

O Arjuna!

Whenever spirit degenerates and avarice rages on earth,

I reincarnate; erupting from the unmanifest,

I come to destroy evil and to resurrect righteousness.

~ Bhagavad Gita

KRISHNA'S COUNSEL

Prince Arjuna's eyes flickered wildly over the ranks of the enemy as his chariot blazed across the battlefield of Kurukshetra in ancient northern India, resting on the faces of gurus, kinfolk and friends for a few crucial seconds. As the unspeakable horror that was looming struck him afresh, a tidal wave of doubt assailed the ambidextrous master archer.

Arjuna focused his gaze upon the figure steering his chariot: it was the Blue God Krishna, avatar, friend and kinsman, who had agreed to serve as his charioteer and counselor in this apocalyptic clash between the forces of good and evil. Lord Krishna was resplendent in colorful attire that flashed like lightning on a stormy night. His skin was hued the dark turquoise of a newborn cloud. Sparkling diamonds adorned his person, while a peacock feather waved gaily from his headband. "I beg your counsel, O Krishna!" the Prince cried, aware that only divine wisdom could restore order to his chaotic world. "Evil as my cousins are, I find that I cannot battle my own kin. How is it possible to kill those who once showered upon me their great love?"

But Krishna only flashed his inscrutable smile and the Prince's head drooped towards his chest. "I am no coward, O

Krishna,” Arjuna muttered in despair. “I know the Kauravas are blinded by lust and jealousy. Indeed treachery has become their second nature. Yet how can slaying them increase our happiness? Should I not offer myself to them, unarmed and unresisting?” And tormented by his moral dilemma, the hope of the Pandavas threw down his magical bow Gandiva and refused to fight; a good thing, as it turned out, for his angst moved Krishna to unravel before him celestial mysteries that swiftly dissolved his uncertainty.

Even as countless life-forms radiating streams of light separated and merged again to create the boundless being of the God of Gods, Krishna’s resonant voice cut through the din. “Your sorrow is sheer delusion, Arjuna!” thundered the Blue God. “Wise men do not grieve for the dead, or for the living. Never was there a time when I did not exist, or you, or these kings, nor will there come a time when we cease to be. These bodies come to an end, Arjuna, but that vast Self is ageless, fathomless, eternal!”

Suffused by torrents of grace, Arjuna discerned the role of the divine in human life, the impeccability of *karmic* law, the immortality of the soul, and the way of the noble human, especially in turbulent times. A colossal burden slid off from his mighty shoulders as Krishna’s luminous counsel penetrated his soul—*that the duty of a spiritual warrior is first to determine what is right, and then to fight the encroaching darkness, regardless of how the cosmic dice may fall.* And with a roar that resounded across that simmering battlefield and straight up to the heavens, the shining star of the Pandavas reached down to pick up his deadly bow.

*Whoever brought me here
Will have to take me home.
~ Rumi*

**Chapter 1 ~ TURTLE'S TOUGH LOVE
MANHATTAN, 1998**

Pia sneaked out before the end of the Twelve-Step meeting being held in the basement of a midtown Manhattan Presbyterian Church and ran up the short flight of stone stairs that led to the world outside. Perhaps because it was Christmas Eve and folks seemed to be extra twitchy, the meeting had only served to amplify her emotional cacophony. Now she could scarcely wait to dump her bombshell news on Turtle—that her estranged father had passed away eight thousand miles away in India, leaving her his sole heir. How was she to accurately convey to him her eerie sense that returning to the subcontinent she'd fled a dozen years ago would trigger a potentially deadly surge of *karma*?

Close to the subway entrance on 42nd Street she bumped into Tatiana, a six-foot ramp model with slanted eyes and a sexy drawl. Plagued by a voracious appetite for cocaine chased with straight vodka, Tatiana had been battling her addiction with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, or AA, and Pia had come to admire the model's grit in always returning to the rooms despite some serious slips.

Tatiana exhaled a cloud of mint-flavored smoke, ground out her cigarette beneath a pointed heel, and complained that she'd

missed the meeting at *The Seed* because of a screw-up on the Broadway subway line. Damn, Pia thought, little point in asking this gorgeous space cadet just why the trains were messed up; now how in sweet hell was *she* supposed to transport herself across five avenues and down thirty-five city blocks to Washington Square Park for her meeting with Turtle?

“Are folks still hanging around *The Seed*, Pia?” Tatiana asked in her languid way.

Assuring Tatiana the meeting was still on, Pia turned direction and took off like a rocket, grateful for her comfy suede boots—this being peak hour on the eve of a major holiday, her chances of grabbing a cab downtown were next to nil. At the corner of 34th and Sixth she spotted Gareth, a rising star in the stand-up comedy circuit she’d met at an East Village meeting, driving his scarlet Miata. Hoping for a ride, she waved frantically, but Gareth didn’t see her and zoomed off when the light turned green. So, praying for deliverance from Turtle’s wrath for being late, backpack slapping against her spine like a wild thing, she began to jog through the swelling crowds.

Funny, she thought, that just like Matt DuBois III—the corporate lawyer for whom she worked—Turtle too was a stickler for punctuality. It made sense that Matt would value his time since he charged over five hundred dollars an hour for his legal expertise, but Turtle could only blame his obsession with strict time-keeping on his U.S. Army boot-camp training. She smiled at the sharp contrast between these two men she was close to—Matt lived in Greenwich, Connecticut, drove a Lexus, and shopped at Brooks Brothers and

Zegna, while Turtle was a jobless Native American cripple who shared an apartment on the Lower East Side with his grouchy half-sister, and spent his days counseling any addict willing to digest his wisdom—usually for a Coke and a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips. Pia valued both men for complementary reasons—working for Matt kept her monetarily afloat in the Big Apple, while Turtle’s tough love kept her on the straight and narrow—which is why she continued to flail her way towards him, pissed that everyone but herself appeared to be enthused about the year’s biggest celebration.

Sweet God, how she wished she’d managed to dump her emotional waste on the meeting she’d just left! But *The Seed* had been packed with folks freaked out to varying degrees by the holidays, and she’d given up hope of getting in a word during the sharing. Instead she’d slunk to the back of the room and drowned her sorrows by drinking a mug of lukewarm coffee into which she dunked a thick slice of raisin-studded pound cake that her friend Brigitte, ex-hooker and dominatrix extraordinaire, had baked to celebrate her seventh sober anniversary.

Pia had held back from spilling the details of her most recent crisis into Brigitte’s ear simply because she felt her friend deserved a break from all disturbing news on her day of glory. After all, it wasn’t too long ago that Brigitte had staggered around with three monkeys clinging to her back—booze, heroin, and the indignity of pursuing the oldest profession in the world. Brigitte had kicked all three with the help of AA and a host of sober friends and now she managed a shelter for battered women in Harlem. Best of all, her

wicked half-Irish, half-Jamaican sense of humor appeared to be resurrecting itself.

At thirty-seven, Brigitte was four years older than Pia, and apart from a genetic predilection for self-destruction, the two women had little in common. Pia traced their unlikely bond back to that distant evening when she'd slipped into *The Seed* and found a seat beside the vivacious ex-hooker. As the ceremony of addicts and alcoholics healing their wounded selves through the divinely inspired Twelve-Step program had unfolded, Pia had recalled her friend Angela's prediction that she'd hit bottom on marijuana—a herb most Americans dismissed as recreational. Those words had caused her to shudder violently, whereupon Brigitte had won her over by flinging a maternal arm across her shoulder and drawing her close.

The cool crowd Pia had hung with prior to AA had oozed 'culture', but when it came to a hand waving for help in the turbulent ocean of life, most had displayed a Houdini-like knack for vanishing. Brigitte, however—who'd barely made it past high school, was missing part of her left ear thanks to a pimp's skill with a razor, and believed her nephew's artwork to be an improvement on both Dali and Picasso—was the kind of mythical comrade who'd tangle with a killer in a dark alley to help a friend.

As she raced downtown, Pia recalled the time she'd been sucking up nicotine in the backyard of *The Seed* when a trio of over-the-hill sober drunks who insisted that the rooms of AA be restricted solely to alcoholics had ganged up on her. How could she possibly be addicted to substances as mild as nicotine and marijuana, their leader Tommy B. had demanded of her in a quavering treble. What was she

really doing in the rooms? Conspiracy theories were big with this gang of wet-brains.

Brigitte and her boyfriend Karl had been arguing in *The Seed's* straggly rose arbor. “You know nuthin’, you old farts,” Brigitte had hissed, marching forward to thrust her pretty face at the gang of three; Karl, a heavy-metal aficionado with sizeable biceps, had hovered menacingly behind her. The ancient trio looked like they’d been hit by a truck. “Now you listen to me good!” Brigitte had barked. “My cousin Tricia got so down on that hydroponic weed shit that she jumped off her roof and died, okay? You guys are dumbasses, I know, but try to grok that addiction is addiction!” She’d glared savagely at the stunned geriatrics. “Next feller who picks on Pia is gonna be singing soprano in the choir, hear?”

Stunned by Brigitte’s fierce defense, Pia held back from throwing in her own two bits—that *if* marijuana is used correctly, it can be good medicine. Clearly all her harassers wanted was to mourn the death of their glory days, when alcohol ruled a sinister world of gangsters and molls who hung out in shadowy bars on the mob-infested west side. As Brigitte had once explained to her, these old-timers felt so alienated in a world gone crazy with heroin, cocaine, crack, crystal meth, and DMT that they picked on any newcomer who believed a silly-making weed could equally destroy body, mind and spirit.

The prospect of life minus 24-karat comrades like Brigitte and Turtle caused the pain monster to suddenly erupt in her chest. Pia had once dealt with this razor-finned shark by smoking herself into oblivion; now, all she had to sustain herself were meetings, yoga

and meditation, candle-lit baths, and books on Eastern mysticism. When she was too dispirited to follow that holy route, she dug into a triple-cheese pizza with anchovies and red peppers from Three Milano Brothers, or junk food from the Korean deli around the corner. What kept her sober was the hard truth that an active addict's life inevitably turns into a living hell; as Einstein had so aptly put it, insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Another Christmas Eve and she had a severe attack of the blues. Perhaps she should head over to one of several parties igniting all over the city, from way uptown to the winding streets of the Village, not to forget the bash at her friend Becky's loft in Tribeca? Pointless, she decided, continuing to jog, for she was in no mood for revelry tonight; instead she sent up a fervent prayer that Turtle would wait for her.

AA advised its members to stick with same-sex mentors, and yet Turtle had successfully sponsored her for the past three years. In truth, Pia thought wryly, no sane person could accuse her of lusting after a guy who'd been critically wounded during a skirmish in some forgotten jungle in Vietnam. Years ago Turtle had traveled to Manhattan from his Atakapan reservation on the fringes of Louisiana to help his widowed half-sister through a suicidal depression; fortunately for the addicts he now sponsored, he'd opted to stay on.

Turtle claimed Pia's almond eyes and dusky skin reminded him of his daughter who had died of a drug overdose in a rundown Los Angeles motel. Her autopsy had revealed a three-month-old

fetus, and Turtle still blamed himself for not believing her when she had called him, in the middle of the night, claiming her pimp had beaten the crap out of her yet again. She'd begged him to give her a home until her baby was born, but sick and tired of being conned by his own flesh and blood, Turtle had refused. Then, a mere week later, his daughter was dead, and the poor man had no sorcery to turn back the clock.

“What to say, Pia?” he'd mumbled piteously. “I told her Hetty's apartment wasn't big enough for the three of us, but truth is I didn't believe her when she swore up and down that she wanted to get straight for the sake of the baby. I loved her mother so goddamn much, y'know, that after she left us I hated to see the kid around. So I packed her off to her mom's family on the neighboring Rez. Later I tried to make up to her, but she was already too far gone, sellin' her body for one more high.”

Privately Pia was relieved that the baby never emerged from that ravaged womb; those drugs mama had shot up would certainly have blown holes in her cerebellum. But when guilt slashed at Turtle like a demented pair of rusty scissors, she figured it was best to just listen to him until he could face life again; she'd come to believe it was their unabashed mutual sharing that formed the glue of their alliance.

Only when she passed the last stone building of New York University and slipped into the park did she realize she'd been weeping. Brisk winter winds whipped her cheeks, drying her tears to a dusting of salt. Then she caught sight of Turtle sitting in his wheelchair next to the green park bench that was their usual meeting

spot and her spirits rose. “Sorry, Turtle,” she gasped as she reached his side, “trouble on the Broadway line. Would you believe I jogged all the way down here from *The Seed*?”

Turtle glowered up at her for a tense moment before grunting his forgiveness. Dropping a kiss on his cold cheek, Pia parked herself down on the bench beside his wheelchair, thinking it a minor miracle that, despite the stream of yuppies, office-workers, pushers, pimps, sex-workers of all varieties, mimes and musicians who frequented this park, this particular bench was always free for them.

“Rough week, eh?” Turtle asked, his narrowed eyes gleaming. “Goddamn holidays never fail to bring out the worst in us, eh?” By ‘us’ Pia knew he meant the Twelve-Step lot, and he was right—year-end holidays were especially brutal for recovering addicts and alcoholics who’d lost intimate relationships and dreaded the void that opened up during days of family celebration. Many revisited old methods of coping and some never made it back. So yes, apart from Brigitte’s exultant share, the meeting she’d just left had been nothing but a bitch session with a few scraps of gratitude thrown in.

Suddenly reluctant to spill her big news, Pia told Turtle about the wild-eyed woman sporting an old-fashioned Afro who’d rushed in half-way through the meeting. “My sister OD’d up in Harlem!” the woman had shrieked. “She’s in the uptown morgue! Someone please give me money to get her buried?”

Jesus, who’d hung out with fishermen, money-lenders, lepers and a lovely courtesan, would have approved of Max, a stockbroker with short cropped white hair, who’d handed the woman a hundred

dollar bill. Unwritten AA law forbade begging at a meeting, but what did Christmas mean if folks who'd been through hell and back could not be extra generous? Others handed her smaller bills, and Pia too had passed a dollar along, watching as the Afro head had bent down to count the spoils. Then the woman had jumped up and raced out of *The Seed*, a triumphant smirk on her face; a deep voice had intoned 'there but for the grace of God go I' and nervous titters had rippled across the dimly lit basement.

Turtle looked morose but refrained from making his usual acerbic comment about active addicts being their own worst enemy. "Where were you last afternoon, Pia?" he demanded. "You didn't answer the goddamn phone."

"With Sherry Hall in Admin," Pia said. "Sherry sounded so grim I thought I was in for it."

"In for *what*?" Turtle shot her a puzzled look. "Didn't you say that Matt guy digs your work?"

"Nothing to do with my work," Pia said shortly. "I figured I was going to get hell for blowing up at Leo Watts—that's the senior litigation partner who's been bullying our new temp, fresh from Bolivia."

Turtle grinned, baring wolf-like yellow teeth. "You got a nerve complainin' about *my* temper, honey. What did the feller do to piss you off so bad this time, hey?"

"Grabbed a heavy law book and swore he'd bash her head in with it if she didn't get some friggin' agreement ready in time for his conference call." She sighed. "He continues to pull shit like this, but

no one but me dares stand up to him since he happens to own a nice chunk of the firm.”

Turtle’s mottled hand reached out to pat hers. He knew the real reason Pia loathed Watts was that, a couple of months ago, the senior partner had abused his secretary for the last time—sixty-two year old Athena Hall, connoisseur of literary fiction and a wide range of classical music, had suffered a fatal heart attack at her desk after a tantrum Watts had unleashed upon her for some bungled travel arrangements. Since Pia’s own cubicle was located behind the ‘bull pen’ where Athena used to work, she had caught the look of fastidious disgust on Watt’s face at the sight of her friend’s shapeless body sprawled lifeless at his feet. Ever since, she had done her damndest to give him hell.

Turtle looked at her inquiringly—he was used to her daydreaming, his eyes said eloquently, but tonight *was* Christmas Eve. “So! Did you get in trouble or not?”

“Not,” Pia said, just as two rail thin teens with identical spiked hair sauntered up to the spurting fountain a few feet away from them and plunged into animated discourse. “Watts must have thought better about reporting me.” She took a deep breath. “Ready for my big news, Turtle?”

Turtle nodded gravely, his grip on her hand tightening instinctively.

“A lawyer based in Bangalore has managed to track me down,” she announced. “Fellow must be as sharp as a knife since I left over a decade ago and with another last name. Sent a letter

directly to the firm, which Sherry thought she should personally hand to me.”

“Bangalore, eh?” Turtle said. “That where you was born, right, sweetie?”

“Right, the south Indian city that’s been hitting the hi-tech news. Dad’s dead, Turtle,” she blurted, baffled that her father’s passing had not shaken her more than it had: Was this because he’d always been extra tough on her? “There are decisions to be made regarding his estate,” she went on, trying to rein in her turbulent mind. “My Aunt Diana’s passed on and her son Steve has moved to Germany, he says, so if I don’t go back pretty soon, these assets will revert to the government.”

Turtle’s jaw worked as if he was chewing on buffalo hide. “Shouldn’t let no damned government grab your property,” he stated emphatically. “All they gonna do is buy more guns and nuke bombs and whatnot. So what you gonna do, huh?” he asked, scratching the stubble on his stubborn chin.

Fear grabbed her in its icy arms. “Don’t you dare bully me into going back!” she exploded, startling the young punk watching them from the opposite bench. “You know damn well it would kill me to leave Manhattan!”

“Kill you, my ass,” Turtle retorted with his usual polish. “Why you goin’ to AA and yoga classes for, twisting your body into all those pretzel shapes if you’re still too scared to face real life, eh? You got some solid sobriety under your belt, and guts and smarts and integrity many would die for. Goddammit, Pia,” he thundered, maneuvering his wheelchair so he was looking directly into her eyes.

“You’ve come a long way from that sniveling brat I saw hiding at the back of *The Seed!*”

“I’ve figured a way out,” Pia said. “Andy Levine at Kroner & Beck deals with several Bangalore-based companies. Bet *he* could talk to this lawyer on my behalf. A General Power of Attorney might enable him to send my inheritance to Manhattan—there are always loopholes, I belong to a devious race.”

“Sometimes, girl,” Turtle declared, “you just too smart for your own good. Sure you can stand on your head and scream at the moon but this ain’t about some fuckin’ inheritance, eh? This is a challenge sent to you by your Higher Power!” His grip on her hand tightened into a vice. “Look,” he said in a gravelly voice, “hide dust under the rug and you gonna be sick right in the center of your soul.” Turtle tended to mix metaphors, but his meaning was clear. “Now you listen to me good,” he ordered, left hand shooting up in the air like Joe Cocker in full throttle. “Only two ways to react to fear—either you can ‘Fuck Everything and Run’, or you can ‘Face Everything and Recover’.”

Pia disliked Turtle’s liberal use of Twelve-Step acronyms and clichés—‘Fake It Till You Make It,’ ‘First Things First,’ ‘Let Go and Let God,’ ‘False Evidence Appearing Real’ (acronym for FEAR), et cetera. Now she held back from telling him about the ghastly sensation that had come over her as she’d read that blasted letter—as if Yama, Lord of Death, was breathing fumes of ruin down her neck! If Turtle believed she was heading into danger, it would most definitely color his advice to her.

“Know what I thought when you didn’t pick up the phone?” he rumbled on. “That you’d run back to that ex of yours, or picked up some bud in Central Park.” He shook his head mournfully. “Don’t know which is worse, Pia, two-legged love or drugs and booze.” His bushy eyebrows came together to form a thick black line. “Folks like us go berserk around the holidays. Cut loose from some jerk with great difficulty, then go runnin’ back when the going gets tough, too scared to be alone. When we gonna learn that no human can give us unconditional love? All we’re capable of on this planet is a fickle, selfish, trivial sort of thing.” He looked up at the sprinkling of stars, as if communing directly with higher consciousness. “Now tell me what you gonna do, Pia. As your sponsor, I got a right to know.”

Like her deceased Uncle Hari, Turtle too believed that the highest goal of human life was to evolve into a spiritual warrior. If he did not respect what this meant, Turtle had once reminded her, he’d have killed himself after the war, when he’d lost both his legs and his sexual ability. The strange saga he’d related to her at the start of their relationship flashed through her mind: Turtle had returned home a broken man and had sunk into the abyss of alcoholism and heroin addiction. Then his shaman father had dreamed his son was in trouble and sent a tribe member in a beat-up pickup truck to spirit Turtle out of his vet group house and back to the Rez. The entire tribe had rejoiced—the prodigal son had returned, never mind his wretched state. His mother had fed him strong medicine to soothe his withdrawal even as the Council of Elders discussed his case late into the night.

At dawn the next morning, Turtle was given an herbal cocktail. Six men carried him down a winding trail to the banks of the Mississippi, the Council following in silent procession. Turtle was lowered into an inlet of water, legless body and all. He'd clung to a rock, his eyes begging for mercy. Then his father gravely informed Turtle of the elders' decision—either he could die in this sacred creek, or he could invite his spirit back, by choosing to forgive.

Turtle had clung to that mossy rock with rising terror before the potion kicked in. His mind had grown magically clear as a parade of villains passed before his mind's eye. There was the 'buddy' who'd tricked him into taking his place on that fateful mission; laughing Vietnamese guards who'd pushed bamboo slivers up his nails, cutting his skin open to pour sugar on his flesh so jungle ants could feast; other captors who'd shoved maggoty rat meat into his mouth and left him to lie in his dysenteric shit; the American doctor who'd later allowed gangrene to set into his legs.

Amazed, Turtle had found he could forgive everyone but the Atakapan sweetheart who'd borne him a daughter, then split with another man. Both of them had died soon afterwards in a car accident. Her honey-sweet face had formed before his eyes. "Turtle my love," she'd whispered. "He swore he'd kill both you and the baby if I didn't go with him—but it was *you* I loved." And Turtle had realized that only the truth could emerge in so sacred a space; it was the peace suffusing his face that informed the elders that his clearing work was done.

“Time for you to make that big leap forward, Pia,” Turtle growled, breaking into her thoughts. “You just gotta go back and face the music, or you’ll always regret being a wuss.”

Hey! Pia wanted to shout. I’d prefer drowning in a sacred creek watched by a bunch of half-naked hunks to going back to face *my* demons! Instead she said, “I called the lawyer last night, Turtle. He’s a pro, crisp, clear, every fact on the tips of his fingers. He says Dad’s left me a nice amount in stocks and shares and that our house should fetch quite a bit—Bangalore’s gone into hyper-inflation.”

“Then why you care about your job, sweetie?” Turtle demanded. “Helping fat cat lawyers sell airplanes to third-world countries ain’t no fit job for a woman as creative as you. And who’s gonna stop you from coming back and getting a job that suits you better, hey? All you gotta do is stay sober and keep the faith.” He took her cold hands and massaged her swollen fingers—she had the beginnings of carpal tunnel syndrome and sometimes the pain got so bad she could not lift her wrists without yelping.

“I’m scared, Turtle, really scared,” she whispered, clutching at his hand.

“What’s really going on inside of you, Pia?” Turtle demanded. “Come on, girl, spit it all out.”

“Boils down to an awful confusion,” she confessed. “Too many invisible strings attached to that money, too many ghosts and demons to confront. You know why I left India, Turtle, things were rapidly going downhill and I grabbed at my big chance to split. Not that it’s been easy here.” Her mind skittered ahead, searching for new arguments to convince them both that she was right *not* to go.

“Besides, Sherry says a position is opening up in the firm that’s tailor-made for me—international liaison between Manhattan H.Q. and our European branches. I’d have to deal with a bunch of multinational lawyers, not a piece of cake, I know, some of those guys have unbelievable egos...” Her voice petered down to a halt.

“I said get it all out,” Turtle urged, his face hard as granite in the deepening twilight.

“HR is willing to give me the job, Turtle,” she said. “At close to double my current salary. Besides I’m more or less happy here,” she whispered tearfully. “I could probably streak down Fifth Avenue at peak hour and get away with it. When you’ve grown up being told how to think, who to talk to, what to wear, and who to marry...hey, let me tell you, life in the Big Apple can feel like heaven.”

A weirdo sporting spiked hair and silver rings all over his pimply face stared at her from the opposite bench. He was smoking a crumpled roll-up that smelled like good bud. If Turtle wasn’t around, Pia realized with a frisson of shock, she’d have thrown her five years of sobriety down the drain and begged the guy for a hit. Turtle let go of her hands, soothed by his gentle ministrations. “Show me one human who says she ain’t scared when the shit hits the fan, Pia, and I’ll show you a liar,” he said. “Now what’s that Indian mumbo-jumbo story you told me about? The one about your God Krishna?”

Long ago Pia had recounted to Turtle her favorite Indian myth—the encounter between the great God Krishna, worshipped as an incarnation of the Divine by millions, and Prince Arjuna of the Pandavas, on the ancient northern battlefield of the Kurukshetra. Turtle had gotten mighty excited at the point at which Krishna

advises Arjuna on how a noble human being should act under pressure. “Krishna’s teaching your Prince how to be a spiritual warrior!” he’d cried. “Each of us gotta do what we gotta do, Pia, like it or not.”

That’s when her mental fog cleared. “All right,” she said hoarsely. “I’ll hand in my resignation on Monday. I’m getting the strong feeling I should quit my job. I love Matt, but working in that high-stress environment is ruining my nerves.” Her thoughts whirled like dervishes. “Besides, what if I inherit a bundle? I might not ever have to work again, especially if I decide to stay on in India. I promised Uncle Hari that someday I’d get serious about my inner work and perhaps it’s time to keep my word. It’s tough to shoot for enlightenment when you’re struggling to keep body and soul together.”

A flash of sadness crossed Turtle’s face. He nodded, tugging at his silver ear hoop. “No point twiddlin’ your thumbs then, darlin’, just go. And be grateful for your dad’s friggin’ money—the guy’s dead and money’s just gas for life.” She saw the glint of tears in his eyes. “Know what, honey?” he muttered, dabbing at his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. “I’m gonna miss you something terrible.”

Night descended rapidly and Washington Square Park took on a surreal look as beings emerged in ghostly streams to mill about their space. The gravity of her news had probably caused Turtle to extend his evening with her; after all, this could be the last time they got to chew the spiritual fat in this mysterious park. Turtle stared up at the stars, resignation reflected on the planes of his craggy face, but Pia’s gaze was drawn down to earth as her thoughts winged

backwards to the south Indian city she'd fled way back in 1986. She focused on Anokhi, a childhood friend she'd truly loved.

The thought of seeing Anokhi after all these years should have thrilled her, but instead dread fell over her like a shroud. Could this disquiet stem from the warning delivered to her by the renunciate that Anokhi and she had encountered one hot summer afternoon an eon ago? What had the fierce old man said? That Pia would be forced to come to Anokhi's aid in the future and should therefore make herself strong. But protect Anokhi from *what*, Pia wondered again? If there was one woman almost too richly favored by both genetics and circumstance, it was Anokhi.

Out of the blue, Pia recalled Anokhi's mother grumbling that her daughter's loveliness was bound to draw to her both angels and demons; Madira had bemoaned the fact that Anokhi's rare beauty had not been accompanied by the wisdom required to deal with the evil in the world. Pia's tears splashed freely on to the cold earth; damn it all, she'd thought she'd be escaping her demons when she'd fled India, but the tricky critters had jumped into her baggage and flown across the ocean with her.

Turtle reached for her hand and held it tight. "It's okay to cry, sweet thing," he said gruffly. "Keep doing the right thing and soon you'll be looking back at this time from a fabulous place."

Pia wiped her eyes and blew her nose with the tissue he handed her. "Spiritual Warrior, c'est moi," she announced with a tremulous smile. Opposite them, the weirdo stubbed out his joint and winked at her. "How about some hot chocolate at that Greek deli on Broadway and sixth?" she asked, suddenly anxious to get away.

“They’ve got Christmas pies too, the old-fashioned kind, and fresh baklava.”

“Your treat, rich lady,” Turtle said gruffly, giving the stoned kid a dirty look before taking off like a chair bound missile, flashing lights and all. They moved onto the twilit pavement, Turtle’s shoulder length hair bobbing up and down as he wove through passersby in the wheelchair the Veterans’ Medical Services had custom designed for him, his atrophied half legs dangling, his weathered face glowering as he navigated the busy streets, with Pia practically running to stay in his wake.

Much later, back in the funky apartment she was about to abandon for god knows what, Pia snuggled beneath her comforter craving sleep. But her mind was as restless as a screaming desert wind; opening the jeweled flagon of time, it allowed the genie who presided over past records to slip out and embrace her in his giant arms—so that, while the city whooped and hollered in celebration of another Christmas Eve, *she* was sent back in time to trace the stream of events that had driven her to flee India for the matchless lunacy of Manhattan.

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*But those who, mistrustful, half-learned,
Fail to practice my teaching,
Wander in the darkness, lost,
Stupefied by darkness.
~ Bhagavad Gita*

Chapter 2 ~ MOHINI

Bangalore, 1980

As Pia watched her father's youngest brother Seb pour himself a generous shot of *feni* and toss the potent cashew liquor down his throat, memories of her last encounter with Uncle Hari came rushing back. She'd been sitting with the old man beside the lotus pool in his riotous back garden, listening to him explain just why Eastern mystics considered human life in particular so precious. It boiled down to a specific human faculty, Uncle had said gravely—the ability to discern, most often via protracted and bitter experience, which actions caused true pleasure and which caused pain.

A lion, for instance, cannot decide to stop killing, for creatures of the wild are governed by instinct; however a human assassin could experience so potent a blast of remorse that overnight he or she could evolve into a resolute pacifist. In this manner, Uncle had gone on to say, by combining the priceless gift of discrimination with intelligent effort, a few humans had gradually transformed themselves into sages, thereby charting a golden path to enduring peace and joy that others could pursue.

Pia had absorbed his words with her usual thirst for wisdom. Could this sublime view of existence be the reason it stung her to see

certain men in their community drinking themselves insensible, she'd wondered out loud. "Possibly, sweetheart," Uncle had replied, "but keep in mind that marinating the brain in booze is only a symptom of a deep seated emotional cowardice. I'd say it's an unconscious fear of facing horrific aspects of our past that's really ruining our people."

Just then his housekeeper Selvamma had called from the kitchen to say that Lalita, Uncle's eldest daughter, was on the phone from Canada, and Uncle had hurried indoors. Alone in the quiet garden, Pia had raised her rebel head to the radiant noon sky and given thanks for this one elder, both willing and able to help assuage her angst about the mystifying matrix into which she'd been thrust.

Now, as Seb shooed her sister Lila off the soft leather couch in their cathedral-style living room and took her place, Pia wondered whether the old man had been warning her that to expect noble behavior from men committed to escapism could only worsen her perennial state of disenchantment. Surreptitiously she studied Seb, and, with an inner sigh of relief, decided that his tragic flaws would not prevent her from enjoying his exuberant company and remarkable skill as a raconteur.

Seb had driven down winding hilly roads leading from Mangalore—a coastal town to which their ancestors had migrated centuries ago—to their home in Bangalore, capital of the rich southern state of Karnataka. After dinner, her mother, grandmother, and Anokhi, their next door neighbor, clustered around him in chairs, while Lila, Pia's elder sister by a year, plopped herself down at Seb's feet, the better to gaze up at him with her puppy dog eyes.

Pia seated herself in lotus position on the cool marble floor, relieved that her father Nick had driven to Mysore early this morning to sort out a snag in his timber business. When her father was in the house, simmering with a rage she could not comprehend considering he'd been blessed with so much, her own nerves would fibrillate with tension.

“Give us a ghost story, Unc,” Lila cried in her childish way, and Anokhi nodded eagerly, although she was five years older than Pia and far more sedate. Pia used to find it odd that light hearted Anokhi was so entranced by the world of spirits, until Madira, Anokhi's mother, had mentioned that the region in Nepal from which their aristocratic clan originated was steeped in the paranormal. As for Lila, Pia knew her sister did not care to know where ghosts came from, or why they so mysteriously appeared and disappeared; Lila was content to lick the icing on life's multi-tiered cake, while Pia herself had been cursed with the yearning to get to the bottom of every little thing.

Their father Nick was tall, slim and grim, while Seb, short for Sebastian, was stocky and jovial with the beginnings of a paunch, doubtless due to his twin addictions to booze and rich food. A luxuriant mustache whose tips curled upward was his second outstanding physical feature. Seb was known within their small community for his heavy drinking, followed by the telling of bizarre tales punctuated with bursts of inappropriate laughter. Judging by his current state, Pia bet he'd carried a bottle of *feni* with him to ease the pain of traversing those three hundred miles to their home in Bangalore.

Like most of their extended family, Seb had inherited wealth, and yet his wife's extravagances seemed to worry him no end. Leona was sexy and socially ambitious and, to Pia's critical eye, cared more for how folks assessed her looks and possessions than for the welfare of her besotted husband and bratty kids. Pia had overheard Aunt Diana saying that Seb's drinking had accelerated after he'd married, and while it infuriated her to hear women being blamed for their husbands' flaws, Pia was inclined to blame Leona's loveless nature for Seb's growing need to seek solace in the bottle.

Pia knew more about Seb's early life than about her father's for the simple reason that while Nick had grown increasingly taciturn, Seb had remained his verbose self. Apart from a common passion for alcohol, these brothers had strikingly dissimilar natures—and yet, Pia thought, they'd been the only two gutsy enough to leave their prosperous clan and strike out on their own. As a young man, Nick found himself an executive post in a British-owned company, while Seb left the family nest to study agriculture in the multi-cultural city of Bangalore. Their brothers had hung around the family mansion in Mangalore, drinking on the sly, flirting with servant girls, and concocting elaborate practical jokes to unleash on unsuspecting elders.

Seb later wangled a job managing an estate in the southern state of Kerala and had lived that bucolic bachelor life for years before meeting Leona at a wedding and falling madly in lust with her. Once, so smashed he'd mistaken Pia for a drinking buddy, Seb confided in her ear that it was Leona's succulent breasts that had mesmerized him into proposing marriage.

Kerala is a south Indian state blessed with a multitude of rivers, backwaters, and seductive beaches. Prior to Independence, some shrewd Englishmen had grabbed fecund portions of her moist earth to grow a variety of spices, coffee and tea. As the manager of one estate in a group of four, Seb claimed he'd relished the sense of power that managing a vast estate had given him. Whenever he reminisced about life on those estates, he had his audience either in splits over his imitations of British bosses, or shivering with terror as he related 'true' ghost stories.

"It was so easy to die in that world," Seb said now to his circle of admirers. "Venomous snakes, wild cats, an elephant on the rampage, quicksand, even the curse of a sorcerer. One night a long cold thing was shoved at my face through the open window while I was dreaming about a slip of a girl I'd seen picking tea that afternoon. Good thing I woke up—that 'thing' happened to be the trunk of an elephant!"

"Omigod, Unc!" Lila breathed. "What did you do?"

"Slid off the bed and crawled under it. Somehow I knew that trunk belonged to a rogue elephant our laborers had been hunting for weeks. Bugger lumbered off to wreak more havoc—killed a woman washing clothes by the river, and trampled a boy returning home from a swim." Seb mopped at his forehead with a white hanky. "That beast could have pulled me out and smashed me to pulp if I hadn't woken up in time. It took sixty villagers to capture him." He burst into crazy laughter. "I suppose that's when I really began to believe in God."

"I want a ghost story," Pia demanded.

“How about a snake snippet to warm you up?” Seb asked, and plunged into it without her permission. “Happened in the second estate I was assigned to, eighteen years ago, mind you. I’d just returned from a wedding in Mangalore and was sitting exhausted on the pot in the dark—power lines were down and I hadn’t bothered to light an oil lamp. Then I heard a hissing sound coming from under my backside.” He paused, his impish gaze falling upon each of them in turn. “I hopped off instantly, and guess what I saw inside?”

“You already said it was a snake story,” Pia drawled, bored.

Her mother Nina shot her a warning look.

“Ah, but it wasn’t an ordinary snake, Pia!” Seb retorted indignantly. “King cobra, over a dozen feet long, coiled from the base of that pot to the top. Sonofabitch squeezed in through the drainage pipe and found himself the coolest place to hibernate!” Another burst of insane laughter. “Instant cure for exhaustion, I swear, shot of adrenaline right up the bloody arse.”

“Did you kill it?” Lila asked worriedly. “Dad says the image of its killer is imprinted on the eye of a dying cobra, so the mate has a sort of photograph to go by in order to hunt you down.”

“Not a chance! All serpents curdle my blood and this was a king cobra, known both for its deadly venom and its intelligence. I backed out of that bathroom stark naked and yelled for the cook. Fortunately the fellow was so smashed he didn’t think twice about shoving that monster into a gunny sack. Must have sold it to a snake charmer or medicine shop the next day, you could get quite a bit for a cobra that size.”

“What if it *had* bitten you?” Anokhi asked, her black eyes sparkling.

“For one thing, sweetheart, I wouldn’t be thrilling you with my tales tonight,” Seb retorted with a grin. “Cobra venom works fast, there wasn’t a doctor on the estate, and that blasted cook couldn’t drive.” He winked at Anokhi, making no secret of his appreciation of her striking beauty. “Why don’t we move to the porch?” he suggested. “Full moon tonight, isn’t it?”

So they all swarmed out to the terracotta tiled porch that encircled the colonial style house and Seb grabbed the best couch, instructing Lila to turn off the porch lights so they were sitting in the near dark. The others dragged chairs closer to him while Pia sat beside Anokhi on the cane bench with the bright silk cushions, leaning her head against her friend’s shoulder. Their housekeeper Rani joined them, sitting cross-legged on the floor beside Pia’s mother; she too loved Seb’s ebullient company, although her smattering of English prevented her from fully enjoying his riveting tales.

“Back to life on the estate,” Seb resumed his story telling. “Mr. Donaldson, our Scottish boss, ordered two of us trainee managers to oversee the planting of a delicate strain of cardamom on a neighboring estate. It was late by the time we got there, so we threw our stuff into adjoining bedrooms and hit the sack. I had a bad night: Someone kept opening the fridge, pouring water into a glass, and drinking thirstily. Must have happened a dozen times, but I was too tired to investigate. Next morning I asked Ajay what the hell he

thought he was doing, guzzling water in the middle of the bloody night. ‘Thought it was you, bugger!’ he shot right back.

“So I summoned the butler, who said the house was haunted by the ghost of an English manager. Now we knew why our big boss had so much trouble getting managers to stay at this particular estate! I warned the butler I’d get him fired if he didn’t sort things out right away, so he scooted down to the village and returned with a sorcerer. Now this chap did some *jaadu*, some magic, you know, to release the spirit—not black magic but white, since how these shamans use their paranormal skills depends on their intention—and after that we had some peace.” Seb sighed. “God knows why no one had the sense to call him in earlier.”

Seb’s tales drew pictures of life on Kerala’s larger estates, which Pia had already pegged as feudal strongholds. Natives of those fertile ranges inhabited a dream world infused by shamanic magic and custom and both men and women were exceptionally tough. It was not uncommon, Seb said, for a tea picker to take a full term pregnancy right into the estate, give birth behind some bushes, bite off the umbilical cord with her teeth, swaddle the baby, and then walk home. No big deal, no anesthesia, no hovering doctors and nurses, and she’d be lucky to get the next day off.

Here, pale English lads had discovered a fantasy life—hundreds of laborers to do their bidding, spacious homes perched on hills overlooking valleys bursting with wild life, hunting and fishing trips, and best of all, lissome beauties who could be coaxed, bought or bullied into sleeping with an influential white man. When the whole pack of cards came crashing down post Independence, most

whites left for home. Some managed to stay on, and a few even committed suicide, loathe to live out their lives on a cold and rainy island after luxuriating in exotic India. The thirsty ghost, Seb later discovered, had been so devastated at being forced to leave Kerala that he'd shot himself dead on the eve of his departure.

The villagers were ruled by their shamans, who in turn were commanded by elemental gods hungry for blood, vengeance and the balancing of *karma*. Once, while inspecting the company's rubber groves, Seb said he'd caught a woman tapper making imprecise incisions on a trunk—the cut made to allow the rubber sap to flow out has to be no more than a fifteenth of an inch, and this woman had been doing an awful job. “I gave her a good shout,” he said in between rapid gulps of *feni*. “But the bold thing just strutted off like a bloody peacock—and this was *before* the big unions sprang up, mind you, when managers could fire workers on the spot and get away with it too!

“The overseer glared at me and right away my guts began to twist with pain. I fell to the ground, moaning like a baby. Thank God for my driver, a grizzled chap who carried me to the jeep and took off. He told me I'd picked on the mistress of the overseer, who doubled as shaman.” Seb grimaced. “I was whimpering as he raced up those hilly roads—yes, the pain was that bad. He stopped before a hut, told me the old chap sitting on the stoop was another powerful shaman, and carried me inside, depositing me on a rickety cot as he explained to this fellow what had happened. This shaman passed a glass tumbler of water all over my body, as if measuring something,

then held the glass right over my belly button. I could actually feel the water getting hot!

“An object formed inside the glass and morphed into a tiny figure,” Seb continued. “He immediately covered the rim of the glass with the palm of his hand and ran outside. Moments later, believe it or not, that ghastly pain was gone! He told me a malignant spirit had been hurled at me like a sword and lodged inside my guts. It would have finished me had my driver not brought me directly to him. He’d thrown it back at the evil magician, he said, and promised that it would not return.”

Anokhi gripped Pia’s fingers tightly, while Pia’s maternal grandmother, sitting quiet as a wraith beside her daughter, pulled her blanket tighter around her shoulders.

“The old man claimed that every aspect of life in the estate was ruled by the old gods,” Seb went on. “Foreigners—and that term included not just whites but outsiders like myself—could only stand on the fringes of their world and gape. He said the overseer-shaman who’d cursed me hated the British and their Indian minions. I was lucky to escape with my life.”

Seb poured himself yet another shot. “The very next morning,” he continued, taking a gulp, “the overseer was found dead in his string cot, his face all twisted up in agony.” Seb did not say so, but Pia was convinced the malignant spirit set free by the good shaman had returned to kill the villain, just as a genie might savage the fool who released him from a bottle; in the tense silence that followed, it struck her that an eerie genus of logic ruled even the shadow worlds.

“Folks practice black magic in Mangalore too, you know,” Seb went on, his words slurred; even in the gloom of the porch, Pia could see that his eyes were already bloodshot. He shot an affectionate glance at his sister-in-law. “Remember the chap who owned the printing press near Kadri, Nina? Rumor had it that he was molesting a Keralite servant girl. The girl complained to his wife, who, adding insult to injury, threw her out without pay.” Seb grinned, enjoying their rapt attention. “I suppose no one warned these fools never to mess with Kerala labor—mostly they’re an unforgiving lot. So what did this poor girl do, eh? Marched straight off to a *maat* sorcerer—*maat* means black magic—for revenge.

“Dreadful stuff started to happen in that house soon after,” Seb ran on. “Food turned to shit right on the dining table, boulders crashed through windows, groans and screams came from nowhere. Then a *jamlam* tree in the center of their courtyard toppled and brought down a bedroom wall, barely missing one of the printer’s grandkids. Now *that* was a healthy tree, no human could have uprooted it. Other servants started to quit and finally the horny bastard called in a Catholic priest to perform an exorcism. But a rock flew in through the dining room window and struck the priest unconscious!

“That’s when the printer hired a *maat* sorcerer. This chap walked around the compound, stopped at a mango tree and dug out a hen’s egg that had been buried at its base. He crushed it to bits, lit a bundle of incense and chanted some *mantras*, and the trouble stopped. Apparently sorcerers insert their spells into an egg, so if you

crush the egg, you break the spell.” His belly shook with his sly laughter. “Bet that old goat kept his pants on after that.”

Pia’s mother bent low to whisper in Rani’s ear and the housekeeper glided away, returning with ceramic mugs of hot chocolate and a platter of raisin butter biscuits. The warm chocolate tasted so comforting going down Pia’s throat that she refused the biscuits. By now, Seb was in full spate; it struck Pia that even when he merely embellished an old tale, no one seemed to mind, for every session was a new and exciting experience. This one was turning out to be particularly intense due to the shadows cast on the porch walls by the glow of living room lamps, the rustling of the wind as it traveled through surrounding trees, and the pale silvery light cast by a radiant moon.

“At my first job,” Seb said, “the company owned four estates where we grew coffee, rubber, tea and spices, mainly pepper and cardamom. Each estate branched off in a different direction from the central estate, where our General Manager, Robert Jones, lived with his wife Phoebe. We four Managers had a standing invite to Saturday dinner at the Jones’.”

“Now that Phoebe Jones,” Seb said dreamily, “she was a real trip, shimmery as a dragonfly on drugs. Smoked grass, flung the doors of that big house wide open at night, even in the heat of the monsoon when you have all sorts of critters prowling about, had an amazing collection of classic rock, played the guitar and sang her guts out for us when she was in the mood. One night the six of us—four Managers plus the Jones’—were sitting in the courtyard when Phoebe insisted Robert tell us what had happened a couple of days

ago on the main estate.” Seb launched into an imitation of the Englishman’s fruity voice.

“A fight broke out between some workers drinking down by the river at night and two of our chaps drowned in the melee. Phoebe and I attended the cremation, and then we drove into town, to change the dark mood, you see, and to buy the usual provisions. Hours later we were skirting the river on our way back home in almost complete darkness when Phoebe pointed to two fellows walking by, caught in our headlights. ‘Isn’t that Mani walking with Pillai?’ she whispered. I had a look, and yes, they were the men who’d drowned the night before, saluting us! You can’t imagine, lads, how fast we took off!”

Pia saw a shudder pass through Lila; it was like a drug to her sister, a fear that rose strongly within her whenever she listened to spooky tales. Seb switched back into his own voice. “The party wound up after that and we managers took off in a group on our motorbikes. Midway down the main estate road, Vasant Naidu split for his estate, which lay to the west. Later he told us that his Bullet began to stall at the beginning of a tricky curve. A woman in a white sari appeared at the road beside him, cupping an oil lamp in her hands, smiling seductively; shocked, Vasant realized she was keeping pace with his moving bike, and that the flame of her lamp stayed steady despite the wind!”

Seb caressed the tips of his mustache, his face looking feral in the moonglow. “Vasant had scoffed at workers who claimed that the section was haunted by the spirit of an estate girl murdered by a white manager: the lecherous shit couldn’t get her to sleep with him,

so he raped and throttled her at that spot. Couple of days later *he* was found brutally murdered in his bedroom, although the house was locked from the inside. Now Vasant realized he should have listened to them; praying like crazy, with the ghost keeping pace, he managed to ride back to his bungalow. Fortunately the ghost vanished as soon as he roared through the gates—the lights were on, you see, and spirits like to operate in the dark. By this time he was running a high fever that almost killed him—*that's* the lethal effect these creatures can have on us.”

“Why was he so scared, Seb?” Pia’s mother asked. “Ghosts can’t actually kill you, can they?”

“Spirits don’t have to *do* anything, Nina,” Seb proclaimed with drunken authority. “The mere sight of a ghost is so chilling it can stop a healthy heart, but certainly this one could kill. She was what the locals called a *mohini*, the vengeful spirit of a woman murdered by a lover. A *mohini* seduces her victim, then snaps off his head, like Kali would pluck a rose—that’s how Phoebe put it anyway, a poet, that woman, heavy into mysticism. Anyway, Vasant suffered for days before a shaman managed to dislodge the curse of the spirit. I swear, you really needed those guys to survive in those parts.”

Anokhi shivered violently beside Pia. “What’s wrong?” Pia whispered.

“Ghost walked over my grave,” Anokhi whispered back with a self-conscious giggle.

Perhaps it was all this talk of the supernatural combined with the chalk-white cast of her friend’s exquisite face in the moonlight

that caused Anokhi's response to sorely distress Pia. Looking around, she noticed that everyone seemed especially struck by this particular tale. Even Seb looked dazed, or was that just the effect of the booze? Pia herself shivered then, though not with the cold.

Lila turned to their mother. "Tell us about Dad and the Pathan, maa," she begged. "Anokhi hasn't heard that story yet."

A nostalgic expression flitted across Nina's delicate face. "Not tonight, Lila," she murmured. "Don't forget you have school tomorrow." She turned to Anokhi. "Oh, and your mother phoned to say she wants you back before ten. Let the girls walk you to your front door please, and send them right back." She turned to Uncle. "Use the first bedroom upstairs, Seb, and please, no more drinking tonight."

With a grunt of laughter, Seb grabbed the bottle and poured himself a giant shot. Everyone looked at him expectantly—clearly he was bursting to drop some earth-shaking news. Nor were they wrong: Leona was sick of living in a one-horse town like Mangalore, he announced in a rush. The family was moving to London in a couple of months: Leona's cousin needed help with his tandoori restaurant and was willing to pull Seb in as a working partner. Leona had a scheme to import embroidered nighties and other fripperies that she planned to have manufactured in Mangalore, where labor was cheap. Seb babbled on about selling the cashew-nut factory, lock, stock and barrel, and making a killing. Their house would be cared for by Carmen, their vintage housekeeper, and sold if they decided not to return.

Selling the factory to work at a tandoori restaurant in London? Sweet God, Pia thought, had liquor permanently scrambled Seb's once bright brain? Apart from supervising his estate and factory managers, Seb hadn't done an honest day's work since their paternal grandfather had passed on, leaving each of his sons a nice pile of money—and that was at least twenty years ago!

In the stunned silence that followed, Seb raised a buttock and broke wind, a sonorous blast that echoed through the porch like a halfhearted bomb; clearly he was smashed beyond redemption. Everyone but Granny, lost in the dream world she regularly visited, eyed him with shocked disgust. Seb doubled up with gales of laughter. “Allow me to conclude our evening with an ancient blessing,” he said without a trace of shame. “Wherever you be, dear ladies, may your wind be free.”

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*In the night of all beings
The wise man sees only the radiance of the Self;
But the sense world where all beings wake,
For him it is as dark as night.
~ Bhagavad Gita*

Chapter 3 ~ ATTAINING HEAVEN

The imminent defection of her second favorite uncle to the land of her country's erstwhile exploiters darkened Pia's mood by ten thousand shades. She awoke early next morning, determined to beg Seb to reconsider, but he'd already slipped away, most likely ashamed to face them after his vulgar exhibition the night before.

During breakfast, Nina said that Seb was off to have a heart-to-heart talk with Uncle Hari and then he planned to drive straight back to Mangalore. Aha, Pia thought angrily, so the besotted fool couldn't wait to get back to the witch masterminding the debacle awaiting him in bloody England! Nina added wryly that Seb would probably last a couple of months abroad before running back to his easy life in Mangalore—the fly in the ointment, she muttered glumly, would be Leona, who appeared to have bound her husband to her with a black magic spell.

Last night, while Lila slept the sleep of the innocent, Pia stayed awake brooding about Seb's crude behavior. It would have been tolerable if it had just been family, but it angered her that he had misbehaved in front of Anokhi. Despite their community's general affluence, it was evident to Pia that heavy drinking and the resulting fall in values had coarsened many of their men. Was it any

wonder that Uncle Hari, the only teetotaler in their extended family, refused to attend most community events?

Her bleak state of mind made Sister Magdalena Mary's lecture in Catechism class later that morning even harder to endure. "Good morning girls," the nun began in her singsong voice. "Today I shall review the teachings on the afterlife." Sister was garbed in a starched black and white habit; her humorless lips formed a thin line, parting to reveal crooked teeth, and her triangular chin quivered with bristles. Add to this a dull skin that repelled light, the shadow of a mustache, and a black hood trimmed in white, Pia thought, and Sister could easily pass for an intergalactic villain.

"My summary is simple," Sister assured her captive audience, the eyes behind her tortoise shell spectacles glittering with zeal. She waved a wooden ruler at the blackboard upon which three words were inscribed in ascending order—Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell. She positioned the tip of the ruler over 'Heaven.' "A good soul who always follows the Ten Commandments goes straight to Heaven." She tapped on 'Purgatory'. "A muddled soul who cannot tell right from wrong has to wait here. Only after Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the other saints give it serious consideration can it move, up or down." Sister moved the ruler decisively down to Hell. "A bad soul ends up *here!*" She paused to eye her students with gravitas. "Three girls were caught smoking in the games cabin, a very bad thing." Her eyes settled on Pia's neighbor, Esther Samuels, who'd begun to tweeze her eyebrows and wear pointy bras. "Admiring yourself in the mirror and running after boys are other very big sins."

Esther dug Pia in the ribs and tittered self-consciously.

“I warn you, girls,” Sister continued sternly, “there are many ways to displeas God. Once you die, you cannot change your fate. It will be too late!”

The nun’s vehement certainty, as black and white as her penguin like garb, felt like iron filings against Pia’s supersensitive skin. Any minor scandal was sufficient incentive for Sister to redeliver this same old dreary lecture, a scratched needle stuck in the groove of an antiquated record, and at the ripe old age of fifteen, Pia resented being forced to listen to her nonsense. Did the woman truly believe God would waste his divine time rating the human race? And that heaven, hell and purgatory were fixed destinations, rather than ‘states of consciousness’, as Uncle Hari referred to them? No, no, no, this crackpot was wrong—the cosmos was just too vast and mystifying to be run by a small-minded tyrant!

“You must pray, girls, pray,” Sister exhorted them, this time with an alarming twist: Today they were to pray for the pagan hordes surrounding them, consigned to hell because they were unaware that the Lamb of God had sacrificed himself to save his followers from the repercussions of their sins.

“Wasn’t Jesus born in 1 AD, Sister?” Pia asked, aiming to deflect her. “Long after human civilization was in progress?”

Sister’s face grew hard as she realized just *who* was asking the question. She nodded uncertainly.

“So what you’re really saying, Sister,” Pia went on reasonably, “is that everyone born before 1 AD is burning in hell right now, correct?”

The nun's face reddened as she digested Pia's valid point; yet, instead of the usual tremor of glee Pia felt at besting her, this time she sensed the fragility of Sister's faith and sniffed the rank odor of her unchallenged assumptions. As rumor had it, the young Magdalena Mary had been consigned to an orthodox backwaters convent in Kerala by a widowed mother unable to muster up a decent dowry in a society where arranged marriages are still the norm. It would have taken an incisive intellect to slice through the rigid doctrine to which she'd later been subjected. Sister's lips twitched as she shook her ruler at Pia, perhaps wishing it was an executioner's sword. "Such a troublemaker you are, Pia Shenoy," she bleated. "Behave, or I'll send you to Mother Bannister!"

Giggles erupted around the classroom—while none of her classmates dared to tease Sister, most enjoyed watching Pia disconcert her. But Pia's own heart was pounding with baffled rage; she bowed her head, pretending shame. Although she'd rejected the nun's dogma as puerile, it scared her to think it might have seeped insidiously into her own subconscious. In a flash she intuited that all of them—teachers, students and parents—were victims of some gigantic conspiracy to keep them from the truth.

Without warning, Pia plunged into the shadows of her memory and imagination, shadows fragrant with myrrh and frankincense. The massive copper-studded door of the towering Protestant cathedral near Mahatma Gandhi Road that Lila and she had recently visited with Madira and Anokhi banged ominously shut behind them. The others had moved on, but she had lingered in the

center of that preternaturally silent space, transfixed by the glowing pictures on the stained glass windows.

Despite the sunlight streaming in through the high windows, she had shivered with fear. Phosphorescent light had shone on the face of Satan—the scoundrel had winked at her and a grin had twisted his knowing face. He'd fluttered jeweled wings and saucily flicked a serpentine tail as if to say he'd get her, one devilish way or another. Terrified, Pia had swiveled around to stare at the portrait of Mary, whose bare feet crushed a garishly patterned serpent. Why did villains always strike her as more interesting than saints? These saints were uniformly lackluster in appearance, with dead eyes and golden halos that had reminded her of the orange jlabis dished up at the sweet shop off Commercial Street.

Esther dug her in the ribs again and Pia looked up to find Sister glaring at her. Perhaps unwilling to risk another question from her most insubordinate student, the nun swung furiously back to the blackboard to erase her notes with a chalk-infused duster. Esther giggled softly, and Pia breathed a sigh of relief to be off the hook, in the process getting a whiff of the expensive perfume Esther had filched from her glamorous widowed aunt, visiting from Canada and ostensibly on the hunt for husband number two.

No, Pia was not scared of Mother Bannister, their gentle English principal who distributed Staedtler pencils and Swiss chocolates even to wayward students like herself, notorious for mixing chemicals in the school lab to mess up class experiments, lighting sticks of sandalwood incense in class just for the heck of it and baiting the most pompous teachers. But she *was* afraid of her

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father's sharp thwacks on the skull; if Nick was informed that his younger daughter had been 'misbehaving', all hell would break loose. It was human malice that terrified her, Pia decided grimly, and not the bloody devil.

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*The mind is restless, unsteady,
Turbulent, wild, stubborn;
Truly, it seems to me
As hard to master as the wind.
~ Bhagavad Gita*

Chapter 4 ~ UNDER THE TREE OF GOOD AND EVIL

Sister Magdalena Mary's reiterated teaching on the afterlife triggered the same nightmare that had first invaded Pia's psyche at the age of seven, terrifying her into bouts of insomnia. This time it came past midnight on the eve of the weekend. Fortunately, since its debut eight years ago, it had lost its power to reduce her to a bedwetting wreck—instead, a part of her split away to watch as it erupted from her subconscious, holding her in its thrall as it unfolded, complete with light and sound, a mystifying prophecy.

Twilight descended over the dense forest and she again saw the Tree of Good and Evil. Under its spreading branches her father Nick had posed in khakis, legs astride, wielding a whip, his face etched in stone. Clutching her woolen blanket, Granny stood skinny, pale and weak-kneed to his left while her mother stood beside Granny, shivering in an aquamarine sari bordered with gold. Lila, Anokhi and Pia cowered opposite them, separated by a yawning pit hissing and bubbling like a live thing. They were in Purgatory, Pia knew, while Heaven lay above, distant and unattainable.

Nick slashed at the frail old lady with his whip, driving her into the pit of Hell, then he turned on his wife, and the girls watched aghast as Nina's slender body tumbled upside down into the pit. But

it was only when Nick turned on Lila and Anokhi that Pia started shrieking, begging him to stop. Her father whirled around to face her. “Fool!” he roared. “Don’t you know that you alone will escape?”

Pia awoke with a start, grateful that there was no warm pool of urine soaking into her mattress. Happily *this* time she would not have to lay in bed waiting in trepidation for dawn to break, for Rani to complain to her mother that she’d wet her bed yet again, and for her mother to threaten to slap her silly the next time she refused to walk to the bathroom in the dark. She attributed this progress to her close bond with Uncle Hari, who, despite the forty years that separated them, she regarded as her guide, philosopher and best friend. It was Uncle Hari who had taught her to observe this nocturnal drama with dispassion; witnessing, the old man claimed, is the quintessence of Eastern wisdom and capable of transmuting darkness into light.

Yet again her mind began to analyze this nightmare that refused to disappear. Why, for instance, did Anokhi, the only child of their neighbors Madira and Ananth Ramkumar, figure in what was so evidently a blood family drama? The only clue Pia had to unravel this mystery was an event that had happened months ago: she and Anokhi had sneaked down to the corner store to buy newspaper cones of the crisp tapioca chips that the owner’s voluptuous wife fried every evening in a vat of bubbling oil. Outside the main enclave gate, Pia had caught sight of a *sadhu* seated cross-legged on the stone pavement, puffing away on a stinky *bidi*. Intrigued, for holy nomads rarely ventured near residential areas that

were guarded by watchmen and dogs, her eyes had taken in his frayed orange robe, the coils of gray matted hair piled atop a narrow head, the rope of *rudraksha* beads hanging around his withered neck and shrewd eyes burning with light. “Namasthe!” he’d greeted her with authoritarian sternness, causing Pia to stop in her tracks.

Another such renunciate had recently passed by Uncle Hari’s home when she’d been sitting with the old man on his sagging wooden porch and Pia had been riveted by the *sadhu*’s appearance, especially by the ropes of *rudraksha* beads hanging down his bare chest. Uncle had smiled at her fascination; the word *rudraksha* meant ‘Tears of Shiva’, he’d explained, and the wearing of them by a Hindu renunciate was considered a symbol of surrender to the Divine.

The wild appearance of this *sadhu* had brought back Uncle’s words. “Ignore him, Pia,” Anokhi had whispered, tugging nervously at Pia’s hand, but some force had rooted her to the spot. The *sadhu* had pointed a skinny finger directly at her. “You come here,” he’d ordered. As if in a trance, she had crossed the lane to approach him. “Your sister?” he’d rasped, pointing this time at Anokhi. Pia had shaken her head, unable to speak. The *sadhu* had smiled grimly and placed a finger in the center of his forehead. “This sees more,” he’d stated. “You blood sisters in past life and still have big *karma* to burn. One day you will help your sister’s spirit roam free again, madame-ji, but first you must make yourself strong.”

Her bafflement seemed to have amused him. “Not to worry,” he’d added with a hoarse chuckle. “All is *maya*, illusion. Only Spirit *real*. Read *Bhagavad Gita*.” He’d set a warning finger on his lips. “No tell your friend what I say, okay? She not strong in heart, like

you.” Pia had been unable to utter a word in response. “Wrong views will destroy your friend in this lifetime,” he’d continued, as if to clarify his weird prophecy, “but next life she will find peace.” Those old eyes had seared Pia with their strange light. “You too will suffer greatly, madame-ji, but everything will come out all right in the end.” Pia had pulled a rupee coin out of her pocket and shoved it at him, but the *sadhu* had shaken his head in refusal, leapt up and rapidly walked away.

“Idiot!” Anokhi had hissed when Pia had returned to her side. “*Sadhus* put spells on people, don’t you know? And I heard him calling you madame-ji, which means he’s from up north. What on earth possessed you to go to him, Pia? And what did he want with you anyway?”

“Oh, just directions to the Shiva Temple in town,” Pia had said with feigned airiness.

“But he pointed at *me!*” Anokhi had persisted. Not daring to disobey the *sadhu*, Pia had shrugged. “Wanted to know whether you were my sister, that’s all,” she’d said, only partially lying. Fortunately Anokhi did not persist in her questioning, nor had Pia breathed a word about this spooky happening to either Lila or Uncle Hari—it was as if the *sadhu* had literally frozen her tongue.

Now she lay brooding over this enigma until she heard her mother moving about in her bedroom next door. It disturbed her that her parents occupied separate bedrooms, especially since Granny claimed that Nina had moved downstairs only after Pia had been born—apparently her father could not stand to be woken up by his younger daughter’s nocturnal wailing. Pia had felt a flash of pure

hatred for the old woman for telling her this; besides, if Granny was right, why had Nina not returned to the master bedroom upstairs when Pia had been old enough to sleep beside Lila?

Pia was convinced that some other obstacle had shot up between her parents like a naked sword; hypersensitive as she was, her mother would have found it painful to dream beside a man whose waking presence caused her discomfort, while Nick, who still seemed to adore his wife in his bullying way, must have suffered a huge blow to his ego when she moved downstairs. Was it any wonder their home was rife with tension?

Nina pretended to be tough, but Pia knew she was really as soft as a *mutli*, a rice dumpling that softens quickly in a hot coconut curry. Gentle and caring as long as her daughters met her old-fashioned standards, their mother's overriding goal was to marry them off to 'good' men within their small community. When Pia sarcastically reminded her she'd handed herself a tough job given the mediocre pool of prospects, tears would glint in Nina's eyes. "You've your father's sharp tongue, Pia," she'd point out sorrowfully. "Lila never argues with me, and have you ever heard Anokhi being rude to her mother?"

Pia could have retorted that lavishing love on Lila while lambasting *her* for the slightest infraction might account for her mutinous nature. She could have pointed out that her father did not even care to hide his preference for Lila. She could rub in the fact that the Ramkumars were so kind to Anokhi that *she* had nothing to complain about; in fact, everyone adored Anokhi, and the neighborhood servants had even come up with a nickname for her—

Rajkumari, which meant ‘Princess’ in Hindi. But provoking her quiet mother beyond a certain point had proved to be perilous.

Breathing in the aromatic scents of summer, Pia continued to lie on her rosewood bed under the mosquito net in the spacious terracotta-tiled bedroom, mentally composing a gratitude list—a practice recommended by Uncle Hari to calm and redirect a disturbed mind. Because she relished the odor of the sun emanating from their silk-cotton mattresses, she began by thanking Rani, their housekeeper, for organizing the regular airing of their bedding on the terrace of their colonial-style home in Bangalore. Second, it was the eve of the weekend—sour-faced Magdalena Mary would not be standing at the door of the Assembly Hall ready to reprimand her for her tardiness or whatever other sin she could dream up. Third, she was glad that it was Uncle Hari, and not her Anglicized parents, who’d chosen their birth names—‘Lila’ for her sister, a Sanskrit word which meant *play of the gods* but could also mean *yogini, beauty or charm*, and ‘Pia’ for herself, a word that simply meant *beloved*.

It was a pure miracle that Uncle had managed to persuade their father to change his Portuguese surname back to Shenoy, which happened to be the name of their Saraswat Brahmin ancestors. Minus Uncle Hari’s intervention, Lila would have been ‘Violet’ and Pia ‘Emily’, both unabashedly Western names that Nina had picked out of a Woman’s Home magazine. Pia was grateful for this act of grace—despite Shakespeare’s poetic claim that roses smelled sweet no matter what they were called, she’d always felt an organic part of this country and wanted her name to reflect this belonging.

“Bizarre, is it not?” Uncle had once remarked. “Your Dad tends to poke his nose into things that don’t concern him in the least, but he’s never cared to investigate our community’s origins.”

“How on earth did you get him to change his last name, Unc?” Pia had asked.

“Basic psychology,” Uncle replied complacently. “I advised Nick to study history, to learn that it’s always minorities who suffer the most. Other influential men in India were resurrecting their ancestral names too, I added, and reverting to Shenoy would be an advantage. That clinched it.”

Pia found it hard to believe that her father and Uncle Hari had once been fast friends. As with her parents, she was sure something major had driven these cousins apart. These days the two barely greeted each other, and her father darted fierce glares at Pia whenever she hung around Uncle during the rare community event he could be persuaded to attend.

While their mother was prone to bouts of melancholy and the intermittent waging of a cold war, it was their father who petrified Pia with his foul temper. As Uncle Hari once said, Nick was unaware that you can catch far more bees with honey than with vinegar. Also, while Nick appeared to have little real respect for the fair sex, Uncle supported a woman’s right to shine. Indeed he admired Madira Ramkumar for being ‘her own woman’ and bemoaned Nina’s submission to their father in major areas. His atypical opinions on feminism had once driven Pia to calculate just how much time their mother spent in managing their home—it added up to around twelve hours a day, except when they had houseguests or parties, when it

was more like eighteen! “No man’s going to get me to do his dirty work,” Pia had sworn, causing Lila to giggle and roll her eyes.

Nina’s hobbies were to minister to rare jungle orchids and weird looking cacti, knit woolen sweaters and pore through Reader’s Digests, which she regarded as the modern Word of God. Pia had tried to get her to read the classics like Hesse’s *Siddhartha* but Nina refused to touch literature that did not accord with her Vatican-framed view of reality. These days Nina spoke to Nick only when she needed money to run the household, and Pia intuited that her father’s anger against Uncle Hari was somehow linked to the conflict simmering between her parents. It greatly relieved Pia to know that, despite her mother’s strong disapproval of Uncle Hari’s ‘pagan’ views, she continued to deeply love the old man.

In the silvery moonlight streaming in through the bay windows, Pia turned to watch Lila lying beside her on the twin bed. In that half state, her lean body splayed on the mattress, Lila appeared to be reacting to dream images flashing through her mind. Envy stabbed Pia: Why couldn’t *she* sleep like that? She watched her sister for a while, then, because Lila often accused her of being selfish, Pia gave her a hard shake. “Lila,” she whispered loudly in her sister’s ear. “Your quilt’s on fire!”

“Shut up,” Lila mumbled, curling away like the red and black velvety caterpillars that devoured their mother’s precious white lilies. “It’s Saturday, let me sleep.”

“*Kachikachikalla!*” Granny chose that moment to let loose her gibberish phrase. Was it in Konkani, the language of their coastal community? No one could decipher it, and Granny appeared

puzzled by it herself. “*Kachikachikalla*,” Granny shrieked again, twisting her bony body under the frayed Kashmiri blanket she would not be parted from. “*Kachikachikalla*.”

Lila mumbled something equally indecipherable in her sleep. She was the athlete and swimmer, Pia the dreamer and troublemaker. Lila had soulful brown eyes and upper teeth that stuck out slightly, earning her a nickname she abhorred—coconut scraper, after the iron toothed kitchen implement the servants used to scrape the creamy meat from the coconuts that grew in clusters on the tall trees in their backyard. As for Pia, the old biddies marveled at how closely she resembled their beautiful mother. Some would predict that she would attract a ‘good’ boy whereupon Nina would invariably retort that it would take a saint to put up with a child so wild, and then add that it was Lila who always endeavored to please.

Both sisters were July babies, children of summer, fire and water, born almost exactly a year apart—Pia on July 9, 1965, Lila on July 13, 1964. Neither Lila’s athletic prowess, nor the fact that she was clearly their parents’ favorite, had held Pia back from loving her sister without reservation. They were a team, bound to each other for life, their differences only adding spice to their relationship. Wasn’t it she who’d cheered the loudest when Lila had won the interschool swimming championship, her strong body in its navy blue swimsuit leaving a trail of white water?

Now Pia burrowed in closer to her sister, enjoying the spicy-sweet odor of Pear’s soap exuded by Lila’s skin, feeling invisible strands weaving them into a single being. Nina had once boasted to a relative that her daughters were as close as Siamese twins, and that’s

the way it felt to Pia too, especially in the colder months, when sandalwood scented quilts were brought out from storage and she and Lila fell asleep, intertwined.

Much later the sun poked its shining nose through the window. She tickled Lila's neck with the peacock feather hidden in her bedside drawer, hidden because their father claimed that peacock feathers brought bad luck and had forbidden them inside the house. Lila groaned and swatted her away, but Pia was as persistent as a ravenous mosquito, and finally Lila jumped out of bed.

Rani had prepared flaky whole-wheat parathas and was garnishing potato and pea curry with popped mustard and coriander leaf in the roomy kitchen. Bands of morning sun washed over her as she served them, and Pia noticed that her eyes were red and her left cheek swollen. When would Rani drum up the courage to ask Dad to toss her husband out of their home, Pia wondered angrily. The bully worked in construction and his muscles bulged obscenely. Since the couple lived in the servant's cottage for free, Nick had the right to evict him. "He usually hits her in places covered by her sari, but this time he's hit her right on the face!" she whispered to Lila, who ignored her.

Pia took a deep breath to calm herself, and the sisters began to eat hungrily, relishing the ghee spurting out of holes in the parathas, dunking pieces in curry and transporting them to their mouths in quiet ecstasy. Lila polished off her third paratha and, without the least warning, delivered a swift kick to Pia's shin.

"Ouch!" Pia yelped, glaring at her.

“Why did you wake me up so early, idiot?” Lila demanded. “What’s so urgent on a Saturday morning?” She swiped her mouth with the back of her hand and rubbed it against her nightie, leaving a bright yellow turmeric stain on her chest.

“Uncle Hari’s expecting us.”

“More questions for the poor man?” Lila asked, raising an eyebrow in what she believed to be a sophisticated gesture.

Pia nodded, knowing Lila too wanted to see Uncle Hari. While Lila and she were poles apart in their interests, it was to Uncle Hari that they both gravitated in their spare time, and not even their father could stop them from escaping to his shabby home, located in a suburb within walking distance of their own enclave. Uncle’s three daughters had all migrated to the West, lively beauties married to men with open minds—a Canadian schoolteacher with a passion for Advaita-Vedanta, the ancient Eastern teaching on oneness, an Austrian writer of children’s science books, and a Bengali management guru related to Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet and visionary. His wife, who had nursed many of the local destitute, had died years ago of breast cancer. Uncle had nursed her with a devotion that left many in their community astounded, and yet he had not grieved over her passing for long, for he truly believed in the immortality of the soul.

At seventy-three, the old man meditated several hours a day. Seated for hours in *padmasana* or lotus pose, a feat for folks forty years younger, Uncle Hari made himself available to all those who needed his particular brand of comfort. His guru was a sage named Ramana Maharshi who had left his body about thirty years ago, a

near-naked man clothed in what Lila mockingly referred to as a ‘diaper’, and whose portraits hung all over Uncle’s home. And yet, although he had long left the Roman Catholic fold, Uncle did not consider himself a Hindu and had no love for religion, accusing it of being the most insidious force for evil on the planet. He claimed to follow the path of *jnana* or Eastern wisdom, one which transcended the dangerous pettiness of all mainstream religions.

To his relief, the clan’s busy bodies had finally given up on him. “Once Satan marks a man as his own,” Pia had once overheard a crabby aunt intone piously in reference to him, “there’s nothing us good Christians can do.” As for Lila, she claimed the women in their community attacked Uncle because he made no bones about his distaste for both their gossip and their vindaloo. Pia however sensed that their fear of him ran deeper and extended to their men folk as well—anyone who dares to step out of the matrix, she was beginning to comprehend, inevitably becomes a target for the mediocre to attack.

“When do you want to go?” Lila asked, in a better mood. “Isn’t it too early?”

“Later he’ll get busy,” Pia said. “Oh, and by the way, Uncle asked Selamma to get chocolate éclairs from German Bakery, especially for you.”

The lure of rich pastry settled the matter—Lila’s sweet tooth was legendary. “Give me five,” Lila said in that fake American accent she’d picked up from a swimming rival, a sinewy Tamil Brahmin girl who’d returned to Bangalore from California with her

scientist parents, both of whom now worked at the prestigious Indian Institute of Science.

Pia herself preferred British English, although she had come to resent the aliens who'd cobbled modern India together from the kingdoms of approximately five hundred maharajas. From all she'd read, the British had looted India of uncountable treasures, patronized, humiliated and even killed her people in a myriad ways—and then, when the 'naked fakir' had managed to kick them out without firing a shot in 1947, had repaid the so-called 'jewel in their crown' by throwing their incompatible bureaucratic institutions over the newly liberated nation like so much offal.

Doubtless the Brits had also left behind a legacy of railways, highways and a postal service, coupled with banking, fiscal and other institutions, and yet, the ultimate insult as Uncle Hari had once pointed out, was that the pompous asses had actually managed to convince themselves that they had screwed India for her own good! That said, and while he'd never been able to stomach their imperial complacency, Uncle respected the British capacity for compromise—which had enabled their Parliament to flourish alongside a monarchical tradition reaching back to the eleventh century.

Uncle's admittedly non-scholarly analysis of India's various invaders fascinated Pia. Like him, she too was glad that India was back in native hands, corrupt and self-serving as the current rulers and administrators of this ancient country often were; now, whenever she heard old timers reminiscing about the glorious days of the British Raj, she got mad. All they craved, she intuited, was the false security a foreign master appeared to provide, while *she* still

dreamed of erupting into the sky like Icarus, ever defiant even against the sun.

Lila ran upstairs to get a jacket while Pia dumped their dirty dishes into the stainless steel sink. Nina let them go without a fuss—it was Saturday, and Nick was out of town on business. Pia took her sister's hand as they walked rapidly towards Uncle Hari's home; although Lila was the elder, it was Pia who designed their adventures. Not so long ago, the two would invade blind Mrs. Oliver's backyard to steal her Alphonso mangoes, giggling at the sight of the bowlegged crone shuffling in circles on her porch and muttering about hearing things. Once they had escaped the house at night in order to climb the Khan's roof, in hopes of catching a glimpse of the female ghost that Ahmed, their body building son, swore glided across their roof at the stroke of midnight. Ahmed claimed she was the spirit of a servant girl impregnated by a deceased granduncle who had strangled her on that roof for fear of being exposed. Lila had panicked and dragged Pia away before the clock struck twelve. Later, when Pia had carped to Anokhi about Lila's cowardice, Anokhi said that Lila's attack of nerves would have repelled the specter anyway, and added knowingly that female ghosts could be excessively skittish.

As they navigated the many lanes to Uncle's home, Pia heard the strumming of a guitar and the memory of their recent joint birthday celebration flashed across her mind. Practically, the whole clan had joined them in a gala that went on until the wee hours. At their best, her people were a fun loving and generous lot, many of them owners of coffee and cashew estates as well as tile factories.

Even Uncle Hari, who generally shunned drunken feasting, had joined the boisterous party. At midnight, everyone had rushed forward to kiss and hug the sisters and hand over their presents. Then Anokhi had called for Pia to play the guitar.

So Pia sat in the center of the lawn and sang the English songs she'd learned from the records their father played on their imported Philips Gramophone. Encouraged by the applause, she followed them with hippie rebel songs that she'd picked up from the tapes that Ram Adhikari, a neighborhood kid who'd lived briefly in America, had loaned her. Her fingers were hurting from the steel strings when Lila had yelled out for one last song, Janis Joplin's 'Bobby McGee'. Pia hesitated, worried that the lyrics were just too liberal for this particular audience, when their father had yelled—"Just sing the bloody song, Pia!" So she'd sung that folk-rock classic, yearning for the freedom of American kids on their journey towards peace and love, her voice melding with the chords of the Yamaha guitar that her cousin Steve had given her on her last birthday. Each time she hit the chorus, *freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose*, the crowd had gathered closer around her to belt it out in unison.

Now the girls entered Uncle's neighborhood, closer to the slum that supplied the local rich with servants. Lila pointed, sniggering, to a *nouveau riche* style house nearing completion, a three-storey monstrosity painted in garishly clashing colors. A life-size stone statue of a resplendent Indian goddess astride a tiger stood guard at the gate. Pia wasn't absolutely sure, but she thought the

statue represented Durga, one of the many manifestations of the Great Goddess Shakti, the cosmic female force.

“Look!” Lila exclaimed, pointing again, and Pia saw a pie dog with elongated milk swollen teats nursing her skinny puppies on the opposite side of the road. A gaggle of bare-chested urchins in grimy shorts jabbed at her with sharp sticks. The bitch snarled at them, trying to cover her brood with her mangy body, baring her teeth to reveal pink gums and jagged, yellow teeth, her whole body, from ragged tail to snout, quivering with the strain.

“Leave her alone!” Pia screamed, racing towards them like a fury. Cursing, they escaped into a nearby alley, turning en masse to glare at the sisters. One chap grabbed a hunk of granite and prepared to hurl it at them, but his companion hit him sharply on the hand and the projectile fell harmlessly to the ground. Lila ran over to her side and joined Pia in staring them down. Shouting insults, the kids vanished into the shadowy slum. Pia felt their misery and, in a bizarre twist, recognized it as similar to her own; no thanks to parents who blatantly favored Lila—one lost in the whirlpool of heavy drinking, the other too crushed to transcend her role as dutiful housewife—*she* too knew how awful it felt to be sidelined.

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