkata hotels. Rajats mother, who likes me to call her Maman, told me that 350 guests are coming. The chief minister himself might stop by. Remember, dear, youre going to be the center of everyones attention! Nothing like this has ever before happened to me. Because I grew up at boarding school, my birthday parties were muted affairs executed in the refectory: balloons, a lumpy cake made by the cook, a few minutes of birthday song and scattered applause. The thought of tonights festivities is a bit alarming, but mostly its exhilarating. I draw in a deep breath and square my shoulders, ready to take my place in the world as Rajat Boses fiance. Why are you all puffed up like a bullfrog? Grandmother says. How

do you expect me to hook the komarbandh around your waist if you do that? Since the party is expected to continue late into the night, Papa Bose has booked three suites at the hotelone for him and Maman, one for Rajat, and the third for me and Pia, Rajats eleven-year-old sister, whom he calls Sweet P. Grandfather didnt care for the idea one bit. He scrunched up his face and started on how girls of the Roy family dont spend nights away from home. But Papa, bless his heart, said in his soft-spoken way, Bimal-babu, isnt Korobi also my daughter now? Papas words sent a surge of joy through me. I wanted to tell him, Yes, I am. And you and Maman are parents to me. Grandfather had finally barked his acquiescence at Papa, but he would never have given in if he knew what Rajat has planned for tonight, which is to smuggle me into his suite once his parents are asleep. He has sworn Sweet P to secrecy. That wasnt hard; she adores her brother. Thinking of Rajat and me, just the two of us together, privacy like weve rarely been allowed, intertwined on a blue velvet couchthats as far as I let my guilty imagination gomakes my stomach feel wobbly. Yes, Im scared, but in a delicious kind of way. My breasts tingle, and I breathe carefully so that Grandmother will not ask me, Whats the matter now? Are you feeling light-headed from fasting? But even my fantasies of Rajat cant keep me from worrying over my mothers visitation. Ive got to bring it up soon. Were almost done. Grandmother adjusts the armband one last time and tilts her head to give me an appraising look. Beautiful! she proclaims. She rises on tiptoe to give me a kiss, and then, after a small hesitation, another one, as though on behalf of someone else. I guess this is as good a time as any. Grandma, can I ask you something? Right then Cook calls from below to inform us that Bimal-babu is dressed and waiting in the foyer, pacing up and down and none too happy that were still dawdling upstairs. Lets go, Grandmother says. I grab hold of her arm. I need to talk to you. Not now, my dear. You know your grandfather, how he can get if people are late. Its really important! There must be something in my voice, because Grandmother peers into my face, her eyes clouding with apprehension. But Cooks raspy yells assail us from downstairs. O Ma, O Korobi-baby, babu has already walked off toward the mandir in a huff. Youd better hurry, else you know whats going to happen. Grandmother sends me ahead to pacify Grandfather. She will join us as fast as her bad knee will allow. She promises to talk to me right after the ceremony. For now, I have to be satisfied with that. I run down the gravel path and catch up with Grandfather. I slip my hand into his as Ive done ever since I was old enough to walk. I dont expect a response; hes never been demonstrative. But he surprises me today by squeezing my fingers. The frown on his face dissolves into a smile, and I feel a moments pride knowing only I am capable of working this magic on him. He looks me up and down and gives a small, approving nod, and that means more to me than the most fulsome of compliments from someone else. In the temple, I sit on the cool floor next to Grandfather, beneath the stern benevolence of the goddesss glance. Grandfather is clad in only a traditional silk dhotino fancy modern clothes for him, not even for a special occasion such as this. Thats one of the things I admire about him: how he is always unapologetically, uncompromisingly himself. His spine is erect and impatient; white hairs blaze across his chest. From time to time, he intimidates the priest by correcting his Sanskrit, but in between mantras, when he places his palm on my head in blessing, his touch couldnt be gentler. How I love him, with all his bluster, his exasperating prehistoric notions, his tenderness that he tries so hard to hide. Across from us, Papa and Maman, unaware of the battles waged over the seating arrangements, are poised splendidly on the wicker chairs. Rajat, however, has chosen the floor. From the other side of Grandfather, he sends me a quick, wicked glance; the private, scandalous things his eyes say bring a rush of heat to my face. A truant lock has fallen over his forehead. Its all I can do to stop myself from leaning over and smoothing it back. When at last he clasps my hand to slip on the diamond ring we chose together, joy balloons in my chest until its hard to breathe. Rajat has made me a believer in miracles. How else could we have fallen in love? Three months ago, I had gone to my college friend Mimis birthday partya minor miracle in itself. Usually Grandfather refused to let me go out so late, but that night Id pushed back. Grandmother had taken my side, too. She needs to meet other young people, shed said. Finally, hed nodded in grumpy agreement. When I walked into the flat, the party was in full swing: the lights low, the music deafening, the adults inexplicably absent. Crowds of people I didnt know were downing suspicious-looking drinks and smoking what clearly werent cigarettes. I looked at the girls in their glittery tank tops and stretch jeans and felt antediluvian in my gold-worked kurta. I was about to make an excuse and leave when Mimi said, Oh my God, is that Rajat Bose at the door? You dont know about him? His parents own that swanky art gallery on Park Street. He just broke up with Sonia Gupta, whose dad owns a Hyundai factory. Wow, I never thought hed come to my party! Id peered through the smoky dimness and seen Rajat. Backlit by the door, he appeared to be shining. A glass was already in his hand, a leather jacket slung over his shoulder. He leaned against a wall, holding court, nodding at acquaintances who rushed up to offer

homage. He allowed Mimi to pull him to the dance floor, where he performed with loose-hipped, dismissive grace, smiling a little when more girls mobbed him. Weeks later Id be astonished when he confessed that upon walking in and seeing all those people milling about, he, too, had wanted to escape. Thank God I didnt, Cara, he added given me my special name by thentouching the bones of my face as though he needed to memorize them. Are you glad I stayed? I nodded; I wanted to tell him that he had transformed my life, bringing Technicolor to my sepia world. But I was afraid Id sound stupid. You were standing in a corner, remember? There was something about the way you held yourself that set you apart from all those gyrating girls. Like you belonged to an earlier era. It made me curious. When I asked you to dance, you told me, quite unapologetically, that you didnt know how. I admired that. He had offered to teach me. While the entire female contingent stared with envy, he asked the DJ for a slow song. Then he took me in his arms. I was nervous and awkward. To help me relax, he asked me questions. He had a way because I found myself telling him things about myself I didnt share with anyone else. My answers seemed to interest him. We spent the rest of the evening on the balcony, talking. What could have caught his fancy? Wasnt my life most unadventurous, deeply ordinary? Are you kidding! Rajat says later when I ask him this. The way youve grown up, orphaned at birth, hidden away in some mountain valley, and now guarded in that ancient, beautiful mansion by your ogre of a grandfatherwhy, just listening to you was like entering a fairy tale! Grandfather isnt an ogre! I counter, laughing. He and Grandmother brought me up so carefully that I never felt I was an orphan. When it was time to leave the party, Rajat asked for my phone number. I didnt give it. Grandfather had informed me a long time back that the daughters of the Roy family did not have boyfriends. Rajat didnt argue. I think he took my refusal as a challenge. A couple of days later, returning from college, I was shocked to find him at our home, having tea with Grandfather. I still dont understand why Grandfather allowed Rajat to see me. Or why, three months later, when Rajat requested his permission to marry me, Grandfather said yes. It must have been my innate charm, Rajat says, laughing. But at other times he says, I think your grandfather, whos nobodys fool, saw that Id do anything to make you happy. Pia, who has slipped down to sit beside me, kisses my cheek, bringing me back to the temple, where the ceremony has ended. The rings gorgeous, Korobi-didi! Oh, you are so lucky! Dada has the best taste. Doesnt he, Maman? Yes, of course, Maman says. She looks at us, and the love on her face makes her even more beautiful. Now Papa and Maman give me their present: an exquisitely designed diamond setnecklace, earrings, a pair of braceletsto match the ring. When I saw the price tag at the jewelers, I was scandalized and begged for something less costly. Absolutely not, my dear! Maman said. Youre worth every rupee of it. Besides, all the guests at the reception will be waiting to see what the Bose family gave their only daughter-in-law! She smiled to show me she was joking. May I get you your outfit, also? I know just the right boutique I wouldnt let her do thatI was Bimal Roys granddaughter, after all. I would pay for my own clothes. But her words lodged somewhere within me. When I went shopping, I kept in mind that I was the only daughter-in-law of the Boses and bought an off-the-shoulder kurti in maroon chiffon with slim-fitting pants, embroidered over with crystal teardrops, more expensive and daring than anything else Id ever purchased. Rajat loved the ensemble and gifted me stiletto heels studded with fake diamonds to wear with it. But once home, I lost my nerve and hid it in the almira behind a stack of cotton saris. From time to time, I imaginedwith a mix of horror and pridewhat Grandfathers reaction would be when he saw me in it. Were not done with gifts yet. Ceremoniously, Papa hands us a large parchment envelope. I know whats in it: the deed to the flat Papa and Maman have bought us as an advance wedding present. The flat is located in a gated high-rise near Rabindra Sarobar Lake, in a neighborhood favored by models and playback singers and newly minted millionaires, only minutes from where the Boses live. This way, Maman says, Rajat and I can be close to them yet have our privacy. Thinking of managing my own home, my own servants, fills me with a heady unreality. How wondrous to be expected to perform such adult acts! But Im thankful that I dont have to worry about that for at least another year, that I have one more year to spend with my dear grandparents. A yearthats when we plan to have the wedding. Its going to be the most wonderful year, a sweet year of courtship, of enjoying the envy in the eyes of my college-mates, of evening forays into the glittering world of clubs and parties to which Rajat has promised to introduce me. A year of play before we take up the serious business of being married. I plan to enjoy every moment. The flat is still in its early stages, but Ive seen the sales model. It looks like a set in a movie. In its media room, the TV screen takes up an entire wall. Bidets gleam in every bathroom. Could anything be further from this dear old house with its water-stained plaster walls, the banyan saplings growing between cracks in the terrace bricks? When Rajat drives me from the crooked alleys of North Kolkata to check on the progress of the flat, I feel disoriented, like a time traveler. After the ceremony,

at Pias insistence, the group gathers on the veranda overlooking the garden. Pia arranges everyone on chairs: Bimal and Sarojini in the center, Rajat and Korobi flanking them. (Boy-girl-boy-girl, Pia instructs.) Mr. and

Mrs. Bose stand behind. Pia is a finicky photographer. People must angle their heads according to her dictates. They must either gaze into the distance, faces benevolent as buddhas, or look meaningfully into each others eyes. She tells the grandparents to hold hands; taken aback by her demand, they do as she says. Under the pretext of bringing lime sherbet and cashew nuts, the servants venture into the frame, for how can there be a family portrait without them? Pia lets them stay. An ice-cream man passes by the gate. The tinkle of his cart bell becomes part of the picture, as do the smells of the engagement lunch: cauliflower khichuri, sauted pumpkin (Cook is given to sudden, wild improvisations), rice pudding sweetened with palm molasses, and, yes, scorched fish-fry. Pia will be particularly proud of this photograph. She will make her father mail copies to all their relatives, even those she will never meet. She will hang an enlargement in her familys drawing room, next to their Jamini Roy original, despite her mothers remonstrations. A copy will go on the first page of the new photo album that Rajat gave her, along with the camera. She will title it Happiness. Even after certain events come to pass and Mrs. Bose removes the enlargement from their wall, Pia will keep her copy. Late afternoons, when her mother thinks she is doing homework, she will remove the album from the back of her closet and run her fingers over the photograph, over the minuscule, innocent smiles fixed on the faces of her subjects. After lunch, the adults rest under the fan on the veranda.

Grandmother passes around a crystal dish holding silvered cardamom seeds, specially ordered from Bara Bazaar, to freshen the breath. Pia disappears into the overgrown garden to take more photos. For the moment, Rajat and I have no further duties and are free to walk up and down the oleander drive. Cara, Rajat says, theres something Ive been waiting to tell you. Ive come up with an exciting idea for the business. I want you to know before I tell anyone else. Rajat works for his father, managing orders, doing the accounting, handling the fancy clients. Hes been doing it for the last couple of months. He had another job before that, business development in a big multinational, but then his father needed him. I want to start a website where customers can see the entire range of our products and buy them online. What do you think? I dont know much about websitesIm studying historybut Im touched that Rajat trusts me with his vulnerable, newborn vision. That hes watching me with some anxiety, waiting for my verdict. It means more to me than all the love words hes spoken. I reach for his hand. Its a wonderful idea. We walk for a while that way, fingers clasped, too happy to need to speak. On the veranda, the men discuss politics. At another time, Id be more interested, but right now, walking hand in hand with Rajat, I feel too complete to care much.

Grandfather says that its a good thing our citys name has finally been changed back to Kolkata from that anglicized version the British saddled us with. But Papa points out the change is costing the state millions of rupees because all the documentation has to match the new name. Its more important to deal with the unrest in the citytheres certainly been a lot of it lately. Remember last month when militants attacked the American Center? Ah, yes, those Muslims. A violent lot. Did you hear about the incident on the train today in Gujarat? All those Hindu pilgrims they burned to death? Tragic, Papa replies. I hope it doesnt lead to more bloodshed.

Rajat, who hasnt been paying attention to the conversation, says, Its going to be a challenge. People here arent used to buying things over the Internet. Well have to make the website attractive and easy to navigate. Do you think you could help me? Maybe take a graphics course? Of course! I am flattered at being asked. I imagine the site Im going to create, vibrant with flashing images of art. As soon as I can, Ill study all the details of the Boses business so I can do a good job for Rajat. Maybe Ill pay a visit to their Park Street gallery, as Maman has been inviting me to do. Farther down the drive, Pia makes Asif pose against the Mercedes for a photo. Your driverisnt he Muslim? I hear Grandfather say. If I were you, I wouldnt have him taking my family around, nights and all. I cringe. I can feel displeasure emanating from Papa. But he says politely, Asif is very trustworthy. You think Im prejudiced, dont you? Youre too young, you havent seen what I sawthe Partition riots, right here in Kolkata, men chopped to pieces on the streets with hansulis Please! Grandmother entreats. Lets not discuss such bad-luck matters today. Grandfather looks thunderous at being interrupted, and Papa says quickly, Roy moshai, do consider attending the party tonight. Grandfather shakes his head. I told you, Bose-babu, all that singing-dancing-alcohol-drinkingyou know I dont approve. Youre better off without me. But theres something I do want to tell you before you leave. I asked our family priest for an auspicious wedding date for the childrenand theres a perfect one, the stars well aligned, in three months. Id like the marriage to take place then. I stare at him in shock. He wants us to get married in three months? Has he gone crazy? Thats far too soon, and besides, he hasnt even consulted Rajat or me! Glancing at Rajat, I see that he, too, is taken aback. Beneath the surprise, is he delighted or distraught? I cant tell. It

strikes me that perhaps I don't know my fiancé as well as I thought I did. Are you sure you want the wedding to take place so quickly? Papa says. I thought we'd decided that Korobi should finish another year of college first. Grandfather sounds tired. Bose-babu, I'm an old man. Who knows how long I'll be around? I want to see my only granddaughter settled before I go. You'll let Korobi continue her studies after the wedding, will you not? I want Papa to argue, to declare that this is a terrible idea, but for some reason I can't fathom, he merely says, in his courteous manner, Of course we will. When Maman starts to protest that three months won't give her enough time to plan a proper wedding, Papa lays a gentle hand on her arm. I want you to announce it at the reception tonight, Grandfather says. It shall be as you wish, Bose-babu. I stare at them all, outraged. Do they think that they can pick up my life like a ball of dough and roll it into whatever shape they fancy? I'm about to speak out, but just then Rajat pulls me behind the leafy cover of the oleanders and clasps me close for an audacious kiss that leaves me breathless. That was a bombshell, wasn't it? But Grandfather's right!

Now that we belong to each other, why should we put off our happiness? My heart knocks about like a caught bird. In the face of his obvious joy, I don't know how to explain to Rajat that although I love him, I'm upset at being pushed into something I'm not quite ready for. We'll celebrate at our own private party tonight after the guests leave, he whispers against my throat. But I suddenly feel I'm not ready for that, either. As soon as the Mercedes backs out of our driveway, I confront Grandfather. How could you do this without checking with me! It is a very auspicious date. That's important. I want to make sure your marriage is luckier than your mother's. But, Grandfather, surely there are other auspicious dates later. I need more time! He shakes his head and starts to turn away. I put my hand on his arm, unwilling to give up, but he says tiredly, Not now, Korobi. His skin has a yellow cast; his eyes are red-veined. He lists a little as he makes his way into the house. Worry pricks me, and I swallow my anger for the moment. I'll let him rest. But I'm not going to let him rush me into the biggest event of my life. Grandmother looks concerned. I had better get your grandfather his heartburn medicine. You lie down, Shona, and get some rest before your big party. She picks up the crystal dish of cardamom seeds. In a moment she, too, will disappear after him. Grandma, wait! I've got to talk to you! I know you must be taken aback by your grandfather's decision. I was, too. Maybe we can discuss it with him after he wakes up. I blurt out the words because there's no good way to say them.

Someone was in my room last night. I think it was my mother. I wait for Grandmother to dismiss my foolish notions with a laugh and send me off to bed, but she pales and takes a step back. The crystal dish falls from her hand and shatters; tiny silver balls go flying over the veranda. Why do you think that? she whispers. I felt it. Even to my ears, my answer sounds weak. But Grandmother accepts it. Her hands are trembling. Did it say anything to you? I shake my head, disconcerted. I had no idea that my pragmatic grandmother believed so strongly in ghosts. But even if she did, why would the thought of her dead daughter's spirit agitate her like this? I realize that I don't want to know the answer. Maybe I imagined it. Maybe you did, Grandmother says, but without conviction. I'll go lie down now. You do that. You rest, too. Yes. But when I

look back from the doorway, she is still standing among the broken glass, scattered cardamom seeds surrounding her like a field of frozen tears. *Revue de presse* "The heady pace of unfolding events [is] driven by the skill of an acclaimed raconteur at the top of her game. . . . The Kolkata parts of the story are the most entertaining [and] could have come from the pen of a contemporary Jane Austen. . . . Also very pleasing is Divakaruni's use of bathos, a literary form that was raised to an art by Alexander Pope but is sadly out of fashion today. . . . A bang-on read for the summer holidays." (India Today) "For those of us who read to escape the banalities of daily life, Chitra Divakaruni's books are oxygen. She writes about India in a way that makes the rest of the world disappear around you." (The Chicago Tribune) "The bestselling novelist's latest offering, just in time for summer, is a beautifully crafted coming-of-age tale about Korobi Roy, who goes on a journey of self discovery on a terrain that includes religion, caste and secrets. Written with empathy and elegance, this novel deserves to be at the top of your list." (Indulge Magazine) "The voyage of discovery [Korobi] undertakes, and the secrets, lies and buried tensions she unearths along the way is the stuff of a classic coming-of-age story, with the added excitement of a quest. . . . Divakaruni's language is lyrical. . . . Rajat's transformation from Prince Charming to a more complex romantic interest is one of the book's more pleasurable aspects. He embodies a struggle between the traditional and the modern, the product of a time and a country that has yet to define itself. Divakaruni's Kolkata is a teeming cosmopolis, the beating heart of the book. (Indian Express) With the present impressive list of publications and her untiring zeal for creating realistic edifices, [Chitra Divakaruni] is sure to go on and on and up and up. . . . Chitra's maneuvering of her characters and events is almost perfect. (Deccan Herald) "Gorgeous. . . [An] elegant and highly evocative new novel from Divakaruni." (PopMatters.com) "With the barest touch of magical realism, *Oleander Girl*

whisks the reader into the layered intricacies of love affairs, family, Indian social class, racial prejudice and religious tension. . . . [Divakaruni] delivers an absorbing modern fairy tale about an orphan in search of the messy truths of family and love." (San Antonio Express News)"Emotionally compelling. . . . Oleander Girl . . . weaves together many realizations social and personal. Its a book that allows you to debate the place of pure emotion as a driving force in life. . . . Divakaruni brings up the generation gap, . . . social status, personal loyalty, Indian mindsets and American realities (ongoing subjects of inquiry in many of her former novels) and serves them with just enough sugar and spice to keep her reader liking the fare." (Live Mint)Divakaruni is a poet as well as a novelista fact on display in this mystery, which unfolds like a time-lapsed lotus. . . . [She] weaves the issues of the caste system, Hindu and Muslim differences, modern Indian women balancing love and duty, and prejudice into the fabric of her story. Its the smell and feel of Kolkata that resonates long after the book is finished. (BUST magazine)"Chitra Banerjee Divakarunis new novel, Oleander Girl, is . . . a showcase for the best-selling authors ability to maintain her signature, beautifully-crafted prose while creating a complex set of deceptions, ruses, and lies, exposing the dark side of human nature. . . . Skillfully crafted, the novel is a bouquet of collisions that illustrate how choices we make affect more than just ourselves. The past and present clash, as do secrets and truths, needs and wants, old and new India, East and West, wise and unwise decisions. Subplots span two continents and families, and double back on themselves." (India Currents)"A many-faceted story of discovery . . . Oleander Girl is part mystery, part search, but mostly the story of a young girl finding herself and deciding where she belongs." (Seattle Times)"An orphan teen raised by her grandparents in India finds the love she always searched for, but a newly unearthed family secret may interfere." (Oprah.com "16 New Books to Get Lost in This April")Oleander Girl will keep you captivated from the very first chapter. . . . The twists and turns to the story will make you want to read it in one sitting. Beautifully written. As an author, Divakaruni is in a league of her own." (UrbanAsian.com)"Oleander Girl is a coming of age novel in the best tradition. . . . Divakaruni's gift is story telling, and she is generous with her gift. Through her wonderful novel we become active participants. . . and grateful witnesses to the maturing of a child into a woman." (The Huffington Post)"Chitra Divakarunis enthralling new novel, Oleander Girl, tells a love story that is more than just that. . . The many memorable characters that people this novel make it a pleasure to read. [Divakaruni] lavishes as much care on secondary characters as she does on the principals. [Her] tale is so well-plotted that few will guess the secrets at the heart of this page-turner." (The Dallas News)"Divakaruni uses her considerable storytelling skills to full advantage in her new novel." (The Oregonian)"Divakaruni explores issues of class and politics in modern India and immigrant America, but the family issues at the heart of the novel give it a cross-cultural appeal. Told with empathy and intelligence, and accompanied by intrigue, the stories--and issues--of the Roy and Bose families should appeal to a broad range of readers." (Shelf Awareness)"Divakaruni has crafted a beautiful, complex story in which caste, class, religion, and race are significant factors informing people's world views." (Library Journal (starred review))"Oleander Girl is a masterpiece--a Dickens novel moved forward 150 years." (BookReporter.com)"An entrancing storyteller with an unerring moral compass, Divakaruni has created a superbly well-plotted, charming, yet hard-hitting novel of family, marriage, and class, a veritable Indian Jane Austen novel spiked with racial prejudice and religious violence. . . . From baneful secrets, poisonous misunderstandings and conflicts, and transcendent love, Divakaruni has forged another tender, wise, and resonant page-turner." (Booklist (starred review))The heart of Divakarunis cross-cultural novel lies in contemporary Kolkata, India. . . . Like an Indian Maeve Binchy, Divakaruni offers an entertaining [read]. (Kirkus)"Oleander Girl is elegant and classic, but also vivid and immediate. Love and loss and secrets collide in this powerful story of the way we live now. There is poetry on these pages, but also the burning-on-both-ends urgency of a page turner. Gorgeous and exciting, this is a wonderful novel." (Tayari Jones bestselling author of The Silver Sparrow)When you think of thrilling page turners, you dont usually think of fluid, graceful prose. But thats what youll find in Oleander Girl. This is the gripping story of a young woman who leaves India in pursuit of a shocking family secret, only to learn far more about herself than she bargained for. It is also a story that bears out the wisdom of something one of the characters says: Never choose something because its easier. Chitra Divakaruni is such an elegant writer, one who makes the reader feel not only engaged and entertained, but a bit elevated, too. Ive been a fan of Divakarunis work for a long time; this book keeps me one. (Elizabeth Berg New York Times bestselling author of Tapestry of Fortunes)Compulsively readable, a real page-turner. I found it impossible to set this novel down once I picked it up. Chitra Divakaruni confronts the hard truths about love, loss, grief, redemption and the choices we make, in a family saga that reads like a detective novel. (Thrity

Umrigar bestselling author of *The World We Found* and *The Space Between*) *Oleander Girl* is a riveting and powerful exploration of family secrets, betrayal, love, and ultimately, the search for self. Divakaruni paints colorful characters on a rich tapestry of modern India, all still haunted by the past. (Shilpi Somaya Gowda
New York Times bestselling author of *Secret Daughter*)