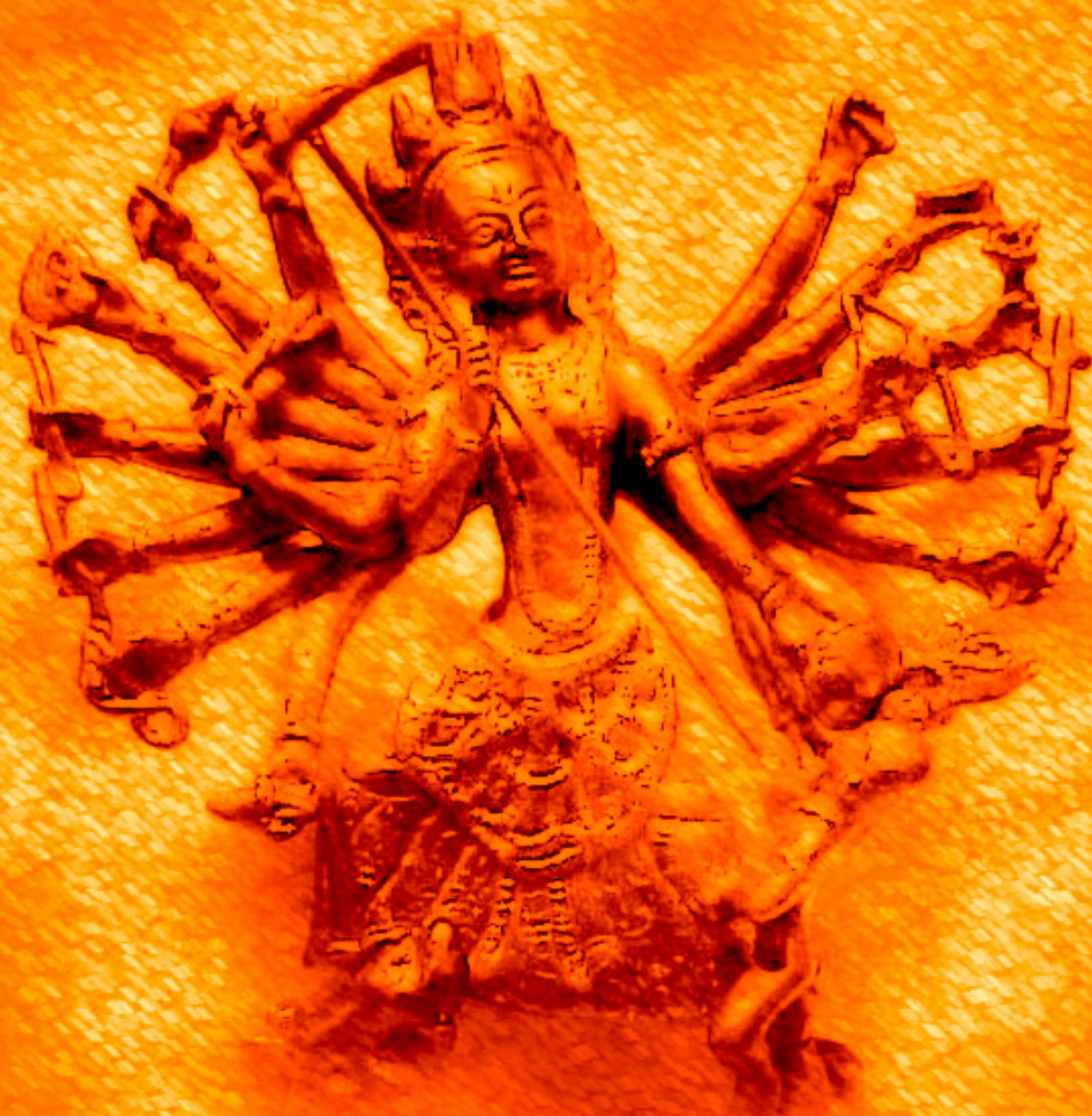


The Thirteenth Manifestation



by Josephine Stewart

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Josephine Stewart

Samas Publishing

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Dedicated to Irna Qureshi, a daughter of Pakistan
and to Phoolan Devi, beloved of Kali, warrior of Durga
Assassinated in July 2001.

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INTRODUCTION

For those of you who have read the first novel, AZAL, this is the story of Isca, daughter of AZAL and beloved of the Goddess. For those of you who have not read the first novel, you will not have a clue who Isca is, but soon will!

The story is written in two sections. The first section is about the young child, Sara, in a modern day gypsy camp. She insisted that her voice be heard as a child. So the first half of the story is told to you as a child would tell it. The second half deals with Sara's emergence as a vehicle of Kali.

I have used many words and expressions in both Romani, the language of Gypsies, and Urdu, the national tongue of Pakistan. There is a glossary at the back of the book. I have also tried to preserve certain customs and cultural idiosyncrasies by including them in the story, as these gems of gypsy culture are quickly disappearing.

All the characters in this novel are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental and was not intentional.

*When my children have gorged themselves on my bones
And my sleep is disturbed by the cry of the last wind
So shall cloudless tears fall upon my sorrowful children
And the milk of my breast will nourish those who have slumbered.*

*Then, and only then shall I fully awaken to dance upon the Earth
Then and only then will she return to me.*

Prophecy of the Thirteenth Manifestation / The Song of Kali Ma

PROLOGUE

Azal watched her daughter play in the sunshine as she chased the waves back and forth on the shoreline. The child's squeals of laughter weighed heavily upon Azal's heart as she looked at the child who would carry so much. The Goddess of blood and death had claimed Isca, child of Azal, at birth.

Orcas, her dearest friend, sat quietly beside Azal and placed a hand on her shoulder. Azal looked at the sand in despair as she whispered, "Tell me, Orcas, of her future." Azal, first child of the Four Winds, mother of all to come, shied away from what she knew was ahead for her child.

Without speaking, Orcas went and stood at the threshold of the ocean. She breathed in the salt spray and looked out over the water. Isca stopped her antics and went to stand by Orcas in curiosity. Neither spoke for a moment. Orcas turned and went back to Azal. Her voice was beautiful, like the ocean, as she spoke the words of prophecy.

"She will not lead many lives. You will be together in one other life, but you will not recognize her. Isca's last life will be one of service to the Goddess. She came from the darkness of the Mother, and to the Dark Mother she will return."

"As you have brought new life into this world, so Isca will take life out of this world. You are the beginning, and she will be the end. It will be foretold but it will not be stopped." Orcas fell silent as Azal got up and walked away.

CHAPTER ONE

Laisterdyke Gypsy Camp in Bradford, England. 1980's

The rain fell in beautiful snakes down the window and Sara breathed heavily on the glass to create a mist. When the mist was thick enough, she drew cartoon faces with happy smiles.

"Sara stop that and get your coat on. I must have asked you ten times now to do as you are told." Maria's voice cut through Sara's moment of quiet.

The child rolled her eyes up to the ceiling in mock disgust and slid off the table by the window. She hated her sisters grinding voice. She hated going to her Grandmother and she particularly hated going out into the never-ending rain.

As she put her coat, her fingers slipped into the holes in the sleeves and wiggled until the hole got bigger. A hand came swinging around into her vision and clipped her on the back of the head before she had time to duck.

"And you can stop that right now you little sod! No one is going to buy you a new one. I'm not going to lay on my back an extra session just so you can tear up a new coat. Now get out that door before I flatten you." Sara stood by the door waiting for her sister to open it. She paused silently for a moment before slipping out into the rain and darkness.

Trudging down the endless streets, Sara saw all manner of demons and terrors hiding around corners waiting to jump out and tear her throat to bits. She started to sing in her head the only song that gave her any comfort. *Guardian angel from heaven so bright, watching beside me to keep me tonight, fold thy wings round me oh guard me with love, softly sing songs to me of heaven above. Beautiful angel, my guardian so bright, tenderly*

guard me till morning is light. Sara sighed as she felt the big warm wings wrap around her. Everything would be OK now, just Grandmother to contend with.

When they arrived at the site, Maria stopped dead and cursed under her breath. “Shit, look at the ground.” Sara peered through the darkness to see a sea of ankle deep mud around the caravans. “I can’t take you through that, you will have to go yourself. I will wait here until you are in the van.” The tone in Maria’s voice gave Sara no option.

She surveyed the endless ocean of darkness and swamp that was bound to have crocodiles and dragons in it. Could she make it without getting eaten? She didn’t want Maria to know she was scared. Sara despised her sister and would die before letting her know her weaknesses so that Maria could use them against her.

Maria shoved her forward and Sara set off at a steady run. She jumped through the pools of mud, avoiding the dragonheads and monster hands. She was about to make a heroic leap for the van when her foot shot out from under her. Sara flew through the air landing in a perfect cross in the mud. The wail she let out finally reached Grandmother who opened the van door, flooding the Gypsy campsite with light.

Grandmother’s voice boomed into the night. “So what you`’s be doing swimming in the mud, granddaughter? It’s awful cold for that now. Come in here before you catch your death.” Sara struggled out of the mud with as much dignity as she could muster and stood before her Grandmother.

Maria walked off in disgust, her bleached blond hair reflecting in the streetlights like a halo. Sara listened to the tip tapping of Maria’s high heels as she disappeared around the corner.

Grandmother watched Sara watching her sister. Grandmother could feel the pain in the child’s heart. “You’re better off here away from that hussy, she’ll only turn you into another version of her. I could beat the breath out of your mother for vanishing like that and you only a little one like you are. Do you hear from your mother?”

The discussion of her mother was a road Sara did not want to go down. She couldn't even bring herself to say the word 'mother' without bursting into tears. She shook her head to answer the old woman's question and wished as deep in her heart as she could reach that her mother would come home again.

She had walked out the door three months ago without a word and never returned. They had heard that she had a job in town but no one had bothered to find her. Let her go, they all said. But Sara wasn't ready to let her go; she was only ten and she wanted her mother.

The child stood with her arms outstretched as Grandmother washed her down. Sara wrinkled her nose at the smell of the woman. Garlic and tobacco, yuck. The old woman looked at Sara and felt the deep longing and loneliness in the child. She cursed her daughter for being so stupid as to abandon her child. Her strong old hands washed and rubbed Sara down, allowing some of her old strength to permeate through the little girl's skin. She knew this was the child who would carry on the line. Not all was lost, yet.

Bedtime was the best time at Grandmother's home. Sara dived into her 'pit', a small corner at the end of the old van that was under the window. Grandmother's bed was at one side of the corner and Sara's was at the other so that she could reach out and touch the old woman if she got scared. Grandmother tucked her in and then sat beside her ready to start the age-old bedtime ritual that Grandmother herself had loved so much as a child.

"So are you in and ready?" The child nodded and smiled. The old woman closed her eyes and started to sing in the old language, the language they spoke before they had been forced to send the children to school, the language she had passed to her daughter who had refused to pass it to her children. The time for Romanies in the north of England was over. There was hardly any left anymore, particularly her family's line. They were not of the English gypsies, nor of the Irish, the two main tribes here. They were from the south of France and before that, the deserts of the Middle East. The local gypsies here only tolerated the old woman because she was so good at her crafts.

The old woman took a deep breath for the chorus and Sara waited for her to get to the two words that she knew, duniya dekki, duniya dekki *The world see, the world sees*. Sara joined in causing the Grandmother to smile, showing her glittery gold teeth.

At the end, Sara snuggled deeper into the warm blankets and looked up. “How can the world see, Grandmother?” Sara was finally beginning to relax. The old woman’s face collapsed into an exquisitely beautiful collection of wrinkles as she smiled. “The world is your mother and when you pray, put your head to the floor and you will be resting your head on the breast of your mother. Your mother, the world, sees everything and says nothing. She only waits.”

Sara pulled the blanket just under her chin so that she could speak without freezing. “What does she wait for Grandmother?”

The old lady sighed, “I don’t know granddaughter, I really don’t know.” The old woman looked past Sara and out of the van window as though the answer lay just beyond the line of sight.

“But you know everything Grandmother, me dad says so.” The old woman smiled at the comment and the inference in those words that was lost on the child. “Now are you wrapped up enough? Then look up at your friends.”

Grandmother smoothed the blanket down with her brown withered hands and tucked away a stray strand of her long gray hair. Sara looked up to the high shelf above the window. On the shelf were three porcelain angels surrounded by cut glass ornaments and beautiful plates.

“Can you remember their names?” Sara nodded. “Azal, Tughaii and Isca.” She rattled them off, struggling over the pronunciation.

Grandmother dropped her voice to a whisper, lulling Sara to sleep. “Azal will watch over you tonight and as soon as you sleep she will help your body grow through the night. When you get up in the morning, something about you will be different.”

She bent over and kissed the child before hobbling back to sit by the tiny stove. She sat for a while in the dim light watching the child as she drifted into sleep. She had always known, from the moment of Sara's birth, that this child was special. As Sara grew, she talked with the animals and the wind. Most of that had been beaten out of her by her eldest sister, ‘but it will come back’, Grandmother thought to herself.

In the morning, when Sara woke, she felt around herself to see what was different. She sat up and looked at the old woman sleeping and took pleasure from seeing her there. This was much nicer than waking up in a bed with her sister’s children. As soon as she thought of that house she could smell the urine and damp walls. She shuddered. Did she really prefer that to Grandmothers? She could never understand why she hated coming to the campsite because as soon as she got here she always liked it better. Yes, something was different about her today; she didn’t want to go back. She wanted to stay here.

She crept out of bed and tiptoed to the door. Her hands struggled with the tiny lock as she tried to open it quietly while putting on her coat, grasping the collar with her teeth. She went outside and sat on the step. It was still early and a mist hung around the camp. Beyond the small camp was the main road and beyond that, the church. There were not many vans here, four other than hers to be precise. One was uncle Vinni’s who she loved to death, one was the Murphy’s, which had ten children in it, one was the Lowther’s, and one was old man Lee with his grandson.

Piles of scrap metal peered out of the mist and the caravans seemed to float on the clouds of cold. All the dogs were still asleep; only Vinni came whistling around the corner. He didn’t see Sara at first and jumped a mile when she spoke. “Hello uncle, it’s me, Sara, Sara Black, do you remember me?”

It had been a month since she had last been here and Sara was convinced that everyone had forgotten her. After the old man had recovered from the shock of the tiny voice whispering out of the mist he stood and pretended to think.

“Sara Black you says your name is, ay, Sara Black, hmm...” He pulled at his beard and pretended not to look at the expectant face watching him. “Sara Black, you’ll not be the grandchild of old mother Fatima would yers.”

She nodded while cringing. He had used Grandmother’s name, a terrible crime. You only speak the names of those on your level and Grandmother was up there at the top with God.

The old man came and sat aside her. “So how are you faring Sara Black? Are you well?” Sara beamed her best smile for her most favorite man in the world. “I’m well enough uncle, do you have your horses here?” Vinni smiled. Sara and horses were the same word in his book, she knew them and they knew her.

“When your Grandmother is up and you have been scrubbed and fed, you can come riding with me okay? I have some things to see to down Leeds road so you can come too if you behave.” Sara jumped up and tried to say thank you while climbing back into the van to get dressed.

When she clambered into the van, Grandmother was just getting up. “Uncle says I can ride with him this morning, can I go please?” The old woman stopped to look at the child whose eyes were finally shining like a little girls should. Grandmother smiled as she answered, “Aye, I suppose so but you must do your bed, eat and wash first.”

Sara nodded, scampering around in the tiny space trying to put the bedding away. She took her washbowl outside and scrubbed herself down from head to toe, not noticing the cold air that nibbled at her flesh; she was too excited to feel anything other than a longing for horses.

When she was suitably clean she went back in the van for her eggs. Grandmother had fried a mountain of eggs and buttered a pyramid of bread. She called out to Sara, “Come, sit and eat. You need food that will stick your sides together.”

When Sara had eaten her fill, she waited for Grandmother to finish her mouthful of food. “Grandmother, you know when you said that I would wake up different, well I did.” The old woman raised an eyebrow in question at the child. She waited for her to continue.

“I have decided that I don't want to go back to Maria's, I want to stay here with you. Can I?” The old woman breathed a huge sigh of relief. “Yes granddaughter, you can stay here, I will discuss it with your father and Maria. You will still have to go to school though, no getting out of that.”

Sara shrugged her shoulders. She liked school, that wasn't a problem, but Maria's reaction maybe. Sara knew that her father gave Maria money every week to look after her younger sister and she would not be happy at having that money taken from her.

Vinni tapped on the door and Grandmother opened it, still holding the long knife in her hand that she had collected for washing. The old man took a step back while grinning. “Hello Grandmother Fatima. How goes your day so far for you yourself?”

Grandmother grinned widely while turning the knife around in her hand. She put her hand on her hip and pretended to wave the knife at him. “All the worse for seeing your face, you lazy filthy piece of Irish crap. You'd better look after this child or I'll cut your bollocks off, understand me? You poor excuse for a man.”

She grinned as Sara held her hands to her ears so that she could not hear her holy sacred Grandmother speak in such a way. The old man bowed deeply before the Grandmother and vowed to care for Sara with all the loving care and attention he would give to his horses. After all, he still valued his baby making machinery.

As they trotted bareback up the main road, Sara breathed in the smells: the dust, the steam from the local public baths, the abattoir, the fumes and exhaust. All bad things, but they reminded her of her mother. They had spent many a day wandering up and down this road looking for clothes or books and Sara could almost see her on every corner.

They waved to the rag and bone man, to Sadhu the milkman, and to 'Jesus', the walking man dressed in a woolsack cloth that smiled at everyone. No matter where you were, 'Jesus' would appear around the corner, walking briskly and waving to everyone. He always had a smile on his face that cheered people up and Grandmother said he looked the same now as he did when Maria was a little girl. Sara wondered if the rumors in the playground were true: that he really was Jesus and if you waved to him, you would go to heaven. She waved again, more vigorously this time, just in case.

Finally they pulled up outside the blacksmith at the crossroads. "So good to be seeing you Mr. Vinni, is there anything I can do for you here now?" The blacksmith stood in his magnificent leather apron smoking the biggest longest rollup that Sara had ever seen.

Vinni propelled the blacksmith into the back of the yard while Sara leaned over the neck of the paint horse she was riding. She stretched her legs out over his back until she was laid straight along him with no saddle to impede her. She tangled her fingers into his mane and breathed deeply, allowing herself to melt into the animal in a deep union. The smell of horse was the greatest gift to man in Sara's opinion, she lived and functioned only for the moments she got to spend with horses. All the love that should have been generated for her mother but had no place to go now poured into the horse's soul. The horse responded to her worship by whickering softly to her.

She lay there for a few minutes before she heard footsteps coming up behind her. The horse shifted his weight so that he could crane his neck around to see who approached. Two young boys of about thirteen years old came along side of her. "You one of them

dirty tinkers then? D’you know what we do ter tinkers like you?” He licked his lips and winked at the other boy.

They leaned forward and pulled her off the horse, which lurched forward in panic. They pulled her to the ground and started to kick and punch the small girl as if she were a sack of flour. She cried out, bringing Vinni running out from the back of the blacksmith’s stall. He threw some tools he was holding at the two boys who bolted off, dodging through the alleyways and disappearing into the maze of back streets.

Vinni picked up Sara who had been kicked half conscious. He noted blood trickling from her ear and swore under his breath. The blacksmith rounded up the horses and then held Sara while Vinni mounted. Vinni took the child in his arms and, leaving her paint horse with the blacksmith, rode back to the campsite as carefully as he could.

His loud calls brought the whole camp including Grandmother to the van door and she crossed herself when she saw the child. As they got her into the caravan Vinni suggested that they call an ambulance. Grandmother’s deep voice grated with fear. “Are you insane? They would love any excuse to take her into care and foster her out. Don’t you think they’ve done that to enough of our children? No, we must look after her.”

As she laid her down and wiped her face, Vinni told her what had happened. He wept with shame at not being able to protect the child, even though he had given his word that she would come to no harm. The Grandmother did not have time for Vinni to feel sorry for himself, she handed him a bottle of whisky and told him to shut up.

She looked at the child from head to toe. She found bruising on her ribs and arms as well as her head. She was starting to come around and the Grandmother looked into her eyes. Her pupils looked normal but the bleeding from Sara’s ear worried Grandmother. She went to her wooden chest and took out the old remedy box that had been in the family for years. It housed many tinctures and herbs along with tiny bottles filled with homeopathic remedies. She chose the Hypericum and gave Sara a small pill to put under her tongue.

She turned the lights down in the van and reached up to the three angels on the shelf. She brought them down and placed them on the surface near the tiny bed. “Now my friends, I need your help. My little one has an injury and it may be serious. I would like you to help me if you can.” She closed her eyes and placed her hands on the statues. She felt other hands hold hers.

She saw herself out in the stars with many angelic beings surrounding her. Their tall bodies and outstretched wings reached beyond the line of the old woman’s sight and she trembled in the presence of their power. They laid their hands on her and together they fell to the earth as one hive being. They fell and fell until she could see Bradford, her hometown and they fell towards the campsite. They passed through the top of the van and landed in a circle around Sara.

One of the angels laid his hands on Grandmother’s back and then passed the hands through her arms so that they became as one. She looked at Sara and saw a beautiful web pattern that ran through her body. It was a web of light with a sphere of fire in the center: her body’s life force. The web was damaged near her head so Grandmother and the angel worked to repair the web and make it whole again. The Grandmothers nimble fingers linked and wove the child’s energy patterns as the angel reformed the connections. She could hear Vinni nearby saying his prayers in his thoughts and she smiled.

When the work was complete, the angel turned to Grandmother and ran his hands across her web to ensure that the inner work had not taken too greater toll on the old woman. When he was satisfied that all was well, the angel joined with the others and created a pillar of spinning fire that passed through all the worlds. The pillar changed in to a flame and then the flame passed into the void.

Vinni jumped when the old lady touched him. “I must have fallen asleep. Sorry, I don’t know how that could have happened.” He rubbed his eyes and stretched while looking down on the sleeping child. “So did you do your prayers to the angels then?” The

old woman shrugged, not looking up at him as she stroked the forehead of the child, allowing her life force to flow into the child to help her in her recovery.

Vinni hung his head in shame. “I am sorry for what has happened Grandmother, I’ll find those boys and whip them hard.” The old woman shook her head and looked at him.

“What’s done is done, leave it be. They’ll get their comeuppance when the time is right, you mark my words.” She made a strange sign in the air with her hand and then spat on the floor. Vinni bowed to the old woman before leaving the van.

She often scared him; the Grandmother was an unknown entity. The customs and ways of the woman were so different from his own that he often wondered if they came from two different planets. He had lived on the sites all his life, moving from one to the other, sometimes mixed in with the English Romanies, sometimes just all Irish. He had never met anything like her.

CHAPTER TWO

Sara paused on the threshold of her new school, her fingers tightening around her Grandmother's hand. The social services had sent a social worker onto the gypsy camp and insisted that Sara attend school on a daily basis. Old Grandmother had spat on the ground near the social worker's foot, just missing her tight black shoe. Grandmother finally agreed to allow Sara to attend school once she had healed from her injuries.

The children in the classroom stared and sniggered at Sara as she stood in the front of the class. Her first introduction to St Peters School was a disaster; she became painfully aware of her untidy worn clothes and tried to merge into the nun's skirts. The faces of the other children were fixed like gargoyles as they condemned her to death by silent taunting. She could almost hear the insults, swirling around her ears.

Standing up straight, with her chin held tight, she dared any of them to hurt her. Her hands would tear to pieces anyone who came near her. She projected this thought and miraculously the children seemed to hear her. They coughed and settled back down to ignoring the teacher and reading the comics hidden within their textbooks.

Sara slid thankfully into her allotted seat and nodded a hello to the girl sitting next to her. The girl, a mass of blond curls and angelic eyes slid Sara a note. It read, 'dirty gypsy, smelly arse, go to hell, I'm going to tan you at playtime.'

Sara blinked for a moment, and then wrote a reply. 'Did you know that gypsies eat children? You look nice and fat, I'm going to tell my dad where you live so that he can steal you. We will eat you for Sunday dinner.'

The girl let out a wail and Sara snatched the incriminating letter from the girl's hand before the evidence could be used to condemn her to a life of penance. She ate it quickly

and coughed to cover the chewing as Sister Claire approached. Sara shot her hand up and stared straight into the eyes of the little girl. "Sister, I think she has trapped her hand in her desk." Sara struggled to keep an air of concern in her voice. She smiled angelically and tried to appear helpful to the little horror sat next to her.

The girl shot her a look and Sara warned her with her eyes what terrible things would be waiting after school if she told the truth. The girl sulked and held her hand in mock pain. Sara let out a huge sigh of relief.

At playtime Sara skipped into the yard where the other children were playing whip n' top and marbles. Her legs galloped around the yard, thankful to be out in the open air again and able to stretch. She made horsey sounds as she slowed down to a trot, tossing her head and looking around her.

Shadows moved around the periphery of her vision. She came to a full stop and stared straight forward so that she would be able to spot the movement if it happened again. There it was again!

Sara stood in the far corner of the play yard, away from all the other children. Again she looked straight forward, and again she saw the movement of a shadow tiptoeing around her. She turned to the shadow and spoke. "Who are you and what do you want?" Sara stood defiantly with her hands on her hips, trying not to appear scared.

She was shocked when she got a reply. "We enjoy watching the children play; how can you see us? No one can see us, we are the unseen."

Sara smirked, "Well I can see you, and hear you. Where are you from? Who are the unseen?"

The shadow moved a little as though uncertain what to say. "We are the souls of the people buried under your play yard. We are trapped here because no one tends to us. No

one ever ministered to us, so we are too afraid to let go and drift into death. We prefer to stay here and watch the children.”

Sara’s eyes grew wide. The thought of standing on the graves of the dead shocked her to the bone. Such a thing was unclean; it was haram, forbidden. “Why were you not ministered to? Why are you not on consecrated ground?” asked Sara.

The shadow replied in a sorrowful voice. “We were a band of gypsies brought here to work on clearing the land. We were given a lot of work and we had almost finished, when a local child went missing. She was found dead three days later and it was blamed on us. There were thirteen of us so they accused us of black magic and sacrificing the child. We were all killed and laid on wasteland. Many years later this school was built upon us. We dare not face the Lord because we did not have confession and the last rites, so we stay and watch the children.”

Sara became thoughtful. “Did you kill the child?” She asked because she knew she had to hear the truth from his lips. Everyone knew the dead did not lie. The shadow wailed. “We did not. We are gypsies and as such we revere children above all others. Children are sacred to us. It was a local man who was not punished until he died.”

Sara heard the bell that called the end to playtime. “I have to go. I am a gypsy too; maybe that’s why I can see you. I will come again, and I want to help you. I have an idea. Good-bye for now, sweet shadow.” She blew a kiss and then scampered off leaving the shadow to melt into the wall and disappear. She would tell Grandmother what had happened; Grandmother would know what to do.

Grandmother listened quietly without comment, absently pulling the long black hairs on her chin. When Sara had finished, she opened the van door and called to Vinni, the camp Papa, to come in. She asked Sara to repeat the story to him. After Sara had finished,

Vinni held her ear lobes and pulled on them. “Do not tell anyone else, you hear me? Now pull your own ears so that you will not forget. Tobah tobah, it is bad to tell. Understand?”

Sara nodded, realizing that she could be in danger if she talked to anyone.

“Can we do the last rite for those poor people to let them go, can we, Papa Vinni?”

Sara’s eyes were filling up. If she were buried down there, she would want someone to help her.

Grandmother nodded and spoke with Vinni, ignoring Sara. Sara knew this was a signal to do something else like read a comic and not listen. But she could not help but hang on to every word that was spoken. Vinni’s voice seemed to fill the whole caravan as he told the story from his childhood.

“I remember talk of this happening when my Grandfather was a child. Grandfather often told me the tale when I was little and I had always thought it was just a story. It was a long time ago and most of them were Irish gypsies.”

“There was one Polska gypsy, God rest his sweet soul, who was in the work gang. He had come to England with a large group of his family and they all lived in Bradford. The gypsies had been blamed when a little girl had gone missing, even though they had all turned out to search for her and the gypsy women had done many tarot readings to look for the child. The women told the towns people that a local man with red hair had stolen the child, but no one listened. Instead, they all blamed the gypsies and sentenced them to death.”

“When the mob was hanging them, the Polska Gypsy went last and he cursed the city of Bradford. He said that in a hundred years time, it would be a cesspit of vice, pain and sorrow. He cursed the families of the men who did the lynching and cursed the ground upon which they were hung. The school was built a few years later because no one would buy the land to build houses on.”

Vinni stopped to sip the cup of whisky that Grandmother had given him. Grandmother shook her head in sorrow. Her voice had a terrible edge to it as she spoke. “And so they put little children on the land, innocents who will carry the weight of the curse. Damn them, damn them all.”

The next day Grandmother walked Sara to school and surveyed the wasteland at the back of the school. It had quite a steep slope that would prevent them from putting vans on the land. She stood and looked for a while before going to talk to her old friend, Malik, who lived opposite the wasteland.

She knocked hard on the door and smiled when she heard the children running to answer the door. All the ones too young to attend school crowded into the porch, fighting to see who was there. One of them peered through the letterbox.

“It’s Aunti Grandmother, it’s Aunti Grandmother.”

The Grandmother smiled and waved at the little pair of eyes peering through the letterbox. Mumtaz, Malik’s wife answered the door.

“Asalaam alekum”, *Greeting*, she said in her beautiful lilting voice. She held out her arms.

Mumtaz had known and loved the Grandmother since she had arrived from Pakistan to be Malik’s wife. Grandmother had looked after her and taught her English. The Grandmother hugged her affectionately. “Valekum Salaam. How are you keeping, are you well?”

Grandmother’s voice brought Malik out of the kitchen.

“Greetings Malik, I need to talk to you on quite a serious matter; I may need your help.”

He nodded and sat down as Mumtaz rounded up the two pairs of twins and herded them into the kitchen. She stuck her head back around the kitchen door, “Grandmother, chai?”

Grandmother nodded. "Chai would be wonderful. Oh before I forget, I have something for you." Grandmother delved deeply into her cloth shopping bag that Sara thought contained the whole world. She drew out two jars of cream and a bag of herbs. "For little Ifzal's skin, and the herbs are to boil when his breathing gets bad." Mumtaz took them and kissed Grandmother on the cheek before vanishing into the swamp of children in the kitchen.

Grandmother settled into the chair and looked at Malik. "I need your help. Diwali is coming up soon and I need an excuse to build a bonfire one night out on the wasteland. The school will not permit the fire to be for bonfire night next week, but they would not dare refuse a bonfire for the religious holiday of Diwali. I know, I know, it's not a Muslim festival, it's Hindu, but do you honestly think the council will know the difference? There would be a few gypsies there and we would need a few Asian people there to carry the claim of Diwali."

Malik studied the face of Grandmother. He could see it was more than just a gypsy scam to wind up the council; something important was going on. "Grandmother, dare I ask why you want a fire?"

The old woman told him the story of the gypsies buried without ceremony and how their souls were trapped. They needed a fire to act as a doorway to allow the souls some release. To have a large bonfire on the wasteland, they would need a good reason. Diwali would be perfect. It was close to all souls night, the night of the dead, so she would be able to use the energy of such a time to open the doors to the other world and release them.

Malik nodded without comment and jumped when he heard Mumtaz's voice. Neither had heard her come from the kitchen. "I will help you. I know lots of Hindu women from college who will bring their families and we will make it a proper Diwali fire. You leave it to me, there will be no need to use Muslims, there is enough Hindu's that I know. I also

am in a literature class with the wife of the leader of the Interfaith center. Her husband is the Hindu representative. Leave it to me, I will arrange it.”

She put down a tray of glasses filled with hot creamy chai and a pile of pakoras before returning to the kitchen, which was eerily quiet. “What has she done to the children to keep them so quiet?” Grandmother was fascinated.

Malik laughed, “Go look for yourself.”

She tip toed to the door and pushed it open a little. The four children, two boys at four years old, and a boy and a girl at two years old, lay cuddled together on soft Afghani rugs while Mumtaz told them a story in Urdu. The little girl, Nighat, twirled her hair as she listened to the tale of tigers and mountains, her eyes drooping and her hand slipping away from her mouth. Grandmother withdrew quietly and returned to the living room.

“She’s a special person, Malik, I hope you appreciate her.” Grandmother gave him a stern look. He laughed and smiled, “Grandmother, I worship the ground she walks on. I dreaded the idea of an arranged marriage; you know I was in love with a white girl from the Canterbury estate area, but my mother and uncle refused permission. When Mumtaz first arrived I hated everything about her. She was not as westernized as me and she could not do anything. It was only when you started to teach her that I realized how intelligent she was.”

“Since then she has just astounded me. She runs a poetry group, studies literature and works with a support group for Muslim women. I’m so proud of her. And she has given me four sons and two beautiful daughters. But most of all, Grandmother, she is my friend. I never thought I would have a woman as a friend, but she is all I ever wanted in a companion.”

“My mother thinks that I give her too much freedom, but I feel that freedom is her right. Chaining her up would destroy what I like best about her. My elder brothers wife, Parveen, has only been out of the house a couple of times. Amijaan, mother, keeps her

tied to the sink and the cooker. She spends her whole time making chapatti and having children. No, that is not for me.”

He looked up to see Grandmother nodding and smiling. Her voice had a lilt of humor as she told Malik about her own marriage. “I had a bad husband. He was a cruel man and was much older than me when we married. I was only fourteen and he was thirty-nine. That is how it was in those days. He always hit me and one day, he ate one too many of my special stews. He died in his sleep leaving me to raise my children in peace.”

Malik roared with laughter at the implications of what Grandmother had just told him. “Remind me never to get on the bad side of you.” Said Malik. As they laughed, something dark passed before Grandmother’s eyes, making her shiver. She stopped laughing and stared past Malik. Malik fell silent and looked at Grandmother with concern.

Before he could ask what was wrong, Grandmother spoke. “Malik, will you promise me something? Promise me that if anything should ever happen to me, that you and Mumtaz would look after Sara? She has no one, and she is a special girl with an important future. I need to know that she will be safe.”

Malik looked carefully at the old woman. He wanted to say that she was being silly and that she would live forever. But he knew better than to speak. Grandmother was a strange person. She was not of the Irish Gypsies, so common in the city. She was of the tribal gypsies of the deserts, the old ones from Syria and Iran. He looked at her dark skin and piercing blue eyes as she fixed on him like a bird of prey. She knew something was going to happen.

He nodded his head slowly and touched his heart. “Grandmother, Allah forbid that anything should happen to you, but Sara always has a home with us.” The old woman nodded, satisfied.

Mumtaz lived up to her words and on the eve of Diwali, a large bonfire was built and lit by the Hindu cultural society members. Over a hundred people turned out to stand around the bonfire and eat baked potatoes, plot toffee and samosas. They had been told that the Gypsies would be joining them to conduct a ceremony of the dead.

The leader of the Hindi cultural society told the gathered people about the story of the exodus from India of the Gypsy people and how they were all of the same blood. Indeed, only a year ago, the Indian government had declared that any gypsy who requested it would be issued an Indian government passport, for the Gypsies are the long lost brothers and sisters of that ancient land.

Grandmother, Papa Vinni and Sara arrived just as the sun was setting and greeted the gathered mixture of Indians and Gypsies. Grandmother also spotted Malik and his family in the crowd, along with his brother and his brother's children. The children watched the fire with awe and the adults watched the children.

As dusk finally settled into night, Grandmother raised her hands for silence as she stood before the fire. She motioned for Sara to step forward and made a space for her in front of the roaring flames.

Grandmother bent down and whispered to Sara, "This is your own contact, you will have to do the job. I will be here to support you and you will know what to do when the time comes."

Sara nodded. Her face was white as a sheet and her legs shook from fear. All day she had felt exhausted and weak. Grandmother had watched her and understood that Sara's body was getting ready for work. She had known at that point that Sara would have to do the work, even though she was so young.

Grandmother's strong voice reached every person in the gathering as she spoke. "Thank you for allowing us to join this fire celebration for the festival of light. Thank you for

allowing us to use the fire for a ceremony of death for our people, we will always be in your debt.”

The crowd murmured and nodded at Grandmother’s words. “We ask that you join us in our prayers, wishing our ancestors a good journey.”

Sara turned to face the fire and Grandmother stood to one side ready to catch her should she fall forwards into the flames. The little girl closed her eyes and called on the dead to be with her, using the ancient Romani tongue. Almost immediately the shadows appeared and circled around her. She could hear their voices whispering, *Sara be blessed, you kept your promise; we will be free.*

A pressure built within her as power flowed from the earth up through her feet causing her body to sway. Grandmother ensured that no one touched Sara: to do such a thing would kill the child. Sara’s lips moved silently and her eyes darted violently under their lids as if watching some internal war being waged.

She tried to root herself as she felt her body convulse with the power. All around her was fire. The screams and cries of the dead echoed around her mind as she reached out for the souls of the Gypsies trapped under the school.

A force began to build in her lungs, making it hard for Sara to breathe. She coughed, fighting the pressure as it rose to her throat and threatened to suffocate her. Instinctively, her body reacted against the strange power building within her, causing her skin to redden as if burned. Tears fell down her face as she struggled to survive the bridging of death.

A face appeared before her, the face of a beautiful woman with long red hair and green eyes. The woman smiled and kissed Sara on the lips. *Isca, beloved child of my womb and she who walks with the Goddess throughout time, step into your destiny as the Thirteenth Bridge and be the bringer of death.*

The power passed from Sara's throat and forced her lips open. Her mouth opened wide and Sara leaned towards the fire as though about to vomit. She felt the souls of the people pass through her body and out through her mouth. They streamed into the fire, flowing through the flames and into the void to begin their death journey.

Sara stood rigid with her mouth open, the crowd watching in silent awe at the powerful event they could feel happening. Even the children stood silent as they watched the little girl battle with unseen powers as they flowed through her.

Finally, after what seemed an age, Sara cried out and fell to the ground. The last ancestor had flowed through her and now her body slumped under the strain. Papa Vinni picked her up as Grandmother shouted, "Good journey, good journey!" to her people as they started their journey through the river of death.

A Hindu priest pushed his way through the crowds and knelt down before Sara. He put his hands into the ashes and made a mark on her forehead. "What is her name?" asked the priest, he looked around demanding an answer.

"Sara, Sara Black," answered Grandmother. Sara's lips formed the name Isca, her name throughout time, her soul name, but the word never left her lips through the haze of pain. Almost immediately the name slid from her mind, burrowing its way back into farthest shadow of her soul.

The Hindu priest began to chant with his eyes closed. Relief and joy danced across his face. At last, he had found the beloved of the Goddess that he had been sent out into the world to find. The elders of the temple had poured over astrological charts and the Prophetic Song of Kali for generations. Now the generation of the prophecy was here and he had been sent as a young man to walk the world in search of the child whom the Goddess called beloved.

For the last ten years he had lived in sorrow, fearing that he had failed in his quest. But now, he had lived to touch the woman who would birth the power of Kali back into the world: the Thirteenth Manifestation. His voice broke with happiness. “Sara Black, Kali Sara, beloved of death, daughter of Kali, I anoint you in her name and may the Goddess walk with you always.”

He slipped a medallion around her neck and then motioned with his hands around her head. He looked up to speak to the Grandmother who was watching him like a hawk. He spoke to her in a low voice, trying hard not to be heard by the others. “She is a special little girl. What she has just done is impossible. Bring her to the temple, the one on Leeds Road, I can help her and teach her things. She is born and beloved of the Mother, and her name reflects this. When you come, bring the details of her birth time, I will draw up a chart for her.” The Grandmother nodded before vanishing into the crowd to join Vinni and Sara.

Five weeks later.

As Christmas approached, Sara hoped that the worst of all the bad times had passed. It had taken five weeks for her to rebuild her strength from the passing of the ancestors through the fire.

A new air of freedom had crept upon her. School was boring, the camp was quiet and the horses were hungry. She left school in the winter dark, fingering the apple pieces she had saved from her lunch for the horses. As she crossed the road to the site they whickered at her impending arrival. Their faces loomed out of the fog as they waited for their beloved human to offer mouthfuls of heaven. She stroked each one tenderly in turn, whispering to them about what they would do in the summer.

When she arrived at the van door she heard voices that made her heart sink. She sighed and stepped up into the caravan to confront her father and sister. Maria sneered at her and her father simply ignored her. He carried on his argument with Grandmother who was beginning to get angry. Sara knew all the signs and did not want to be in the middle of this.

She fled the van, ignoring the calls after her as she dived for uncle Vinni's van. She did not even knock, but burst into his van in tears and buried herself in the small sleep space under his cupboard bed. "What the hell..." Vinni shot off of his chair as if he had been electrocuted. He looked at the child for a moment and then squatted down beside her. He waited until her sobs subsided and then asked her what had happened. He had already guessed though. He saw Maria and her drunken father as they marched up to the Grandmothers van.

He had wondered how long it would take Maria to realize that she was no longer able to claim child allowance payments and extra food vouchers for Sara. Christmas was coming and the social would be giving out bonus moneys to families based on the amount of children in the home. Maria would have been very pissed off when she found that she

was no longer entitled to the money. The hospital social worker will have informed the social about Sara's change of family. So now she wanted Sara back and Sara did not want to go.

Vinni told Sara to stay hidden and that he was going to go help Grandmother. He knew she could hold her own but she was also very tired and worn out. She could do with a knight fighting in her corner.

When Vinni entered the van he looked long and hard at Sara's father who stopped shouting and just stared at him. The man's face was full of hate; he had never liked the Gypsies. He did not want Sara, he did not give a shit where she went but his favorite daughter wanted Sara back. What Maria wanted, Maria got.

His hatred of gypsies burned and any chance to take anything away from them made him happy. He felt as though the Grandmother was about to cave in when the site Papa walked in. Vinni stood like a rock, glowering at the drunken slob before him. Vinni did not need to threaten nor shout. "Sara stays with her own people where she belongs. You have no claim on her; now get out before I kill you. You set foot on any site again, I will have you ripped to pieces."

The man wavered for a second. He had heard about-unwanted guests being attacked and sometimes killed; even the police visited the camps in fours or more. Then he realized that his manhood was being challenged in front of the women. "I am not going anywhere without my lass Sara and that's final." He stuck his jaw out firmly in defiance.

Vinni's eyes darkened and he bared his teeth ever so slightly as he spoke in a low hiss. "But she's not your 'lass'. She is not your daughter and you have no claim on her, so piss off before I kill you with my own bare hands." He looked at Vinni in astonishment. "Wha...What do yer mean she not mine?"

Vinni drew a deep breath. He had not meant it to come out, particularly under such circumstances, but now it had he would have to follow it through. “She’s not your daughter, she’s mine. Remember that year at the Appleby horse fair when I took Margaret, that year you went traveling? Didn’t you think it was strange that she got pregnant while you were hardly ever there?”

Maria looked at her father in confusion. His face creased in thought as he lowered his eyes away from Maria. Yes he knew that Sara was not his, but he had not made a fuss because another child meant more social money, so he was happy enough. He did not like Margaret anyhow and he had his own women to keep him happy. But Vinni! That’s what shocked him. The Papa with our Margaret? He shook his head in astonishment. Now what?

He pushed past Vinni and dived out of the van. “I’m going to the flying Dutchman pub. Fuck the lot of yer.” With that he staggered off towards the pub leaving Maria swearing and stamping.

She was furious. Christmas was coming up and she had wanted the extra money that Sara brought in so that she would not have to spend quite as much time stood out in the cold and rain on Lumb lane, the lane of the night girls. Maria was getting too old. Most punters went for the young ones, and they were getting younger by the month. The last one she saw the other night could not have been more that twelve. She could not compete with that. She needed to find an alternative income.

Maria stared at the Grandmother. She then crossed her fingers and spat through them. Her blond hair spun as she turned neatly on her chipped black stilettos and left the van with as much dignity as she could muster. Her long leather coat rustled and creaked as she left, her body swaying with the movement of defeat as she walked towards the road.

Grandmother’s heart was heavy. She had felt the trapped pain within Maria as the young girl had stood so angrily before the old woman. Her first grandchild carried a terrible

burden of suffering and the pain filtered its way into Grandmother's heart and lodged itself there firmly. She wanted to pick Maria up and hug her, sing to her in the old language, wash her, tend her and help her develop.

She had so much promise in her as a child but now? Nothing. She chose to stay away from her own people, she chose to walk the streets at night, and there was nothing she could do to stop that. She was Margaret all over again. Margaret who had fought and battled against her own people from the first day she drew breath. Margaret, who had many children only to dump them or give them away. Margaret who took what she wanted from whom she wanted without thought or cares.

Grandmother looked up at Vinni who was trying to avoid her eyes.

"It's okay Papa, it was a long time ago. I'm glad that Sara is of you, that none of the blood of that cretin runs through her veins. I'm too tired for fights, I need to rest. Where is Sara?" Vinni breathed a big sigh of relief and pain. "She is hidden under my bed, in the child's sleep space. The child I never thought I would be able to claim."

Grandmother nodded understandingly. She knew that Vinni had loved Margaret and that because she would not have him, he never married. He was much older than her. She wanted fast cars and discos not vans and the old life. But it had never occurred to Grandmother that Vinni would have fathered a child with Margaret. That had come as a complete shock.

"Papa, go get Sara and bring her here."

He nodded respectfully and left. She had called him Papa. That was the title of the site family leader, which he was but she had never acknowledged his title before because he did not have children. And until a man fathers a child, he is not a man; therefore he cannot be a leader in her eyes. But now, she nodded to herself, this is not bad, this is good. She was just too exhausted to think about it anymore.

Nothing was said to Sara, and Sara didn't ask. She assumed that Maria and her father had given in and left, and that all would return to normal. It was Christmas and a time that was going to be particularly hard for Sara. Her mother had often left her for long periods of time, but she had always returned. This Christmas, she would not be able to stroke her mother's cheek as she listened to her mother whisper the story of St. Nicholas who gave gifts of goodness and peace to children on Christmas eve. She would not be able to peep over the covers to the pillowcase hung at the end of the bed, to see if it had been miraculously filled to the brim with toys.

There would be many things that would not happen this year and Sara mentally counted up the days since her mother left. Three hundred exactly. She decided there and then that three hundred would be a bad number for her for the rest of her life.

She left the van and drifted towards the fire that had been lit in the center of the campsite. All the children had gathered around while uncle Vinni told them stories of the old days. He told them of the gypsy children who could talk with the faeries, and how they used to sneak off with the beings of the forest to play in Paradise when 'God the Father' was not looking. They would sneak through the door that was labeled 'angels' in golden letters and that door led to the garden of Paradise. There, the grass was carpeted with flowers of every color and the trees dripped with honey that the children would catch on their fingers. Sara snuggled in between two of the Murphy children and her eyes glazed over at the thought of walking on real grass that had flowers.

She had spent her whole life on Leeds road and the surrounding warren of old streets. Grass and flowers were non too plentiful here. The fire warmed her, shielding her from the biting cold that crept upon the vans and the stories reached out to touch her bitter heart.

It was when the Grandmother stood up to sing that Sara finally broke. Grandmother stood on the threshold of the fire and let down her long white hair. It fell in wisps around her voluminous body creating an ethereal light that enveloped her. She closed her eyes and

began to sing, first in the old language and then in English. This way, the young children who had never learned Romani would at least remember the songs, and therefore their history in this time of forgetting.

She sang with a deep rasping voice that was born in the Mediterranean Sea, wiping her tears as they splashed down on to her breast. She sang of the pits dug by the soldiers. She sang of the guns, which pierced the hearts of the women as they watched their lovers die. She sang of the children's faces, as the fear slid from their expressions with the blood that drained from their wounds. She sang of those who hid in the forest, those who witnessed, those who performed the rites of the dead. Those whose tears fell red with blood, as they followed the path of the moon in search of their mother, the land.

All was silent around the fire. The old ones nodded in remembrance of the holocaust. The younger sat silent with the pain that they carried for their elders.

Sara sobbed. She sobbed with all her might, allowing the torture of her wound to overtake her. The loss of her mother bathed her in a pain that Sara could not comprehend. Her tears were shed into the fire, the fire that cleanses all things. The older women wept with her, knowing the pain that this little girl carried in her heart and their tears were shed to lessen Sara's load. Grandmother sat down, wiped her face with her shawl and pulled down her sleeves obsessively. She had done this as long as Sara could remember, hiding the line of numbers stamped on her forearm.

Uncle Vinni stood up and bowed in great reverence to the Grandmother. He then held up his hand for silence. "It is Christmas, the time for giving, the time when the Gori's, the non gypsies outdo their own gluttony, the time when we give what is most precious to us. Who would like to begin?"

Nora Murphy stood up and nervously edged to the fire. She picked up a stick and turned to the assembled family, "My gift is to my mother. I give you my hands, that they may work for you to ease your load." She then threw the stick into the flames to seal the vow

and bind her soul to it. Nora's mother smiled and enveloped the young girl in a huge soft hug.

One by one the assembled group stood up, and swore on the fire a vow or gift that they had given. Finally Uncle Vinni stood up. He knelt before Sara and took her small hand in his. "I give you my door, that it will always be open to you, that my protection will always be at your shoulder."

Sara realized the full weight of the gift that he had given her. In the gypsy community, to make such an undertaking was a very special thing. He had vowed to do the job her father had so miserably failed to do, protect her.

The following day Sara stood, thinking hard as she faced uncle Vinni. He had asked her to name one thing that she wanted and he would get it for her. Her face suddenly lit up with an idea. "I know, I know, can I tell you uncle Vinni, I mean Papa." She stumbled over the title that everyone now used when addressing him. She had no idea why the camp had suddenly started to call him Papa, but she reckoned it must be important because even Grandmother and Mr. Murphy called him Papa now.

She smiled as she told him what she wanted. Grandmother laughed with surprise, "Steak lunch at the Italia? Are you sure?" Sara nodded vigorously. "Well, a steak lunch it is then." Papa put his coat on and held Sara's out for her.

"Are you sure they will be open on Christmas Eve?" Grandmother always worried and today was no exception. She did not want Sara to be disappointed. Vinni smiled and gestured with his hands. "The Italia's always open. Come young Sara, into the car with you."

Sara bounded into the fiat super mirifiori that was the Papa's pride and joy. They spend off and Sara held on to her tummy so that it would not forget it was going to get food, good food.

Her face was a picture of total contentment as she sat before a plate of steak, chips, peas, fried onions and a mountain of homemade Italia bread. The noise of the pinball machines added a perfect serenade to a feast of the heart. Here she was, eating her favorite food, in her favorite cafe, with her favorite man listening to her favorite game. This was the cafe where anyone could come, no matter who they were. The cafe was always full of people from strange and exotic countries who attended the nearby university. Gypsies were as welcome as anyone and indeed were looked upon with respect by the owner. The gypsies always helped him and he helped them.

She felt safe here, unlike the many other cafes in the town center where people would complain about you or the manager would ask you to leave. She cringed as she remembered how many times before she had been enjoying a lunch with Grandmother or her mother and the staff had asked them to leave. Just like that. They would point to the signs on the door: *No dogs, No gypsies*.

She had just about finished her last soggy chip when Vinni stood up to greet someone who had entered the door behind her. Sara wiped her mouth on her sleeve and her hands down her front before turning around to see the biggest man she had ever seen. She smiled inwardly as she thought that he looked like Stromboli, the puppet keeper from Disney's Pinocchio.

He hugged uncle Vinni and then bent over to look at Sara. His dark eyes and wild curly black hair fascinated Sara and her eye caught the enormous scarab ring on his left hand. He followed her gaze and laughed loudly, "A true gypsy if ever I saw one. She could spot gold a mile away." He laughed more and put an arm around her to hug her. Sara looked up at uncle Vinni, pleading for help. Vinni sat down and motioned his friend to join them.

“Sara, this is Mostapha Kamal, an old friend of mine from Cairo, in Egypt. We met when we were teenagers. He is the man who sells all the lovely shawls, scarves and jewelry at the horse fairs.”

Recognition dawned on Sara’s face. She nodded and smiled as she remembered the beautiful scarf that Mr. Murphy had once bought for her at the Wyke horse fair.

The man looked at Sara closely as though giving her a thorough check over. He looked to Vinni with a single raised eyebrow and muttered, “Tinker?” Vinni shook his head, even though he was her father. A gypsy took lineage from the mother, not the father.

“No, Rom. From your neck of the woods actually, her great great grandmother traveled from the deserts to Spain, her great grandmother continued into France, and her grandmother traveled to here.”

The man looked closely at Sara again and nodded, “Yes, the hair and eyes, I have seen those eyes before. Allah, have I seen those eyes before. So, young one, you read my palm eh?”

He stuck his hand before her and Sara looked up, startled. She knew what to do but she had never yet done anything on her own. She was only ten, well, maybe pushing eleven, but it was only pushing.

She was too embarrassed to refuse so she took his hand into her hers and looked at it. She then took his other hand and looked into that too. Her hands touched both his hands to her head and then she spat on the floor, aiming at the foot of a nosy bus conductor who had stopped eating his dinner and was staring wide mouthed at the proceedings at the adjacent table.

Her brow furrowed in concentration as she looked again into his hands, turning them this way and that to catch the dim light as it streamed through the dirty windows. She felt the flesh at the base of his thumb and smiled. Good flesh, she thought, he is an energetic

husband. She dared not even use the real words in thought lest the Virgin Mary hear her. Yes, he is certainly making someone happy under the sheets. Although Sara was not fully sure what happened under the sheets, but she had a pretty good idea. Her finger traced his lifeline and she saw all the problems he had as a child. Then she looked around his palm.

Something was nagging her. She closed her eyes instinctively and looked at his hands with her inner senses. A vision of green car with the man in it filtered into her mind and she saw him traveling at high speed across Saddleworth moor, on the motorway. She saw him struggle to keep the car under control. He closed his eyes as the car hit the barrier. He did not cover his face nor try to avert the impending disaster. He knew he was going to die so he just sat and whispered the first words of his prayers, *Bismillah e rahman e raheem*.

Sara felt the impact and jumped, dropping his hands and pulling hers away as if burned. She looked at uncle Vinni in terror and then looked to the man.

He knew she had seen something terrible. "Sara, whatever you saw, you must be truthful, and it may save my life or someone else's." Sara's lip quivered as she struggled to find the words. "Do you have a green car?" The man nodded and answered.

"I have just bought a green car for my son who is at university in Manchester. I am to drive it down there tonight."

Sara panicked. "Please don't do that, you will have an accident and die. There is something wrong with the car, it is dangerous." Mostapha stared at the child intently.

"Are you sure?" Sara nodded and began to cry.

The bus conductor had stopped even trying to pretend that he was not listening. He had turned his chair around and was looking woefully at Sara and did not notice Vinni staring at him. Mostapha breathed out and leaned back in his chair. "That bastard, Shah, sold me that car. He said it was in perfect nik. I'll kill him."

He leaned forward again and took hold of Sara's hands. "Little Rom from heaven, you have saved my life and that of my son. You could have done me no greater service." He drew out a crisp ten-pound note and crossed her hand with it. "Give this to your Grandmother for your keep and this is for you." He pulled the scarab off his finger and dropped it into her hand. "It is the most precious thing I have. It was my fathers, and his fathers before him. May Allah bless and keep you, and may the goodness of the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, be with you always."

With that, Mostapha Kamal got up from his chair with much ceremony and bowed to the little girl. As he left, Sara found herself whispering to her angels to follow him and keep him safe. She liked him, not because he had given her a precious ring, but because he had a good hand, he was a good person.

Grandmother bit the ring and then held it up to the light as Papa told her about Sara's meeting with Mostapha. She knew him from the fairs and was most surprised that he had given her such a worthy gift. Sara stood proudly, satisfied that her first venture of fortune telling had proved so lucrative.

That weekend, as she approached the temple, she patted her bag to check and see if she had remembered Ganesh's treats. She put her shoes neatly to one side and sped up the stairs to wash her hands before entering the temple room itself. It was still empty. She had purposely come early so that she would not be disturbed. She tiptoed up to the statue of the man with the elephant's head and knelt down before him. She spoke to him in her head, telling him of her week at school.

At the feet of the statue were three china bowls with elephants on them. The priest had put them there especially for Sara, causing many arguments and protests from his community who came there to do their daily prayers. That was one thing that Sara liked about the temple. People came to see God every day here, not just on Sundays.

She filled the first bowl with coffee beans, the best scented coffee she could sneak into her pockets without being seen. She filled the second to the top with chocolate buttons, her favorite. The third she filled with sherry from a small bottle sneaked from the Papa's supply that was hidden under his bed. She smiled to herself at his puzzlement as to how the bottle always seemed to empty itself, even though no one lived in the van with him. The last time he had mentioned it, Grandmother told him it was probably the faeries.

"There," she said out loud to towering elephant that loomed over her, "and don't drink it all at once, its not good for you to do that." She smiled up at him and then shut her eyes. "Dear Ganesh, I don't want to be like Maria. I want to be like Grandmother. Please help me." She opened her eyes and sat back on her heels, looking up adoringly at the brightly painted eyes.

My beautiful rose, take the gift that lies between my toes and give it to its rightful owner. You will meet her this afternoon, and you will know her, because some of me is within her. Your future is not what you think. You will be a doorway and I will be the threshold.

Sara looked at him, startled. He had been talking to her more and more just recently, but this was the first time he had requested something of her. She was more than happy to oblige.

She looked around to make sure no one was looking and then looked between his toes. She had not seen the priest sitting cross-legged in the shadows at the back of the hall. He had been observing her since she had come in. He was aware that a conversation was happening and decided not to interfere. Never before had he seen nor heard of a white child or adult communing with their Gods. In fact, it was so rare within his own people that if you claimed to be conversing with the Gods, they thought you were mad or arrogant. But he knew that this little girl was doing something he could only dream about.

Sara looked hard between his toes and had to look a few times before she spotted the gold coin that had been wedged deeply between his middle toes. She thought she would not be able to get it out, until she remembered her long hairgrip. She used it to lever the coin out and kissed his foot as she retrieved it. She slipped it in her bag and went to change for her class.

Sara was tired out from the community dance class, but Grandmother had asked her to go into town to get some meat from the market and run an errand. As she sat on the bus, she sat by the back, by the large entrance with a pole and no door. People would hang on to the pole ready to jump off at their stop. It was an old bus and Sara preferred them to the newer more modern buses with doors and sliding windows. She liked old things, like Grandmother. They made her feel safe and gave her a sense of a constant world.

Once in town, she trudged up the steep hill to the meat market and held her nose against the strong cheap perfume as she pushed through the Saturday crowd of women in curlers with scarves covering them. It gave their heads a strange lumpy sort of shape that fascinated Sara. When she was smaller, and did not know better, she thought that their heads were that lumpy shape naturally. One day, the truth was revealed as she watched one of the ladies take their scarf off to adjust a curler underneath.

She pushed hard to get through the fish section of the market without being sick. She hated the smell of fish and was nauseated by the time she got in the market proper with its long rows of meat shops. She went to the stall that was Grandmother's favorite and bought the stewing meat that was on her list. She then went to the pie stand and bought a steaming plate of pie with mushy peas, her Saturday treat with the money that Grandmother had given her. She ate every last little bit, almost descending to licking the plate. But the pie man who, seeing what was coming, whipped the plate out from under her and saved her dignity.

She turned to leave and at first she did not see the commotion that was happening further up the market isle. The people parted like the red sea and Sara could see the end of a walking stick waving over the heads of the people. She was about to turn and get out of the way of whatever was coming but she was not quick enough and found herself stood before the fattest woman she had ever seen. The lady was big, with a heavy woolly hat on and an army overcoat. She had a beard of long black and gray hairs, and a mustache that would make any man proud. Her stockings wrinkled about the Wellington boots that she wore and her stick waved about her like a charmed snake. She swore and cursed at the people around her, lashing out with her stick and spitting at anyone who got near.

Sara was terrified and was about to run when she saw something familiar in the woman's eyes. She saw the eyes of Ganesh looking back at her and realized this was to be the recipient of her coin. Sara's legs shook in terror; surely there must be some mistake she thought, as she looked at the mad woman before her, thrashing all who came near her.

But Sara had promised, and it was a promise she was going to keep. Boldly stepped forward, she tried not to look as frightened and breathless as she was. She dug out the gold coin and held it out to the woman who immediately stopped waving her stick and looked at Sara. She took the coin and bit it, showing her black rotting teeth.

"From a friend," stammered Sara, "From a friend."

The old woman took Sara's chin in her filthy hands and turned Sara's face this way and that, as if looking to buy. She then took the child's face in both hands and stared deeply into Sara's eyes. "Over the seas twill be, over the seas shall be your fate and your death. Lie at the feet of the mother and remember me as you fight for your life." She pushed Sara away and fought her way through the people leaving Sara shaking and rooted to the spot.

A dumpy woman with her hair in curlers steered Sara back to the nearby pie stand. "Watch over this young un for a sec, George, I think she just had a run in with big Anna and could do with pepping up." The pie man told Sara to sit down and he opened a bottle

of Tizer and put a beaker before her. “Here young’un, have a drink on the house. You’ve survived Anna, now you can survive anything.” He laughed and ruffled her hair but all Sara could feel or think of was the deep penetrating look of the mad woman, how she had looked into Sara’s eyes, seeing her whole soul in its bare form. Nothing was hidden from that stare and all was known. It was like going to confession after doing something really bad and the priest moving the curtain so that he could see your face.

“Why is she like that, Mr. Pie man?”

The man scratched his head as if searching for the right words with his fingertips. “She was a twin during the war. They did experiments on her, see, and that is why she is as she is. She was apparently very beautiful and intelligent before the Nazi’s got her. She has the keys to the city no, God bless her.”

Sara looked puzzled. She did not know that the city had locks; she had never seen any doors or gates even though there were streets called west gate and Northgate. “What are the keys for, Mr. Pie man?” The man looked puzzled. He was not that sure himself, “I think it means that she doesn’t pay for anything. When she comes to my stall I give her pie and peas for nowt. But that’s not because of the keys, its because she terrifies the pants off me so much I darn’t ask for money.” Sara smiled with the man at the secret fear they both shared.

Sara was not prepared for what she found in the caravan that late afternoon. She had sprung into the van, put down her bag and taken her shoes off. She turned around to find Grandmother slumped over her seat by the stove. She had thought initially that she was just resting, but when she did not react to Sara’s wild entry, Sara realized something was wrong. She shook the Grandmother, crying out her name and trying to think what she should do. The Grandmother groaned ever so slightly, causing Sara to bolt out of the van, screaming and crying for help. Uncle Vinni dropped his bucket of horse feed and came running, along with one of the Lowther men.

Natti Lowther ran to the phone box while Uncle Vinni cradled the Grandmother in his arms, calling her name and trying to keep her awake. Sara sobbed on the step as her world fell apart around her and all she could do was point when the ambulance finally rumbled onto the site.

Sara did not speak on the way to the hospital. Her lip was held tight by her teeth and she counted the shops as they sped through the town center in an effort to distract her mind from the awful possibilities of what she would find at the end of her journey.

Her first sight of the hospital caused her throat to tighten. Its shape looked like a spider crawling out of the darkness and Sara shut her eyes tight against the night. She opened them only when they came to a halt in the car park. She had not asked Uncle Vinni what was wrong with Grandmother and he had not spoken up to now. He turned off the engine and looked at Sara. "She is going to die soon. You must be strong and ready for this."

Sara nodded and began to cry. All her life she had been told she would have to be strong and Sara had never really quite managed it. Good things were always taken from her and her life with Grandmother had been really good. Grandmother was going to be torn away from her and Sara prepared herself inside for the greatest battle of her young life.

She held Uncle Vinni's hand as she walked down the long corridors of the hospital. It smelled of antiseptic and fear which caused Sara's heart to beat faster. "Go," she said to herself. "Beat faster and faster until you can beat no more, then let me sleep in my Grandmother's arms as we meet Our Lady in heaven." She wanted to die so badly at this moment but her heart would not go any faster. She clung to Uncle Vinni's hand and tried to stop crying.

When they got to the room where Grandmother was, Sara gripped herself inside. The pain and fear crept its way up into her throat and threatened to emerge as loud sobs. She gulped and coughed in an effort to suppress the emotions and her hand gripped tighter to Uncle Vinni's strong fist.

She was shocked when she saw the Grandmother. She had been stabilized and now the nurses left her for the family to have a short visit. The sobs died in Sara's throat and the creeping reality of death showed itself for the first time to this little girl. All fear, all pain and all sorrow left Sara, and all that remained was a vast empty void. No words reached her lips as the scent of death stained itself deep into her heart. She moved as if mesmerized. Sara sat aside the old woman and simply looked.

Grandmother's face was bloated and she seemed to have shrunk considerably. Sara looked at the old woman for a long time. Then she stroked her hair and sang the angel song to her quietly, so that the angels would protect her. After that, Sara didn't know what to do. She knew that she had to be there, and that she must not leave, but she was not sure how she could help her beloved Grandmother. So she sat and waited, watching the old woman's body rise and fall with each breath.

After a few hours uncle Vinni tried to get Sara to leave but she would not budge. Vinni sighed and went off to call Malik, promising to come back in a moment. Sara laid her head down on the bed beside Grandmother's arm. She drifted in to a fitful sleep and her breathing slowed to the same rhythm as the Grandmother's and the beeping machines. She drifted and dreamt until a voice called her.

She looked around in her dream to see where the voice was coming from. As she turned around she saw a window with a head stuck through it. "It's time you got to work young lady, and here, eat your dinner first before you go anywhere, put some flesh on them bones." Sara looked at the disembodied head in astonishment and blinked as a table appeared with all her favorite foods on them. She sat down at the table and realized she was famished. She ate and ate until she could eat no more and then pushed her chair away from the table.

"Now," Said the head, "Put on this suit, it will protect you." The head nodded to a boiler suit that was lying on the floor. "Why do I need protecting?" Asked Sara.

“Because you are going to a place that can be dangerous and this suit will protect you, that’s why, missy ten questions! Now do as you are told.”

Sara got up and put the shiny boiler suit on. It was far too big for her but it felt good. It felt like the safety of the angel wings when she sang her angel song. “Now what do I do?” Said Sara as she stood before the head. The head suddenly rushed close to her at horrific speed, “WAKE UP” it shouted right in her face.

Sara awoke with a jump and looked around her. She rubbed her eyes. She knew she had dreamt something, but she could not remember what. She went to the sink in the corner and washed her face to waken herself up.

The noise of the running water drowned out the sound of the Grandmother groaning. But the second time made Sara spin around and rush back to the Grandmothers side. The old woman opened her eyes briefly and looked at Sara. The old woman tried to speak but her voice would not work. Sara stroked her long gray hair and smiled at her. Something made her put her hand on the Grandmothers head and Sara felt a rush of heat flow down her arm, into the Grandmother. The old woman looked around her as if seeing people stood around the bed. She looked back at Sara and tried to speak again but Sara heard the words in her head.

“I love you, child. I love you.” And I love you too Grandmother, I love you too. Please don’t go, stay with me, and get better...” Sara’s voice broke and the flood of tears ran into her mouth.

The old woman strained to sit up until her eyes became fixed with pain. She stared through Sara as she clung to the little girls arms and Sara struggled to hold on to the woman who clung to her. Grandmother turned her gaze to Sara and saw her this time. So much passed between them; Sara felt as if she was being filled for an eternity. Everything that the old woman had learned and experienced seemed to pass into the little girl in this instance.

Then the old woman coughed. A torrent of old blood and fluids flowed from her mouth, drenching the little girl. “Good journey Grandmother, good journey,” cried Sara at the top of her voice through her tears as her Grandmother’s spirit began its long journey through death.

The call echoed down the hallway breaking Vinni from his conversation with the Doctor. He found Sara covered in black blood and vomit, clinging on to the old woman. She cried and shook, fighting uncle Vinni as he tried to disentangle her from the body of her Grandmother. A nurse paused on the threshold while she surveyed the scene. They struggled to separate Sara and the Grandmother, allowing the doctor to finally lead Sara away to be cleaned up.

When Sara has been bathed and dressed in clothes from the children’s ward, she was allowed to return to her Grandmother who had also been cleaned up. “Can I have some time alone with her please?” Sara looked to Uncle Vinni with the request for him to sort it out. Vinni turned to the nurse and the doctor who nodded. Sara looked to the Doctor. “Can I light a candle?” The nurse bent down on one knee to be level with Sara, “No love, no flames. See that tank over there? If you light a flame it will explode. No flames.” Sara nodded. The nurse and doctor left, and Vinni went to stand in the corner. “You too uncle Vinni, I want to do this alone.”

Uncle Vinni was not sure that she should be left alone with the body. She was obviously in shock and he was deeply worried about her. “It’s our way Papa, I have to do this for her.” He nodded. The use of Papa had gotten through to him. He realized that Sara, as the only gypsy of Grandmothers tribe present, would have things that she alone could do.

Once alone, she walked around the bed and came to rest at the head. She closed her eyes and saw a flame burning deep within her. She reached into herself and drew the flame out, resting it at the head of the bed. She repeated this at the foot and both sides of the bed so that a flame burned in the inner worlds around the directions of the body. She then went to stand at the foot of the bed. Closing her eyes, she saw herself reaching into the

body of the old woman. Her mind searched for the Grandmother but could not find her; the body was empty.

She looked up to see her Grandmother standing at the head of the bed. The old woman raised an eyebrow. "Ready?" she said; Sara nodded. The hospital room fell away and they found themselves stood on the banks of a canal. A boat appeared out of a mist with an old gray man steering it. Grandmother waved to him and he pulled over. The old woman reached into her hair and pulled out a silver coin. "I have saved this all my life for you, please carry me well, old man." She then turned to Sara. "You must help me in because I cannot do it myself. My own blood must hand me over to death."

Sara went to the old woman and picked her up. She did not once think that she could not do it. She cradled the woman in her arms and kissed her. As she got nearer to the boat, she got hotter and hotter until she thought she was going to burn. She handed the old woman over to the old man who placed her gently in the boat. He then grabbed Sara's hand before she could turn away. "Return tomorrow. Here is a whistle so that you can call me. Here is a sweet so that you will have energy. Here is a thread so that you cannot lose me."

The man then pushed off and floated down the river. Sara opened her eyes and held on to the bed to stop herself from swaying. She went around to the old woman's ear and whispered, *good journey, Fatima, good journey*, once more to her, the gypsy blessing of passage.

She then looked at the body that had carried her Grandmother for so many years and thanked the earth for making such a strong body for her Grandmother. She thanked the wind for giving Grandmother breath, she thanked the ocean for giving Grandmother a bloodline and she thanked the sun for shining so brightly through her Grandmothers eyes.

Her young body became tired as knelt down and placed her forehead to the ground, allowing her tears to fall around her. “Thank you Mother for giving me such love through my Grandmother. Please be with me.”

The following morning Sara awoke feeling bruised and sore. Her heart ached for her Grandmother and the pain she tried to push away grew with each second of consciousness. She turned in the bed to find Nargis, eldest daughter of Malik and Mumtaz already awake and watching her. Sara opened her mouth to speak but nothing would come out. Nargis reached out and held Sara who began to weep. She cried and cried until there were no more tears left to shed and then she just shook.

Nargis stroked her hair and whispered in Urdu to the distressed little girl. Mumtaz stood with her hand on the closed bedroom door, not wishing to intrude and yet her heart ached for the little girl. She wanted to rush in and embrace her, tell her everything would be all right and that she would take her pain away. But she knew she could not do that, so she stood vigil by the door until Malik awoke.

The funeral was held in the church opposite the campsite and Sara tried hard not to cry but to be strong and proud, just like her Grandmother had been when one of her children had died.

Everyone laid a hand on her head in sympathy and everyone began to argue as soon as they got out of the church. Sara held her hands to her ears as they fought over the burning of the van and the parenthood of Sara. The little girl ran across the road and broke into the van, pushing her way through the barricade that had sealed the tattered door.

She stood and cried as she looked around the tiny van that she had thought would be her home forever. Her hands lovingly fingered Grandmothers belongings and she lifted them to her nose, burying herself deep in the Grandmothers smell. Garlic and tobacco. She remembered how she always hated that smell. Now, she would give anything for a whiff of her Grandmother alive and well.

Vinni climbed into the van behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. He turned her around and knelt down until he was level with her eyes. His voice was calm and controlled. "You must fire the van. That way, there is no arguing. Maria wants to keep it and sell it. That is against all gypsy laws, wherever we are from. It must be burned, all of it. Without the burning, her soul cannot be free and the laws of death will have not been attended to. Everything she was must go to the fire. That way nothing can hold her back. You know that, don't you?" Sara nodded slowly. "Papa, what will happen to me now? Where will I go? Who will care for me? Please don't send back to Maria's."

Vinni hugged the frightened little girl and fought the impulse to tell her who her real father was. "You will be cared for. Malik has agreed that you will live with them as one of their children. I am stopping traveling totally so that I can be around for you at all times. Your father and Maria have agreed to this and so has your mother."

The word 'mother' stung right through Sara's heart causing her to contract in pain. "Where is she, can I see her, has she asked about me?" Vinni reeled from the pain that was so prominent in the child's eyes. He tried not to allow his anger to creep into his voice. Margaret had never nurtured this child but he did not want Sara to feel that her mother did not want her. "She thinks it best that you stay at Malik's. She has not been well with her nerves and she needs to be alone. She loves you very much but she would not be able to care for you."

Sara held the burning torch in her hands as she stood before the van. The crowd of gypsies, locals, police and the parish priest had all come to say good-bye and the fire engine was parked nearby, at a polite distance rather than intruding – a concession by the authorities to a popular local woman. They had thought about banning the burning, but after advice they understood that a riot would be harder to deal with than the burning of an old wooden van.

They had insisted first on inspecting the van for substances that may give off toxic fumes. They had been very conscious of the many pairs of hostile eyes watching them as they desecrated the final resting place of the old woman.

Sara held the torch up high, and with the priest, walked to the doorway of the van, which had been filled with straw, and paraffin soaked rags. She threw in the torch and jumped back, watching her only security vanish in to the fire. The priest knelt in the dirt and began reciting Grandmother's favorite prayer. Sara and the other gypsies knelt in the dirt and joined in the recitation of the Blessed Mother; *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus. Sancta Maria, Mater dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen*

The priest then stood and sprinkled holy water over the fire. He held his arms aloft and in a loud voice cried out: "Eternal rest give unto her O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her, may she rest in peace. Amen."

The assembled company echoed the Amen and crossed themselves. As the priest withdrew, the gypsies, one by one, approached the fire. They each in turn whispered their own message and prayer to Grandmother Fatima into their cupped hands before sprinkling the spoken words from their hands onto the fire.

Sara felt a light touch on her shoulder and was thankful for uncle Vinni being beside her at this horrible moment. She turned to ask him something and stopped in mid sentence when she realized nobody stood with her. Vinni was over one hundred yards away placing a stone on the growing pile of remembrance markers that were stacking up by the site entrance. Sara could still feel the hand on her shoulder and she placed her own hand there. "Thank you, whoever you are. I know you are not Grandmother but I appreciate you being here, please don't leave me yet."

The hand stayed with her as she slowly got into the car that Malik had steered her to. As they drove slowly down the street she turned to look out of the back window for one last

glimpse. The outline of uncle Vinni and the diminishing orange flames were a sight she would never forget.

Sara sought refuge in the temple. Her uncertainty for the future and her fear of being alone ate into her. Only here could she find peace. The temple priest had seen her fear and asked her to follow him, saying that he wanted to show her something special. She followed him down a corridor she had not noticed before and when they got to the end, he paused before opening a door. The door had a large daub of red paint on it and a strange symbol flashed through the red.

As they entered the room, Sara had to struggle to see in the dim light. They stood in a small temple room with a figure at the far end that Sara could only see vaguely through the mist of incense and the low candlelight. Her legs carried her instinctively towards the figure, drawn by some deep inner urge that she could not express. She found herself at the feet of a Goddess with many arms and staring eyes. Blood dripped from her lips and her hands held swords, knives, and many other things that Sara did not recognize. Sara knew this Goddess, she did not know where from, but she knew her.

She instinctively fell to her knees and touched the feet of the statue, bowing her head as her heart soared. She felt as if she had come home, at last, and yet none of what she was feeling made any sense. The priest hung back and observed without comment. He knew that he had been right; her reaction confirmed everything that he had suspected. He had never seen such a reincarnation within the white races. But he was sure this was a priestess of the dark mother from the old times, the times before the priesthood stole the power from the women and destroyed it.

Sara closed her eyes and tried to talk to the Goddess as she had spoken to Ganesh, the elephant God. At first Sara's mind was a blank. Then, as if far in the distance, she heard a voice like the galloping hooves of horses.

Sara, child of Azal who was the first woman, marked throughout time as my beloved. I have been with you always. My hand rests on your shoulder as your heart rests at my feet. Serve me always, this I demand of you. Give to me your life and I will flow through you.

Sara found it curious that the Goddess knew about one of her angels, Azal. Deep down inside she knew that this Goddess felt the same as St. Sara. Even though she looked frightening, Sara knew this Goddess would always be with her, protecting her.

Her lips moved silently as she promised to serve this strange Goddess, even though she did not know what that would entail. She knew she had to trust the voice that had risen from the depths of her being and demanded to be heard. Her body told her she had found her way home, so she would make her home at the feet of this Goddess.

The priest demanded that Sara tell no one of the secret temple room, and in return she could have a key to return here whenever she wanted. Sara promised faithfully on her Grandmothers soul that she would not breath a word to anyone. She placed the key on a length of string and wore it around her neck so that it lay close to her heart.

CHAPTER THREE

A FEW YEARS LATER

Sara chewed her nails absently and jumped when Mumtaz knocked her hand from her mouth. Her voice pierced through Sara's daydream. "How can we make you beautiful if you chew your hands? Keep still and put your hands on your lap, it has taken you so long to grow your nails and now you destroy them, crazy girl."

Sara looked up and smiled as Aunti Mumtaz twisted Sara's hair around the rags and pinned them to the top of her head. She looked at herself in the mirror and could hardly believe what was about to happen to her. It had been so exciting when the event was fixed, but now she had cold feet and began to panic.

"What if I'm making a mistake, what if it goes wrong, what if they all hate me. What will I do?" Mumtaz sat down on the bed before Sara and removed the bundle of pins from her mouth. She looked at the young girl with deep love in her eyes, remembering the frightened gypsy child she had taken in on the night of her Grandmother's death. This poised and beautiful young woman now sitting before her bore little resemblance to the straggly girl who had once driven her to despair.

It had taken Sara a long time to adjust to living in a Muslim household and at times, Mumtaz had worried that Sara would never understand their ways. But Mumtaz and her husband Malik had promised to take care of Sara if anything had happened to her Grandmother, and they were both determined to keep that promise.

She placed her hand on Sara's head to steady her. "They will love you, as I love you. And don't forget, Nargis is already living in Pakistan, in Kotli with her husband and she

will visit you from time to time. You will love Pakistan and your husband will adore you. You are the most beautiful thing he will have set eyes on.”

Sara tried to remember what he looked like. She had met Zakir, Mumtaz’s cousin and her husband to be, at a wedding six years ago. She and Nargis, Mumtaz’s eldest daughter who was two years older than Sara, had spent the whole afternoon of the wedding giggling and smiling at the handsome Zakir. He had returned the furtive looks and both girls were instantly in love with him. Nargis had argued that because Sara was only ten, he must have been looking at her because she was a rather mature twelve.

But now, Sara was finding it hard to retrieve any memory of him other than his dashing blue suit. The photographs of Zakir looked very handsome and his voice on the telephone was deep and sensuous. She wanted to fall in love. She wanted to be loved. And she wanted to be her own person at last, rather than being the orphan.

Mumtaz and Malik had been wonderful parents to her, and they had sacrificed much to prevent her being taken into foster care. But she longed for her own place, her own sense of who she was. Maybe this marriage would give her that.

She had no one left of her own blood to turn to. Papa Vinni, the gypsy tribe Papa, had died within a year of Grandmother. Her mother had committed suicide, her father was in prison and as Mumtaz had pointed out to her, Sara did not have much going for her. No one in the white community wanted her because she was gypsy. Most people within the Asian community would consider her high risk because she had no family stability.

Zakir had asked for her and inquiries had been made as to the possibility of a match. She had blanched at the idea of moving to Pakistan but at the same time, something about the place pulled her strongly. Zakir had a good job and lots of interests. Sara convinced herself that this was the right thing to do.

Her mind ached as she sat through the Wednesday night women's Mendhi celebration with the women singing while her Aunti decorating Sara's hands and feet with henna. Aunti had hidden Zakir's name in the intricate patterns on Sara's hands and she had thought that was great fun.

The women's singing seemed to go on forever and Sara wanted to crawl into bed. She was so tired from the rounds of dress fittings, shopping and visits from half of the city. Zakir had flown over from Pakistan for the ceremony. When it was all over, they would both return to Pakistan the Monday after the wedding.

She had always loved the women's Mendhi nights, the pre-wedding women's celebration, with the stories, singing and eating. But now she could feel nothing, not even panic. She thought about her Grandmother who had raised her and wondered what she would say. Grandmother had come from a Muslim line and would have preferred this sort of marriage to one with an English boy. She had always said that the English men were only good for emptying garbage cans. "Full of rubbish," she used to say.

Sara smiled as she felt the hand on her shoulder, the hand that had been with her since her Grandmother's funeral. She knew it was not Grandmother, but she was happy it was there.

The following day, after much arguing and shouting, she was allowed out to go and visit the Indian temple one last time. Mumtaz had made Sara dress in European clothes and wear a hat so that no one would recognize her going into a Hindu temple so close to a Muslim wedding ceremony.

Her future husband did not know that she had been visiting the Indian temple since she was a little girl and Malik did not want Zakir to find out. As her feet followed the same path she had walked since she was eight, she thought about her first meeting with the Hindu priest.

It had been the night of a Diwali bonfire that the local gypsies had attended along with Malik's family. He had approached her, placing his hand on her head while asking her name. As her Grandmother told the priest the child's name, he slipped a strange medallion around Sara's neck.

The priest had acted strangely, looking intently into Sara's eyes and nodding his head as if hearing some far away voice. Before he left the fire, he requested that Sara join the Hindu children in their weekend activities at the temple. Grandmother agreed.

Now, years later as a young woman of sixteen, she sneaked through the same temple street door and tiptoed up the stairs. She changed in to a silk sari that had been given to her many years ago and adjusted her hair into a pile on top of her head. Her hands fingered the medallion for a moment; she had never taken it off since the day it was placed around her neck. It now lay hidden in a silk pouch so as not to offend her Muslim husband to be.

She knew that she was not supposed to dance in the temple itself; such practices had stopped many years ago. The only dance that happened these days was the classes in Bharata Natyam that were held every evening in the community hall. Sara had attended every week since her childhood and the structured movement had given balm to her soul when her beloved Grandmother died.

Malik had allowed Sara to continue the classes as long as she was discreet. But today, she knew she had to dance in the temple before she left, regardless of what the consequences might be.

She looked around quickly to ensure that the temple was empty before walking softly into the room and shutting the double doors. She stood before the statue of Ganesh, the Elephant God, stamped her feet and bent to the ground, touching her hand to the floor and then to her head in an act of worship. Her body settled into a stance with her legs firmly turned out and her arms in position.

The music and chants drifted through her mind as she wove the ancient patterns of invocation, awakening the God power and asking him to be with her. Her body twisted and turned with the inner rhythms that punctured her mind, holding the sacred positions with her body and the mudrahs with her hands.

As she came to an end with her hands closed in prayer before the God, she whispered to him, from deep within herself. ‘Please be with me. Please guide me and protect me, for I am frightened. I will adore you wherever I am.’ She bowed deeply and drew out a gift from a pouch around her waist. It was a small gold ring that had been her mothers. It was the most precious thing she had.

“Lord Ganesh, I know how much you love gold and jewels. This is the only real jewel I have, and I want you to have it. Please don’t forget me.” She placed it at the feet of the God and bowed before leaving the room.

She walked down the corridor, drawing out a key as she went. She tried to walk quietly but the bells around her ankles insisted that they tell the whole world of her presence. She unlocked a hidden shrine door and slipped into a dark room, searching for comfort in the familiar candlelight and incense. She put her hands together in prayer over her head before bowing to kiss the feet of the Goddess.

She fought back the tears that pushed their way to her eyes, demanding that she weep. This was her home, and this was going to be the hardest thing to let go of. She gave way and wept openly at the Mothers feet. At first she did not hear the voice that seeped into her mind.

Child, I am with you always. I am everywhere. I am all creation. I am all death. I will flow through you as I cleanse the world and all will finally hear my song. Go out into the world, beloved of Kali, and prepare for what is to come.

Sara did not understand what the Goddess was telling her; all she knew was that she never wanted to leave this place. She could hardly remember her mother, and the image of her Grandmother had also faded over the years. But here, in the stillness and the candlelight, the image of the Goddess Kali had been her anchor.

She stood and began to dance for the Goddess in a last parting gift of worship. She danced the strict, powerful and controlled dance that she had learned from Indra, her dance teacher. But from deep within her, something else was demanding to be released.

As she became immersed in the dance, it became looser and wilder. She pulled away from the traditional mode of dance and found herself moving wildly, her long hair falling loose and swirling around her. She turned and turned, her hair whipping around her as her body convulsed from strain of the energy flowing through her.

Her movements became faster and wilder until she felt something grab and hold her. She opened her eyes, finding herself in the arms of the priest who was trying to calm her.

“Beti, daughter... Kali Ma, I send your daughter out into the world.”

His shout punctured the whirling chaos of vision and power that had gripped Sara’s mind; she stared through him as though her sight reached out into the future. He smeared a red mark on her head and laid her down at the feet of the Goddess. He began to chant as Sara curled into a ball, trying to shut out all that lay before her.

At the Nikkah, the wedding ceremony, all held their breath when the Moulvi asked Sara if she gave permission for the marriage, if she would accept the bridegroom. At first Sara did not answer, but seemed to be deep in thought. Mumtaz squeezed her hand and whispered to her. The Moulvi told Mumtaz to be quiet and to leave the girl alone.

Finally, Sara nodded her head and confirmed that she accepted the marriage. Her words could barely be heard though the thick red veil that covered her face. Her hands clenched

under the weight of the gold on her hands and her ornate glass bangles clinked as they hit one another.

Once the Moulvi had left the room, Mumtaz lifted Sara's veil to see if she was okay. Sara's face was red from crying, and the gold ring in her nose with its decorative chain to her ear stood out against the heavy make up. She blinked at Mumtaz, signaling her fear and Mumtaz smiled, patting her gently.

Sara knew that she was supposed to look sad at her wedding, it was tradition. But Sara did not have to fake it. She was leaving her family, her home and her friends to go to a strange country. Her heart was heavy as she breathed through the silk and hoped for the future. "It will be over soon, not long now." Mumtaz's voice filtered through Sara's brain and soothed her gently.

She was led out down the corridor and into a main hall. Women on either side of her supported her as they led her up to the platform and sat her down beside her husband on the throne that was waiting for her.

His face was masked with a cascade of blossoms and Sara strained to sneak a look though her veil. Half way through the celebrations, the groom lifted off his hat of blossoms and Sara's veil was repositioned around her face. Mumtaz held a mirror to the couple in the traditional way so that they could view each other. Sara lingered on his face; he was so handsome, she thought.

She had not had any real experience with boys. Her school was all girls and she had not been allowed to date boys like the white girls did. The only boys she came into contact with were in the family or the boys on her street.

She had turned sixteen and was preparing with the rest of her class to go into the advanced level classes. She had not given any thought to marriage but when the idea was put forward to her, she accepted without quite knowing why. She belonged at last, and

she wanted to carry on belonging. There were many girls within her class who were preparing for marriage and it felt good to be one of them.

She blushed at the people who came up to wish them both good luck and place money at their feet. Her husband reached beneath her silk veil to clasp her hand in friendship. His hand was soft and warm, and the confident grip eased Sara's panic.

She was beginning to tire when the women brought in the doodh pillai, the ritual glass of sweet milk, to the groom. He took a sip and then held the glass up to Sara's lips for her to sip. The warmth and sweetness refreshed her, she wanted to grab the glass and drink the lot. But instead, her lips took only a drop before she lowered her head.

Part of her wanted to get up, jump around and chat, but Sara pushed that part of her deep down where it could not get her into trouble. It had faded over the years to just a whisper that arose on occasions like this. It had not taken long for the wild Sara of old to be hidden away in a cupboard and the quiet, demure Sara of Pakistan to emerge.

Finally the women came to lead her away for the Rukhsati, the crying of the bride as she leaves her family. And Sara did cry. She cried her heart out. She did not want to leave Mumtaz; she wanted to take her with her to Pakistan.

That night, Mumtaz slept on the floor beside Sara in her old bedroom that she had shared with Nargis. Zakir, on the request of his parents, had postponed the wedding night until he was in his hometown of Dudial in Pakistan. It was an unusual request and Zakir had been hard pushed to agree. His parents wanted at least some of the real wedding to be conducted on home soil and they secretly wanted their grandson conceived on Dudial land.

The following morning, Mumtaz held the family Qu'ran over Sara's head as she walked to the car that would take them to the airport. The family holy book was less ornate than the one that had been given to Sara by Malik along with the prayer mat.

Sara had converted to Islam four years before but her own religious roots were too deeply embedded for them to be put to one side. She secretly whispered good-bye to Our Lady and to the Goddess as her feet left the soil of Bradford and entered the car.

It did not sink into her that day, nor when she stood in the airport-waiting lounge trying hard not to cry. There was no one of her own blood to see her off. No one to say 'good journey' to her. Her hand habitually went to her medallion that was hidden deep beneath her clothing. Knowledge that it was there gave her strength and courage.

She looked around the sea of faces and realized that although she recognized nearly everyone there, she did not actually know any one. Not really know them. There was no one she could share secrets with or rely on in terrible times. At least in Pakistan there would be Nargis, her foster sister and dearest friend.

Thinking of Nargis helped Sara to relax a little and enjoy the adventure of Manchester airport. She had never been to an airport before and its grandeur made her feel particularly backward. Yes, she thought as she looked around, there would be many new experiences ahead of her. She sat quietly watching families come and go as they excitedly boarded planes for their holidays.

Everyone was circling around her husband. Everyone chatted at once, with the older women screaming at the tops of their voices to be heard. Sara watched as everyone took turns to hug Zakir and shake his hand. No one talked to Sara; no one shook her hand. Only one of the littlest children came and sat beside her. The little girl's wide eyes gazed in to Sara's and what Sara saw made her afraid.

She bolted for the bathrooms, put down the toilet seat and sat with her head in her hands. Did she really want to do this? Was it already too late? She was still a virgin; the marriage had not been consummated, so by British law she could back out.

She had been careful to repel the advances of the boys in her street. To lose her virginity out of marriage would have been as great a sin in Gypsy terms as it would have been in Muslim terms.

But the family was a different thing. To bolt from the marriage now would bring great shame on Mumtaz and her family. It was Mumtaz who had pushed for the wedding and she would take the brunt of the storm that would follow. Sara would lose her home and what family she had.

She turned around, lifted the toilet lid, and vomited. She ejected all her foreboding with her breakfast, leaving an emptiness that seemed to grow within her. She knew that it would not work. And yet, deep inside her, she knew she had to go. Not for the marriage, but for something else.

Maybe it would not be bad; maybe it would be wonderful. She cleaned herself up and returned to the gate lounge sucking mints to cover the vomit on her breath. She had rearranged the beautiful outfit she was wearing, checking the delicate cream silk for vomit splashes. Despite the mountains of wedding gold and embroidered silk she was wearing, she felt worn and shabby. She needed to brighten herself up if she was going to be presentable when she reached Pakistan.

Concentrating hard, she forced herself into daydreaming that her husband would sweep her over the threshold of their exotic country house and he would lay her on a bed scattered with rose petals and scented with sandalwood. He would slowly seduce her and worship her as a goddess and she would live a life of comfort and serenity under the blazing sun and towering mountains.

At least she liked the heat. She had hated the cold all her life and the thought of finally getting out of Bradford and moving to somewhere hot and exotic had been the final thing that had pushed her towards agreeing to the marriage. She had loved growing up with Mumtaz and Malik, they had been kind and patient with her, allowing her to learn from

mistakes. They had gently guided her, and Malik had not lost his temper with her too often. It had been hard for Sara in the first year, but gradually she had adjusted.

And now, she was to have a husband of her own. As Mumtaz had said, love comes later, first comes respect and friendship, so she did not really expect to fall in love, not really. She looked over to her husband who was talking to a group of young men. She lingered over his muscular body and hard jaw, yes, she thought, he is handsome. He was ten years older than she was, which was a relief to Sara. She wanted someone who was strong and able to help her in her new home, rather than a boy whom she would have to mother.

Zakir stopped talking and looked over at Sara, as though he picked up her thoughts. His eyes traveled over her body and she knew that he was desperate to get her into bed. She blushed at the thought and was relieved that she had been given some extra time before she was to be led off to the wedding bed.

Sara was not sure what she had been expecting, but Islamabad airport was certainly not it. The customs staff was rude and aggressive with her, pulling things out of her bags and making lewd comments about her. She pulled her veil closer around her, thankful that it was there to hide her embarrassment. She finally realized why women wore them. They were not law in Pakistan, as most westerners thought, but families favored them as a protection from the burning sun and from the invasive eyes of the men.

She was pushed and shoved in all directions until she felt the touch of her husband's hand on her arm. Thankfully she allowed him to steer her towards the door and a waiting car. Four cars were lined up ready for them and the family entourage that had traveled with them. She was introduced to more faces before being bundled into the back of a car and whisked off.

The city sat in total darkness and Sara tried in vain to get some sort of impression of her new home. She had been told that they would stay in the city for a night or two before traveling on to the town where they would both live.

She was deeply asleep when Zakir nudged her awake. A woman peered into the car window and Sara jumped as the eyes came level with hers. The face smiled and the woman opened the car door. Her voice carried a perfectly clipped English accent, “Welcome to my homeland. May it be your homeland and may Allah bless you with many strong sons.”

Sara blinked and almost fell out of the car. Her body ached as she stood trying to wake herself up. She smiled weakly at the woman. The woman smiled back and held her hand out to Sara. “I am Zakir’s aunt and you will stay with me for a day before you vanish into the wilds.”

She hugged Sara strongly and then went around to the other side of the car to hug Zakir. The woman waved her hand absently, motioning for a servant to pick up Sara’s bag as she marched into the house. Sara began to follow and spun around when the car sped off leaving her alone.

She stood, stunned, looking at the car as it sped down the long tree lined driveway and vanished around a corner. A guard holding a machine gun emerged out of the shadows and motioned for her to go in. “I thought, but where, where is my husband going?”

The question was directed more at the universe than at the woman stood on the threshold of the house and Sara was not sure if she wanted a reply. “Oh, I forget the love of newly wed brides. He will go to his uncle’s house to make peace and talk. It has caused a bit of a stir, your marriage, because Zakir’s uncle wanted Zakir to marry his wife’s niece. Chacha Jaani, Zakir’s uncle, is very important to Zakir, so they need to talk. Then he will join you in a day or two. Relax, enjoy your freedom.” The woman smiled at Sara but there was an edge of bitterness to her voice that left Sara feeling uncomfortable.

The house was nothing short of palatial and Sara whistled as she walked through the spacious and luxurious hallway. She was shown to her room, which was large and

comfortable with a huge four-poster bed. The bathroom, which was off to one side, glittered with gold taps and shining rails. “I know you will have a large dowry with you but there are certain things you will need to get before you leave the city. We will go shopping tomorrow. Are you hungry? There is lots of food cooked and ready if you are.”

Sara shook her head. She still felt sick from the airplane food and from fear.

“No, thank you Aunti. If you don’t mind, if you don’t think I’m too rude, I’d like to go to bed. I do not feel too good and I think sleep would put me back on my feet. Thank you so much for your kind hospitality.” Aunti hugged her again, “Goodnight and may Allah bless you.”

Sara smiled and attempted her first Urdu words in Pakistan, “Khuda hafaiz.”

The Aunti’s face broke in to a wide smile. “Your Urdu sounds good, we must practice over the next two days.”

As she closed the door, Sara sat on the bed. Still it did not sink in. This is just a dream, she said to herself, just a dream. Only, was it a good dream, or a bad dream?

Sara was amazed by the shopping center the following day. She had not expected such wonderful buildings and high-class shops. She had formed a picture of Pakistan as some sort of remote backwards third world country but what lay before her was a sophisticated and extremely expensive shopping mall.

Each store window displayed a profusion of exotic and not so exotic wares. Sara lingered over the carpet shop, which had display after display of intricately woven silk rugs, cushions and hangings. The next window she looked in was draped in beautiful hand embroidered silk clothing. Her Aunti pointed to another store, a jewelers, whose selection of gems astounded Sara. One gem was an amazing smooth ruby with the inscription ‘Allah’, carved delicately across it.

The scents that drifted around the mall awoke Sara and made her feel beautifully exotic. Sandalwood, frankincense, amber and rose drifted around her, perfuming the cream silk dowry suit that she wore. She reached down and smoothed the heavily embroidered outfit that she was wearing, hoping that the perfumes would penetrate the silk and stay there forever.

She felt over dressed as she watched the other women who paused to look in shop windows or who sat watching the world go by as they sipped their tea. Most women seemed to be dressed in comfortable but smart cottons.

One young woman marched past her holding a briefcase and Sara looked at her in amazement. She wore a Shalwar Kameez, the Punjabi shirtdress and trousers. It was made of cotton, and cut with such flair that it swirled around her in an elegant flow. It was a plain dark gray with a fine muted pinstripe through it. The overall effect, with her gently rolled hair, was an image of smart intelligent power.

Sara was not expecting any of this. She had expected ladies fluttering in silk confections with their chaperones in tow. She had expected Turkish markets with chickens and Ali Baba type sales men. She had watched the travel programs on Egypt and that was what she had expected.

She asked her new Aunti about the women that she had seen working. Her Aunti looked at her in surprise, “This is not Saudi Arabia you know, lots of women work here and probably lead better lives than your friends in England.”

She smiled at Sara and hoped that she would have a good life here. She had followed Sara’s life with interest since Mumtaz took in the child all those years ago. She had never heard of gypsies before but had been told that they were similar to the Powindah, the nomads of Pakistan.

She had raised an eyebrow when Sara had been matched to Zakir, son of her husband's brother and Mumtaz's cousin. Her husband's family was quite fussy about the women who were brought into the family but apparently Zakir had demanded Sara ever since he first saw her at a wedding in England. She had only been about ten or eleven and Zakir was twenty.

Aunti watched Sara twirling the spoon in her coffee cup as they sat in Pappasalli's, the in pizza place to be that was nestled in the corner of the fashionable Jinnah market.

"So, Sara, is Pakistan what you expected?" Aunti asked.

Sara shook her head and laughed. She started to tell Aunti about what she had expected and Aunti fought hard to keep her face straight. Finally she started laughing.

"It's amazing how people get things into their heads. When I was first invited to England for a visit, I was about your age. I had expected palaces, sophistication, green fields... you know... the whole pretty picture. Well, we landed in London, which was the smokiest, dirtiest place I had ever seen."

"We traveled to Manchester which was even worse and then on to Bradford. I was astounded at the poverty, the dirt and ...the smelly people. English people smelled really bad. I must say, I was relieved to find that you were not like that. That image, or should I say, the smell, from all those years ago had really stuck with me."

Sara nodded vigorously. "Yes, English people do smell. They only bathe once a week. When I was a little girl I used to hold my nose in class because of the smell. Gypsies bathe twice a day at least. My Grandmother would not come to school plays because she could not stand the idea of sitting with all those unwashed bottoms." Aunti laughed and waved to the waiter who was holding a large pizza destined for them.

Soon, Sara was deep into the best pizza she had ever tasted. It stuck to all sides of her stomach and sent messages of extreme comfort to her brain. When her stomach was suitably full, Sara sat back, watching the women and their daughters walk by on their

shopping expeditions. She watched them in the restaurant, chatting, laughing and eating pizza.

Everything seemed so relaxed, so unlike what she had envisioned. She had been warned by girls of her own age in the Muslim community in Bradford that the girls in the city were given plenty of freedom, but that there were some old fashioned elements still in society. She liked the close knit community with its rules and security. It made her feel safe. Soon she would be in her own home, and she would be able to create her own little palace for her and her husband to live in.

They collected their bags of shopping and bundled them in to the car. Aunti had spent a lot of money in the boutique ‘Art and Style’ in the Jinnah market, buying this and that for Sara.

“You have lots of silk and gold, but that will be no good for you on a day to day basis. What you need is comfortable simple daily clothes.” Aunti held up one suit after another for Sara to approve of.

Sara had been embarrassed at the amount of money that had been spent on her and she searched for the proper words of thanks, but could find nothing in her head that would do justice to the bags of clothes that they had come away with.

The car wove through the outskirts of the city, driving through streets lined with Bougainvillea, Hibiscus and Jasmine. It was March and the brief spring warmth had brought the land into its yearly explosion of color and fragrance before the coming of the searing heat.

The city had a beauty and style that she had not expected; compared to dirty smoky Bradford this place was heaven. She loved it. She loved the smell of cooking spices, the heat that warmed and caressed her body, and the strangeness.

Here she was, Sara Zakir. She was dressed like a queen, in a city fit for emperors. A year she would never forget. It all seemed so familiar and yet so far away in her memory that she could not quite reach it.

There was no doubt in her mind that she would be happy here. Sara never did fit in England, even as a small child. Grandmother had said it was because she had too much of the desert in her to be happy in such a terribly dark and cold place as England. Here, in Pakistan, the people actually looked alive.

Later, back in her room, Sara unpacked her suitcase in an attempt to fit in her purchases from the days shopping expedition. Aunti knocked on her door and came in with a trunk. "I thought you might need this."

Sara beamed as she sat on the bed surrounded by her dowry clothes from England plus the things that she had smuggled past Mumtaz and the other women. She had been told to leave everything behind and take nothing of her old life with her. The dowry was supposed to provide for everything that she would need in her new life.

But Sara could not do that. There were certain things from her past life that she did not want to forget. She wanted her children to know their roots, to know about her Grandmother. She tried to hide some of the things but her Aunti stopped her. "Don't worry about me, I think it is good that you brought part of who you are with you, you will need it. You will also need this."

She handed Sara a large envelope. Sara opened it and looked back to her Aunti in shock. "There must be thousands of rupees in here, I don't understand," Said Sara.

The Aunti sat on the bed with Sara and took her hand.

"Hide this from Zakir and everyone else. You may need it someday and they will take it from you if they find it. Gypsies are not the only ones who look to the future."

Sara did not quite understand what Aunti meant. She hugged the older woman and whispered thank you. On impulse, she pulled out the bedcover that Grandmother had made for her when she was a child and pressed it into the Aunti's hands. "I feel that you should have this, be guardian to it. It was made by my Grandmother and it is a part of who she was."

Sara had a feeling of foreboding. The hand on her shoulder had vanished along with her family. As soon as the plane flew out of England, she had felt many things fall away from her and she felt terribly alone.

"Have you converted to Islam? I forgot to ask Mumtaz when I spoke to her," asked Aunti. Sara nodded. She told Aunti that Grandmother had been born a Muslim but raised a Catholic. She pulled out an old photograph that had been taken of Grandmother when Sara was a little girl.

Her fingers traced the glass, running her hands over her Grandmother's face, trying to imagine that she could feel the deep creases in the old woman's skin. Grandmother had held Islam in one hand, and Christianity in the other. They never conflicted within the old woman and Sara had always grown up to love God, no matter what name people used.

When she had read the holy Qu'ran in school it had entranced her with its simplicity and clarity. At first, she had struggled hard with the learning of Arabic, and she had despaired of ever mastering the language. But the teacher had been patient with the strange child that she had been handed.

Over the years Sara slowly began to unravel first the language and then the holy words of the sacred book. Sara had felt the power of the words as she had recited them and a peace descend upon her that had given her the strength to go on through her troubled childhood and early teens.

At night sometimes, when the pain and loneliness of her loss was at its greatest, she would wash her body, clean her teeth and clothe herself in a simple clean shalwar kameez. She would drape a white dupputta, a veil, over her head and would place her prayer mat to face east. Slowly, seated cross-legged before the small wooden stand that held the exquisitely calligraphy book given to her by Malik, she would begin the recitation of the first Surah of the Holy Qu'ran.

Her body would rock back and forth in rhythm as the words left her lips and she would continue entranced through the night until the first light dawned. At the end of the full recitation, she would ask Allah to dedicate her prayer to the souls of her family. The recitation through the night filled her with a deepening peace and focus. Her body would ache and be totally exhausted but the gaping wound in her heart would have been closed, temporarily.

She did not find it a conflict to talk to the Goddess at the temple, nor to go to mass at the church. She had been raised by Grandmother to see God as God, no matter what clothes God was wearing and that God was not male, nor female - just God. She knew better than to share this with anyone.

Her roots bore deep inside her, and even though she had developed a love for Islam, her blood could not be washed away. No one at home had known that she went in to the temple for anything other than dance class and they regarded her visits to the church as part of the facade for the social services so that they would not take her away from the family.

CHAPTER FOUR

That night Sara dreamed wild dreams. She dreamed that she was walking through a desert and an angel started to walk alongside her. They talked for a while before Sara realized that the angel was not one of the ones painted on the local church walls. She asked the angel who he was and the angel stopped and looked at Sara. He placed his hands across her eyes and told her to look through his hands.

I am the angel of the earth upon which you walk. I am the skin across the soil, the grains of sand in the desert; I am he who lays between the stars and the underworld. I am around and within you. I am completion.

They found themselves at the gates of a large fortified city. The angel began to sing and the gates opened to reveal a modern city full of cars and people. The angel guided Sara down a street, passing through the cars, stalls, and buildings until they came to a gigantic wall. Sara watched people praying at the wall and finally, she recognized where they were. "Is this the wailing wall of Jerusalem?" she asked the angel, but he did not reply.

They passed through the wall and Sara briefly felt the agonies and fears of many people as they passed through the stone. She heard millions of whispers, which she recognized as prayers; even though she did not speak the language, she understood what was being whispered. She wanted to cry from all the appeals that reached out to touch her.

They passed through the wall and emerged in a magnificent temple with columns that seemed to reach to the stars. Each wall had a singlewide bookcase filled with many scrolls and tablets that stretched high up to the roof. Sara stood in awe until the angel distracted her and urged her forward.

Before her stood a square frame that was suspended from the roof and from it hung linen veils that had been torn. The angel wept as he held the linen and he asked Sara to repair it. Sara did not know what to do and handled the linen in panic. The angel put his hands to her shoulders and calmed her.

You know what must be done. It is deep within you and only a human can restore the holy of holies. So it is written in the hand of angels and whispered upon the twelve winds.

Sara closed her eyes and called on the Goddess to be with her. Warmth spread within her until it became a fire. Her mind turned inward, reaching deep within herself; she found herself pulling out a length of cloth, like a spider creating a web. As it came out she hung it on the frame and the angel secured it. She worked her way around the four sides until the veils were replaced and a sanctuary had been woven. Stepping back, she looked at the square tent that she had made.

Now you must restore the inside. Go in and right what has been wronged.

Sara stepped into the tent and saw a wooden stand that had been knocked over. On the floor was an oil lamp that had spilled. She picked up the wooden stand and placed it in the center. Before she could reach for the oil lamp, a creature that she had not noticed hiding in the corner knocked the stand over again. She turned and looked at the creature, which was a thin small man with the scales of a lizard.

Her brow furrowed as she tried to understand why he did that. She reached out to pick up the stand. He knocked it over again. “Why did you do that?” asked Sara. The being stopped and looked at her. *Because that is what I do.*

Sara thought for a moment. She wondered what Grandmother would do in such a situation: an idea dawned on her. “Do you know they have been asking for you, out there,” said Sara. She waved her hand and imagined the landscape of the moon.

“There are many things for you to knock over there and they really need you. I can help you get there if you wish.” Her voice stayed calm and steady. The Being nodded enthusiastically.

For a long time people had tried to destroy him, which had only made him stronger. Here was someone who wanted to help him. He was more than happy to oblige. Sara saw the surface of the moon with her imagination and the being leapt towards the vision and vanished. Sara slumped with the effort and the angel withdrew his hand from her shoulder before she noticed that it had been there.

She straightened up the stand and lit the oil lamp using the fire that was burning within her. The flame grew in intensity, its light spreading out to illuminate the temple beyond the veils. The light traveled, howling with the sound of a great wind as it shot in all directions. It lit the walls and floors, before pushing beyond the boundaries of the temple to the city beyond.

Sara could see through everything as the light traveled this way and that. She watched in amazement as everything took on a new and vital form. The angel caught hold of her hand.

You must leave this place and follow me. There is more to be done.

She followed the angel as he walked around and around the perimeter of the temple before coming to rest by a heavy set of doors that she had not noticed before. They pushed the doors open and walked into a mosque that had a large rock in the center.

Many shrill lights were focused on the rock and rails surrounded it so that no one could touch it. She pushed through the rails and laid her forehead on the rock. There was a heartbeat; Sara looked up at the angel in astonishment.

This is the breast of your mother. Honor her.

Sara stroked the rock gently and felt as if she could settle down to sleep upon this ancient outcrop of stone. The angel nudged her on and pointed to a covered doorway in the corner. Sara went to the doorway and peered down a steep stairway that twisted around in to the darkness. An Imam lay sleeping in a chair by the doorway; Sara touched his feet in respect. She tiptoed past him and vanished down the dark stairs with the angel close behind her.

At the bottom was another door and Sara put her hands to the ancient carved wood. It had the mark of a red hand and Sara instinctively placed her hand upon it. She felt the presence of a woman, a woman of great spirituality and honor. She pushed the door open after whispering to the female presence and found herself in a small cave directly under the large rock. It was damp; she could hear water running but she could not see where the sound came from.

The door slammed shut and Sara jumped with fear, reaching out for the comfort of the walls as she was plunged into darkness.

Sara, my Sara, mother of our people, child of the first creation, beloved of the Goddess. Sara who carries the seed of the future next to her heart. She who brought the universe to this place. Sara, be born. Remove thyself from the womb of your mother and go forth into the world to give death to the sons of men. Only then shall the Daughters of the Void be born. Birth their threshold. Sara, be born.

Sara drifted to some deep place within her. The sound of running water was all around her as she floated in the comfort and safety of the cave. She did not want to leave; she wanted to stay here forever, in the womb of the mother, but she knew that she must go.

Her hands instinctively pushed the door open and Sara walked out into the stairwell. She did not recognize it and the thought of ascending the stairs filled her with terror, but she knew there was no other way. She must do it. She had vowed.

Her legs weighed heavy as she ascended the stairs and Sara became increasingly aware that she carried some other female presence with her. Together they moved, step by step until she met the angel who was waiting at the top. The female presence turned within Sara and pulled away from her, whispering many words and songs as she left.

The angel touched her on the forehead and told her to take breath. She breathed in. As she exhaled, many visions passed before her. All the things that had happened in her life up to now paraded past her at high speed. She knew her life had led to this moment and yet she could not comprehend what was so important. The angel took her by the hand.

This is the womb of the Mother, the cave of Prophets, the womb from which all messengers of God must be born of. You are to carry the sorrows of the Mother to the people and pave the way for what is to come. The daughters of God are to be born soon and your actions carry them from the womb of the earth to the arms of the world. Now your work here has been done. There is one last place you must see.

Sara felt herself fall. Her body twisted around and around until she hit the sand with a thump. She stood up, finding herself in a small empty cubic building. The aged walls were covered with many small rough-cut niches. The niches were empty and Sara knew she must fill them, but she was not sure what with.

She went up to one wall and ran her hands over the niches. The angel leaned against her. Power built up within her, forcing breath from her lungs until her body screamed for oxygen. Color drained from her face, the ashen white of death dancing with the nausea that assaulted her throat. She could not inhale. The angel grabbed her by the hair and shouted in her ear.

Recite! Recite what the lord thy God commands you. Recite the words that the Prophet, may peace be upon him, brought to the world and uttered before the throne of God. Recite so that thy soul shall never forget. Recite from the depths of thy heart where the words of God are written upon the souls of men. Recite so that all worlds and all times

shall hear what we have given to those who would listen. The prophecy is fulfilled and the children of Fatima will be born. God is great. There is no other God but God, and Mohammed is his Prophet. Recite!

Sara opened her mouth and inhaled. The oxygen hit her brain, exploding a light throughout her mind that wove its way to her lips, forcing out words that she could not understand. The words took form and traveled across the surface of the room, mingling with the angel who joined in the recitation.

The word forms became shapes and settled in the niches creating a light of their own. When the niches were full, the room danced in brilliant light and Sara finally understood. “This is truly paradise,” whispered Sara as she bathed in the power and beauty that surrounded her.

They were all one power. Each word was God and she came to truly understand that God was neither male nor female but a power. That the power formed a word and the word became a form. When people worshipped the form, they could not hear the word and therefore could not find the power of God. With that understanding the angel allowed Sara to leave the room.

As she touched the door, it moved and breathed causing Sara to step back in fear. The angel stood behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder. With a wind that came from nowhere, the door transformed into a wall of light that burned itself into Sara’s heart. The angel held out his hand and spoke to the light.

Hail Ridwan, keeper of the doors of Paradise, threshold to the Throne of God. May this mortal pass through you and still be as one being. May she leave Paradise and hold its secrets on her lips throughout eternity. This shall be her grace, for her sacrifice in life shall be terrible.

The light dimmed and the angel pushed Sara towards a thickly studded door decorated with many carvings. She stepped out into the center of a huge courtyard that surrounded the building. Thousands of people dressed in white were walking anti clockwise around the building that was covered in a huge embroidered cloth. As she looked up at the colossal drape, she saw the words of God imprinted upon the cloth. It was then she realized she was in the holy shrine of Mecca.

She panicked; she should not be there. She turned to the angel in fear. “What am I doing here? I should not be here disturbing the prayers of these people.” Silently, the angel turned and looked at the people. At first she could not see what he was looking at. He placed his hand on her shoulder, triggering the sight of angels within her human mind.

As the people walked, they prayed. Their prayers, their words, took form above them and joined together. The joining of the forms created a pattern and through the pattern stepped many beautiful and shining beings. They spread out, creating doorways down into the earth and up into the stars. Through these doorways walked people, some going from below the earth and reaching up to ascend to the stars. And some came down from the stars to descend into the underworld. They stopped briefly on the earth’s surface to listen to the prayers of the people and they smiled, reaching out to touch the faithful as they walked around the sacred sanctuary of Ka’bah.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sara awoke with a sudden jolt. The hammering on the bedroom door disorientated her for a moment; she could not work out where she was or even who she was. It was not until she heard Zakir's voice that she realized where she was. She looked at the clock and bounced out of bed when she saw that it was nearly eight in the morning.

She had lost all sense of time; her inner clock had been totally thrown to the wind with the air travel. Her body struggled to shake off the cloud that seemed to fog her head from the dream. Calling out, her voice felt weak as she told Zakir that she would be ready soon.

When she finally emerged in the kitchen she could see that Zakir was angry at her for not being ready and she groaned inwardly at her failure to do anything right. Aunti smiled and handed her a steaming cup of chai. "I have made some food for you both, it is a long dusty journey and there will not be many places worth stopping at. You are lucky you came in spring. It is pleasant now but in a month or two you would not be able to adjust to such a journey without air conditioning. It will take her some time to get used to all the new things, Zakir, so look after her."

Again Aunti's voice had an edge to it that Sara could not quite understand. When it was time to go, Sara hugged Aunti and thanked her. Zakir drummed his fingers impatiently on the roof of the car.

The trip to Dudial was longer than she had imagined. Sara was painfully conscious that she was only sixteen and that he was a good ten years older. He started chatting to her, helping her relax. She watched his eyes warm as he told her about the town of his birth. He obviously loved Dudial and Sara was determined that she was going to love it too.

He told her about a dam that had been built and how the old town was submerged. The new town of Dudial would be their home. “It’s not going to be too strange, there are lots of people with Bradford accents in Dudial, so you will feel right at home,” said Zakir. Sara raised an eyebrow.

“Oh yes,” he continued, “Many people from Dudial have family members who live in Bradford. They moved there in the sixties to work in the wool mills. Many of the houses built in new Dudial were financed by funds sent here from people working in Bradford. Most people here speak English with a Yorkshire accent so don’t worry, you will be fine.”

Sara glowed at his attention. He cared about her, he *really* cared. She was more in love with him than she had been before. She studied his face, trying to familiarize herself with his handsome profile. Her hand absently drew the heavily embroidered veil further forward over her dark hair as she chewed the edges of the fabric. Everything would be fine, and she would be happy. Sara repeated that thought until it became a mantra as the car sped down the highway.

The road veered sharply at Mandra and Zakir told her that they were half way there. They stopped briefly at the Kashmir checkpoint by the Mangla dam, and Sara cast her eyes down as the soldiers peered through the car window.

When they finally arrived, Sara felt as if she had been in the car for days even though it had only been a few hours. She tried to hold his hand in the car but Zakir shook his head and nodded towards the driver. It was hard to remember not to touch Zakir in public, she had not encountered such restrictions at home in Bradford.

She fidgeted with her dupputta until she realized that the veil was becoming damaged in the corner where she had picked at it. She tried to hide the damaged part by throwing it over her shoulder but the weight of the gold embroidery caused it to swing out and catch

Zakir in the eye. She tried to apologize but finally gave up and sat in silence as they drove up to the front of the house.

It seemed to Sara that the whole world had turned out to greet her. She looked into the sea of faces and was terrified. She would not get out of the car and had to be virtually dragged out by Zakir who propelled her forward to greet his family.

His mother and father had not been able to attend the wedding in England, but now they stood on the doorstep of their house waiting to catch a glimpse of their new daughter in law. Zakir was their eldest son and there had been much fighting over his choice of bride. They had finally relented and allowed the match after lengthy discussions with Mumtaz.

They greeted the nervous girl warmly and Sara played the respectful daughter. The younger members of the family threw rose petals over the couple and the smaller children tried to peek under Sara's veil, which was draped over her head in such a way as to cover the whole of her face. She was traditionally led into the house and seated in the largest room that seemed to be bursting at the seams with women. Zakir was led off to another part of the house where all the men were waiting his arrival.

One of the excited women told Sara that tomorrow there would be a huge celebration of the marriage for the entire village to attend. Sara groaned inwardly. She just wanted to settle in quietly. She was also shocked to learn that she would not be living alone with Zakir. There were many things she had taken for granted and no one had thought to tell her any different.

She would be living, it seemed, with her parents in law, Zakir's uncle and three of his nephews from his sisters marriage. His sister and her husband had been killed in a road accident in Lahore two years ago and the family had battled with the husband's family for the guardianship of the children.

Sara heard a familiar voice through the thick veil and burst into tears when she recognized the voice of Nargis. Nargis had traveled down from Kotli, the town in the mountains where she lived with her husband and family.

Nargis took off her burqa, the heavy black veil, and hugged Sara, whispering to her that everything was going to be OK. She spoke quickly to the mother in law in a way that Sara could not understand before bundling Sara up the stairs and into her room.

She would stay here tonight, Nargis explained, until after the wedding celebration tomorrow and then she would be in her own section of the house with Zakir. They would have a bedroom and sitting room to themselves.

She gently undressed Sara, who had reached her screaming point of endurance, and tucked her into bed. Nargis gently stroked Sara's hair as the new bride quietly cried to herself. "Do you regret marrying Zakir?" asked Nargis. Sara shook her head. She sat up in bed and wiped her eyes.

"No," she answered, "I think I love him. I'm just tired. Everything I do seems wrong and I don't understand what people are saying to me. Their Urdu is not like the Urdu in Bradford, it's faster and I don't understand it. I thought we would have our own home, I didn't know I would be moving in with his family."

Nargis smiled. She spoke quietly, hoping to soothe Sara's panic. "The wife of the eldest boy always moves in with the parents. You will take over some of the housework from his mother so that the work becomes more equally shared rather than just being on the shoulders of one woman. Don't worry, you will get used to it. I will not be too far away and you can always come to visit me."

"And the language they are speaking is not Urdu, it is Mirpuri. Most people in Bradford understand Mirpuri but they speak Urdu so that their children will learn the official tongue of Pakistan. You will pick it up quickly, it is not so different. Now go to sleep and

rest, tomorrow will be a better day.” She kissed Sara on the head and tiptoed out the room.

Later, as Sara drifted in sleep, she heard Nargis shouting at Zakir downstairs. She understood enough Urdu to know that Nargis was telling him off for not looking after his new bride. Zakir told Nargis to mind her own business and Sara pulled the pillows over her head so that she could not hear the war that was raging in her name.

The following night, Sara froze in absolute terror as the women fussed around her while she sat on the bed. The ladies twitched her wedding dress this way and that to ensure it looked perfect before they sprinkled the bed with flowers and ribbons. Rose petals tumbled around Sara as she tried hard to breathe beneath the heavy red veil that had been draped over her. When all the women had scuttled out of the room giggling, Sara listened to the silence that followed.

Her hands fidgeted as she waited for the door to open and her husband to finally claim her as his wife. But nobody came. She was surprised. Zakir had been angry at the many delays that stopped him bedding his new wife. She had expected him to come rushing through the door the minute she was left alone.

Her feet began to cramp so she shifted her weight to get more comfortable. She started to chew the edges of her veil and then the tips of her scarlet nails. Her hands still had the deep markings of the henna patterns and she would challenge Zakir to find his name hidden among the flowers and peacock patterns. Her voice crept through the silence as she sang quietly to herself. Minutes ticked by, each second getting longer as she waited, her eyes fixed on the door handle. Without realizing, her eyes closed as her mind drifted, pulling her to sleep under the weight of an exhausting day.

Zakir tiptoed into the room some hour or so later and quietly shut the door. He had been listening to the lectures of the men below who were telling him how to handle what could be a difficult wife. She had not been raised as a Muslim and she would be wild. He would

have to tame her by being master from the very beginning so that she submitted to him. He looked on her as she slept. Her veil had slipped off and she had fallen asleep sucking the edges of the embroidered fabric.

She looked like a small child curled up with her dark hair, full of tiny flowers, cascading around her face. She is very beautiful, he thought to himself; he did not know if he would have the heart to bring her to heel. His new wife had not seemed difficult up to now, indeed, she had been quite shy and nervous. Uncle Malik had said that she was a good and studious girl who had lived a life of terrible hardship. Zakir had felt the stirrings of protectiveness bubble up within him.

But as he stood here, looking at the child woman sleeping before him, he realized that if he grew soft, she would become one of those awful women in the west who dominated their husbands and brought shame on the family. No, he would have to be strong.

He opened the door again and slammed it shut to wake Sara. She jumped from the noise and sat up rubbing her eyes. Her hands rubbed make up all over her face and Zakir wanted to laugh at the sight that sat before him. He checked his humor and commanded her to go and wash her face.

Sara was stunned. What had she done wrong? She fled to the bathroom and cleaned her face and hair up before walking back meekly to the bedside. He told her to strip off her clothes and Sara instinctively pulled her wedding dress closer to herself in fear. She had never stood naked before anyone, not even her Grandmother, and Nargis had told her that her husband would not challenge her modesty. It was forbidden for gypsies to show their bodies. Most women always had some covering, no matter what was happening.

“I said, strip. I am waiting to get into bed.” He shouted at her while he began to take his clothes off.

He had a long history of sleeping with women on his many trips to Europe and although men were supposed to prize virgins, he preferred a good experienced woman: virgins

were too much like hard work. He stood before her sporting a huge erection and Sara tried to find somewhere to put her eyes, anywhere but on his body. She had never seen a naked man before and the sight terrified her even more than his commands.

Finally, he lost his temper at her unmoving and shaking form. He ripped at the wedding dress, which made her cry out for him to stop. She stood and slowly undressed, being careful not to damage the beautiful dress that Mumtaz had made for her.

She paused in her underwear until Zakir indicated for her to take that off too. He touched her hair softly as she stepped out of the remaining silk that guarded her modesty. Only her medallion remained, covered in a pouch to hide it from disapproving eyes. He ignored it, assuming it was verses from the holy Qu'ran, hidden in a piece of silk.

Sara now knew that this was the greatest humiliation she could suffer; it could only get better from here, or so she thought.

He caught her hair and wrapped it around his hand, pulling tight on her scalp, making her yelp with pain. He threw her face down on to the bed before mounting her, kicking her legs aside with his knees. The pain tore through her in a way she could not have imagined.

She opened her mouth to scream but found her face pushed so hard into the pillow that she could not breathe. He held her hair in his fist and groaned at each push as Sara gasped for breath. Leaning forward, Zakir bit into her neck, leaving teeth marks along her hairline.

Sara could not cry out, she could not even breathe properly. The pain tore her apart, destroying her innocence and replacing it with hate. He paused for a moment, as though to gloat before he spun her around on to her back. He pinned her arms above her head and bit hard into her breast, drawing blood and causing her to scream in agony. He stuffed her veil into her mouth and re-entered her, lifting her off the bed with each push

until his face began to contort. He groaned loudly, tearing at her with his nails and teeth until his grip tightened around her throat. He held her as he convulsed with pleasure, squeezing the life out of her.

Zakir finally rolled off, leaving Sara to cough and gasp for air as she fell to the floor. She crawled on her hands and knees to the en suite bathroom and collapsed in the shower.

He lay on the bed looking at the ceiling. He did not like having to do this, but he knew it was important to instill fear from the beginning; his uncle had made that quite plain to him. He now understood why virgins were so prized. It had awakened something within him that he did not know existed. He had never made love that way before and it had aroused him beyond anything he could have dreamed of.

He drifted into a contented sleep. Sara vomited as she lay slumped under the trickling shower. Sobbing quietly, she scrubbed herself between her legs, as if trying to erase what had just happened. It took her an hour to pluck up the courage to go back into the bedroom and she stood looking at him as he slept. He looked like an angel, curled up among the white sheets scattered with petals. Her stomach churned as she took off her wedding ring. She held it up to her face and looked at Zakir through the ring, using only her left eye. Keeping her right eye shut, she held the ring to her lips.

“I curse you, Zakir, son of Saddiq, I curse you with the breath of the wind and the strength of the dirt on your land. I curse you Zakir, son of Saddiq, to live a short life and to die in horror with your only child looking into your eyes as you die. I curse the seed of your family. I curse the land upon which you reside and the air that you breath. I curse your hands that inflict such pain, pain that will visit you a hundred fold. May your soul be caught in the wheel of remembrance, may you never forget in death and may you never escape the wrath of the Mother.”

She whispered the curse through the ring and when she finished, she slowly put the ring back on before slipping into bed along side him.

He awoke long before Sara and sat looking at her for a while, noticing the bruises that were coming up from the night before. He wanted to take her into his arms and gently make love with her, giving her the love that burned in his heart.

He reached out to touch her and stopped, his hand hovering over her smooth skin. He grimaced, telling himself that he must not allow sentiment to cloud what must be done. They had repeatedly told him that she would be an outcast, a stranger in this land. If he was going to protect her and turn her into an honorable wife then he must go through with this, no matter how much it hurt him. He sighed, falling back onto his pillow and wishing that he had never seen her, and never fallen in love with her.

Later, just after breakfast, Sara tried to talk to Nargis before she left for Kotli. She managed to pull Nargis into a corner of the house while the men were eating. Sara tried to broach the subject of the marriage bed but Nargis did not seem to understand what Sara was driving at. She decided to be open after hints did not work. She propelled Nargis to her room and shut the door.

“Nargis, is this normal for a first night?” Sara pulled off her Kameez and turned her back on Nargis who stepped forward to touch the bruises and scratches. She collected her waist length dark hair and pulled it to one side revealing deep bite marks that had broken through the skin. Nargis turned Sara around, looking into her eyes in shock. Sara burst into tears.

Nargis tried to quieten her. “Sshh, don’t let them hear you. Sit here and tell me what has been happening. No, that is not normal. Jehangir has never laid a finger on me. What on earth possessed him to do that?” She put her arms around her friend and wondered what on earth they were going to do.

“Please don’t leave me here with him, he is an animal. Please Nargis, take me with you, don’t leave me.” Sara cried as quietly as she could. Nargis tried to calm her down. “You

cannot leave your husband. You have just got married; he will kill you if you dishonor him in such a way. I always thought that Zakir was a gentle person, I don't understand. Listen, stay calm and be submissive around him for now. Do not challenge him over anything. Give me time to think. I will also ask Jehangir to talk with him without going into too much detail. Just hang in there and see if it settles down. He might just be trying to tell you who is boss."

Nargis had to leave soon. She got up before Sara could protest and hurried down stairs. Sara dare not move from the bedroom. She stayed there until Zakir's mother came to take her downstairs. If his mother saw the bruising, she did not pass any comment. Sara already knew that he was her beloved son and he could do no wrong. If he had beaten Sara, he must have had good reason.

CHAPTER SIX

It took Sara three months to adjust to her new life and accept Dudial as her home. She had busied herself around the house and with paperwork for the family shop that they owned. They sold fabrics and threads to the local villagers. Sara worked hard to put the receipts and invoices into neat order. Her Saas, her mother in law, was pleased with the filing that Sara had done, and she slowly began to warm to her daughter in law.

Zakir had recently flown to the Middle East on business, leaving Sara with some badly needed breathing space. She spent her days cooking and watching films. The weather had been intensely hot and everything had shriveled to nothing in the garden.

Sara sat on the doorstep at the back of the house watching the chickens pecking at seed that did not exist. She threw small stones at the chickens out of boredom and jumped when her mother in law appeared behind her.

It was announced that Sara was to go to the market with the house servant, giving her a chance to take responsibility for buying the food. Sara jumped at the chance to get out of the house and bounded upstairs to get changed.

She appeared thirty minutes later much to the relief of the servant who had been waiting for her. He would guard her modesty and deal with all the shopkeepers. It was unusual for any of the women of this family to go shopping; servants usually did it all. But her mother in law had quietly understood that to cloister this child too much too quickly would be cruel. A simple shopping trip would be quite safe, she thought.

The trip to the market was uneventful until something in the distance caught Sara's eye. "What's that?" asked Sara as she pointed to the tip of a minaret in the distance.

The servant squinted to try and see in the high sunlight. “Oh, its the tip of the disused mosque in the old town. It usually lies hidden under the reservoir but with the heat we have had, the water sometimes dries up a bit and old Dudial comes out of the mud.”

Sara stood and thought for a while. “Drive me there, I want to see it,” she demanded.

The man’s face collapsed in terror, “No, no, Mem, you cannot, it is not safe, there may be people there, and the mistress would not allow it and...”

She cut him short by putting five hundred rupees in his hand. He looked at the money. He looked around and bundled her in to the car. “You tell no one, you say nothing... hai hai... hai... They beat me, they sack me, mem want to look at dirt and mud, hai hai,” his voice was full of terror.

Sara tapped him on the head, “Drive, or else...” The servant looked into the car mirror with wide eyes. He had heard rumors that she was not really a Pathan from England, which is what the Begum had told everyone. The rumors said that she was a witch, a Banjaran, a traveler. He recited his prayers under his breath and hoped that she would not cast a spell on him.

They drove towards the Mangla Jheel, the lake, and away from the houses. The car sped through the fields and farmlands until they finally parked the car and the servant told her that they would have to walk the last part of the trip.

They walked for twenty minutes before finally reaching the muddy expanse with the mosque sadly emerging from the moisture and earth. She had not realized it was so far; it had seemed so close from the town street.

Sara jumped off the grassy bank and began to walk towards the old mosque. She waded through ankle deep mud, which clung to her chador as she wrapped it around her. The wind caught the edges of the fabric and flapped them around her making her look like a demented crow.

When she reached the mosque her heart filled with sadness at such desecration. She leaned against the walls and slumped down into a squatting position. The servant puffed up behind her swearing and cursing under his breath. She commanded him to stay outside and watch. He complained heavily until she stared at him. He slunk out, cursing under his breath as he looked for a rock to perch on out of the mud.

She dropped the chador and pulled her dupputta over her head to cover her hair in respect. The chador was too heavy and too muddy for what she wanted to do.

Her hands gently touched the walls of the buildings and Sara felt the flow of prayers seeping out of the stone. They had resonated around this building for many years and the voices of the faithful could still be heard in the substance of the stone. She remembered her dream, how the angel had shown her that sacred words were true divinity and that the word became form. She touched the stone again reverently, aware that she was touching sacred substance itself.

She pulled off her shoes and fell to her knees, placing her forehead to the ground in total submission to God. Her head rested in the mud as she recited her prayers in a whisper, allowing the words to flow over the sacred soil and mingle with the words imprinted in the stone building.

She did not know how long she had been there but she became aware of a presence that she knew instinctively was not the servant. She looked up, her face, hands and body covered in mud.

Before her stood a man. By the clothes he was wearing she realized was a local Moulvi, a man of religion. She panicked, realizing that a woman alone unveiled and in such a state would bring terrible shame on her new family and especially on her husband. She was too overwhelmed to speak. Sara began to cry. The old man looked kindly on her, thinking she was a woman who had lost her mind, maybe from grief.

“Daughter, why are you here?” He spoke gently, in almost a whisper, which resounded through Sara’s heart and salved her pain. She searched for a suitable explanation, anything other than the truth, that would undoubtedly brand her as a witch, but she could find nothing to say. He saw her struggle to explain herself. He also saw, upon closer looking, that she was not mad.

“Child, to whom were you whispering?” Again he questioned her. Sara gave up the struggle. She realized she was probably dead already, so she may as well tell the truth and die with the words of God on her lips. “I was praying to Allah,” she whispered. The man stood and looked at her for a moment. “Why were you praying here, in the mud, away from your home?” His voice was soft and cultured.

Sara looked up, averting her eyes from the rudeness of looking at him directly. “I was drawn here. The mud and stone is sacred. The words of Allah are sacred. This is a house of Allah and I am one of his servants. Should I not bow my head to the sacred earth to utter my prayers?” She spoke with gentle defiance as she looked at the ground.

The man clasped his left arm with his right, hugging it to his body. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable, but his instincts told him that this encounter was important and he should be patient with this poor woman. “Come, let me take you to my wife, she will clean you up and we can talk. Your servant did not do a very good job of guarding you did he?” He nodded out of the mosque to the servant who had fallen asleep in the shade.

The man’s wife was appalled at the state of Sara as she dripped through the door. The Moulvi whispered something to his wife before turning and marching the servant back to his car. He handed the servant a note and the frightened man drove off. Sara panicked as she looked out of the window.

“Where is he going, I will get in trouble and he will be beaten,” Sara cried. The Imam’s wife soothed Sara with her gentle voice. “Hush child, my husband has sent word that we

bumped into one another and that you are to be my guest for our evening meal. Does your family have a telephone?" Sara nodded.

"Well, if I can get a line out, I will call your mother in law later. She knows me well and she will not worry nor be angry." The woman spoke kindly and Sara nodded dumbly.

It was a relief to be somewhere other than her home. She had not left the place for over two months and now that she was out, she felt nervous. Her thoughts drifted back to her days of freedom as a child on the gypsy campsite. It all seemed so far away, like someone else's life, not hers.

The woman, whom Sara called Aunti, out of respect, helped her up to the shower room. Sara moved about as if in a dream and when the woman asked her to put her arms up so that she could get the mud splattered kameez off, Sara did not protest. Aunti made a shocked noise when she saw the bruises and bite marks. Sara had become so used to being attacked that she had not thought to hide them. Her few moments in the mud of the mosque had given balm to her soul and she had not thought about her injuries. But now, she was embarrassed.

The Aunti did not mention the marks, but just steered Sara into the shower. She had heard much about this strange girl who had married into the family of Saddiq. Saddiq's son was obviously not the pillar of the community that his family would wish people believe he was. She was truly shocked at the state of Sara and her heart wept for the young girl.

She was so thin and drawn. Some had said that she was Pathan but Aunti knew the Pathan people well and this girl was not Pathan. She was not even of Pakistani blood. That was obvious. She laid out fresh clothes for Sara and went downstairs to instruct the cook to prepare dinner early tonight.

When Sara finally came down she did not know what to say to the kind people who had offered her such gracious hospitality. She sipped the chai that had been put in front of her

and the Aunti hovered in the corner while the Moulvi talked to Sara. He told Sara that she was safe to talk, and that she should be open with him.

She eyed him suspiciously, but something deep inside told her to trust him. She had to trust him; she had to talk before she went insane.

She started slowly, telling him of her experience in the mosque and of her dream with the angel. He nodded and listened without comment. She told him of her life in England in the Gypsy camps, the death of her mother and her Grandmother, and finally her life with Mumtaz and Malik.

The Aunti sat in the corner and tutted every so often at the terrible things that had happened to Sara as a girl. The Aunti spoke to the Moulvi in a form of Urdu Sara could not understand; the man's face grew dark with what he heard. "Tell me about your husband, and the marks on your back."

Sara reddened and did not know what to say. It was unheard of to discuss such things, particularly with a strange man. She stuttered and finally jutted her chin out. "It must have been my fault, I must be a bad wife, I always make mistakes and do things wrong, I'm sorry."

She trailed off and sat looking at her hands in shame. Aunti jerked her head towards the door in a gesture to the Moulvi to leave the room. She went and sat before Sara and took Sara's hands into hers. "Daughter, there are many here who believe that hitting a woman is a just punishment for a wrong doing, and sometimes I agree with them. My husband does not like violence towards women at all. But what I see on your back is not marks from a beating. It is something else isn't it." Sara nodded.

"So tell me child, what happened to you." The woman's voice was full of compassion.

Sara shook her head and began to cry. “I know it is embarrassing and shameful to talk about such things,” she continued, “but one person in the world must know, then we can both carry it. You do not have to endure it alone. Do you understand what I am saying?”

Sara nodded. She grew up with a similar thing in the gypsy community. If you suffered something, you would tell another person and together you could carry suffering. “So tell me what has been happening to you,” asked the woman.

Sara searched for words that would express what was happening to her. The silence within her broke as she found the courage to speak. “He will kill me if he finds out I have told someone. Even his mother does not know.”

The Aunti shook her head as she spoke. “She does not know? Rubbish, of course she knows. A woman knows everything that happens in her house. I will not tell anyone, it will not get back to your family, I promise.”

Sara told her of the endless nights of rape and torture that she had endured. He had beaten her harder because she had not become pregnant even though her periods had stopped. He desperately wanted a son and it had become an obsession with him. She did not know why he wanted a child so badly and she had not dared to ask him.

She had lost weight, losing her womanly shape until she now looked like a boy. That had angered him even more, so the beatings had taken a new turn. He had become more and more excited by the things he could do to her and she had suffered silently through fear and modesty rather than any wish to protect him. She did not tell the Aunti about the curse though, that was kept wrapped close to her heart.

The old woman clapped her hands to her head in horror at hearing such a sorrow. Sara knew that she should not have spoken out; such family matters are supposed to stay within the family. But Sara knew that if she had not have spoken, she would have killed

herself eventually. Telling a stranger had relieved some of the pressure that had mounted in her heart.

Later, she was driven back home with a bag full of goodies for her mother in law and a letter requesting that Sara visit often. Her mother in law looked at her in astonishment. “How did you know Mrs. Qureshi? She’s the most important woman in the town, her father is very wealthy and powerful.”

Sara knew to tread carefully. She kept her voice steady and her eyes down. “She knew that I was your new daughter in law and she wanted to make friends. She admires you, and she talked about you all the time.”

The old woman lifted an eyebrow and began to preen herself. “Well we lead a religious life in this house and now you understand why I tell you that you must be veiled and stay indoors. See what respect it brings you.” Sara smiled meekly.

“Where did you meet her anyway?” she asked. Sara looked at the servant who was trimming a plant near by. He had said nothing to the mistress, simply passing her the note and shrugging his shoulders when questioned. Her voice stayed firm as she looked at the floor. “I met her in the market, she was with her man servant and she recognized our servant.” She nodded towards the man servant who was hovering near the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Zakir returned from the Middle East, he resumed his evenings of torture with renewed vigor. Carefully, Sara made up her face to cover the bruising. Her mother in Law frowned when she saw the heavy make up. “Go take than dirt off of your face, you look like a harlot. If there is a reason that you put it on, stay in your room until the reason goes away, I will have food sent to your room.” She turned and vanished into the kitchen before Sara had time to appeal.

That night she dreamt about the mosque in the mud, seeing it full of brightly lit beings praying. Their human shapes, bathed in light, seemed to melt and flow around the fabric of the building, enlivening and awakening the stone.

Slowly, she walked towards the mosque, accompanied by a man who seemed to appear out of the clouds of dust that swirled around her. His hair was long and trailed on the floor behind him, brushing away his footprints. He wore only one sandal, which Sara thought was strange.

He held her hand and walked her to the threshold of the mosque. When she appeared at the doorway of the mosque, the beings inside stopped praying and put their heads through the archway of the entrance to speak to her. She could not enter the mosque no matter how hard she tried.

They stood and looked at her in silence until one of them started to cry. Another wailed, holding his cupped hands to catch the tears as the others joined in the weeping. It was too much for Sara who held her arms out to them in an attempt to comfort them. Their pain reached her heart and she too began to weep. “Who are you? Why are you crying? What is wrong?” Sara appealed to them with all her might.

We are Al Mu'aqqibat, the keepers from death until time.

We are crying for you, sister, our tears are for you.

She awoke to find Zakir shaking her. "What is it, what is wrong, why are you crying?" Zakir looked truly concerned and Sara hoped that the loving person she knew was in there was finally emerging. He opened his arms wide and she snuggled into him. "I'm not sure, I was dreaming about the old mosque. It was so sad," she replied. Zakir looked puzzled, "Which old mosque?"

Sara realized she had almost been caught out. She had to think quickly. "Mrs. Qureshi, you know, the Moulvi's wife, told me about a mosque that had been submerged under the reservoir and that in hot weather it re-emerges again. Maybe that's what I was dreaming about."

Zakir nodded and nuzzled her hair as he spoke. "I had forgotten about that place, we will go there tomorrow and see it. It will stop your nightmare from coming back."

Sara wanted to protest but she did not want to say anything that would jeopardize this rare moment of tenderness. Lying back, she fell asleep in his arms, thinking of better times ahead.

The following morning, as promised, he announced that he was taking his wife out on a short trip. Sara was fully veiled, covered in her Burqa. Zakir waved away the driver. "No, I will drive myself, I need to spend time with my wife."

Sara sat quietly in the car, being careful not to annoy him. She did not complain about the stifling heat under her heavy veils. No one knew yet that she was pregnant. Her periods had been erratic but now it was obvious to Sara that she was carrying a new life. Her body had begun to change and she was waiting for the best moment to tell Zakir. Maybe in the mosque, she thought.

They would not tell anyone, only her mother in law, as was the custom. Her growing body would be hidden under the veils and no special treatment would happen, other than her mother in law keeping a closer eye on her. Her mind drifted to the women in England and the fuss that they made when they were pregnant. She remembered the advertisements for pregnancy classes, relaxation classes, books, and leaflets. What did they do before such things existed?

Her thoughts turned to her Grandmother and Sara wished that Grandmother would have lived to hold the child. The idea of her children not having blood of her own line around them worried her. After she was dead, they would forget who they were and would become strangers to her ancestors. Her eyes watched the houses whiz by as she looked out of the car window in silence.

Zakir looked at her and smiled. He was happy that she had settled so well and that she seemed so submissive. He told himself that he should stop being so heavy with her. But in truth, he had come to enjoy it and did not want to stop. Not yet anyway.

He did not tell anyone where they were going, they would think them mad. No one went there anymore. The whole area was covered in graves that had been submerged with the dam and now, the mosque was a place that no one wanted to go to.

Sara thought about this as they drove down the single road with shops on either side that made up the town of Dudial. Zakir laughed as they dodged the cows on the road. The creatures seemed so stupid, just standing there looking at the car as it hurtled towards them. He honked his horn and shouted out of the car window for them to move.

Sara drifted into daydreams. She thought about the old mosque, which, even covered in mud was the most beautiful building she had ever seen. She wondered why the Moulvi went there, was one of his jobs to watch over the old mosque? She was glad that he went to the mosque regularly and looked after it. The power of prayer was strong there.

On arrival, Sara knew it had been a mistake to tell him about the mosque. She did not want to go in with him. A deep churning instinct told her to turn and run, but pulling her veils around her, she hoped that this would mark the start of a new relationship with her husband.

He looked around the mosque, telling her about the beautiful architecture, the history of the building and the tale of old Dudial itself. His voice was soft and full of pride as he spoke.

“Dudial was named after a Sikh called Dudial Partab Singh Puha. All of this area was Sikh before partition. It was then handed over to the Kashmiris. The land, which you see now, was called Kalvarri and the mosque itself was called Mohran Malkan Mosque. It was the bigger of the two main mosques in Dudial and all the local villagers used to come here from all around for the Friday prayers.”

“At its height, the old lawn here would hold two thousand people in prayer. And now look at it, nothing but mud and stones. I loved this place as a little boy. I’m so glad you reminded me of it.”

Zakir scanned the horizon but there was no one to be seen in the rising heat. He turned back to Sara and she did not recognize the look in his eye at first. Her brain dismissed it in such surroundings and the shock took a moment to sink in. “Are you wearing silk underwear?” His voice was hoarse as he whispered to her.

Sara became uncomfortable. To talk of such things in a holy place was a terrible crime. She was deeply shocked at Zakir and started to protest. “I asked you a question, now answer me, bitch.” His teeth were bared as he hissed through them.

He was becoming more and more excited, even though some part of him begged to stop. A battle waged within him and the twisted side won when Sara slowly nodded her head.

He had not planned this, but it came upon him so strongly that he could not help himself. “Take it off, now.” He shouted and Sara jumped with fear, fumbling under the heavy veils and slipping in the mud.

He lost patience and reached out for her, catching hold of her veil and ripping it off. He tore at her clothes, pulling her hair out from the roots and shoving the veil in her mouth to silence her screams. His knowledge of torture had increased with his visit to the Middle East and Sara thought she was going to die. She was beyond the humiliation; she was fighting for her life.

He pulled a knife out from beneath his trouser leg and held it to her face. He slid it down her exposed body and turned the blade in his hand before trying to ram the hilt between her legs.

Holding her throat in his mouth, Zakir started to bite, crushing down on her windpipe as Sara tried to grab for his hair. He straightened up, eyes sparkling from excitement from the thrill of turning the knife between her legs, cutting the tender skin. He watched her eyes as she tried to cry out in pain through the veil in her mouth. Sara tried to scream about the baby to him, but the gag held the words in her throat.

Zakir looked deeper into her eyes and saw something that made him freeze; a pair of eyes looking out of Sara’s. She was pregnant. He had always been able to tell a pregnancy in women, by their eyes, it was just something he could do.

Blood hit Sara’s face at a high pressure. Bits of flesh and spongy matter showered her as Zakir slumped across her exposed body. Sara did not know what had happened for a brief second until she saw the Moulvi stood behind Zakir. He threw a heavy stone to one side.

She looked at Zakir in horror, pushing his body away, unable to make a sound as she fought for breath. Pulling her clothes around her, Sara crouched in the mud, coughing and

wheezing. The Moulvi bent over her to see if she was okay and Sara cowered in fear, covering her face. “Don’t kill me,” she whispered, “Please don’t kill me.”

The Moulvi squatted in the mud beside her, his voice full of sadness. “I killed him to protect you. Now we must hide him, quickly. The rains are due in tomorrow and the mosque will vanish again. But for now, I must bury him.”

He found a flat stone and scratched at the soft mud until he made a space big enough to lay Zakir in. Sara squatted in the mud and put her hands to her ears; she could hear the sound of weeping echoing all around the shelled out building. She remembered the previous night’s dream and her head filled with the sound of crying and wailing; it took a second for her to understand that she was hearing her own voice.

Once Zakir was out of sight, he stood Sara up. The Moulvi managed to clothe her in her long coat and pulled what was left of the veil over her head. He did not live far from the banks of the reservoir and they managed to get back to the house without being seen.

No words were spoken of what had happened. The Moulvi washed and then sat with his head in his hands. Aunti seemed oblivious to what had happened as she cleaned Sara up for the second time in a few weeks. She drew out a large pair of scissors and began to cut Sara’s hair.

Sara was too shocked to try and stop her, but after half of her hair had gone she found the strength to talk. “Why?” she asked as she held a tuft of her own hair. “You have to leave Dudial, you know that don’t you,” said the Aunti. Sara nodded.

The woman’s voice was curt and to the point. “You cannot board a plane out of the country because they will be looking for you. You will have to go over the mountains and try to reach India through Kashmir. From there you will be safe. I have a brother in Kotli who will help you. You will have to travel as a boy; any woman traveling is going to arouse interest. If you are traveling alone, you will be arrested and sent back to the

family. You are small enough and thin enough to pass as a young boy and I have an idea for getting you into the hills.”

Sara was silent for a while. She realized that she had placed them both in a lot of danger. “Why did you both help me, your husband has risked everything.” She wanted to say more but her mouth and brain were beyond function. Her body began to shake and the more she tried to stop it the worse it got. The Aunti handed Sara a boy’s Shalwar and shirt, “Dress in this and come down stairs when you are ready.”

The Moulvi stood up when Sara finally emerged looking like a Pathan boy of about twelve years old. He nodded and motioned for her to sit down and drink the sweet-spiced tea that would ease Sara’s shaking hands. As she sipped, the Moulvi talked to her from the armchair that was positioned nearby.

“I have never understood the violence that some men hold so dear to them. I think it started with the films, they became so violent and the young men copied them. The young men these days drink alcohol and read filth from the west. They do not pray or fear Allah anymore. I would ban all violent films if I could. I had a daughter once.”

The Moulvi’s voice trailed off. The Aunti moved to stand near him in support. “She was raped and beaten to death in Karachi by a western tourist. When I saw you in the mosque, I saw my daughter and Allah gave me a chance to help her. She was our only child. Now there is nothing, we have nothing.”

“They will kill you if they find you, so you must leave tomorrow. There is a flour delivery truck that takes sacks of flour from the mill in Dudial all the way to Kotli. The mill owner’s cousin has a bakery in Kotli and he will not bake with any other flour than the Dudial flour. I will wave down the driver to talk with him. While I do that, you will sneak on the back of the truck and hide among the sacks.”

“I will give you a letter and an address of someone in Kotli who will help you a little. If God wills it, you will cross into India and to freedom. If he wills that you die, then you die. I know that you are not of Pakistan and I am ashamed for my country that you have had such terrible things happen to you.”

Sara wanted to reach out but she knew that to touch him would be a terrible insult. Her words were the only gift of gratitude and respect that she could give. “Sir, do not be ashamed of your country. It is a beautiful and special place, filled with people who live a holy and good life. It is the land that I was born in that has brought such shame to your heart. The people of the west have brought every manner of destruction to your door; it is I who should be ashamed. It is I who brought such dishonor to you and your wife. I pray to Allah that I should bare any consequences.”

The following morning, Sara carried a small backpack filled with food, some survival necessities and a letter. Aunti had also slipped her a knife and told her to hide it from the Moulvi, because he would take it off of her if he saw it. She crept quietly up to the flour van as the Moulvi asked the driver about his new grandson. Once he was sure that Sara had climbed among the sacks, he waved good-bye to the truck driver and Sara began the long painful journey into the hills.

She thought she was going to die from the heat and the lack of suspension on the truck. Every bump jarred her bones and every stop terrified her. She would be killed if she were found.

At one point, Sara tried to open her pack and feed herself, but the violence of the bumps and the fear of being spotted by a passer by forced her to stay hidden deep among the large white sacks. One of the sacks was leaking and it showered Sara in a cloud of white. She licked the flour off her lips and sipped from the water bottle in an attempt to nourish and hydrate herself.

It was dark when they arrived in Kotli; Sara was asleep and was woken by the shouts of the driver as he gave orders to a young local boy. She panicked. What if she had come all this way just to be found because she had fallen asleep?

She looked over the side of the open truck and was thankful for the dark. While the truck driver was shouting at the young boy, Sara eased herself over the far side of the truck and fell to the floor clutching her backpack. She ran immediately to the cover of the tall pine trees by the side of the road, hoping that no one had heard her.

The driver did hear something and walked slowly around the truck. He called out to the boy to hurry up bringing help, saying that he did not want to be eaten by wolves while waiting for someone to off load the truck. Sara crouched beneath a bush and nearly cried out at the mention of wolves. Wild life was not something she had expected nor thought about.

She pushed deeper into the trees until she came to a ledge that overlooked the city. At first she thought she was looking into a valley of strange trees until she realized she was looking at minarets, many beautiful towers of Allah reaching for heaven through the dark night sky.

She sat among the bushes and wrapped the thin wool chador around her that the Aunti had packed. The temperature was much cooler here than in the valley, something else she had not expected. She ate slowly, trying not to shake from the damp that was creeping into her thin body.

When she finally fell asleep, she felt something that she had not felt for a long time, a hand upon her shoulder. It eased her mind, knowing that whatever terrible thing she had done, someone still cared, some being still watched over her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

That night, Nargis tossed and turned, unable to sleep. She finally got out of bed and walked to the window, closing it against the chill that had crept upon her through the night. Standing with her hand on the window, she looked up at the stars and remembered Sara. The stars always reminded her of her favorite sister. For some reason, she felt Sara strongly; she hoped Sara was happy and had begun to settle into her new life.

She had heard nothing from her recently, and took that as a good sign. But something nagged as she closed the window and turned back to her bed. Jehangir was deeply asleep and Nargis ran her hands over his smooth muscular back. He mumbled slightly as he turned under her hands and snuggled up to her. Nargis shrugged off her intuition and curled up beside her husband, drifting in half dreams before finally falling asleep.

The following morning Sara awoke stiff and cold. The city below unfolded in the early morning sun and Sara decided she had never seen anything quite so beautiful. The city was nestled in a steep valley with heavily forested hills rising sharply in all directions. Beyond the hills were hints of snow-capped mountains, her way home. But where was home? She could not go back to Bradford; the long arm of the family would find her there even if the police did not.

She had already decided that if she were caught, she would admit to the killing and not involve the Moulvi. He was a holy man with important service to Allah and to implicate him would be a terrible crime for Sara to commit. He had risked his own life and respectability twice to help her, so she would give her life in return, should it be needed.

She looked for the letter with a small picture map to guide her to the house. She looked again at the city and realized that the house she was to go to was somewhere in the hills quite near to her.

Mrs. Qureshi had drawn her simply picture layout of the town, but she would need to ask directions to get the exact location of the house. She was terrified of being caught or raising suspicion when she spoke to anyone. She looked at the letter, which read, “To Mohammed Rifat, Kotli. Please direct this boy in his work.”

She aware that she now looked like a dirty village boy, which would probably help her. She wiped some earth on her face to better the effect and hide the fact that she was a woman. She was bare foot and not having shoes was beginning to hurt her tender feet. She dodged the rocks and pinecones as she made her way to the area where the house should be.

It took a long while before she found someone who could direct her. She coughed, holding up the letter to them, pretending that she could not speak. The man glanced at the letter and nodded at the name ‘Mohammed Rifat’. “Ha, the butcher, yes, his house is near here.” He directed Sara up a track to a house plot at the end.

Her relief was something immeasurable as she saw a group of women through the iron gates of the courtyard at Mohammed Rifat’s house. A little boy with eyes like a gargoyle sat silently on a rock watching the track. Sara tried to stay to the side by the trees as she approached the house, but she was finally spotted which sent the little boy hurtling towards the house shouting for his ‘Ami’, his mother.

Sara was not sure what to do. She had not been told that they would be expecting her and she looked up to see if any phone lines led to the house. There were none. Sara became frightened. What if the police had been? How would they know where to look unless the Moulvi had been captured? She was about to run through the trees when a heavysset woman came to the courtyard gate and shooed the children into the house. She called out Sara’s name and mentioned Mrs. Qureshi.

Sara knew that she had no choice but to trust this woman, it was that or die here in the mountains. Trying to keep an eye on the track behind her, Sara edged carefully toward the house and the woman looked nervously in all directions.

The heavy Iron Gate was opened and Sara hurried into the courtyard. She began to thank the woman who looked up and glowered at the disheveled girl. Sara's words dried in her throat as the woman dropped a pack, a man's heavy wool chador, some socks and shoes, and a torch on the floor before her. She then handed Sara a rough drawn map, a compass and told her to leave.

Sara tried to protest. She was tired and hungry but the woman insisted and kept looking over her shoulder. When Sara would not shut up the woman grabbed her by the shoulders. "Betí, daughter, I don't know what you have done, and I don't want to know. I also don't understand why such respectable people are helping the likes of you." She paused to look Sara up and down, noticing the short hair and dirt.

"People know you are here, they think you are going to your sister's house. The police are looking for you, something was found in Dudial and Mrs. Qureshi got a message to me. You must find your own way over the mountains, that is all I can do for you. We are a respectable family and I don't want any trouble. The compass was my father's from when he was in the army, maybe one day you can send it back to me. I'm angry to have to give you this but I will not sleep if you are wandering around those mountains alone with no guide."

"Keep following the river upwards, you will get there. Beware the bandits and the soldiers. And when you get over the border, remember you will still not be safe. You will have to pass through Kashmir, out of India's Muslim territory before you will be safe. Now go and don't come back."

The woman scuttled into her house and slammed the door shut leaving Sara to pick up everything and get to cover before she was seen. Her mind plunged into despair as she

turned and left the courtyard. Heading for the cover of trees, she did not stop until she was out of sight. Scanning the ground for insects, she sat down among the pine needles and lizards to put the shoes on.

The shoes were too big so she tore a piece of the old chador into strips and tied them around the shoes, securing them to her feet. Among the scent of fresh pine needles and early morning baking from the nearby house, the aroma of Mrs. Qureshi's food rose out of the pack. Garlic and spices mixed with bread teased Sara's empty stomach. Looking around to make sure she was securely hidden, Sara pulled out the contents of the old bag that the Moulvi had given her. She hungrily ate the food left from the old backpack before burying it under soil and pine needles.

The new backpack was heavy as she lifted it to her shoulder. Her face winced from the weight of the pack as she staggered to pick up the torch before starting to walk. Her shoulders ached from the long cramped journey in the truck, her body unused to such indignities. Sara had tied the compass to her clothing, putting it in a pocket so that she could not lose it. Her hand repeatedly patted the compass in her pocket as she sought a wealth of security from its presence.

It took a lot of frustrated searching to find the river. As she stood, trying to catch her breath, she realized that this was the river Poonch that flowed into the dam at Dudial. She climbed down the bank of this raging torrent and touched the water.

"Dearest St. Sara, patron saint of all gypsies, please send my love and all of your blessings to those I have left behind in Dudial. Many of them will be in pain because of what has happened. My Saas, my mother in law, has lost her eldest son and the pain will be too much for her, please be with her while she needs you." Sara sent the blessing down the river to Dudial. Loose stones fell into the river and joined the blessings as Sara scrambled back up the hillside.

She started the long hike into the hills and sang old bar songs that uncle Vinni used to sing in the pub all those years ago. She smiled as the singing revived long hidden memories of her childhood and she began telling the stories of her camp days to the trees and the birds.

As she made good progress up the hills, her singing was cut short by gunfire. She dived into the trees and sat listening for a while. No one came near and after a while, she quietly emerged out of the bushes and carried on walking in silence.

Later, as the sun began to slide towards the horizon, she came to a part of the landscape where it was impossible to follow the river. She looked at her compass; the river was flowing from northeast. She pulled away from the cliff edge of the river and moved inland a little, following the delicate needle of the compass.

Her diversion took her deep into the woods and she was thankful for the shaded protection. The scent of the trees and the slight breeze on her face were the most precious things she had felt in a long time. Her lungs filled as she took a deep breath, savoring the earthy scent of forest. Distant and before that, her hometown in Yorkshire had both been barren places. The land there had never pulled her, never spoken to her.

But here in the steep foothills, the towering trees felt at one with her. Stillness crept over her as she looked up at the treetops and for the first time in a long time, she felt at peace. And yet here in the mountains, by the cease-fire line, there was nothing that could possibly be called peaceful.

She watched the sun as it slowly went down, aware that she would have to find somewhere to camp for the night. She had made good progress that day and Sara was pleased with herself. The numbness and shock was beginning to subside and Sara had begun to relax. Her head hurt and her stomach rumbled as she tried to find somewhere suitable to sleep. Intermittent gunfire rattled in the distance and eventually Sara realized that it was coming from this side of the cease-fire line.

She was about to bed down by a fallen tree when she heard voices. Squatting in a bush, she saw a group of armed men preparing camp just feet away from her. Her body crouched immobile as the minutes ticked by. She dare not move and her feet were starting to cramp. Many scenarios ran through her head as to what would happen if she were caught.

Her mind concocted a feeble story of a runaway boy wanting to fight in Kashmir. She would not be able to talk to them properly because they would tell from her voice that she was female and not a native Urdu speaker. She remembered the bruising that had come up around her throat from Zakir's last attack and she decided that her throat was too badly damaged for her to talk properly. The memory of Zakir contracted her heart in pain.

After crouching for a while, her body screamed for movement. When she could no longer take the pain, she tried to lay down and quietly move into a position where she could sleep. She lay wrapped in her chador, listening to the men talking. An argument was brewing between an old man and a much younger one. She strained to hear what was being said.

The older man stood up and started to shout at the young man. It was clear that they were talking politics and the younger man had suggested talks with the Indian government. The old man became hysterical.

“How could you expect me to sit around a table with those people? Have you any idea what they did to my family, to all of us? The Baniye Hindus destroyed us all. They owned everything, they owned us. They were all moneylenders, and the Maharaja encouraged it. I borrowed a small amount of money for my daughters wedding. With the interest they demanded there was no way I was ever going to be able to pay it off. I had to pay back a hundred times what I had borrowed. They kept putting the amount I owed up instead of down with each payment.”

“They destroyed our whole village. We all owed money and we all starved. I don’t forget and I don’t forgive either. So don’t mention sitting around tables again to me.” The old man grunted and the young man sat looking into the fire. It was around that time that Sara needed to urinate. Sara cursed herself. Her bladder was never on her side, it always became temperamental when she did not need it to be.

To move would alert them to her presence, so she crossed her legs and prayed that they would fall asleep soon. She tried not to think about it and started mentally reciting her times tables to distract herself. Once she had completed that she scrolled through the names of the continents, the oceans, and pondered over the meaning of the word ‘baniye’. The old man had used it in a derogatory way so she guessed it was an insult.

Eventually, she could bare it no longer. The men were talking in loud animated tones so she decided to risk it. She left her pack and took off her shoes, trying not to fall or make a noise. She walked gently on the soft ground, placing her weight carefully so as not to make a sound. She did not see the young man stand up and look in her direction, nor did she see him follow her.

She found her way to a tributary stream from the river and climbed down to urinate. Her face contracted with pain; Zakir’s knife slashes were at the painful stage of healing. When she had finished she was about to climb out of the stream when a hand grabbed her from behind and caught her around the throat. Another hand went over her mouth and she was shoved from behind on to the mossy stream bank.

As he came into her vision she recognized him as the young man from the camp. Before she could scream, he punched her full on in the face and told her that if she made another noise he would kill her. Sara knew that if she did not think quickly and clearly, she would die.

Her face stung from the blow and her nose unleashed blood that trickled into her mouth. She remembered the knife that was on her belt and had obviously been missed by the man.

As he grappled with her clothes she pulled the knife out with her opposite hand and sliced it straight across his throat. She thanked the Aunti that it had been there and had been sharp. He gurgled as blood spurted out of his throat and she pushed him to one side away from her.

She felt nothing. No fear, no remorse, none of the emotions that had hit her in the mosque. She stood up and wiped the blade on her left sleeve, spotting a rifle on the ground beside him. She picked it up, throwing it over her shoulder as she sifted through the man's pockets, taking out cigarettes, matches, gum, and a few rupees.

She pushed his body into the stream so that he was not so visible and climbed back up the steep bank. She crept slowly back to the camp, picking up her pack and shoes before creeping out away from the men who were bedding down to sleep. They had not yet missed their friend and the whisky that they had drunk would keep them quiet long enough for Sara to get away. She could smell the liquor from the bushes.

She walked until dawn, too scared to stop in case she came across another camp of bandits. She wondered about Nargis, who lived in Kotli. She had decided not to go to her as the police would be watching her house and she did not want to implicate her beloved sister.

As the sun rose she realized that she would have to take cover. She kept an eye out for possible places and an hour after sunrise, she spotted a small cave. It was well hidden except that a gust of wind blew aside some grasses that were overhanging the entrance and covering it from view. Perfect, she thought.

She crawled in, not noticing two bowls full of food laid out to one side at the mouth of the cave. She put on her flashlight and checked the ceiling for bats. Good, she thought, none. The cave had a strange sulfurous smell, which was unpleasant, but Sara told herself that it was a small inconvenience in contrast to the shelter the cave would provide.

She laid her pack as a pillow and covered herself with her chador, the gun laid beside her hand. Gingerly, she touched her swollen face and nose in an effort to comfort herself. Her mind fell in to the darkness of exhausted sleep almost immediately, allowing her body much needed rest and recuperation.

CHAPTER NINE

It was well into the afternoon when she finally awoke. She lay on the floor for a while, looking at the light filtering into the cave through the foliage and listening to the sound of dripping water coming from the back of the cave. In the stillness, she thought about the man she had killed last night and wondered why she still did not feel anything. She was not in shock, or denial. She just did not care.

Her stomach rumbled and Sara was about to open her pack when she heard rustling. She froze, not daring to move. Sara tried hard to make her breathing as silent as possible. It felt as if her breathing was so loud it could be heard down in Kotli. A figure bent over by the cave entrance and Sara heard the clink of pottery.

When the figure withdrew, she laid motionless for what seemed like an age until she was sure that no one was there. Pulling the gun towards her, she crept slowly towards the cave mouth, her fingers fumbling for the safety catch.

Slowly, she emerged out of the overhanging grasses to find two bowls of food placed neatly by the cave entrance. She quickly looked around in astonishment. Who knew she was here? Why else would someone put food out here? The first bowl was full of dhal and rice, the second with Mithai, delicious sweets.

She looked both ways before grabbing the dishes and vanishing back into the cave. She ate the lentil curry and rice, scooping up the food with her fingertips. It had a strange taste, but she was thankful for the fresh food. Finally, she ate the Mithai, savoring the last few sweet creamy crumbs.

Her eyes cast over the cave as she sat digesting her food. If someone had discovered her there, they would be watching the mouth of the cave. Sara wanted to see if there was

another way out of the cave in case she needed to flee quickly. She checked the knife at her belt and put on her shoes.

The cave was low and deep, with a strange sulfurous aroma, which seemed to come in waves. She walked to the back of the cave and flashed her light down a crack that was just big enough for her to squeeze through. If this led to a way out it would be a good escape. No man would squeeze through that gap.

Holding her breath, she pushed herself through the crack and found a low tunnel that she would be able to crawl through. She lay on her belly, trying to put her weight to one side in case she injured her womb that held her tiny son. She had not begun to swell yet. In fact, her tummy was still flat. Despite the terrors inflicted on her by Zakir, and her ordeal in the mountains, she could still feel the presence of the child within her.

She crawled along the stone surface that was becoming increasingly damp. The tunnel seemed to go on forever and Sara was beginning to wonder if it would ever end: would she be trapped here? She could not turn around in the tight space; she could only go forward. If this tunnel went deep into the mountainside, she would surely die here, she thought. Pushing on, Sara found it harder and harder to breathe from the tight squeeze, and the sulfurous gasses were getting stronger with each inch that she crawled.

Finally, the ground fell away before her into a cavern and Sara shone the torch over the edge to see if the drop was a long one. It was only about six feet but she was coming out headfirst. She tried to maneuver her body in the tight space and hung her leg over the side. The weight of her hanging leg helped her to turn around so that she could drop down feet first.

But as she attempted to move herself, she fell, landing on her side. She was winded for a moment and dropped the torch, which went out. "Shit. Oh great, total darkness."

She spoke aloud to herself, the words echoing around the space that she could not see. She had never been in total dark before and it terrified her.

She calmed herself, convincing herself that there was nothing to panic about and that if she moved logically she would find the torch and fix it. She laid herself flat on the floor and gently stretched her arms and legs out. Her foot touched something that moved a little. The torch?

She left her foot touching the object and slowly pulled her body towards it, turning around so that she sat up with her leg extended out, guarding the torch with her foot. She finally reached out and found the light. She ran her fingers over the torch and felt a small crack where the battery lid had lifted in the fall. The batteries were still inside but the contact had been lost, as the lid had lifted - the batteries had moved out of place.

She worked slowly and carefully so as not to make a mistake, talking herself through each move as she removed the battery lid and repositioned the batteries in their slot. She replaced the lid and the light came on. Sara closed her eyes in thanks. Thanks that went out to everyone, God, St. Sara, the Virgin Mary and Ganesh as she got to her feet. She knew how close she had come to dying here in the darkness.

She shone the torch around the cave and tilted her head as she heard running water. She was in a small cavern where the far end seemed to slope down. The torchlight picked out another crack at the far end of the cavern and Sara debated whether to go through it or not. The sound of running water was coming from there and there seemed to be no other way out than the way she came.

She edged towards the crack and shone the torch through to see if she could see anything. It opened into a tall tunnel that curved out of sight. She pushed through the crack and walked down the tunnel, shining the torch upwards to try and see the height of the ceiling, but the beam of the torch vanished into the darkness.

Coming to the end of the tunnel, she cried out in awe at the cavern that opened out before her. It was a large space, so high that she could not see the top or the far side. In the

center bubbled a hot spring, which filled the cavern with steam. The spring was surrounded by red mud, and many stalagmites and stalactites joined from the roof to the floor creating a forest of columns.

She walked gingerly towards the spring and as her torch beam shone through the steam she froze from the image that peered back at her through the mist. A large pair of red eyes pierced through the steam and glittered in the light of the torch. Once Sara had realized that the eyes were part of a large statue she relaxed a little and became curious. She edged around the hot spring and stood in awe before the giant statue. She recognized the image instantly. Kali.

The image stood at least ten feet high and was inset with precious gems. The eyes were giant rubies, her head held a crown of gold, woven like lace, that depicted every type of cat that Sara could imagine. In her forehead was set the biggest moonstone Sara had ever seen and her hair looked human as it tumbled down around her waist. She was naked, with a large glittering diamond set in her belly and a necklace of real skulls dangling at her breast. She had only one breast, which intrigued Sara. Her many arms held glittering swords, axes, a disc of clear crystal and a plain wooden bowl.

Sara's foot knocked against something as she edged near to the statue to get a better look. She shone her torch downwards and jumped back as she found herself surrounded by bones and skulls. Her first instinct was to run screaming but she checked herself, knowing that if she panicked she could die lost in the maze of tunnels and caves. On closer inspection, it became clear that the bones were very old.

She knew about Kali from the temple in Bradford and a deep instinct told her she was safe with this Goddess. Step by step, she edged as close as she dare to the statue and realized that the faded red paint around the mouth of the Goddess was actually dried blood. She swallowed hard, singing to herself in an effort to stay calm.

The torch beam reflected off the brass of an oil lamp at the feet of the Goddess. Squatting down, Sara carefully placed her finger into the dish shaped lamp; it had oil in it. She fumbled for her matches and lit the strange shaped lamp with many wicks. It did not occur to Sara that it was strange to find an ancient abandoned shrine that still had oil in its lamps.

As the flames steadied themselves she looked back up at the Goddess in the full light. She was beautiful and terrifying all at once. An instinct deep within told Sara to honor this hidden Goddess for this was still a sacred place and divine power was still flowing through the image that stood before her.

Quickly, she cleared a space, pushing the bones out to form a circle in which she could dance. Her left foot struck the floor. Sara squatted to touch the sacred earth, her forehead, and then the earth again in an act of worship. She completed a small section of movements dedicated to Ganesh, the God of beginnings before straightening up and closing her eyes.

She stood with her hands clasped in prayer, breathing in the steam and stilling herself inwardly. Her body, guided by a strange deep memory that bubbled up into her mind began the long sinuous movements that evoked ancient India. Music flowed through her mind and her body responded to the ghostly instruments that drifted out of the springs.

Her movements became faster and more precise, pausing momentarily in certain poses with her hands fixed in mudrahs, the sacred positions, before the next movement would come upon her with almost animal instinct. The movements grew more frenzied, her feet weaving complex patterns on the dusty floor and her hands pulling power from within her before offering it at the feet of the Goddess.

The dance became as needful as breath as the steam of the spring drifted over to dance with her. She moved as one with the steam, feeling the Goddess move through her, whispering to her, caressing her, commanding her.

She licked her lips, tasting blood as it flowed from her bitten tongue. Her legs became damp as blood trickled down from her womb and dripped onto the dust at her feet, joining with the patterns and creating a yantra; a gift for the Goddess.

A whirlwind of fire whipped around Sara's mind. She joined with the whirlwind, turning and turning until she turned out in the stars, free from the restriction of her body. Stellar power flowed through Sara's fingertips as she moved. The turning continued faster and faster until she passed through the stars into nothing. She drifted in this nothing, and she remembered it. This was home; this was where she came from. She merged with the nothing, returning to her universal source.

Sara burned and was consumed in a fire that started in her throat. She could not pull her mind out of this fire no matter how hard she tried; pain engulfed her in waves, tearing at her throat and body.

She tried to cry out, but her voice would not work. She tried to open her eyes, but nothing happened. She could hear voices in the distance but she could not quite reach them. The pain was too much for her to bear so Sara tried to find refuge back in the nothingness, but she could not find it. Someone wiped her face with a wet cloth and Sara tried to turn her head to lick the water.

Someone watched her as she tried to turn her head and as she parted her lips, the shadow dripped water into her mouth. The cool water hit the fire in her throat like oil on a hot skillet. It relieved and exploded the pain all at once. It took on a new dimension. Exquisite pain became her whole consciousness. The face of Kali swam before her.

*Do you submit to me, Sara? Will you honor your vow to me as I honor my vow to you?
Are you mine forever throughout time?*

"Yes." Sara whispered the single word to the Goddess before her.

Then you shall tend my shrine and birth what is to come.

She tried to sit up, but the pain tore her mind apart, sending her back into the silent bliss of nothing.

Sara opened her eyes and looked around her. Ghee lamps burned softly out of the darkness creating a low light that eased Sara's suffering and the stillness in the space where she lay washed over her in a soothing quiet. She tried to sit up but her body was too weak to move. Her body ached and her head throbbed but the searing pain that had assaulted her had now gone. She did not know where she was or how long she had been there.

It was obvious that someone was caring for her. She was laid upon a low bed in a cave that was decorated with soft fabrics and woven wall hangings. The scent of sandalwood hung heavily, permeating everything in the room. The floor was strewn with large silk carpets and the pitcher full of water beside her was made of the finest cut crystal.

She stirred, trying once more to sit up. Someone moved in the shadows and came towards her. She strained to look beyond the circle of lamps that cast a wall of light around her and deepened the dark shadows beyond her. She tried to speak but could only produce a faint rasp. The body passed through the line of light and the dark wrinkled face of an old man peered at her in concern.

“Pine ke liye kuchh lau? *Do you want a drink of something?*”

Sara lay back on her pillow trying to think what he had said. She recognized the words, but his accent was strange and her ear was not used to anything other than Mirpuri. She did want a drink; she was desperate for a drink of water. She tried to speak but could only manage to whisper, “Mujhe sirf pani chahiye.” *Just water.*

As he handed her the drink of water, she studied his face. He was definitely not a Pakistani, she could tell that from the shape of his face and also from the way he had spoken to her. She took a long drink, which seemed to ease her throat. She tried to speak again, her voice finding a little strength from the water. “Do you speak English?” Sara

knew it would be a long shot, but she wanted to try. She would find it difficult understanding his speech and maybe English could be a common ground for them.

The old man smiled. "I speak perfect English. I studied at Trinity College in my youth. I thought you were Pathan from your looks and yet your medallion intrigued me. How are you feeling? You have been ill for a long time. What were you doing here anyway?"

He helped Sara sit up and she looked around, taking in her surroundings. She was still underground, deep in the mountain. "What is this place? Why do you live underground?" she asked.

The man ignored her question and stirred a glass of red liquid before handing it to her. She looked at the glass and he told her to drink it. "What is it?" she asked warily. He responded with an air of gently authority. "It is a medicine for the red illness, Scarlet Fever, the sickness of Kali Ma. It will stop the illness descending into your bones and organs. Drink and you will recover quickly."

She sniffed the bright scarlet fluid. It smelled of nothing. She sipped it. It tasted of water. She drank it and as it trickled down her throat she felt something powerful move through her, adjusting her.

Lying back, Sara closed her eyes and flowed with the power that was traveling around her body. The old man pulled the covers around Sara. "Sleep now and you will heal."

Sara emerged from a heavily drugged sleep to find herself back on the floor before the Goddess. The room and bed she had been in were gone and she was totally alone. She sat up and shook her head in an attempt to clear her mind. Did she dream it? Did she fall asleep and meet the old man in her dreams?

She stood up and put her hand to her throat. It felt fine but she noticed her hand was red. She held both hands before her and looked closely at them. They looked as if they had been burned: the skin was starting to peel and her joints were stiff.

She looked around, realizing that she could see into the corners of the cavern. There were many oil lamps at various points of the large cavern, which lit up the whole space. So she had not dreamed it after all, there was someone around. She wandered around the cavern, trying to stretch her stiff peeling legs as she explored every inch of the cave. There was only one way in or out and that was the way she had originally come in.

Obviously whoever helped her wanted her to return to where she came from, but she knew simply by logic that the room in which she had slept could not have been located off the tunnel that she had squeezed through. How would they have got her, unconscious, to that room through such a narrow passage? So where was that room? There must be another way out, a hidden way.

She walked around the cave again, absently pulling off her peeling skin and this time looking at the floor. She noticed when she got to the statue of the Goddess that the floor was well used. It was not dusty nor did it have any bones in a semi circle from the Goddesses right side to the cave wall behind the statue.

She ran her hands over the wall behind the statue and came to a part that felt different. It was wood! She had found a moss covered door hidden behind the statue. She tried to open it but could not find a lock or a handle. Running her fingers around the base of the door, she found a catch that she fiddled with until the door clicked and swung slowly open. There was no sound as she crept through the doorway into a semi dark damp tunnel.

Using her dance training, she walked as quietly as she could down the tunnel, which was getting darker and darker. Shadows moved around her and Sara became frightened. She

felt the tunnel expand into a larger cave. Sara struggled to see in the dim light cast from the open door behind her.

Standing still for a moment, Sara became aware of the sound of breathing coming from the deep shadows: her skin ran cold with sweat and fear. Small sounds and movements echoed around her. Sara stopped herself from crying out or running back down the tunnel, back into the light of the big cavern.

There was a gentle low flame of a ghee lamp some feet before her. Moving slowly, she made her way towards it, talking to herself as she went. It did not cast any light beyond the lamp as the flame was almost out, but it did give a spot for her to aim to in the sea of darkness that surrounded her.

She had begun reciting the rosary without really thinking about it, searching for some strength, some protection in this dark hell deep below the earth. She smiled to herself when she thought about what she was reciting. Here she was, a converted Muslim, in Pakistan, and her instincts reverted her to what had protected her as a child; the rosary and the angels.

She reached out for the ghee lamp and beside it was an oil lamp, which Sara lit. The cave flooded with soft light and Sara turned around to look back into the cave. She physically leapt and screamed at the same time, backing herself against the cave wall. The cave was full of men, squatting still and quiet in the dark, obviously trying to avoid detection from her prying adventure.

They were very dark, non-Pakistani looking and were heavily armed. Each man was festooned with daggers, guns and bullets. And each man wore a length of silk, weighted at the bottom and tied to a belt at his waist. Some of the men had pulled out the cloth and were twisting it around their hands as if ready to strangle someone.

Sara's hand went instinctively to her throat. She was about to bolt when the old man who had helped her appeared out of the darkness. He held his hands up to the men and told Sara to stand still, not to move.

She smiled and the old man stared at her for a moment, as though she was mad. One of the gun toting men started to laugh, which caused the old man to smile and relax. The gunman stood up, still laughing and waved his arm to her. "Guts girl, I like that." He spoke in a perfect American accent, which totally pulled the rug out from under Sara's mind.

He looked as if he had just walked out from the costume set of an historical Indian film. Sara opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. Her legs were beginning to hurt and her mind could not process what was happening. The man with the American accent told her to sit down, but to move slowly. She instinctively went to his patch of floor, to sit near him for protection causing the Indian in the space next to her to quickly move away from her, muttering in a language that Sara could not understand.

The man with the American accent smiled and spoke to her. "You are unclean, you are a foreigner, he is on sacred duty and you could contaminate him. Tell us who you are and what you are doing here. You are not Pakistani, Bapu here told us that much." He waved at the old man who placed his hands together in greeting to Sara. She responded back with the same hand movement and she also bowed her head, just for good measure.

"They want to know who you are and why you came here, then they will decide if you will live or die," said the American. Sara blinked in shock; obviously these people did not like intrusions. She tried to keep her voice steady. "I don't know what to say. I was hiding in a cave and I found my way here. I'm sorry. I did not mean to intrude. Please let me go."

She watched the men, of which there were thirteen, as they looked to the tall American for translation. The American frowned at her. Sara could not take the stress any more.

She began to cry, pushing her hands to her face in an effort to stem the tears that were shaming her as they fell.

She shook her head, trying to pull herself together but her body had endured enough. Her legs were burning, her skin was falling off in layers and her feet were stiff. Her hands were hurting too, as was her womb. She placed her hand on her abdomen and thought about the child that lay there. She looked up as she heard the old man clicking his tongue; he shook his head and looked in sorrow at her. His quiet voice stung her heart. “Beti, daughter, your child has left your womb and is in the arms of the Goddess. He did not survive your illness. You were sick for many days. You will have one other child, it is seen.”

Sara looked at him in shock and despair. This was too much for her to take in. They watched as her strength finally collapsed around her, leaving her a vulnerable frightened young girl. The urge to cry out for her lost child pushed against her, causing her to shut her eyes and fight for control. Ajit, the American, looked at her and breathed out in annoyance.

“Tell me why you were in the cave, now!” Sara jumped from his command. The suffering that burned in her heart was pushed deeper inward as her fear grew. Whatever she said next would decide if she lived or died. Pulling on her last reserve of strength, she started to talk, slowly at first. The Bapu translated to the other men. They all hunched around listening to the story like children at bedtime and nodded to each other when Sara got to an important bit.

She reached beneath her clothing and pulled out the medallion that she had been given by the priest when she was a child. He had told her to always wear it beneath her clothing and never part with it again, that it would keep her safe. She had worn it hidden away ever since.

She told them about her arranged marriage and that she had murdered Zakir. Sara decided at that moment to wipe the Moulvi from her memory so that she could never make the mistake of implicating him. The tale of her murdering Zakir raised eyebrows among them and they nodded to each other. She told them of her flight from Dudial and her hiding in the hills that led her to the cave.

“I danced for the Goddess, the one back through there and something happened to me, I don’t know what.” Sara fell silent, dropping her head to her hands in exhaustion. When the Bapu finished talking and translating, he squatted before Sara. He looked deeply into her face for a few seconds before clearing his throat and speaking.

“Normally, someone who had violated our cave would die a terrible death, but it was foretold to us by the oracle that you would come here and that you were a daughter of the Goddess Kali, our eternal mother. Now that we are sure that you are the daughter in the prophecy, we must trust you.”

The American squatted down beside the Bapu and the Bapu kept the others informed of what was being said. Ajit pulled his long black beard for a moment as if trying to figure out what to say. It was obvious from the tone of his voice that he did not want to talk to Sara. “We are Thuggees, servants of the Goddess Kali. We are servants to the cycle of destruction and regeneration. We give the blood of the Asrkkapala, the skull bearing sacred blood, to the Goddess and serve her in anyway she demands.”

“I was called as a young man of nineteen to return to my native land from Miami, Florida. She called me, night after night until I could stand it no more. So I came here, guided by her voice. I guard her and kill any who pass over her mountain.”

“The oracle told us that one day, a daughter of Kali would come and she would release the five elders back into the world. The five elders will suck in the breath of the world from the four directions and the underworld, causing many to die. Then, and only then, can the Goddess be reborn into this world. She will walk through the gates of destruction

to bring regeneration to the world, dropping her seeds of renewal as she walks. Flames will leap from her feet and blood will drip from her lips, renewing the earth and giving new generation to the people.”

He stopped to get Sara’s reaction. She did not know how to react. The wild mythical story was wonderful, but it was just a story. Where they expecting her to take it literally? Her instincts had told her that Ajit, for one, did not believe what he had just told her. All her alarm bells rang as she looked at him. Maybe he was a CIA agitator, she had heard about them from Zakir. But she knew that the Bapu was genuine, she could feel that in her bones. She decided it would be prudent to follow on with anything that was said at the moment. To challenge the outlandish myth would probably mean death. If she had stumbled on a smuggling ring, hit squad or drugs ring, she really did not want to know.

Sara spoke confidently to the American. “Look, all I want to do is get out of this god forsaken land and go live somewhere where I can lead a normal life. Can you help me to get out and find somewhere? I have nothing to offer as payment.”

The man studied her for a few seconds. He nodded and spoke to Bapu in a language she did not understand. Bapu answered in an animated and excited way, shifting his old body this way and that as he spoke to Ajit. Ajit turned to the others, again talking in a strange tongue that was not even remotely like Hindi. Sara wanted to know what was being said, seeing as she was obviously the topic of conversation. She looked from one man to the other, trying to figure out if what they were saying was good or not.

Finally Ajit nodded to them all and turned to Sara. “They have all agreed. We will get you through Kashmir and to Delhi. From there, we will put you on a flight to Miami. I have friends in Florida who will help you. They have said that if the Goddess wants to do something, it will happen, we cannot plan it. She has brought you here and we will help you.”

Sara opened her mouth and closed it. She opened her mouth again and paused in mid breath. She loved the idea of getting out to America, seeing as she could not go back to the UK or to Pakistan. “There is just one problem, I don’t have a passport, or money or anything other than the clothes I stand up in,” said Sara.

Bapu waved a hand away as he spoke. “No problem, this is India. You can get anything here. Pepsi, passport, same thing, haina?”

Ajit moved closer to Sara, which made her skin crawl. Something about him was not right, but Sara did not want to appear unfriendly. She was aware that she was in a strange and potentially dangerous situation, deep in the center of a mountain surrounded by assassins who did not wish to be found.

“Look, I have good friends in a place off the coast of Florida, in the keys. They run a series of T-shirt shops and I was their head of security. They will look after you if I ask them to,” said Ajit.

Sara raised an eyebrow. “Head of security, for T-shirts?” Sara asked. Ajit just smiled and turned to a man beside him. “Chai pinni hai?” All the men nodded. He got up to leave and Sara called out to him, “Could I have a cup of tea too?” Ajit did not stop or turn, but nodded as he walked off into the darkness.

CHAPTER TEN

The following morning Bapu shook her awake and threw clean clothes at her. He told her to be in the big cavern in three minutes. Sara dived out of bed and put on clothes that were meant for a young boy. There was a turban length of cloth that she had no idea what to do with, so she slung it over her shoulder and ran down the tunnel in her bare feet. They had not been able to find any shoes that would fit her.

On entering the cavern she slowed down in respect of the Goddess enthroned there. The men were sat in a circle at the feet of the Deity waiting for Sara. Once she arrived and had taken a place on the floor, slightly away from the men, Bapu started to hum and throw herbs in to a fire that had been lit at the feet of the Kali. He chanted through the smoke and the assembled men closed their eyes, allowing the chant to carry them off.

Bapu's resonant chant pulled at Sara to also close her eyes. The chants and the smoke pulled her in to a deep still trance. The more smoke she breathed in, the further into a trance she went. She was aware that Bapu was moving about as he chanted and as the sound got nearer to her she realized he was going to each and everyone of them.

Finally he stood before her, his chant vibrating through her body. Something was wiped across her lips and Sara instinctively licked. It tasted sweet and she licked some more in search of the sweetness. A heavy blanket was placed around her but she did not open her eyes. The chant had stilled her to a point where she did not want to break the spell that was being woven.

She pulled the blanket around her and lay down, curled up like a child. Her mind produced strange visions, daydreams, as she lay half awake and half asleep; in a twilight world filled only with the chanting.

A heavy dream overtook her, pulling her through the floor. She found herself in a labyrinth of tunnels cut deep within the mountain. Sara traveled at great speed down the tunnels until she saw a bright light that urged her to follow. She followed the light until it opened into a low roofed cave. The walls were covered with paintings of terrifying demons, their eyes watching Sara's every move. Spirits moved around her, whispering to her, taunting her until the light drove them away.

The light hovered over some large pottery jars, each one big enough to hold a man. They were placed carefully in one corner of the cave. Each jar had a series of symbols scratched in the dirt around its base. She tried to reach forward and touch the jars, but she could not reach over the symbols in the dirt; they created a protective barrier around the jars that Sara could not break through. The magic entwined within the symbols was too powerful.

She knew that she had to release something that was in the jars but she could not get close enough to do anything.

Do this for me, as an act of love. Do my bidding and unravel the work of those who despise and fear me. In time you will come to recognize those who would dare to challenge me and you will destroy them in my name.

The voice of Kali coursed through Sara's mind, emptying her consciousness of anything other than service to her Goddess.

She awoke with a start and moaned from the pain in her limbs. She must have been sat there for hours. Everyone else had left except Ajit who sat patiently in the corner, waiting for her to emerge. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry," she mumbled, "I must have fallen asleep. I had the strangest dream."

Ajit held up his hand for her to be silent. "Do not tell me what you have dreamed, it is a pact between you and the Goddess, She who must be loved by all men," said Ajit.

Sara frowned. How did he know that she had dreamed of the Goddess? She was about to ask him when Bapu entered from behind the Goddess and greeted Sara.

“Ah, you are back with us, I was a little concerned that the nectar might have killed you.” Sara became alarmed and confused. “You gave me something that could kill me? Are you mad?” Ajit came and sat beside her. He tried to explain.

“You were given nectar of the Goddess, the seal of service to Kali. Do you not remember a sweetness that was placed on your lips?” Sara instinctively put her fingers to her lips as she remembered the honey tasting touch as she had listened to the chanting.

Ajit watched her face as he continued. “The nectar opens your mind so that she can show you what she wants you to do. You have to be part of this otherwise the men will not travel with you, no matter what Bapu or the astrological charts tell them. Now they will be confident that you are under the control of Kali and will not betray them. The Goddess in their vision gave them each a task and it is important that their task is carried out straight away. When the tasks are completed, we can begin our journey over the mountains.”

Ajit straightened up and put his arm out to help Sara get up. “How come you did not take the nectar?” she asked. Again Sara got the instinct that there was something not right about this man and she was surprised that Bapu was not aware of it. Bapu seemed to be the priest and head of the Thuggees but Ajit was the gun that they followed. Ajit did not answer, but merely shrugged his shoulders.

She accepted Bapu’s hand and stood up to tell him what had happened. “I was given a task to do, but I’m not sure what it means or even if I can do it. It is something deep down in the mountain. What should I do?”

The Bapu looked at her intently before answering. “She has given you a task? Then you are truly our sister. You must go now and complete what has been requested of you.” Ajit looked concerned and tried to stop Sara. Her hackles began to rise; some anger deep within her wanted to tear him to pieces. He was not really concerned about her, she could

feel that. He did not want her wandering about the mountain for his own reason. What was he hiding?

“Bapu, she does not know this land, this mountain. It will not be safe for her.” The American was becoming agitated and his voice could not hide his feelings. Sara stood with her two feet firmly planted in the dust and her eyes locked on to Ajit’s face. Her voice was low and full as she challenged him. “The Goddess has asked me to do a task for her. If she did not think that I would be able to do it, she would not have asked me. Are you trying to say that your knowledge and wisdom is greater than that of Kali?”

Ajit’s eyes were the only thing that gave away his sadistic hatred. His face relaxed as he apologized but his eyes remained cold and accusing as Sara turned away to avoid his glare.

Bapu stood before Sara and smiled. “Would you like an old companion to be aside you in your work?” Sara looked into the face of the old man and knew that it would be good for her to take him. She nodded and the Bapu smiled wider. “It would be a great honor to walk with the daughter of Kali,” said the Bapu.

The Bapu had to struggle to keep up with Sara as she wound her way around the many tunnels cut deep inside the mountain by prehistoric underground rivers. She held her lamp up high, casting a strange light along the length of the pathway that they followed. Bapu did not ask her where they were going or why. He was curious to discover what this strange girl would lead him to.

After they had twisted and turned down the many tunnels, Sara began to sense that the cave she had seen in her vision was before them. The light that she saw in her dream guided her. It now shone deep within her, driving her onwards deep into the heart of the mountains.

Strange faces started to appear on the walls as they walked deeper and deeper into the mountain. The faces were demons, painted in brilliant colors that jumped to life under the light of the lamp. The wild eyes of tigers, and warriors riding lions watched them as they pushed further and further down in to the earth.

Bapu held up his lamp and shook his head at the wondrous sights that lay before them. He had never known that these tunnels and carvings were here, even though he had spent all of his life in service to the Goddess of the mountain. He had first been brought to the ancient Kali cave as a small boy when his parents gave him in service to the old priest. He thought that over the years he had explored every inch of the mountain. But looking at the wall paintings around him, it was obvious that there was an Ancient temple complex hidden deep within the mountain.

This finally convinced him that the young girl he picked up from the feet of the Goddess was the girl in the prophecy, the Thirteenth manifestation. A girl who would come from the direction of the setting sun, a girl who would awaken those who are to be awoken, a girl who would take all life across the abyss and into the plains of death. His mind struggled to remember and understand the ancient Song of Kali that he had studied as a young man. But now, as always, the meanings of the prophecy eluded him.

The further they walked into the heart of the mountain, the more elaborate the paintings became until they reached a point where the stone itself had been carved. Beautiful snakes, frogs, rabbits, birds and lizards were carved out of the stone, their eyes set with precious gems.

Bapu whistled as he looked at the immense carvings that lined the way. "I had never realized that all this was down here. I knew that there were tunnels but I never thought that there was anything like this. And it is not Indian either. I don't know what this is. It looks almost Tibetan, and yet Tibet is hundreds of miles away to the east."

Sara could not look, she was driven onwards towards the cave and Bapu had to run to catch up with her. They finally came to a part of the tunnel that made them both gasp. The occasional stone carvings ended and what had begun left them both speechless. The whole tunnel had been carved out so that an entrance had been fashioned out of the stone tunnel itself.

The entrance was square, as opposed to the archways Sara was used to. Each side pillar was an Elephant rearing on its hind legs and the sculptures had been leafed in gold. The capstone was the upper torso of a woman with her arms outstretched, her face staring down at any intruders. The face was that of a demon woman with fangs; ruby chips were placed around her mouth to look like blood and her eyes were diamonds that flashed in the light. Her breasts hung down and each nipple had a pearl drop hanging on the end to look like milk.

As they passed slowly through the archway, Bapu put his hand to his shoulder in the sign of the Thuggee and Sara bowed her head in respect of the Guardian that they passed under. Sara looked up and the Guardian's body continued on the roof of the tunnel, stretching out to create a canopy under which they passed. Her feet rested on two further pillars that marked the entrance to the cave that Sara had sought.

The feet stretched on tiptoe, resting on the heads of two lions with demon faces. Each toenail of the Guardian's feet was decorated with a precious stone of a different color and the point of contact with the lion's head was marked with a circle of silver and diamonds. The lions stood proud and erect, guarding the cave entrance. It was only when they got closer that they realized that the lions had many eyes that seemed to bore right into the traveler's soul.

They passed unhindered into the cave, which was a circular room with a low ceiling. Beautiful images of mountains, birds and ancient trees lined the wall, creating a forest deep within the mountainside. The trees extended across the ceiling to create a canopy from which hung fragments of fabric decorated with strange symbols. Sara ducked out of

the way: she did not want to disturb something that may have hung untouched for thousands of years.

Something within her made her stop and look at the floor. She held her lamp up so that she could see. In the exact center of the room was a stone. It was smooth and round, and had beautiful patterns laid out around it. The patterns looked as if they were made from beads laid in intricate shapes. But as she bent closer she realized they were tiny cut gems and pearls. They had been laid in a ritual pattern around the central stone.

Sara reached out to touch one, but Bapu caught her hand. He shook his head and was visibly scared. His fearful voice barely whispered as he warned Sara.

“This is dangerous, you must not disturb it. I have heard legends of this from my Grandmother but I didn’t think it actually existed. It is the stone at the center of all things, the world in its entirety. The pattern around it is the shape of existence, called the Kali yantra. Without this pattern, the world would cease to be. This stone is the Goddess herself, in her most powerful and deadly form. She has no human shape; therefore she has no understanding of human needs, only planetary needs. That makes her, for us, very dangerous.”

“There used to be legends long ago that before the Aryans came to this land, there lived here another race which came from afar. They were known as the tall ones from the Garden, a city of gold far away on an island beyond our horizons to the west. The tall ones brought their powerful magic and created a race that would serve them.”

“The giants, however, became too powerful and turned their face away from the Goddess. In her anger, she made their children shorter, and with each successive generation, they got shorter and shorter. Some fled from this settled land and hid high in the mountains to the east. The rest stayed here, mixing in with the Aryan invaders.”

“This stone and pattern must never be touched and the secret of its whereabouts must die with you, do you understand? You must speak to no one of what you have seen. Do you

fear the Goddess?” Sara nodded vigorously. “Then stretch out your hand to me and you will tie your fate to this secret.”

She held out her hand and Bapu, in one quick movement, sliced her hand across the palm with a sharp knife. She yelped and tried to pull back but Bapu grabbed her hand and squeezed so that the blood fell upon the pattern. “Now you are joined in blood to this place,” said Bapu. “Your soul carries the strength of the secret and your body carries the burden of the protector. You must be the guardian of this place; no matter where in the world you are, your soul is linked here in constant service. If the place is in danger, you will know. If this place is harmed or violated, terrible powers will be unleashed into the outside world.”

Sara looked at him. She knew that he spoke the truth, but she also felt that there was something about the place that she was not grasping. Something that Bapu did not know about. She looked at him, questioningly. “So what about you? Are you not also going to vow your guardianship of this place?”

He looked at her, his lips muttering and his eyes full of fear. She had said it half jokingly but she felt a fear building up in the old man. “I did terrible things in the past. I was born into this life to make amends for my stupidity. I have helped you, and now my debt is finished. I must die the way I died before, but this time it will be with honor and devotion to my Goddess, not in hate and spite. Once we have left this mountain, I know my fate awaits.” She wanted to tell him to stop being so stupid, but something held her tongue.

She stood up and walked around the cave, holding up her light so that she could look closer at the wall paintings. In among the trees and birds, hidden cleverly, were paintings of women. The women had been painted in the same colors as the trees and foliage, so that Sara had to look carefully to find them. The bark of a tree held the image of one woman, seemingly resting against the tree trunk.

Inching carefully around the edge of the cave, she looked intently at each section of this ancient forest sleeping in the depth of the Kali Mountain. A woman with intense red hair and green eyes emerged out of foliage that leaned away from a wind. A tiny deep black face with blue eyes peeped impishly out from a dewdrop hanging off the end of a leaf. The more Sara looked, the more she found.

Sara counted thirteen women in total. The last one, which was by the cave entrance, fascinated Sara. It showed a dark haired woman holding out her hand. In the palm of her hand was a collection of strange tiny creatures emerging out of darkness. The other hand held a bunch of severed heads, held by their hair.

The picture unsettled her, making her feel uneasy. She turned around, calling on Bapu to move. “Come on, we are not where we are supposed to be yet, we have another cave to find. It is interesting that these paintings and carvings look Tibetan, and that the legend you talked of put the giants in a refuge in the eastern Himalayas. I wonder if this is a remnant of a culture that went on to be Tibetan?” She posed the question to herself more than the Bapu as she poked around the cave looking for another exit.

She found it just as she finished her sentence. It was a crack in the rock that had been filled with small stones, sticks and dirt. She started to clear it with her hands, scooping out the earth and dropping it by her feet. The Bapu held the lamp as she dug. She started to sing as she worked.

Where as thi bin since I saw thee.... on Ilkley moor bha tat, where as thi bin since I saw thee? Where as thi bin since I saw thee, on Ilkley moor bha tat, on Ilkley moor bha tat, on Ilkley moor bha tat. Thas bin a courtin' Mary Jane...

As she got to the second verse she broke through and a puff of foul air caught in her throat. “Phew, what a disgusting smell.” She turned to the Bapu who was looking at her as though she was an alien.

“What on earth were you singing? It sounded awful,” said Bapu. Sara laughed at his question and at his serious face. “It’s a folk song from Yorkshire that I used to sing when I was a kid. Don’t ask me what it’s about because I haven’t got a clue,” replied Sara.

She pulled out more earth and kicked the rest through to the other side.” Are you ready?” she said to Bapu, who nodded. Sara paused before squeezing through the crack. She knew something was important on the other side, but her childhood fears arose in their thousands to taunt her as her imagination ran riot. What would she find?

She had joked and talked her way through the dark tunnels, not letting her fears take a hold on her. But now, as she peered through the crack into the darkness, she smelt death and her whole body bristled against the dark.

They squeezed through the crack, finding themselves in another circular cave with walls covered in paintings of elaborate demons. In the shadows stood five large pottery jars, each one big enough to hold a human being. Intricate patterns half covered in dust stood guard around each jar; Sara looked closely at the pattern, which was painted in blood. Dark energy swirled all around Sara and Bapu, whispering, threatening, and awakening curses long dormant. Eyes painted on the jars stared at Sara in hatred, daring her to step into the circle of patterns.

She knew she had to release what ever was in the jars. She picked up a heavy rock from the entrance blockage and threw it at the nearest jar. The jar cracked but did not open. She tried again. Bapu screamed at her to stop, but when she turned to look at him, he saw the eyes of Kali looking back at him. This was what she had come to do.

He stood back and crouched in the corner, hiding from the power that Sara confronted. She threw a rock again; this time part of the jar fell away revealing a large chrysalis. Sara pulled and smashed the jar away from the object within it until no part of the pottery was left. She looked carefully at the chrysalis, holding her lamp up close to see what was inside. A pair of eyes stared out of the membrane at Sara.

Her cry brought Bapu to her side. They held the lamp up closely and saw the body of a man, perfectly preserved, curled up in ball with his face pushed against the membrane that enclosed him.

Sara knew instantly what her task was; to release these souls. She could feel the soul of the man still trapped in the body, even though he was dead. Her whole body screamed in a united choir for her to turn and run. The tightness in her throat mounted and Sara talked to herself in an effort to calm the voices that raged through her mind. She knew she had to release the souls from eternal exile and open the door of death for them.

Turning the lamp, Sara tried to get a good view of the body while talking to Bapu about how she was going to approach the task. He nodded intently, saying that there were ways, mentioned briefly in the ancient texts that referred to the trapping of a soul to stop the cycle of rebirth. The Bapu shook his head as he spoke of such a terrible thing.

“Such a trapping would stop the soul from ever reaching the state of Godhead, stopping them from partaking of the natural order of life and death. It is a terrible crime, the worse than can be inflicted on anyone. It denies them a part in the universe, a part in creation, and it denies the flame within the chance to express itself in the human and inner worlds.”

He stood, shaking his head in disbelief at the terrible crime that had been committed. Sara took out her knife and cut through the membrane, allowing the body to unfold out of its casing. The body slumped out on the floor: although it was dry, the features were perfectly preserved.

Sara looked at the skin more closely. It had many ritual tattoos and some of them had been painted over. She gently rubbed the paint off, allowing the patterns underneath to emerge. The patterns were similar to the ones in the previous cave around the stone. His eyes had been replaced with eyes fashioned from moonstones, which gave them the

staring look and his mouth was blocked by a piece of cloth that had been rammed down his throat. She had a deep instinct that she could release the soul through the mouth.

She pulled out a long silk scarf out of the mouth. Upon it were many strange symbols and patterns: magic used to trap the soul in the body. She felt the power within the cloth as she pulled, and she felt the power of the ritual flow out of the cloth; a ritual that had been performed so long ago to imprison these poor people.

When the last of the cloth was pulled from the throat of the body, she punched hard into the face of the man. Her hand had moved without thought, shocking her as she made contact with the body's face. The face collapsed under her fist and a strange sound emitted that caused both her and Bapu to freeze. The body breathed out a huge breath from the hole in its face. The breath touched Sara's face, a feeling she would never forget.

She moved on to the next pot, repeating the same process, this time for a woman. When she had finished, the cave was littered with the bodies of five men and women, their faces punched out and their breath hanging in Sara's memory. When she was satisfied that everyone had been released, she and Bapu pulled the bodies into a pile in the center of the cave.

"They need to be burned, everyone of them, so that the form of the body no longer exists. Then their souls will truly be free." Sara's voice was full of urgency. Bapu looked confused." How are we going to burn them? With what? And won't it be dangerous in such a closed area?"

Sara looked around. She was not sure what would happen, but her instincts told her to burn them, and that was what she was going to do. "I don't know what is going to happen," she replied, "but I know that I must burn them. Help me Bapu, be ready to run."

She gathered up the last bits of the membranes, which were dry and brittle. Fumbling for her matches, she told Bapu to stand by the entrance. As she held the first match to the bodies, flames shot up from the desiccated flesh and the two bolted through the crack, ran around the Yantra and fled down the tunnels. Sara panicked for a moment, forgetting the way through the labyrinth. She told herself to be calm and allowed her mind to talk to her, guiding her this way and that.

They heard the roar of the fire, and above that noise, a wail. Sara held her hands to her ears as she ran. The stress and fear finally broke in her and she sobbed as she ran through the darkness. As they changed directions around the tunnels and began to climb slowly upwards, the sound faded away and stillness was restored to the subterranean world of Kali.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

That night Sara dreamed of mountains. Faces appeared before her, searching for her, reaching out to communicate with her. They had no features until she spoke to them. She asked them who they were. They responded by transforming into men and women of great stature and beauty. Their hair, fashioned in a stiffened ruff, looked strange and powerful. Light flowed from their deep orange robes and Sara watched their hands in fascination as they moved gracefully, revealing intricate patterns tattooed upon the palms.

But it was their faces that Sara gazed on in awe. Each one had a face that reflected a purity and balance that Sara had never seen in any human before. One of the men held a tattooed hand up in greeting. He spoke to her, his voice sharp and musical as it resounding around her mind, clearing away the clutter.

You have given us the greatest gift any soul could have. Your kindness has released us back in to the cycle of life, death and the inner worlds so that we may resume our work. Thank you, daughter of Kali, may blessing descend upon you and wisdom ascend to you.

He reached over and touched her on the head. Sara awoke with a jump. She sat for a moment trying to get her bearings. The faces swam before her and she wondered if her dream was wishful thinking or whether the faces were those of the people she had released in the cave.

She was wide-awake but she could tell from the stillness that it was night and everyone was asleep. She tiptoed out of the room and went into the main cave to sit before Kali. Bapu was already sat before the Goddess. He looked up as Sara entered the chamber.

He nodded to her as she sat beside him. In a quiet voice, he recounted a dream about the people they had released. She told him about her dream and her description of the people

was the same as Bapu's. Sara now knew that it was a real contact, they had managed to reach her and Bapu to say thank you.

Sara felt really good inside. For once, she had done something right. She looked up at the Goddess, her jeweled eyes glittering in the light of the oil lamps. "Bapu, where did all the money come from to build such a Goddess? Who built her? Where did all this come from?"

Bapu looked at the dust by his feet as though the answer lay hidden in the floor. His voice echoed around the empty cavern as Sara listened. "The caves have been here before time was measured. I presume that what we found down there was the original temple from thousands of years ago. But here in this cave temple, people have come to worship Kali Ma for hundreds of years."

"There has been a tradition of Thuggees, the assassins of the Goddess, in this cave for almost six hundred years, but the statue is fairly recent. Two hundred years ago Muslims invaded this sanctuary and many precious jewels were stolen. The sacred texts were destroyed, the Goddess herself was smashed to pieces: the whole place was desecrated. The sanctuary was rebuilt and the Goddess restored with the profits of the local moneylenders in Kotli and surrounding areas. All the moneylenders were Hindu and they each gave of their wealth to restore the Goddess. We made the Muslims pay for their sin of desecration."

Sara shook her head remembering the conversation between the bandits on the hills surrounding Kotli. Her voice was heavy as she spoke to Bapu. "She is beautiful, but at what price? The Muslim women are her daughters too. And they suffered terribly because of the moneylenders. Their children died from lack of food and medicine because there was no money, the moneylenders had taken it all."

“Bapu, the Goddess must fight her own battles. She punishes those hard enough that steal from her; there is no need for others to exact a price too. It is all very sad. And why should the wives and daughters pay the price of their men’s transgressions?”

A horn sounded around the caves to herald the morning and the men prepared for the journey to Delhi. Sara made herself look as much like a boy as she could before strapping a pack to her back. She placed her knife in her belt and checked the other one that Ajit had given her which was strapped to her leg under her Shalwar, her trousers. She tied on the boots that the Bapu had produced for her out of nowhere; she was finally ready to go.

Sara was nervous. She had been tucked away safe in the cave for quite a while and now she had to face the guns, the police and the murders that were routine in the area. Bapu had explained that tunnels would take them under the cease-fire line to the Indian side of the mountain. But reaching India, he had said, would only be the start of their problems.

As they finally reached the end of the tunnels, Sara caught a glimpse of the early morning sun through a small cave entrance that was partially blocked by a wooden board. One by one, they squeezed out of the entrance and Sara emerged into the sunshine, the brightness blinding her momentarily. The light stunned her, trapping her like an animal. Someone grabbed and shoved her to the ground.

As she looked back to the cave entrance, she could see that the board was covered on the outside by creepers. Voices echoed below them. They all lay silent in the grass, daring not to breathe while waiting for the border patrol to pass. After a few minutes, all went quiet and Ajit grabbed Sara by the collar and yanked her on to her feet. He took out a length of bloodstained cloth and started to wind it around Sara’s throat. She looked at him in confusion. “You cannot talk, because some one tried to slit your throat.” Sara nodded and put her hand to the cloth.

They started to trek down the side of the mountain, keeping close to the tree line. They had walked unimpeded for over two hours when Ajit motioned everyone to find a shelter

in the trees and rest for fifteen minutes. Sara complained about the madness of hiking in the midday heat. “Exactly,” said Ajit. “No one else is stupid enough to be out at this time, it is particularly hot today for this time of year. So we should take advantage of the situation and make as much progress as possible.”

Ajit stood back up and turned away from Sara, just in time to see a panther leap on to Bapu as he sat beneath the shelter of a rock. Sara turned and cried out, silenced immediately by Ajit clamping his hand around her mouth. He motioned for no one to shoot, which would alert the border patrol.

He knew from one look at Bapu that the old man was finished. The lion had punctured the old mans artery in his neck with the first bite. Bapu did not fight or cry out. Instead he lay still as he bled to death in the grip of the large cat.

The animal, catching the change of wind direction, smelled the other humans and panicked. The men threw sticks and stones as he bolted into the trees, leaving the assembled company to stand in shock and disbelief. Three of the Thuggees looked in all directions for more animals. It was unheard of for an animal to attack like that in broad daylight, unless he was protecting a mate.

Sara began to cry. She remembered that Bapu had told her he was going to die, and that it would be the same way that he died in a last life. She traced the cut in her hand, where he had exacted a blood price for her silence. She closed her eyes as he died, praying for Kali Ma to guide him in death. Through the prayer, the voice of the Dark Goddess drifted through her mind.

He is with me already. My lips have drained his life, and my arms have given him solace. All is now balanced. He is free of his debt.

Two of the Thuggees came and laid a hand on her head. It touched them that she would grieve for their father and they nodded to her, smiling through their sadness. It was an

honorable way for a devotee to be killed; by an animal held sacred by the Goddess. They tried hard to get that message through to Sara.

But it did not work. Sara continued to sob quietly. She had grown close to Bapu in the short time of their adventure but also she grieved for everyone who had died around her. It seemed that anyone who touched her life was doomed; all she had ever known was death in one form or another.

They lay hidden among the trees, taking a short break after an hour of digging in the searing heat. They were preparing to bury the body on the edge of the wood. Bapu would have been horrified at the idea of being buried, but they could not light a fire here to burn him. The men had argued long and hard with Ajit, causing a rift among them, which had settled into an uneasy silence. Ajit had refused any option but to bury the old man and he threatened the assembled group in such a way that they started to dig while cursing under their breath.

Sara could not understand what Ajit had said to them but she could see the anguish in their eyes at the thought of their Bapu not joining with the sacred waters allowing the Ganges to carry his ashes to the Mother.

She quietly knelt by the body and pulled out her knife. Two of the men stopped digging and watched. Sara cut a good length of his hair and curled it into a pouch. "We will burn his hair in honor of his body and his ashes *will* float down a river accompanied by our prayers." She spoke in Mirpuri, knowing that even though they did not use that tongue, they understood enough of it.

Later, the men silently passed around food and water as they sat watching the sun go down. They talked in muted tones and stopped frequently to gaze into space and mumble under their breath. Bapu, a name that meant father, was a father to all of them. He had nurtured and taught them, taking each one of them in and giving them a home. He was the center of life in the mountain caves, and now without Bapu, they floundered. Ajit did

not waste time establishing himself as new leader. He talked to them with authority, and they responded.

Sara found herself a small shelter under a rock and pulled her chador close in an effort to comfort herself. She did not react to the lizards that occasionally bounded over her, or to the spiders that lowered themselves to her body to inspect the intruder. She tried to sleep, but it just would not come.

She did not hear someone approach her quietly and she jumped when she felt the hand on her shoulder. Ajit put his finger to his mouth to tell her to be quiet. “Are you all right? I was worried about you, why are you not asleep?”

He lay down beside her and looked into her face that reflected the moonlight. Sara felt uncomfortable. He was a lot closer and friendlier than he should have been. She was not used to such close contact from someone who was not her husband. And yet she craved comfort and companionship.

Ajit could feel that she was unsure of how to read the situation. He looked at Sara’s thin frame, her hipbones jutting out of her clothes and her big eyes pleading for protection. Protection was not what he wanted to give Sara, but he knew he had to tread carefully if he did not want to blow everything. He held his arms open and smiled, “Come here, I will hold you like I hold my little sister when she is frightened.”

Sara, desperate for comfort, cuddled up to him and nuzzled into the dirt stained clothes. For the first time in a long time, she felt safe. She drifted into sleep.

She did not hear the men returning. She had not even been aware that they had gone anywhere. Ajit managed to disentangle himself from Sara and greet the returning Thuggees. They looked in surprise as they saw Ajit holding a sleeping Sara. He smiled back, tilting his head to one side in triumph, suggesting much to the men, which he knew to be untrue.

They unloaded their pouches and dropped their sacks, revealing the spoils from the nights work as they spilled out on to the ground. Ajit walked through the small piles of gold jewelry and gems, nodding and smiling at particularly nice pieces. “I see there was a wedding. Was the bride beautiful?” asked Ajit.

One of the men smiled as he held up a long black length of plaited hair. Ajit raised a brow, whistling at the length of the hair.” Those Muslim women really know how to grow hair, our women are becoming too modern,” said the Thuggee.

Ajit paused; he was about to say something else when his train of thought shifted. He changed the tone in his voice, trying to sound casual. “Did any of you meet the man I said might be waiting in the village for me?”

One of the older men, one who was dark and short stepped forward, throwing a bloodied envelope at Ajit. His speech was slurred from the nectar of the Goddess he had drunken earlier. His eyes held the glint of visions and madness as he told Ajit that the man had struggled well as he was being slaughtered.

Ajit wanted to kill the little blood-encrusted idiot that stood before him, but he knew that if he did that, his cover could be blown. He picked up the envelope and stuffed it down his belt before picking up his blanket and stomping off to find a place peaceful enough to sleep. He knew that the men were too high on the nectar to sleep yet. They had all experienced the terrifying dreams that Kali sent when they drank of her nectar. It was better to stay awake.

As soon as the sun rose Ajit walked to the edge of the forest and looked down the mountainside to the river and the village beyond, the village that would wake up to the carnage of Kali. He opened the envelope and tipped out the contents. He fingered the

small locker key that had a New Deli airport tag attached, tucked the credit card in his pouch and read the letter.

Everything was in place, everything was as it should be and the girl turning up would be an added bonus. No one would suspect two American tourists leaving the country and going home. First he had to get her a passport and get her cleaned up. To do that, he had to get her out of Kashmir and away from the Thuggees.

He had enjoyed being with them; they had stirred something ancient in his blood that he had not expected. His father and generations before him had all been devotees of Kali, and his family in America were all too happy when he declared out of the blue that he wanted to discover his roots and return to India.

It was a perfect cover for him, and the Thuggees had accepted him with open arms. He had been tempted to remove one of the huge ruby eyes from the Goddess in the cavern before they left, he could have sold it for a fortune. But superstition had crept upon him causing him to despise himself. There was no room for weakness in this job. He tore the letter up and held a match to it. Once he was sure it was fully burned, he trampled the fragments into the earth and went to wake Sara.

They trundled slowly through the hills towards Galuthi, a small town where they would eat and get transport. Sara noticed as they got nearer to the town, the men hid their silk scarves that were weighted with pennies and took on more of a subservient stance. Sara was told to keep her face down, half hidden in the chador that she had wrapped around her head to protect her skin from the scorching sun.

She had already burned a deep brown, which was to her advantage, but her skin had gone much darker in patches where she had peeled from the Scarlet Fever. Her face was now badly patched and Sara desperately tried to protect her skin from further damage.

They squatted on the hillside above the village, looking at Galuthi below. Ajit squatted beside her. “We will part with the men here, as they have other places they must go to. I will take you to Delhi and get you out of the country.”

Sara nodded. She was glad to have to part ways with the men. She sometimes felt as if one of them was going to sneak up behind her and strangle her in the middle of the night. And yet, they had all shown her levels of kindness that had surprised her. She did not understand them and she feared what she did not understand.

Ajit stood up as the Thuggees came and squatted around her. Sara became afraid. They all nodded and smiled. One approached her, squatting down in the dirt and looking deep into her eyes. He pulled out a length of red silk that put Sara on her guard. These were the lengths that they used to strangle people in their late night raids. He hung it loosely around her neck and opened her hand. He poured the contents of a small pouch into her hand and watched her face as she looked, stunned.

In her hand was a small collection of the most exquisite rubies and diamonds. She looked to Ajit in astonishment. One of the men spoke to her in halting Mirpuri. “You our sister. You daughter Kali. She bring, you help open way her return. We give you gifts in her honor. Please give us blessing. One day we meet again, sister. It is foretold.”

Sara looked at Ajit again in panic. They were all sat around her waiting for a blessing. What was she to do? She asked Ajit who asked the leader. Ajit smiled at the man’s request, he was clearly enjoying this. He translated the request for Sara. “They wish to be anointed with your menstrual blood. They know that you are bleeding. It is the greatest gift that Kali can bestow. I would not refuse if I were you.”

Sara was shocked. “And what am I supposed to do, wipe my blood rag over their heads? Come on Ajit, this is pushing it too far.” Her voice edged on anger.

Ajit's face grew dark. He did not want to insult the men causing them to take back their jewels. His mind had calculated the fortune that had just been poured into Sara's hands; such moneys would be of great use to him. "Do not snub these men, they will kill you. Do as they ask, I do not care how you do it. We are wasting precious time." He hissed at her in a low voice.

She had never been so embarrassed and humiliated in her life. Grabbing a large leaf, Sara stomped off behind the bushes. She squatted and bled on to the leaf. After rearranging herself, she returned red faced to the waiting men. She went to each man, and wiped the blood on his forehead. When she got to Ajit, he shook his head. "No, you don't need to do that to me, I'm not that into it."

Before he could stop her, she wiped the blood across his face and as she did that, something flashed through her mind. A vision of his face covered in blood swept before her. It vanished before she could comprehend what she had seen. She said nothing but turned her face away from his as the nausea rose in her throat.

She bundled up the gems that had been given to her, carefully tucking them in to the folds of her clothes and hiding them away from prying fingers. She said good-bye to the men, thanking each one yet trying to avoid eye contact. It was not from Asian manners that she cast her eyes down, but from the deep humiliation and confusion that she felt. She knew that the ceremony of the blood was important and ancient, but it still did not overcome the deep-seated taboo that she was raised with in Malik's household; that women's blood is dirty, unclean and shameful.

She wondered as she walked beside Ajit towards the village, whether she would have reacted in the same way if Grandmother had brought her to adulthood. She knew that Gypsies took out their first blood and buried it deep in the earth, as a gift to the mother. In fact, she had secretly done just that, burying the blood stained cloth at the bottom of Malik's garden.

But she had not had the celebration that she would have had in her own community, nor the power to threaten the men with ritual uncleansing if she touched them while she was bleeding. She had been raised to not speak of it in any way.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As they reached the small town, Ajit told her to squat at the side of the road and look at the dirt while he negotiated a ride in to Jammu with a man stood by his truck. Ten minutes later, they were hurtling towards Jammu at a speed that made Sara extremely uncomfortable. She remembered not to speak or look up. Ajit told the driver that the boy was simple, an idiot. She looked out of the window for the whole journey, not responding to the children who jumped up to ride on the side of the truck, or to those who waved at her as they sped by.

They reached Jammu as the sun went down and Ajit went to bang on the door of the man who hired cars. They argued for a while before Ajit waved money in front of his face. The car man spat, pulled at his dhoti and scratched his chest. Sara tried to sneak a look at the man. She could only see his feet without looking up and his toenails were the dirtiest that Sara had ever seen.

The telegraph pole propped Sara up as she dreamed she was a housewife in Bradford. At this moment in time, that was all she wanted. Still, she thought, with the fortune in jewels that she now had, she could start a good life somewhere. Yet where would she go to feel at home?

The dirty car hire man took Ajit to a car that looked like it had been through ten world wars. They argued before the man finally handed over the keys and Ajit whistled for her to come out of the shadows. He talked to her like a servant, demanding that she fetch the bags they had brought with them.

Within minutes they were driving through the dark towards Pathankot. “Are we not going to stop and sleep? I’m tired,” moaned Sara. Ajit frowned and looked in the rear view mirror for what seemed like the hundredth time.

His voice did not hide his irritation as he snapped at Sara. “We must keep going. We have to be at Pathankot for morning, ready to catch a plane to Delhi. From there we will get your passport and get out as soon as possible. Now shut up and get some sleep.” Sara did not understand what all the rush was about. She was too tired to argue and shut her eyes, immediately falling asleep.

It was still dark when they reached the small airstrip and Sara was fast asleep. She awoke suddenly, finding herself alone in the car at the side of a small terminal building. She could hear Ajit’s voice as she wound the window down. He was speaking to someone over the phone and it took a few seconds for Sara to realize that he was speaking English. She wondered whom he could be talking to and she strained to hear what he was saying. It was difficult to catch the actual words and when he returned, she pretended to be asleep. He checked on her, turned, and vanished back into the night.

As morning broke, Ajit kicked the side of the car and shouted through the window. “Come on, get up, we have to go.” Sara rubbed her eyes. She wanted to go to the bathroom. She wanted to clean up. She had been in these clothes for two days and her skin was shedding like a lizard. The scarlet fever had damaged her skin, which was now falling off in lumps leaving her to feel dirty and uncomfortable.

She started to protest but the roar of a small aircraft engine drowned her voice out. She was virtually dragged on board and strapped in by Ajit as he shouted at the pilot to take off.

As they taxied on the airstrip, Ajit looked back towards the small terminal and Sara followed his gaze. A long black car pulled up and two smartly dressed white men got out. They watched the plane take off and were obviously not too happy about it. One pulled out a mobile phone and started to shout into it while running back to the car. Sara turned to Ajit. “Who are they?” she asked.

Ajit shrugged his shoulders and tightened his grip on a metal briefcase that Sara had not seen before. She wanted to ask him where it had come from and what was in it, but the engine noise was too loud to shout over. Sara was beginning to wonder if she had hopped from one potential disaster to another.

It was becoming obvious to her that Ajit was in some sort of trouble. He had been edgy from the moment they had arrived in Galuthi. Maybe he was a drugs runner? Well, she was too tired and uncomfortable to care. If he got her out of the country, she did not care who he was or what he had done. She was beyond caring. The encounter with the Thuggees had seen to that. After them, anything was possible, she thought.

In Delhi, everyone seemed to be going everywhere at once. Ajit bundled her out of the plane and into a car. He stopped at some stores, buying toiletries, clothes and baggage. As she waited in the car, the city of Delhi rode past her on bicycles. People of all ages seemed to be going somewhere or returning from somewhere. Sara's eyes drunk in the amazing colorful sights around her; beautiful chiffon saris that danced around elegant women, mirrored kaleidoscope buses, and the wide eyed children playing bones as they too watched the world go by.

Somewhere, someone was frying Puris. She knew that smell instantly and her stomach growled with hunger. The delicate fried breads and accompanied bowls of dhal manifested in her mind, driving her mercilessly into a hungry torture. She looked hard to try and see where the wonderful aromas were coming from but all she could see were cars, people and two cows.

The cows wandered the roads unhindered by the traffic and Sara marveled at how the gentle honorable creatures seemed oblivious to the chaos and pollution around them. Car upon car dodged around them, spewing exhaust in the air and creating a cloud of dust from their worn tires. The peaceful creatures plodded slowly through the street looking this way and that for a morsel of food or a suitable spot to shelter from the rising sun that would soon scorch everything in its path.

Once back in the car, Ajit stuffed the shopping into the new suitcases and threw her a sheet. He spoke to her in a whisper, keeping one eye on the driver and the other on Sara. “Cover yourself from head to toe in this, wrap up as if you have a fever.”

That was not hard to simulate. Although it was only mid morning, Sara felt as if she was sat in a furnace that had both fire and ice in it. The sun intensified her heat and yet she shivered from a cold that seemed to be lodged deep in her bones. Sweat poured down her face, and her peeling skin had now started to itch, driving her insane. She lay across the back seat and panted loudly. Ajit told her not to speak any other language but English, and to pretend that she did not understand any Asian languages.

When they arrived at the hotel, he shouted at the baggage boy and pulled Sara into his arms out of the car. He strode up the desk and demanded a decent room, now. The manager, seeing Sara, looked up at Ajit in question. “My wife is sick, I need a room now, I will book in later as soon as I have her settled. Give me a good spacious room with no noise.”

The manager looked at Ajit in confusion. Although Ajit looked Indian and was very ragged, he spoke with a cultured American accent and wore an expensive Rolex watch.

The manager took a key and escorted the couple to the room himself. He was curious and he wanted to know more. In the lift he inquired, looking at Ajit’s clothes, if they were explorers or adventurers. Ajit smiled at the man in a seductive and sadistic way that made the man nervous. “We where on an expedition when my wife was taken ill. She has seen a doctor and she just needs to rest.”

The manager nodded, trying to peek at Sara who was buried beneath a sheet that was suffocating her. Once they arrived at the room, Ajit tipped the manager and the baggage boy. The manager still tried to get a look at Sara as he was going out of the door.

As soon as they had gone, Ajit locked the door and Sara threw the sheet off. She dived for the bathroom and started to run a cool bath. She looked in the mirror, the first time she had seen herself in a long time. She was shocked at what she saw. Her face was burnt brown, with darker patches on her cheeks and blister marks on her forehead. Her hair looked as if it had been cut with a knife and fork. She touched her hair and thought of the Imams wife in Dudial. That haircut alone had saved Sara from recognition so many times.

She took off her rags and surveyed herself in the mirror. Her body was thin and wasted, with her white skin glowing in contrast to the dark arms, and face. Ajit called her. "Do something to make yourself look human while I go check in. Be ready to go out in an hour." He left before she could answer.

"Doesn't that man ever sleep?" She spoke out loud as she returned to the nearly full bath. He had not rested nor eaten properly for over twenty-four hours. Sara noticed how abrupt and bad tempered he had become. She thought that he would relax now that they were finally in Delhi.

She bathed luxuriously, filling the bath with the bath bubbles he chose for her. He obviously knew women. Ajit purchased makeup, nail polish, clothes, shoes, and perfume, everything that she would need and had never had before. He guessed her sizes well, she thought as she held up a dress and looked at the matching sandals.

She took the small nail scissors out and trimmed her hair to make it look more acceptable. Sara took time, preparing her make up, doing her nails and selecting her clothes from the outfits he had bought for her. She raised an eyebrow at the lingerie that was made of sheer oyster colored silk. She ran her hands over the delicate fabric. Yes, the man had taste. Most men would buy cheap red and black lace.

Dressing in a simple lemon cotton dress, Sara looked at herself in the mirror. She looked half decent. The make up had covered some of the discoloration in her skin, and the eye shadow had really made her blue eyes stand out against the dark skin and black hair.

The door clicked, alerting Sara that Ajit had returned. She was going to ask him where he was going to sleep; the room had only a double bed, not the customary twin beds that she had expected. His reaction to her drove the question out of her mind.

He stood by the door and stared at her. Dabbing perfume on her wrist, she asked him to smell it. "What do you think? Is it nice?" He nodded but did not answer. His eyes drank deeply from the child woman before him. "You make a pretty boy, but you make a much better woman." His voice became low and dusky causing Sara to blush.

She was not used to wearing dresses or having her legs exposed. Sara dressed in Shalwar Kameez ever since the death of her Grandmother when she was a child. After years of being covered up she now felt naked stood before this man in her thin dress and silk underwear.

The TV chatted to Sara while Ajit washed and changed. Bored, she flicked through the channels until she came to a news program. The Hindi was a struggle for Sara to understand. She became more absorbed when a news alert stated that Pakistan had detonated an underground bomb in a nuclear test. It exploded deep beneath a mountain close to the India/Pakistan border. The Indian government had taken it as an act of aggression, which heightened tensions between the two countries. Border patrols were doubled and strangers rooted out of the border areas. Sara realized how close they had come to being trapped in the dispute.

The newscaster started to talk about the location of the explosion when Ajit came out of the bathroom for his clothes. He was totally naked and dripping wet from head to toe. He was busy rubbing his hair as he stood beside Sara, watching the TV. Sara instantly put

her hand to her eyes and started to shout at Ajit. She was so embarrassed that she did not know where to look.

Ajit pulled her hands away from her eyes and shouted at her. “Sara, we have to stay here together for a while. Maybe a day may be longer. Get used to this, we have to share this room as man and wife. When you go to America, you are going to have to be a normal everyday woman and not shocked like a little Muslim girl. Look at my body, get used to seeing men naked, or else you will not survive in the western world. Innocence is destroyed there in seconds.”

He forced her hands away from her eyes and held her chin so that she would have to look at him. His groin was nearly level with her face and Sara swallowed hard as she looked at his genitals. She had never realized before how ugly men’s bodies really were. He stood her up and held her arms. His voice was full of authority. “Today you grow up. Men’s bodies are something you will have to get used to. Not all men will rape you like your husband did. Some men will give you pleasure, but you have to be in control. You have to call the shots and make the moves, not be at the mercy of their whims. We are going out in ten minutes, but first you are going to learn about men’s bodies.”

He saw her panic and grabbed her harder. “No, I am not going to lay a finger on you. But you are going to do the touching.” He pulled her up and stood her before him. “Now, explore every inch and I will tell you about them as you go.”

Sara was consumed with fear, repulsion and, curiosity. She never had chance with Zakir to learn anything other than pain and fear. Her inner voice told her that she was moving into dangerous waters and everything that anyone had ever taught her told her that this was wrong. But, she thought to herself, Ajit is right. Everyone always said that the USA was a dangerous and promiscuous place. She would have to learn how to survive in such a world.

Immediately, she chided herself for dishonesty. She was not truly concerned about that. It was his muscular body and the chance to explore it that interested her. Honesty was becoming a more frequent visitor to her door and now it was knocking loudly.

She reached out and gently touched Ajit on the chest. Leaving her palm there for a while. Sara enjoyed the sensation of her hand touching his skin. She began to explore, slowly at first, running her hands down his arms and across his belly.

Walking around him, her fingers touched his back and his buttocks, exploring his muscles with her fingertips, tracing scars on his body. He told her about all the sensitive spots on a man's body and Sara listened intently. Her fingers ran up into the nape of his neck and across his ears. She wanted him to make love to her. At the same time, a terrible fear surfaced, clutching at her throat and fighting with her. Sara's breathing became heavier as she walked around to face him; he could see the battle waging within her. 'Good,' he thought, 'all goes as it should. Women are so easy to manipulate.'

He caught her hand and kissed it lightly. "Now, Empress, I dress and take you to dinner. I want you to meet a friend of mine."

As she walked in to the sophisticated Italian restaurant she thanked the universe that Ajit had bought her such wonderful clothes. She tried hard to look uninterested at the collections of wealthy people who chatted over glasses of wine and picked at tiny plates of pasta.

The decor of the restaurant was elegant, its design taken from the times of the Mogul emperors. She looked up at the ceiling, which was covered with tiny mirrors and bordered with colored stones inset in paisley designs. Delhi's best-dressed daughters shimmered in their silk saris like peacocks in a palace, giving the whole restaurant an unearthly feel.

The scent of garlic and herbs tore into Sara's senses and her stomach began to growl loudly. As they sat in the reception area waiting for a table, a waiter brought them drinks and crackers. Sara was tempted to tear into the bowl of crackers and devour them all, but Ajit's look was enough to stop her.

Ajit was constantly looking around. Sara assumed he was looking for his friend. Over an hour later, a fat little man came puffing to the table. "Namaste." The little man greeted them with a high voice. He put his hands together in greeting before shaking hands with Ajit. The man ordered water and sat down while mopping his face.

"I am so sorry, my friend, I was caught up in other business. I had to run here. How are you, you look well? How's..." The man paused in mid sentence. He was about to ask something, but he looked at Sara and cut himself short. Sara wondered if he was going to mention some other woman. Ajit had begun to grow on Sara, although she did not trust him, he fascinated her.

Ajit smiled at the man and handed him a menu. The man did not speak to Sara but buried his head in the long list of food before him. As the empty plates were cleared away the man looked at his watch, leaned forward and spoke in whispers so as not to be heard around him. "I will need four passport photos this afternoon, drop them at my office. It will take at least a week."

Ajit shook his head, "No, that is too long, we need to leave straight away." The man sat back and huffed. "No chance. Everyone is getting crawled over after what has happened. Let it die down over the next few days. You will be safer that way. Get the photos to me this afternoon and I will be as fast as I can." He raised his eyebrows as he finished speaking.

Ajit sat back with a frown on his face. Sara wanted to ask what had been happening but with the look on Ajit's face, she decided to stay quiet.

She felt strange, drained, almost impacted, as though some terrible force had torn something from her. Sara felt uncomfortable. Something, somewhere had happened to someone or something linked in blood to her. Absently, she rubbed the blood pact scar on the palm of her hand.

Her eyes glazed over as she tried to think who or what it might be. No one came to mind as she thought of everyone whom she knew. The Yantra that was hidden deep in the mountainside and the blood tie that connected her to it did not surface in her memory. Draining her glass of chilled water, Sara watched the hushed conversation that flitted around their table.

The man took an envelope from Ajit and scurried off leaving Ajit to throw money on the table for the bill. “Come on, we have to get your photograph taken.” He marched her out of the restaurant and out onto the street.

As they waited by the photo booth for the pictures to develop, Sara decided to ask some questions. “Ajit, why do we need to leave straight away, and what has been happening to make it so difficult to go? Also, how come you have so much money, are you rich or something?”

Sara meant the questions to sound casual, but they came out like an interrogation. Ajit frowned. Sara irritated him beyond belief. If it were not so useful to have Sara as a means to get out of India unseen, he would have killed her on the spot. He hated women who spoke, but he had enough training and discipline to pull himself in and not blow his cover.

He looked at Sara and smiled as he spoke, “I need to get back to America because I think I was spotted by police while I was with the Thuggees. Just being with them is enough to be cast as guilty of all known crimes in the area. And yes, I’m rich.”

Sara nodded, relieved, and yet something inside her knew that he was lying. She pushed that feeling away, not wanting to listen to it. He bundled her into a taxi and told her to go back to the hotel.

While she lounged on the hotel bed Sara half listened to the TV until it came to the news. She heard the word ‘Kotli’ and looked up. The newscaster was pointing over the hills to the cease-fire line and Kotli beyond. She turned the TV up and sat opened mouthed as the screen displayed a deployment of troops. The newscaster turned back to the camera and Sara’s blood ran cold at what she heard.

“And the Pakistan government has denied all knowledge of the detonation, stating that their nuclear program was not on track for tests at this time. The defense minister for Pakistan accused the Indian government of detonating the warhead on the cease-fire line, and then denying it to destroy the UN peace negotiations over the Kashmir problem. So who detonated this bomb, deep under the hills that lay on the cease-fire line between Kotli and Galuthi?”

Sara panicked. The Yantra and the temple will have been destroyed. She was scared and did not know what to do. The words of destruction that Bapu had spoken echoed in Sara’s head. If the yantra were destroyed, the world would have no pattern to uphold its existence. What then?

She knew that she would have to tread carefully with Ajit; she must get her passport without raising his suspicions. She also wanted to see what was in the steel reinforced briefcase that was still propped up against the wall where Ajit had left it. Her hands had fumbled with the locks for a while without success, so Sara just sat and stared at it.

It was obvious to her that he was somehow involved in the bombing, she just wasn’t sure how. She decided to play along with everything until she got her passport, then she would bolt. If she planned carefully, she would be able to get away from Ajit fairly easily. He often left her unattended. But what would she do for money? She remembered

the small collections of gems that the Thuggees had given her. She would have to try and sell them without raising suspicion.

Ajit arrived back a couple of hours late. Sara decided not to tell him what she had seen on the news. The magic of an old Hindi movie called 'Guide' took her away from the stress for a while. Ajit did not speak, but went straight to the shower and emerged ten minutes later, again totally naked. He ignored Sara and rooted through his bags for something. She averted her eyes, trying hard to look at the TV and nothing else. Once he had found what he wanted, he threw it on a chair and went to sit behind Sara on the bed. She was terrified and excited all at once.

He flopped himself down and looked at the TV over her shoulder. She could feel that her face was redder than the carpet, but she did not want to panic and seem unsophisticated. Sara did not speak or flinch, but simply pretended to continue watching to TV. He put his arm around her and bent to kiss her neck. Sara could not decide whether to respond or run into the hall screaming. She was saved by the telephone that almost jumped off the table as it rang loudly. She heard him curse under his breath and he answered the phone with a growl.

His language changed within seconds. Ajit began speaking in the tongue that the Thuggees had used and he became very animated. He shouted and laughed, before falling silent as someone told him something important. Sara needed breathing space away from his naked body. She indicated with her head that she was going down stairs and Ajit nodded as she opened the door.

Downstairs, the hotel lounge bustled as a group of English and German tourists gathered around the TV. The newscaster appeared on screen and began to talk about the Pakistani bombing. She stood rooted to the spot as her eyes fixed on the TV screen. Her imagination began to work overtime as she thought of the words Bapu had spoken when they had discovered the yantra: *if this place is harmed or violated, terrible powers would be unleashed into the outside world.*

Sara did not see Ajit walk out from the lift, nor did she see him stride over to her. He put his hand upon her arm and guided her into the bar. He ordered two drinks and steered her to a corner table. "Sara, I'm sorry if I offended you with my nakedness. I have not had... relationships with a woman in a long time and you are so beautiful. I cannot bare the thought of you going to America with such innocence. I want to help you." He let his eyes glaze over as he talked to her.

Sara was not taken in. The time had arrived for Sara to finally begin to grow up and Ajit had been the perfect teacher. She did not trust him as far as she could throw him. But she knew that he was dangerous and that she had to tread carefully.

She nodded and sipped at the drink that had been put in front of her. It did not occur to her that it was anything but a fruit drink and as the alcohol hit the back of her throat, her eyes began to water. The feeling fascinated her as it roamed around her body, relaxing her and loosening her mind.

Ajit told her a little about his friends in Key West and how they would look after her. She pretended to accept his explanation and apologies, smiling through the haze brought on by the drink. Her voice struggled to stay normal as she asked him what was in the drink. "Brandy, with a splash of coke; my favorite." His reply was quiet as he looked around the room.

She made a mental note of the mix. Ajit ordered a bottle for the room and when it was brought over, he put it before her saying, "A present, for you."

She smiled inwardly at her new freedom. This was a bonus she had not expected. She could do things without worrying about repercussions and recriminations. There were things she had not even thought about doing that were now beginning to bubble up into her mind, released by the brandy.

She looked at Ajit, allowing her eyes to travel all over his body and ignoring the alarms that habitually rang in her mind. Ajit picked up the shift in Sara and smiled inwardly. He knew he would have sex with her. He also knew that he would have to tread gently; she would have to be happy and in one piece if he was going to leave the country without alerting the police.

After finishing the last mouthful of brandy, Ajit stood holding the bottle, waiting for Sara to follow. Something screamed at her to stay in the bar among the people, where she would be safe. But the brandy allowed her to be lead like a child.

Once inside their room, Ajit turned and looked at Sara softly. He stroked her hair gently and touched her cheek. He whispered to her, his voice hoarse and deep. “Sara, I want to make love to you. I want to worship you like a goddess. I want to give you a pleasure that you have never felt before. But I want to do this with you, not to you, do you understand?”

She looked at him for a second without moving. She was petrified but the alcohol had loosened her control. She wanted to be loved. She wanted to be worshipped and her body cried out for comfort. Ignoring her fear of Ajit, Sara nodded slowly. Ajit breathed out without revealing his tension. He was so proud of himself. He played the soft lover well, he thought.

Carefully, he undressed her and shrouded her in a soft dupputta; to protect her modesty, thought Sara. She lay on the bed as he took off his clothes and lay aside her. His fingers played with her hair as though its fragility would control the raging power that built up inside him. He kissed her harder, pushing against her and opening her thighs with his hand.

The drink awakened something deep within her; a seed that was planted during the illness she had suffered in the caves. Power moved through her, awakening her to some ancient

primal force. She turned and pushed him down onto the bed, straddling his body and holding his hair with her small hands. With a passion unknown to her, Sara grabbed parts of his skin, kneading them before traveling to his groin.

She pulled at his organ, demanding that it grow more and Ajit groaned with pleasure. She looked at him and was aware of another being looking through her eyes, watching him squirm under her touch.

He closed his eyes, losing himself in his own secret world. Ajit reached out for the body upon him, a body that became more demanding and passionate as the seconds past. Pleasure danced around him in a union of power as Sara pushed him to a threshold of ecstasy.

The being grew stronger and stronger within her. She pulled at Ajit's body, tearing his flesh with her nails, allowing the urgency within her to find its own way out. As the presence of the being filled her body, Sara faded away, manipulated by a force that was beyond her comprehension.

Finally distanced from herself, she began to recognize the power that flowed through her body. She saw the Goddess Kali in all her magnificence as she devoured Ajit. Ajit opened his eyes at the woman who was demanding more and more of his body. This he liked. This power and fight in a woman excited him. He hated pathetic women, but this one had a power to match his own. He threw her around on the bed, fighting to satisfy the appetite of the siren that demanded more and more. Sara watched her body passively from the corner of the room, her emotions lost to the Goddess who had clothed herself in the mortal's skin.

His excitement peaked and he pulled her back on top of him, biting her breasts as she moaned and thrashed. She opened her eyes and looked deep into his. Ajit stilled. Her eyes were endless stars that looked into his depths. She saw everything about him; he could hide nothing.

He saw himself detonating a bomb at a nuclear power plant in Ukraine. He saw his involvement with two other assassins posing as Thuggees. He saw his years in training in the American marines and his subsequent career as a mercenary. He saw the faces of every man, woman and child that he had ever killed. He saw the chaos and destruction his terrorist actions had caused in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. He saw the women he had raped and murdered, the babies he had cut from their mother's womb and the children he had used as target practice. They all paraded before him, watching him intently as the Goddess balanced the scales in her hand.

The destruction of the Kali shrine and the Yantra deep within the earth was now held before him in accusation. The power of destruction flowed through Sara's eyes and pierced his soul. She opened her mouth and out came a voice unlike any other.

Vran, warrior of the ancients, reborn to a task of rebalance, still you tear at my flesh, and still you do not redeem yourself. You choose not to join with me and make amends for you're past deeds. Instead you destroy. Now I match your destruction. Come to me erring child, that I may punish you forever.

Sara bent down as Ajit cried out in horror and pleasure, her body pulling in his seed that he had so willingly given. She gripped his throat in her teeth and bit hard. He thrashed about, trying to stop her, but his strength drained slowly, leaving him unable to move.

Sara had the power of the Goddess flowing through her. Nothing would stop her. She bit deeper and deeper until she hit an artery. Dark red blood pumped from his neck as she sat back and looked. She dipped her hand into the blood and smeared it across his face: the mark of the Dark Goddess. In that instant, she saw Ajit in his first life: that of Vran, the ancient warrior who turned his back on the Goddess and used his power for destruction and greed.

He looked into Sara's face as he died. The Goddess, her mouth dripping with blood looked back at him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The phone rang. Sara jumped out of her skin. She did not know how long she had been sat there, looking at Ajit's body. He had grown cold and gray. She answered the phone automatically and awoke at the word passport. The voice in the phone shouted at her.

“Did you hear me? Tell Ajit the passports are ready. He needs to pick them up in the next couple of hours because I have to go somewhere.”

Sara forced herself to speak. “I will be there, Ajit has gone out and I do not expect him back for a long time. Where are you? Where shall I meet you?”

She showered and changed quickly, packing a change of clothes and the small bag of gems. Her shaking hands were the only indication of the horror that was churning inside her. The taste of his blood sat in her mouth despite the repeated doses of toothpaste and brushing. Only the faint scent of the vomit that she had ejected into the toilet promised to mask the taste of death. She could not believe what had just happened. But she did believe that if she lost control now, she would die in an Indian prison.

Trying to think clearly, Sara emptied Ajit's wallet and found an envelope full of cash. With that firmly hidden in her money belt, she placed a single small luggage bag and the steel briefcase by the door. The briefcase key was safely in her purse and all she needed to do was check the room.

Carefully, she wiped the brandy glasses clean and put them away in a cupboard. She scattered the clothes and drawers around to make it look like someone had searched for something, and just for good measure she knocked over a lamp and a table. She had also been careful to wash Ajit's genitals before struggling to put a towel around his body. Now she was ready to leave.

She checked the corridor, slipped into the hallway and closed the door quietly behind her. Sara looked at the old thin door for a second before kicking it hard by the lock. A loud crack echoed around the hallway as the door flew open. Her feet moved quickly as she ran down the hall, down the service stair and out through the staff entrance at the back of the hotel.

She hugged her American passport and repeated her name to herself, Sara Kale, Sara Kale. She had wanted to go back to her old name of Black, but Ajit had quite rightly pointed out that she could be traced that way. She had struggled to think of a name, not wanting to lose who she was. She had an idea. Kale. Most westerners would pronounce it like 'hail'. But the word kale in the Romani language meant black and was pronounced Kali. Perfect!

That night was particularly hot causing Sara to toss and turn in her new hotel bed. She finally fell in to a fitful sleep after spending many hours trying to shut out the terrible replaying of the day's events. Her imagination insisted on reliving each moment of the murder that she had committed, as though to torture and punish her.

Her dreams pulled her deeper and deeper in the Underworld until she found herself falling through the earth; down and down, deep in to the center of the planet. A strange voice vibrated around her, drawing her ever deeper into the earth.

Welcome home my daughter, be at one with me, and lay your head on my breast as I tell you stories of what is to come.

As Sara merged with the rock, she saw pictures of the surface world. She saw many people dying. She saw the land destroyed and the waters poisoned. She saw the animals murdered and the plants become unrecognizable. Her heart wept at such horrors; she did not want to return to that world.

The earth moved closer around her, embracing her. The voice of the Mother whispered all around, echoing through her brain.

Do not weep for what is to come, it is a needful cleansing, and you will be the bridge of that cleansing. The people have repeated their mistakes over and over. Still they try to be as Gods, to create their own world for their own selfish needs. So I will allow them to destroy everything they see around them. Humans are unimportant in the pattern of existence. They will cease to be, but my song will last forever, my voice will give shape to power and my seeds will bloom as they have always done. Humans come and go, but my world remains always. And when always ends so we shall turn back into the void. The dance will be still, the song will be silent and the last breath will be taken in and held. The directions will be no more and the elements will return from whence they came. In that nothing, we will be as one, you and I.

Sara plunged through the earth and passed into a cave where old women were turning around a table that held her body. The turning was creating a whirlwind that extended beyond the stone walls of the cave. Sara saw herself as a gentle wavy line. How strange, she thought, as she looked at the wavy line. That is what I should look like, not this strange and ugly human body.

The old women slowed down, bringing the wind back down to a standstill. They stood looking at her. Without warning, one of the old women bent over and blew hard in to Sara's mouth. The second one pulled her hair hard and the third one poked her in the eye. Sara was terrified of these old ladies who just laughed at her reactions. They all grew serious and talked to Sara at once.

Child, you have many challenges ahead of you. Your life is a service to the Goddess and your existence is and shall always be linked to destruction and regeneration. As the child of Azal, the first woman, you must awaken from the prison of your life and remember who you are. You must remember and face the tasks for which you were born. You are the

servant of the Goddess and you will be her instrument. Behold your mother, give honor to her truth.

The old women vanished and Sara found herself at the foot of the statue in the cave at Kotli. She looked up at the statue of Kali and the statue looked back at Sara. Moving slowly, the Goddess emerged from the statue and Sara was terrified. She cowered at the feet of the Goddess, watching the blood drip off the end of the Goddess's robe on to the floor. Sara thought of the blood of Ajit as it had spurted all over her and her heart was heavy with the pain of death.

No, Isca, beloved of the Goddess, this blood is the blood of generation. It gives life to all creatures, all beings. What happened to the man was not you, but I. I moved through you, it was needful for him. I am not destruction, I am cleansing. I am the balance to substance; I am the balance to growth. Look, Isca, at my greatest secret.

Sara looked up at the Goddess and saw something move among her robes. From behind her crept a small man-child who smiled at Sara warily. The Goddess reached her hand down protectively laying it on the child's head. Her robes parted to reveal a faun, an antelope, a cow and a white horse.

These are my children, who are blessed upon the earth. They shed no blood and take of no blood. You have shed blood in my name but you will shed no more. Live your life in my honor and be taken wherever I shall lead you. I have been awoken. Be as one with me, dark Sara, for you are the vessel through which I shall pass.

Sara awoke with a start. She was dripping with sweat and had tangled herself in her sheets. As she stood in the shower with her head resting on the cool tiles, Sara turned the dream over and over in her mind. The name that the Goddess had called her, Isca, caused a tightening in her throat. She recognized it from somewhere, but as she searched through the fog in her mind, the memory eluded her.

The dream continued to trouble her the following day as she prepared her bags and called a ticket agent for flight to Miami. She had booked a seat on a flight that would go via Kuwait and London the following day. She had a day left in India and Sara knew exactly what she was going to do.

The desk clerk looked at Sara as if she was insane when he heard her request. She repeated the question and the clerk held his hand up to state that he heard the first time, but why on earth would she, an American tourist, want to go there? He called her a taxi and shook his head in disbelief as he watched her walk confidently out of the door. Women who traveled to strange countries alone always made him feel uncomfortable, and this one made him even more uncomfortable.

The taxi driver tried to dissuade her from the trip but she was adamant that she wanted to go there. He offered to wait for her at no extra charge and she accepted his offer. He said that he would not sleep at night if he left her there unattended without a way out. She paid him his fare plus a generous tip and told him, even though he had offered to wait for free, she would pay him more if he waited. He nodded and watched her walk off down the dirty alleyway that marked the beginning of the red light district, more affectionately known locally as the cattle market.

She moved quickly, following the directions on a scrap of paper that the desk clerk had drawn for her. Most people were still in bed. The cattle market did not stir at this early hour and Sara was thankful for that advice from the clerk.

When she reached the building she sought, she took a while to look at the outside and to think about what she was going to do. She knew she could not go back to her old life; the gypsy, Sara, had gone forever. She had begun to feel that Sara Black never existed, that her life started deep in the caves under Kotli. Sara knew now that she belonged to the dark Goddess and that there would be no escaping her.

She took off her heeled shoes and stepped into the cool of the temple. It was small and old by comparison to some of the more modern and architecturally stunning buildings she had seen around Delhi. Many intricate stone carvings that had been smashed surrounded the entrance and the whole building had fallen into disrepair. She had read about the desecration of temples by the British invaders; they had viewed the erotic carvings with disgust, and later had discouraged the Indian people from the worship of the Goddess.

She ran her hands across the smashed faces, caressing them with her touch, acknowledging their greatness even in the face of such destruction. She also touched the feet of Ganesh; the elephant headed God, as she passed through the outer door, leaving a single coin at his feet so that he may turn it into many for those who needed it.

Once inside she was mesmerized by the silence. She washed her hands and face in the small sink provided, and looked around for the resident priest. There was no one whom she could ask permission to enter the temple. So after searching, she stepped forward into the temple room itself.

She found herself at the end of a line of columns that created a pathway to the Deity at the end. Alternate columns hid small sanctuary lamps in the recesses so that as she walked down the aisle to the Goddess she was walking through light and dark, light and dark. She finally found herself at the foot of the Goddess. Sara bowed deeply to the image of Kali before her.

This statue was small and squat, painted black with three red eyes that peered out through the haze of incense that burned before her. Around her shoulders were many garlands of flowers and at her feet, a row of bowls with offerings in them. She drew out a small package and unwrapped it. In the package was a short lock of Sara's hair.

The priest had not heard her enter the temple. He was sat meditating in a dark corner when he felt a shift in the power of the deity. He opened his eyes to see a slender European woman with short-cropped hair kneeling before the Goddess. This sort of thing

annoyed him. When the white people first started to seek out Kali in the sixties, it had elated him that his beloved mother was reaching far beyond the horizon, drawing people from all countries to her feet.

But the novelty soon wore off when he finally realized that they were seeking their own fantasy. They wanted empty rituals and prayers. They wanted to be told how to think. They wanted Kali to make them feel better, to make them feel whole. They did not know nor understand Kali Ma. Nor did they want to. The tired priest pulled himself up and prepared himself to face yet another confrontation.

Sara did not hear the priest approach. She was deep in meditation, chanting something in a low deep voice. It had risen from her depths, demanding to come out. She did not know what it was, or what it meant, but it pulled her deeper and deeper down into meditation. *Uma, Ambah, Am'ma...* She repeated the phrase over and over as she knelt in an hypnotic trance.

The priest stopped short of touching her when he heard the chant. His hackles rose, every hair on the back of his neck stood up to attention. The ancient chant of the Goddess names. How could someone have passed this on to a Gori, a white person? His anger grew at what he felt to be a sacrilege.

He firmly tapped the woman on the shoulder. She turned, still chanting, to face him. Her eyes were glazed over and he spotted traces of nectar around her lips. He looked past her to the statue where a pouch hung around the neck of the Goddess. In the pouch was a small vial of nectar. A juice made of the seeds of special plants, plants sacred to Kali. She had drunk the nectar, the final insult.

He raised his hand to strike her across the face in his rage when the gentle light of the ghee lamps reflected on something around her neck. He looked at a medallion that hung over her clothes. His arm dropped as he saw the image of Kali and Siva making love, with a diamond inset between them – the universe in the making. It was the same

medallion he had touched, along with twelve other priests all those years ago, in a ritual blessing.

He looked up into her eyes, seeing that she was far away. He needed to get her settled again. He gently guided her back to floor as she chanted and once she was steady, he pulled a cloth around her.

Running out of the temple building, he hurried to summon his Guru. He dashed through the streets, his heart leaping in his chest. He wanted to sing and shout from the rooftops, but he knew that he must concentrate on what he was doing and not waste time. “Baba ji, Baba ji, come quick, you must come quick, it has happened. Baba ji, where are you?” The priest shouted at the top of his voice as he arrived at his Guru’s humble home nestled among the brothels.

He flung open each door looking for the old man and finally found him reclining on low divan smoking bhang, the sacred herb of Siva. “Baba ji, come quick, it has happened. Come, now.” The priest pulled at the old man who looked up at him lazily.

“Son, what has happened? Calm down, sit, take chai.” The old man’s voice was unsteady as he tried to orientate himself from such a rude intrusion on his rest.

“No chai, she is here and she wears the medallion. It has finally happened.” Shouted the priest. He waited triumphantly for the old man’s reaction.

The old man sat up, fully awake at the mention of the medallion. He put on his chappal, his sandals, and adjusted his dhoti. Trying hard not to sound excited he calmly told the priest to join him on a walk to the temple.

“Chelo, *let’s go*,” he said, in as calm a voice as he could muster.

The world swirled around Sara as she sank deeper and deeper in to a dark and powerful place. The arms of the mother enveloped her as the Goddess’s hands touched her feet, her abdomen, her throat and her head. Each point of contact burned Sara, her skin dissolving

in the fire of Kali, and her mind joining with the flame to become one. She danced in the fire, allowing it to consume her, allowing it to flow through her and become her.

As her soul became the flame, it released and flew over the city, looking down on the people below. The Goddess flew with her, showing her the work of Kali in the world.

They looked at prostitutes, as they emerged onto their doorsteps, ready for a days work.
See my daughters who bring my destruction.

They flew over the financial part of the city.
See my sons who are drawn to my daughters on their way home from work.

They flew by a hospital and they looked through the building into the wards where patients were being treated.
See my venom, the bacteria, as it flows through the veins of these people. See their medicine, my curse that destroys their health and feeds my venom. The more medicine they give, the stronger my venom becomes.

They flew over the parks where the people gathered.
See the people who do not know me. See the people who have brought about their own demise. I am the beginning and the end. I am the cleanser. I am she who wipes the face of the world clean. I am she who allows Man to be what he wants to be. I am she who waits. I am the door through which the worlds pass. And now I prepare to shut the door through which Man walks.

All around her Sara could see destruction and desolation. She saw people's bodies slowly degenerating. She saw the animals and the trees destroyed. She saw the earth and the water tainted with the byproducts of greed and she wept. Her tears washed over the Goddess and fell as rain upon the people below.

Weep for what must be. There is no regeneration without destruction. Already the seeds of new beginnings sprout, nourished by the waste of what has passed. As the face is cleansed, so a new expression appears. Take heart and be strong, for it is you who will birth the new beginning.

The priest looked up to the sky in astonishment as spots of rain hit his baldhead. Although there were no clouds, and it was certainly not the season for rain, a gentle shower moistened the air as they ran to the temple.

They were stopped short by the shouts of a woman who ran from her home screaming. She ran straight into the old priest and babbled in excitement to him.

“Baba ji, he took the milk! He drank the milk, come quickly!”

She could hardly get the words out as she hung on to the old man to stop him from running away. He just wanted to get to the temple before the girl vanished.

A crowd gathered around the woman, moving on mass to her threshold, pulling the priest and the old man with them. They were both catapulted into the humble home of the woman who steered them to her house shrine.

She knelt down before the image of Krishna and held a spoonful of milk to his lips, as was customary. For a brief second, nothing happened. Then, to the astonishment of the two onlookers, the deity drained the milk from the spoon.

The priests looked at each other in astonishment. The old man snatched the spoon and ran his hand carefully down the back of the metal statue. His head shook in amazement. With shaking hands, he poured milk on to the spoon and held it to the God’s lips. Again, the milk was drained. He bowed his head deep and low to the God as he whispered a prayer. With the agility of a young man, he suddenly sprang to his feet and grabbed the younger priest by his clothes. Without comment to the woman, he pushed through the crowd and ran from the house to the temple as fast as his tired old legs would carry him.

They arrived just in time to see the young woman tip forward, knocking over the ghee lamp and setting fire to herself. They both ran to her, the old man using a nearby rug to dampen out the flames. When they were sure that she was no seriously hurt, the old man told the priest to fetch strong sweet tea to bring her around.

Once alone with her, he sat with her in his lap as she fought to surface from the nectar that had drugged her. The medallion flashed brightly in the light as he looked at it. Yes, he thought to himself, this is the necklace that was sent out into the world to find the daughter of the Goddess. He wept with joy, thanking the Goddess that he had been allowed to see her before he died.

All his life he had waited for the signs that the astrologers had predicted. They had sent the medallion out in to the world many years ago but nothing had returned, until now. It had been over ten years ago that he had given up the search and now he asked the Goddess to forgive him for his lack of faith.

Once Sara recovered from the nectar, they questioned her heavily as she sipped the sweet tea. She told them of her life and what had happened to her. The two men listened without comment. Then it was her turn to question.

“Why is this happening to me? I am not Indian; I was not raised with Kali. I was raised a good catholic and I still bear the Virgin close to my heart. All I want is a peaceful life.” Sara was distraught. The drug had taken much energy from her and she had finally woken up from the daze that she had been walking around in since she arrived in Delhi.

The old priest nodded at the questions and patted her hand. “Beti, daughter, Kali is not a Goddess of destruction as you understand it. That was something spread in India by the British. They wanted to destroy all-powerful Goddess worship. So they slowly introduced their fear and loathing of death.”

“Eventually that fear and loathing spread to our people, and they began to fear the Mother. Kali Ma is the power of fire, earth and water. She is wherever the water, heat and land meet. Kali is the power of hot mountain springs, hot coastlands, and warm seas. She is the power of regeneration, of balance. From her came the first human, and to her, we will all return.”

“In death we are given freedom and regeneration, in sickness we are cleansed, in war we are educated. If we do not accept her gifts, we are surely doomed. You are Indian. Your bloodline is of India, as is that of all gypsies. The gypsies were ancient followers of Kali, that is why they were, and are, feared so much.”

Sara was thoughtful as she listened. She knew what he was saying was true, but she did not want to believe it. She wanted to get to America and live a normal, simple life. No religion, no powers, just a gentle life. She stood and looked around her. This was not her place; this was not where she belonged.

As she stood up, the old Guru caught a hold of her hand. “You were brought first to Kotli and then here so that you could awaken from your deep slumber of life. Now you know who you are, you must allow yourself to be guided in your task. We in our selfishness would want you to stay here. But my heart tells me that is not what the Goddess has in store for you.”

“What ever happens, remember, this is your home now, however long you are away. Should you need sanctuary, you will find it here. Any Priest around the world who is dedicated to Kali will be told of you and they will offer you shelter and anything else that you need. You need only ask.”

Sara wanted to get away of the oppressive power that was bearing down on her. It was too much for her to bear. “I must go. I’m sorry, but I have to leave here. I have a taxi. I need... air, I need to think.” The older priest nodded to the younger one to go find the taxi.

“Where are you staying?” He stood by the door waiting for directions.

“I’m staying at the New Delhi Hilton, Connaught place.”

He nodded again and vanished through the door. Sara looked into her hands, as though all her answers were hidden in the lines that she now traced with her fingers. The old man touched her sleeve. His voice soothed Sara’s confusion. “You have gone through much in your short life. You must now use all that you have learned in your service to the Goddess. Do not plan anything, she will guide you.”

Sara looked at him in defiance, “and what if I choose to ignore the Goddess and all this...stuff, what then? What if I just vanish into America and live a normal life?” Her voice bordered on hysterical.

The old man smiled. “I hid once. But wherever I went, she was there waiting to greet me. I fled to the corners of the world, but she would be sitting there, waiting for me to arrive.”

“The Goddess is everywhere. She is not Indian, she is not Hindu. She is herself. She is the ground upon which you stand; she is the fruit that you eat. You cannot turn away from her; you can only turn away from yourself. I would love for you to stay here so that I can help you. But that is simply my own longings talking. We sent out the medallion so that you would be recognized and now my task is ended. Go in peace daughter.”

Sara put her head into her hands. Ever since Grandmother had died she had lived under a cloud of rules. She longed to go back to Bradford, to her hometown. She even toyed with the idea of turning herself in, serving her time in prison before getting on with her life. But she knew that there was no going back, and that imprisonment would be worse than any death.

As the taxi pulled away, she made a point of not looking back. The taxi drivers voice punctured her thoughts. “Mem like you go see Raj Ghat? Special place for Ghandi rest.

You go? Very nice, pretty garden by river. Or you go Laxami Narayan temple? Very nice very nice, I take you very cheap okay?” He looked expectantly in the rear view mirror at the white woman who appeared tired.

“Just go to the hotel please, I don’t want to go any where else thank you.” Said Sara who was exhausted. She just wanted to get to her room and soak in a bath.

The taxi driver was disappointed that she did not want to go on a tour. What was the point in these people coming to this hellhole if they did not spend their money? He mumbled under his breath about how people were becoming so tight fisted these days. It was getting harder and harder to make a living. Sara could hear and understand him. She felt guilty that she could not give him a tour to do. She made up for it by giving him a big tip that cheered him up considerably.

The Airport was busy and Sara pushed through the crowds to get to the check in desk. Everybody seemed to be shouting at once as children darted in and out of the groups of people standing around their departing relatives.

She stopped to try and get a sense of where she should be. She did not notice the man who walked just behind her, mirroring her every step. Her hand went to her money belt as she checked it for the hundredth time, her eyes darting in all directions in search of likely thieves. The sight of the many police waving sticks around trying to move people was strangely comforting and Sara began to relax.

Ajit had told her when they first arrived in Delhi that if she was caught with the gems, she would not be allowed to leave India with them. So she had sprinkled them through her hand luggage – some in with her makeup, some with her hair clips and some in a lunch pack.

Checking in, the clerk hardly even looked at her passport, pausing only to remove the fake entry visa before almost throwing it back at Sara along with her boarding pass. For a while, she wandered up and down the airport shops, pausing to buy some French perfume, still unaware that she was being followed. She noticed the shadow only when she looked into a shop window as she walked. There was something about the walk of the man behind her, she recognized it but she could not remember where from.

Sara ignored him for a few minutes. Her alarm grew as she saw that he was still just two paces behind her. Something prompted her to turn and look at him.

He smiled. “You do not recognize me, do you Sara Black?” His voice seemed untouched by the noise around them. Sara began to panic. How did he know her real name? She had not heard it in so long.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Her voice seemed to vanish into the chaos, and fear built steadily within her.

“Sara, my Sara, do you not remember when we walked together through the gates of the Holy City?” Now she remembered the strange gait of the angel and she finally recognized the stranger before her. She looked around to see if anyone was watching her. Could they see him? She talked to him in her mind as she walked towards the gate for her flight. “Why are you here? What do you want with me?” Sara squeezed the thoughts out, trying to look normal and relaxed as she found a seat in the gate lounge.

There were things she needed to know. Before she had time to ask, the angel reached out and touched her knee. The moment he made contact with her skin, Sara heard a news bulletin coming from the TV suspended from the ceiling. She looked up to see a reporter outside a government building in Delhi. She leaned forward, straining to hear over the conversations and music. The angel touched her ear.

“Broadcasting live, CNN news from Delhi. Today, the mutilated body of Michael Singh, an American mercenary, was found in a hotel room in Delhi’s fashionable tourist quarter. He was wanted in connection with the Kotli bombing, and the recent wave of assassinations of prominent Indian ministers. A further man has been arrested in connection with the killings and police are still searching for a woman thought to be involved in the matter.”

Sara felt the panic rising to her throat and she looked around to see if anyone was looking at her. No one seemed to have noticed the news report and Sara turned to the angel. The seat beside her was empty. He was not in the crowd.

Her hand stayed at her throat as she tried to calm herself. Nausea crept upon her, forcing her to stand up and walk around. What if she was caught? What if she were just hallucinating? The nectar she had now drunk twice was fabled to send people mad. Was she mad? Did she imagine the angel? She paced around and did not hear the first call for her flight. It was only when people tried to cram themselves down the walkway that she realized the flight was boarding.

Sara waited until everyone had pushed his or her way down the boarding ramp before she nervously stepped aboard the plane that would take her to her new life. Once in her seat, she pulled out a magazine and tried to read, keeping her face down until she was sure that the doors were shut and the ground crew were off. Once they were in the air, she would feel safer, she thought.

Eventually, she dropped off to sleep, trying hard not to lean on the man sitting next to her. Her body twitched as she fell deeper and deeper into sleep, lulled by the warmth of the blanket she had tucked around her to keep out the cold of the air conditioner.

As her sleep pulled her down she found herself dreaming of her childhood. She looked clear and happy, running alongside the ponies as they trotted down the street at the Appleby Gypsy Horse Fair. She tripped and fell, landing on her knees in a pile of horse

ding. It stuck to her hands as she brushed herself down and she wiped her hands down the back of Micky Lowther's coat, dodging his fist as he turned to swipe her with his hands.

She laughed as she ran away. The laughing stopped as she ran to the side of the bonfire that Grandmother had arranged for the passing of the trapped gypsies. A small girl was stood with her eyes glowing in the heat of the fire. A man put a medallion around her neck and her eyes became dull. Her shine faded and a whirlwind of chaos surrounded her. Sara recognized herself in the dream.

She went to try and take the medallion off the little girl but a hand reached out and stopped her. She tried again, and the hand became more forceful. Sara lost her temper and grabbed at the medallion, ripping it from the child's neck and flinging it into the darkness. The child turned and faced Sara. The little girl had a deep gash down the center of her forehead that had healed red. She looked at Sara and smiled.

The air steward nudged her awake. "Did you want food or were you asleep?"

A tray of mush and packaged cardboard was placed in front of her and the man sat next to her started to laugh at her face. "I see you have the same opinion of airline food that I have. Well, enjoy!"

The food refused to go down her throat, or her throat refused to let it down, so Sara lay back and stared out of the window. She wondered what on earth she was going to do in America. The only place she knew about was Key West, so she had decided she would go there. The contact that Ajit had mentioned should be easy to find, but did she want to find someone connected with him?

Her hand went to the medallion. She had worn it ever since that day at the bonfire and since then her life had become littered with death, loneliness and chaos. She lifted it over her neck and looked at it in her hand. She felt a shift in her body and she became curious.

The man sitting next to her took off his reading glasses and looked at the medallion in her hand. “May I be so rude as to ask if I can look at that?” He smiled at her and held out his hand. She handed it to him, and as it left the field of her body, she felt different. Really different. It still had an effect on her with it being so close, but it certainly wore off the further away it got from her.

The man took out a small eyeglass from his pocket and looked at the piece in detail. “May I ask you where you got this?” He asked as he took off his eyeglass and looked at her.

“It was given to me by an Indian priest when I was a small girl. I’ve worn it ever since. What is it? I know nothing about it.” Sara’s voice was full of curiosity.

The man turned it in the dim light and looked at it from every angle. His voice was educated and soft; Sara was soothed by the calmness in the man’s voice as she listened to his reply.

“It seems to be a Tantric piece. It’s old and probably quite valuable. The style of it suggests that it came from the northern mountainous regions; probably what is now Kashmir. The area was not really known for such things. But there was a legend, many years ago of an ancient temple to Kali hidden in the hills, a place where the worshippers practiced Tantra.”

“The temple housed an ancient order called the Watchers of the Thirteenth Manifestation. It is possible it came from there. But how it got to England I have no idea, unless it was taken from a body by a British soldier and kept as a memento.”

He turned it again, looking at the diamond before turning it around to look at a Sanskrit inscription on the back. It read, *Isca, beloved return.*

“Are you a jeweler or something?” Sara asked; she was becoming curious.

The man smiled and shook his head. “No, I am an archeologist. I specialize in the temples and sites of India. They are the love of my life. I am just going back to America to give a talk on my recent work. I hate going home. I want to stay in India until I am too old to move. Then I will ask someone to toss me in the river.”

Her face relaxed as she laughed. Sara was beginning to feel human again for the first time in years. “So what is Tantra?” asked Sara. “What does that mean as far as the medallion is concerned? And what does the inscription say?” She was becoming more and more interested in finding out what power this piece had.

The man screwed up his brow in thought. “As far as the medallion is concerned, I would say that it probably belonged to a woman who was a worshipper of Kali. The inscription says,” The man turned the medallion towards the light. “It says something like, ‘Isca, beloved return’. Maybe it was a marriage piece, though I don’t recognize the name Isca as being a Sanskrit name.”

The blood drained from Sara’s face as she heard that name once again. She knew it was her name. In some strange way it was beginning to feel more of her name than Sara. The walls seemed to close in even tighter on Sara, suffocating her. She reached up to turn up the air blower on to her face; she needed to breathe.

The man seemed oblivious to the panic that arose in Sara. He carried on talking about the medallion, turning it in his hands as he talked. “Tantra is about the powers that come together in union between a man and woman, or a God and Goddess. It is about the power of creation and destruction, of giving birth to new powers. Tantra is the method of passing through doorways, and the deities are the doorways to the Void.”

“Kali is often perceived to be a Goddess of destruction therefore the followers became destructive. Have you ever heard of the legends of the Thuggees?” the man asked, his white eyebrows rising in question. Sara nodded and tried hard not to go red.

“Well they followed Kali and murdered for her. That is only one side of Kali. That is the easy way, the degenerate way. A rare, and probably the original way to work with Kali, although we have no historical proof of this, was to be totally vegan. They would have spilled no blood, and would have been celibate unless the union was ritualized. I do have many theories which I will not burden you with.”

He handed her back the medallion. She did not want to touch it but she could not let him see her fear. She put it in her pocket and decided to get rid of it as soon as they got off the plane. “Please, do go on, I find this interesting. Tell me about your theory.” Sara was truly interested and wanted the man to continue.

The man was pleased to have such a captive audience. He tried to keep his voice low so as not to be overheard. “I feel that Kali is a much older deity in India than the rest of them. She was probably there before the various invasions and her concept probably came from the eastern Mediterranean. I have absolutely no proof of this; it’s just an instinct. I also feel that the lolling tongue in the image is wrong, that it is not a red tongue, but red blood around her mouth. That the image finally changed over the years to make her more, shall we say, acceptable.”

“Yes she is a Goddess of war, death, sex and sickness, but her followers make a big mistake by mimicking her activities. They should be the polar opposite to compliment her.” The man’s voice continued, but Sara’s thoughts drifted away from his story.

Sara remembered the Kali shrine deep below the hills in Kotli. It would probably be totally destroyed now, thanks to Ajit. Her mind drifted back to the time when she lay at the feet of the Goddess and was consumed by a fever. The voice of the Goddess pierced Sara’s brain again as she looked out of the airplane window, the man beside her falling silent as he saw Sara retreat into a secret world of her own.

Tend my shrine for me.

Well, she had not do a good job of that one. It was now a pile of rubble forgotten by the world forever. She inwardly sighed. Nothing ever worked the way that it should. Nothing ever made sense. Nothing was ever completed.

Her thoughts were interrupted by an announcement that they were about to land in Miami. Everyone started to talk at once. The seat had just about molded itself to her rear end. She had been sat on the plane for nearly twenty hours, hopping from Delhi to Kuwait to London.

They were herded through immigration to a gate lounge after the plane had landed and Sara gravitated towards a burger outlet. She was starving. Her eyes went up to heaven to say thank you for the inspiration to buy US dollars while she was in India.

After eating, which only seemed to have touched a small corner of her stomach, she thought about how she was going to get rid of the medallion. If she were seen dropping it, maybe someone would hand it back to her. An idea dawned. It was important that it went to someone rather than go in the rubbish. It was after all a sacred object and had to be treated with respect, regardless of what she thought of it.

The crumpled burger wrapping that was in her hand was perfect. Placing the medallion in with the wrapping, she dropped the wrapping on the floor. Her movement was fluid as she bent down to pick up the wrapping, leaving the medallion behind. Walking briskly, she went to the rest room to clean up as she waited for her boarding call for her next flight to Key West.

She stood before the mirror and looked at herself for a moment before washing her face. Reaching out for a paper towel, she knocked over the metal brief case that she had placed on the floor beside her. She had not yet opened it. She had almost opened it at Delhi airport, just to ensure that there were no guns in it. But the angel, causing her to forget about it, had distracted her. It had been through the X ray checkpoint, and no one had asked her to open it for inspection.

Looking around, she realized the rest room was too public a place to open the case. Goodness knows what Ajit had hidden in here. She went into a toilet cubicle and shut the door. The briefcase rested on her knee and Sara waited for a moment, staring at the metal case. Carefully, she placed the key in the lock and turned it without opening the lid. What would she do if it were full of drugs? She could just leave it in the rest room and walk away from it.

But curiosity got the better of her. It had been given to Ajit in the Kashmiri airport under strange circumstances. There was bound to be something exciting in it. She fingered the lid for a moment before opening it.

She looked for a moment in disappointment and confusion. Why was Ajit carrying such a thing? What was so important about this? She reached in and picked up a glass vial that was filled with clear liquid. There were many other clear glass vials filled with liquid, each nestled in their own cushioned compartment. The only other thing was an inscription on the inside of the case lid. It was a strange symbol that Sara had not seen before. She opened the lid wider to take a closer look and spotted a slim pocket with documents in the lid lining.

Her hands fumbled, trying to open the lining. Furrowing her brow with concentration, she leaned forward, her fingers trying to pry the fabric away from the base. She did not notice the case slipping until it was too late. The case tumbled on to the floor, tipping on its side.

The vials fell from the case and smashed on the ceramic tiles at Sara's feet. Tiny shards of glass shattered everywhere and the liquid contents oozed across the floor. Thin rivers of the liquid trickled out from under the bathroom door, getting under the feet of women who walked past.

One woman slipped on the wet floor and looked down at the wet patch. The woman swore under her breath as she got a paper towel to wipe the liquid off of her shoe. Sara tried to gather up the bits of broken glass with toilet paper, cutting herself as she wiped the floor.

The public announcement told her that her plane was about to board. Cursing, she ripped the papers from the case and bolted out of the bathroom, leaving the empty case behind. Shoving the papers into her travel bag, she bumped into a woman and small child as they entered the rest room. Sara reached out and caught the child before she was knocked over. The liquid of death, all over Sara's hands, passed to the child and then to the mother.

All of the women who had been in the bathroom carried the viral matter with them. It seeped into the air, entering the lungs of everyone in the terminal. Quietly, death accompanied everyone on their journeys as they boarded their planes or greeted their relatives. The virus moved quickly, by touch and by breath as the people went about their business, taking death out into the world with them.

Once Sara was settled in her seat, waiting for the plane to depart to Key West, she pulled out the papers from the case. She laid them out on her lap and screwed her eyes up as she tried to make sense of what she was looking at. The first paper was clearly a world map that had the tracking of wind patterns written in red ink over the continents. The second was a weather print out for extended forecasts, one for Africa and one for Asia.

The third one was a confusing mass of chemical structures and strange diagrams. She turned the paper on its side trying to figure out what the signs meant. A man squeezed into the seat next to her and nodded his head at Sara. He looked over at the papers on her knee in curiosity.

"So, Do you work for CDC?" he asked. Sara looked at him blankly. "I beg your pardon, I'm sorry, I don't understand." Replied Sara.

The man pointed to the papers in Sara's lap. "The chemical structures and maps. Don't mind me being nosy, I thought you worked for the Center for Disease Control, the CDC." His voice was too loud for Sara, she felt like the whole plane could hear their conversation.

Sara shook her head and pushed the papers back into her flight bag, which she placed under the seat in front of her. She sat back, ignoring the man next to her as she stared out of the window.

'Oh god, what have I done'. The words repeated themselves over and over in her brain as the plane took off for Key West, leaving behind a trail of death that was already growing in size. *In death we are given freedom and regeneration, in sickness we are cleansed, in war we are educated. If we do not accept her gifts, then we are surely doomed.* The voice of the priest in the temple of Kali in Delhi echoed through her thoughts.

Bending forward, Sara placed her head in her hands. She wanted to sob, but her throat was silent. She wanted to run, but the seat belt held her firmly, forcing her to look down at the world that she had just poisoned.

Isca, my daughter, you have birthed me into the world where I shall dance my dance until all is stillness. Allow the imprisonment of life to fall away from you; return to me and we shall be as one, you and I.

A sharp tap on her shoulder forced her to open her eyes and lift her head up. One of the flight attendants held the medallion in her hand. "Excuse me, but the man over there said that you dropped this in the airport. He tried to get it back to you, but there was no time."

The flight attendant pointed to a man sat on the center isle. The man waved and smiled. She recognized him immediately this time, the angel who had followed her in the airport.

The medallion weighed heavy in her hand as she closed her eyes, trying to shut out the nightmare that was unfolding all around her.

*And on her return shall the dark sleep come,
Reaching out across all the lands
As my erring children are brought home to me.
All will be still, all will be silent.*

The song of Kali / prophecy of the Thirteenth Manifestation.

GLOSSARY

Begum The senior woman in the family.

Dhoti A cloth wrap piece of clothing for males.

Diwali Indian festival of light.

Dupputta A veil.

Imam Islamic holy man.

Mudrahs Sacred hand postitions.

*Pakor*as spicy battered vegetables.

Pathan People of northwest frontier Pakistan.

Samosas Spicy pasties.

Sari A length of cloth that is the national dress of India for women.

Tizer A bright red soda.

Urdu Official Pakistani language.

Whip n' top Wooden top with leather whip. A popular toy in Northern England.