

ALONG THE WEFT
Memoirs of a Bastard Colonist
Volume II
by
Susanna Bonaretti
66,000 words - Unfinished

Susanna Bonaretti
PO Box 347
Ramsgate NSW 2217
Australia
+61 (0)412 287 219
scriptum@iinet.net.au
nonseq@iinet.net.au
susannabonaretti.com



PART I

1905

Sunday, 17th December – 2 a.m.

Newington, London, England

The crack of fracturing timber echoed through the empty third-floor corridor of the Louisa Mansions. Another sharp crackle was followed by the rattling of splinters of wood hitting the bare floor.

The large, well-dressed man froze and stood anxiously at the damaged doorway, scanning the corridor in both directions, his iron jemmy raised in readiness to quell any interference to his criminal act.

There was none. All was otherwise quiet. At this time of the night, it seemed, everyone in the adjoining flats was fast asleep.

His dark eyes darted to his two fellow-burglars standing apprehensively on either side of the doorway. In one swift and silent move, he broke through the damaged door and the three stole inside, pushing the door shut behind them. The evidence of their intrusion lay there on the floor in silent condemnation of their crime.

Inside, the three stood wordlessly peering about the darkened room. The leader mumbled something indiscernible and one felt along the wall for a cord and pulled it. The incandescent electric light bulb flickered and glowed steadily and once more they stood ready for battle. These were no ordinary burglars; they appeared to be English gentlemen dressed impeccably in bespoke dark suits. But their swarthy complexions, dark eyes, black hair and full beards betrayed their exotic origins. They were neither gentlemen nor English. Their hushed tones were harsh and guttural.

Sensing they were alone in the flat, and without further instruction, each intruder took to a different part of the small apartment quickly turning out every drawer, opening every door of every wardrobe and cupboard, stripping the bed of its clothes, the walls of their

meagre decorations and the floor of its moquettes and rugs. Not a corner, niche or crack escaped the scrutiny of these three trespassers.

Unable to find whatever it was they were intent of retrieving, the three regrouped in the middle of the parlour-come-sitting room just as a timid rapping on the door diverted their attention to it.

“Who goes there?” the timorous male voice enquired, followed again by an equally uncertain knock. “Miss Davies? Is that you? Did you lose your key?”

Startled at being discovered, the leader stalked to the door and unsheathed the pesh-kabz hidden beneath his coat. Gripping the knife with menacing intent, he took hold of the door’s handle. The other two stood behind him, ready for any altercation.

“Miss Davies? It’s Grayson, the caretaker,” the elderly man offered once more. “Miss—”

The door swung open with such violence that it took the caretaker’s breath away. There, filling the doorway, stood the three dark, bearded intruders, the whites of their black eyes glowing with such ferocity, and the long knife brandished so menacingly, that the elderly caretaker staggered back in fear.

It was not their intention to harm anyone but their orders were that they were not to fail in their mission and not be discovered doing it. The leader stepped forward, knife threatening to strike, and spat out words the caretaker could not understand.

“Who...who are you?” he quivered, his bravado faltering, “What...what are you doing in Miss Davies’ flat?”

Each step the swarthy man took towards him, Grayson retreated two. He was unaware that it was only a few more steps backward before he would reach the top of the stairs.

The armed man continued his slow approach, flanked by his gang of two. With each step forward, he uttered words that were unfamiliar to the caretaker but nonetheless intoned with menacing intent and punctuated by thrusts and slashes of his sharp weapon through the air.

The commotion had awakened occupants of the adjoining flats and several doors along the corridor opened. One-by-one, an inquisitive head poked out to see the cause of the ruckus and, just as quickly, retreated.

“Don’t—” the caretaker pleaded as he backed away. He held out a defensive arm while the other felt for the balustrade that should have been somewhere behind him. He miscalculated his position and the step backward had no solid purchase. He lost his balance and toppled backward.

The swarthy man lunged at Grayson, not to harm him but to prevent him falling but he was unable to catch either of Grayson's flailing arms. In desperation, the old caretaker grabbed at his assailant, and gripped a handful of his attacker's buttoned waistcoat and fob chain but the chain came loose and Grayson fell backward tumbling down the steep staircase to the second-floor landing. There, Grayson lay motionless, his faded blue eyes staring into the distance and his head tilted at a peculiar, unnatural angle.

Suddenly, all was quiet.

Those eyes that had been peering through their partially opened doors now vanished behind closed and bolted doors.

The three men stood speechless staring at the crumpled, lifeless form of the old man at the bottom of the stairs. They glanced at each other, looked about and quickly dashed down the stairs, stopping only to prise the gold fob chain from the clasp of the dead man, then vanished into the darkness of the cold London night.

#

1905

Sunday, 17th December – 6 a.m.

Lilyfield Manor, England

I heard the mantle clock strike six but I was in no hurry to rise. I felt languid and contented for the first time in a very long time indeed. No demons haunted my dreams; I could not recall the last time I had felt so at peace. Mrs McPherson had yet to come in and open the shutters but I knew the sun was yet to show its pale face. I lay there, comfortable and warm, reliving the events that brought me here and marvelled at the outcome of situations that could have resulted so easily in my death. It seemed that Destiny had other plans for me. And, at that moment in time, I was truly grateful to Destiny or any other ethereal being that controlled my fate.

I had arrived at Lilyfield Manor three weeks earlier and a few days after the ‘Mad Colonel’s Depravities’ as they became known, had been resolved by the capture of the ‘Mad Colonel’ himself, Neville Humphries. He was now securely confined in the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum and most likely for the rest of his perverted life. The efforts of the Metropolitan Police’s Special Branch and its secret offshoot, the Department of Special Operations, saw to this. Sir Giles Hawthorne, ostensibly the head of the DSO, revelled in the glory that its success had brought but the special police agents in his charge were well aware that the real hero had been Major Reginald Williams, formerly of the Queen’s Own Corps of Guides, and now a leading figure in the DSO, and my mentor and protector.

We had both been badly wounded in bringing Humphries and his coterie of kidnappers, rapists and murderers to their well-deserved end. Wills, as I called Major Williams, was recuperating in a country village in Cornwall and I here at Lilyfield Manor, the country house of Lady Katherine Agnes Stuart Delaney, the 14th Countess of Chestermere. She had been the fourth and final victim of the ‘Mad Colonel’ and the only one to survive his depravities.

Lady Katherine and I had formed a special bond, which was growing stronger with every heartbeat. If I had doubts of my love for the countess before I came to stay—and hers for me—there was none now.

The last few weeks had been a time of discovery for both Lady Katherine and me. We went riding almost every day to different parts of her vast estates, meeting her tenant farmers and shepherds, the resident villagers, her estate manager—all of whom held the countess in high esteem. Her household staff, too, treated her with uttermost respect; not the sort that is demanded by the upper class but one that is given freely because it is returned.

Today, she promised to take me to the ancient ruins that gave Chestermere its name. But first was Mass in the village, something I would not be attending as God and I did not see things eye-to-eye.

So I lay there, comfortable and warm, with Lady Katherine nestled in my arms and nuzzling my neck. She stirred.

“Good morning, my love,” I whispered.

She smiled and looked up at me.

“Good morning, Rebecca.”

#

1905

Sunday, 17th December – 10 a.m.

Newington, London, England

Detective Sergeant Keith Charles Yabsley strode purposefully through the small crowd gathered around the doorway of Louisa Mansions and up to the second-floor landing. He was ex-army and it showed in his bearing. His no-nonsense approach to situations meant he got to the heart of the matter quickly but also had the effect of putting those he interviewed offside. He was a good, honest officer of the law but brusque and unsympathetic and being called out on a Sunday mattered naught to him; this was his duty and the good Lord would understand.

“What’s the story here?” Yabsley snapped at the fresh-faced constable on the second-floor landing who was watching over the victim’s corpse. Other uniformed constables from the same Metropolitan Police Force stood guard on the third and first floors keeping witnesses and ghoulish gawkers at bay.

“And you are?” the young detective enquired somewhat put out.

“Detective Sergeant Yabsley of the Special Branch. Mr Alexander Quinn has directed me to take charge. You do know who Mr Alexander Quinn is, I presume?”

The young constable demurred. He was well aware of who this Mr Quinn was: the chief, no less, of the Special Branch, which comprised a group of elite detectives to which he hoped to belong one day.

“Sir! Of course, sir. Em...” he hesitated not knowing where to begin.

“Out with it man. Time is of the essence.”

“Em...the victim here is—was Kenneth Grayson, the caretaker of Louisa Mansions here. Witnesses claim that he was pushed down the stairs by three burglars when he discovered them breaking into one of the flats on the third floor. That flat was empty but is usually occupied by...” he fumbled through his notebook, looking for the name.

“Miss Rebecca Davies.”

The constable looked up at Yabsley askance.

Yabsley offered, “You need not know who she is, Constable. What did these three burglars look like?”

“Several witnesses state they were large, bearded, dark-skinned, well-dressed and spoke in some foreign language. One had a long, curved knife and it was he, according to the witnesses, who pushed Mr Grayson down the stairs and to his death.”

“A foreign language, you say?”

“Yes, sir, but no one seems to know which.”

“Arabic!” The call from the third floor drew the attention of both police officers.

“How do you know that, man?” Yabsley asked of the elderly gentleman peering over the balustrade.

“Hundred and First Royal Bengal Fusiliers, Shadipur. I know the lingo well enough. A dialect, actually. I believe from the Sindh.”

“Did you hear what they said?”

“Not much. Whispers and such. But I did hear the chap with the knife warn him about the stairs. I don’t believe he was bent on doing old Grayson in.”

“Right.” Yabsley turned to the constable. “What’s your name?”

“Brown, sir, Denis Brown.”

“Take statements from all the witnesses.”

“Yes, sir.”

“On my desk by this afternoon.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Stay here until photographs have been taken and make sure they’re taken before the body is removed to the morgue, understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Yabsley peered at the crumpled corpse of the elderly caretaker. He noticed one of his hands was clenched. Bending down, he carefully prised open the fingers, rigor mortis beginning to set in.

“What have we here?” he said as he pulled a gold seal from the dead man’s palm.

“It looks like a fob chain charm, sir,” Brown offered peering over Yabsley’s shoulder.

Yabsley examined the object closely and discerned cursive script on the face of the stamp. “Arabic,” he said to no one in particular, “what does it say?”

1905

Sunday, 17th December – 10 a.m.

Lilyfield Estates, England

It had yet to snow and, even though most at the estate were hoping for a white Christmas, the lack of snow that would quickly turn to slush meant that riding would be quite pleasant although chilly.

As promised, after Mass Lady Katherine took me to the border of her estate and, as we rode along to it, she explained the origins of the ancient title and name of ‘Chestermere’.

“A long time ago, during the Norman Conquest,” she began as though she were relating a fairy tale, “a certain Engenulf de Laigle, a nobleman and companion to Duke William, showed outstanding bravery at Hastings when he personally saved the Conqueror from being killed in battle but he, himself, was mortally wounded doing so. As a result of this exceptional courage and to reward his widow, the Duke awarded these lands to her and made her a viscountess in her own right with a special remainder that has carried down through the first born, male or female, up to this day.

“The title came under threat from Henry VIII when he split from the Roman Catholic church but the then Earl, Roger, even though a staunch papist, kept his allegiance to the Pope secret and the earldom, and he, survived those tumultuous times. The Civil War brought its own dangers to my forebears but prudence and inventiveness saved the family, the title and the lands. Thank goodness we are now a more accepting society and Roman Catholics and Protestants seem to tolerate each other reasonably well.”

“Except in Ireland,” I noted. “So, your family name of ‘Delaney’ derives from ‘de Laigle’,” I concluded, impressed that she could trace her lineage to 1066 and beyond. All I knew about mine was that my mother came from Cardiff and that Davies was such a common Welsh surname that I could be connected to half the Welsh population. My father, on the other hand, was an enigma to me; Mother never told me who he was and I was resigned to never finding out.

“Debrett’s has your father’s family name as ‘Stuart’,” I stated. “Your mother take that name when they married?”

“Grandfather, the twelfth Earl, wouldn’t allow it. He insisted that the Delaney name be carried down just as it had been in the past whenever the title was held by a countess or viscountess *sue jure*.”

“A proud man.”

“Perhaps. But knowing Grandfather, he didn’t want to be the one to break tradition and bring ill luck upon the house.”

I smiled. Even the high and mighty didn’t like to leave the door ajar to the devil.

Reaching the shore of a lake, Lady Katherine gently reined her horse to a stop.

“There it is,” she said indicating ivy-clothed ruins a little way in the distance and situated near the edge of the lake. “Chestermere. It was a mediaeval castle built by the fourth Earl on the ruins of a Roman fortress.”

“Castrum ad mare. Fortress by the sea,” I offered.

“You know your Latin,” the countess said with an engaging smile. “Over time, the name transformed to ‘ceaster mare’ and, eventually, ‘Chestermere’. Ancient maps show that this used to be an inlet but the waters silted up centuries ago and formed this lake. A stream now flows into it from the north-west and the lake empties out over there to the east. We’re about eight miles from the sea. This is a beautifully cooling place in summer. You’ll love it here.”

I was buoyed to think that Lady Katherine saw me, a low-born Australian—and a bastard—as a part of her future—until summer, at least.

“Let me take you upstream.”

Keeping up a steady walk, we steered our mounts north-west, following the course of the clear flowing water. The stream’s verge was grassy and easy for our horses to negotiate and, before long, we came to a lush glen that winter seemed to have forgotten. Nestled on higher ground and surrounded by aged willows and evergreens, stood a simple stone building.

“Our chapel,” Lady Katherine announced.

The hallowed grounds were studded with graves and headstones, some obviously ancient, others relatively new, the rest falling into intervening epochs. They were as immaculately kept as the ground on which they stood. A sense of peace and reverence filled the chilled air, fragrant with pine and silent save for the gushing of water and birdsong.

We dismounted and strolled along the path toward the door of the small church.

Lady Katherine's pace faltered. I stopped to see her looking at me with such melancholy. Tears welled in her eyes.

"Here is where I would be now had you not..."

I understood immediately what had caused her anguish and gently wrapped her in my arms.

"But you're not," I whispered, "you're alive and you're safe." It was all I could do to keep my own distress coming to the fore. We both would be dead now except for the grace of God and our own determination to keep each other alive.

After a long moment, Lady Katherine came to herself and led me toward the chapel.

"I come here when I lose my purpose. They speak to me..." Her sideward glance to me was punctuated by a snort and a sheepish smile. "I mean to say—"

"I know what you mean," I reassured, "I often wish I could visit my mother." My poor mother, God bless her soul, lay fifteen thousand miles away in the Rookwood Necropolis alone, deprived of all kin and surrounded by other Roman Catholics unknown to her. I longed to visit her grave, as well as Sarah's, but I knew that I could never return to Australia. But here, in eternal rest, were those whose essences were purified into the woman who walked beside me.

In the few remaining steps it took us to reach the door of the chapel, I asked, almost with envy, "It must be of great comfort to you to know they are here."

Her reply was preceded by a look that spoke of unfathomable sorrow.

"Not all." Tears glistened in her eyes once more as she pushed open the unlocked door and led me inside.

Her reply had mystified me but the glorious splendour of the sanctuary's interior took my breath away. Instead of the dingy gloom I expected of the small chapel, I was awestruck by the brilliant light that filled the room and fell across the intricately carved pews and marble altar. Six stained glass windows filled almost the entire walls on either side.

"This chapel was built in 1774 replacing an ancient one that had been damaged by fire. In 1875 my father renovated it and engaged William Morris to design the windows. They depict my ancestors in heroic or pious deeds. That one is of Engenulf de Laigle and his wife."

"They are exquisite," I remarked, almost breathlessly, "Pre-Raphaelite in style."

"As was Mr Morris' wont. The restoration of this chapel was one of the last projects Father undertook before..." She looked at me again with those sad, wistful eyes. "Before he and Mother were taken from me."

We stopped at the altar and, embedded in the flagstone floor in front of it, was a large brass plaque.

IN PIAM MEMORIAM

Agnes Elanor Stuart Delaney

13th Countess of Chestermere

and

Ailbeart Douglas Stuart

Laird of Glenross

29th December 1879

IPSI VIVET IN AETERNUM

“In loving memory’?” I queried, “They’re not here?”

Lady Katherine’s eyes once again sparkled but she said nothing to me, instead her faraway look told me she was reliving painful memories. Something dreadful must have happened to them but I determined then and there to allow the aristocrat to tell me in her own time.

#

1905

Sunday, 17th December – 4 p.m.

Special Branch, Metropolitan Police, London, England

“You wanted to see me, Mr Quinn?” Sir Giles Hawthorne’s query was pronounced as courteously as possible but, even with this supreme effort, his dislike for the head of the Special Branch was evident. Added to that was the gall of the man to summon him on Sunday, his day of rest.

“Yes, Sir Giles,” replied Alexander Quinn, barely looking up from the report he held. “Sit, please.”

Well, that was better than standing in front of his so-called superior like a schoolboy waiting to be chastised by the headmaster. He had had enough of kowtowing to him after being privately censured over his innocent embroilment with his former friend, Colonel Neville Humphries. He had not been aware that the retired colonel was, indeed, insane.

“There’s been incident at Newington?” Quinn stated bluntly.

“Newington? That Davies woman?” Contempt bore into that name. Even now, with her out of his hair—hopefully for good—the mention of her name made his stomach cramp. He detested that troublesome, brazen invert.

“Her flat was broken into,” Quinn declared, eliciting a denigrating scoff from Sir Giles.

“What for? God knows what she wouldn’t have anything worth stealing.” Sir Giles’ derogation came to a sudden stop. “Was she at home?”

The eagerness in Sir Giles’ question took Quinn by surprise.

“No. The caretaker was killed.”

“Oh,” sounded a little too disappointing, “Pity.”

“I’ve assigned the case to Detective Sergeant Yabsley—”

“Detective Sergeant Yabsley? I don’t see why we’re wasting—”

“Do you have any idea why someone would want to break into her flat?”

“How the dickens would I know that?”

“Are you aware that over the past few months there has been a number of enquiries at the front desk as to Major Williams’ private residence?”

Sir Giles appeared confused. “I...enquiries at front desk?” He was aware of only one and that was directly with him but that was nothing he was about to discuss with Quinn.

“Do you not read the daily reports, Sir Giles?”

“Of course, I do.”

Quinn let out an exasperated sigh. “You are aware of the regulations about divulging the personal details of our employees to the general public?”

“Yes, of course!” Sir Giles’ reply was quite brutal. “But Davies is not an employee of the Metropolitan Police. She is in the private employ of Major Williams. And Major Williams...well, I cannot answer to that.”

“Did you give out Miss Davies’ address?”

A gasp of stunned outrage preceded Sir Giles’ reply, “You ask this of me? The Chief of the Department of Special Operations? Sir, I find that accusation highly inappropriate and...offensive.”

Quinn gnashed his teeth in an effort to keep harsh retaliatory words from escaping.

“Sir Giles,” he uttered in measured tones, “someone has. I want you to find out who and I want to have words with that person. A good man is dead because of this blatant breach of protocol and I fear Miss Davies’ life may be in jeopardy.”

Sir Giles stood up abruptly, putting an end to this scolding. “Perhaps we’d all be better off to see the back of that woman. There’s no place in the police force for women of any inclination. Will that be all, sir?”

“Bring me the culprit.” Quinn’s demand took any further argumentative wind out of Sir Giles’ sails. His only response was to glare at his superior. “That’ll be all,” dismissed Quinn and returned to the report in his hand.

Sir Giles turned on his heels and strode out of the office and back down the stairs to his.

A scapegoat. That’s what he needed. His actions had been in good faith. How could he have known what was to come? He flung open the door to his rooms and swept past his secretary’s vacant desk and into his office.

Inside his spacious room, Sir Giles paced back and forth, thinking, thinking. To whom had he given that vile woman’s address recently? Other than, of course, that swarthy young

man. Nobody else. No reason or excuse as to why he did this would wash with Quinn. This undoubtedly was a breach of trust—a minor one in his own eyes—but one nonetheless that could cost him his pension. Sir Giles needed a gull.

He flung himself into his overstuffed swivel chair and drummed his fingers on the desk. Sir Giles had given Yabsley the Newington address several months ago when he ordered him and Byrne to...Byrne! Yes, Detective Constable Kieran Byrne. *Dead* Detective Constable Kieran Byrne. It was he, after all, who had been caught as the traitor amongst his company and was a covert accomplice to Mad Colonel Humphries. It was Byrne who had tossed the Newington flat and planted the incriminating evidence that condemned Davies. Therefore, it was most likely Byrne who divulged the Newington address to that swarthy young man. That's what he'll tell Quinn. It had been Byrne. Dead Byrne who can't refute the allegation.

A smile crinkled his flushed cheeks and bloodshot eyes. He'd sort this out quick and proper. A glance at his pocket watch told him it was almost tea time.

Tomorrow. He'd sort it tomorrow. Tomorrow he'd summon Yabsley first thing and seed his mind with the further treachery perpetrated by Byrne in disclosing that wretched woman's home address.

#

1905

Sunday, 17th December – 4 p.m.

Somewhere in Oxfordshire, England

“Nothing?”

With a wave of his hand, the dapper young man summarily dismissed the three burly figures standing before him. He turned to the young woman seated in one of the sumptuous settees in the elegant sitting room.

“Where to now?” she asked languidly, watching the young man pace back and forth along the expensive Persian carpet.

“The chap that was with her. I shall make a telephone call to my greedy *al'iinjiz*. Nothing works so well as a quiet approach and the loud jangle of cash.”

The young woman snorted a deprecating huff of disapproval. Was it for him or the object of his exaction, the dapper young man wondered.

#

1901

Tuesday, 5th February

Chelmsford, Essex, England

The red-headed youth huddled in a darkened corner of his room curled up in a tight ball, sobbing quietly to himself, his blue eyes swollen and reddened.

His fifteenth birthday anniversary, a little more than a month away, was to have been a happy celebration, attended by his mother and father, aunts, uncles and cousins, and a few close friends from school. But that was now cancelled, postponed out of respect for the dead. It was only a little more than two weeks since old Queen Victoria had passed away and the British world was still deep in mourning. But he was not crying for her.

His heart was rent by the unexpected death of his father two days before the old Queen's funeral. He loved his father more than anything in the world and, together, they had made plans for their future—his future. He grieved for the loss of his father and for the loss of a future with him.

“Charlie...”

The soft intonation of his name only made him turn away from the woman who uttered it: his mother.

“Charlie, you must pull yourself out of that brown funk and stop crying. You're the head of the household now. And men do not cry.” Her tone was a mere whisper, sympathetic but firm. “Come,” she continued, approaching him, “come downstairs. The Army Chaplain is here to see us about the funeral.”

Even though Charlie's father's premature death had been accidental and while on furlough from duty in South Africa, as a serving British army officer he would be afforded a military funeral with full honours.

#

PART II

1905

Monday, 18th December– 10.00 a.m.

Special Branch, Metropolitan Police, London, England

Detective Sergeant Yabsley was a man who learned to control his humours early on but being kept waiting when he had urgent business to attend was not acceptable. He could feel his yellow bile rising and he was becoming quite irascible.

Comfortable enough sitting in Sir Giles' outer office but there was only so much he could do there and wasting time was not one of those activities. He had already taken mental inventory of his surrounds—as was his wont as a well-trained detective—and he did notice with some irony that the once-proudly displayed photograph of Sir Giles during the South African campaign had been removed. It had held the evidence that linked him to Captain G. Smith, the infamous 'Dickie' who was Colonel Humphrey's accomplice and criminal facilitator.

But enough was enough.

"Mister Fawkner," he barked, abruptly rising to his feet, startling the secretary and causing him to blot his notebook, "What the devil is keeping Sir Giles? I must be elsewhere in a matter of minutes."

"Apologies, Detective Sergeant, Sir. It...it...it must be the traff—"

He was cut off mid-word by Sir Giles' sudden appearance who rushed past, ignoring his wide-eyed assistant.

"Yabsley! In my office!" His words trailed behind him as he disappeared into his room.

A very irate Yabsley collected the file on the seat beside him and followed Sir Giles through the door, closing it behind him.

"You wanted to see me," Yabsley stated and, before his superior could reply, added, "at nine-thirty."

“Yes, yes. Traffic. Some such. Sit.”

While Yabsley had been Sir Giles’ ‘golden boy’ during the Mad Colonel Investigations, Yabsley’s remit then was to find the rapists and murderers while Sir Giles’ had been to rid himself of ‘that aberration’ Davies.

“Quinn’s put you in charge,” Sir Giles began, his fluster abating but his indignation rising. “Bypassing me.” Sir Giles peered at Yabsley.

“A matter you need to address to Mr Quinn, Sir Giles,” replied the detective impassively, “I do as directed. Here is my report.”

“Yes.” Sir Giles opened the file, taking his time to shuffle through the few pages inside causing Yabsley some further irritation. “One man murdered—”

“Misadventure,” Yabsley corrected.

“Still dead as a doornail. And the question remains how these interlopers discovered that woman’s address and to what end. Do you believe that someone here divulged that information?”

The question unsettled Yabsley. He knew what Quinn had asked him to uncover and he suspected who the leak was but neither was something he wished to discuss with the man sitting behind the desk opposite him—the prime suspect.

“That is the crux of our investigation, Sir Giles. When we are certain of who divulged the information, we can discover the reason.”

“Well, I’ll tell you who the culprit is. Was,” Sir Giles stated, closing the file, “Detective Kieran Byrne.”

Yabsley couldn’t contain his disbelief. “He’s dead, sir.”

“Yes. He’s dead, you’re not. I gave both you and Byrne that woman’s address. Do you recall? You and he tossed her apartment. Planted evidence. Put her in the frame. False arrest and all that.”

Yabsley caught on quickly but said nothing.

“Now, I believe it wasn’t you, Yabsley. But, if Byrne was paid by Colonel Humphries to do what he did, then he would have been open to other bribes, don’t you think? Giving out that woman’s address to a third party, therefore, is not inconceivable. In fact, the two events may even be connected. That is what I want you to establish, Yabsley, that Humphries and this incident are connected. That Byrne sold this address before he was killed.”

Yabsley absorbed everything that his superior officer was saying and couldn’t believe that this man, this ‘knight’, was instructing him to find evidence that didn’t exist; to fabricate evidence.

“Are there any questions, Detective Sergeant?”

Yes, there were many questions, answers to which he would uncover independent of any coercion.

“No, Sir Giles, I understand completely.”

“Good. Then your reports are to come to me directly and not to Mr Quinn. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“To me.”

“Sir.”

#

1901

Saturday, 9th February – 3 p.m.

Chelmsford, Essex, England

The funeral had been heart-rending for Charlie. Now, in its aftermath at home, the gathering of a few close family members and friends condoling his mother in her grief, Charlie had shed his last tear. He no longer denied that his father had been cruelly taken from him. Now he was angry. Angry at the world, angry at his mother, angry that his father had the audacity to leave him when they had planned to do so much together. All those plans were dead and buried alongside his father.

He had withdrawn himself into a corner and, taking a long look at the weeping, sad faces around him, took himself out of the room and away from the relentless pity.

Charlie found himself in his father's study, expecting to see his beloved mentor sitting at his desk, look up at him and smile the way he always had done whenever he burst into the room with some inconsequence.

He meandered along the walls, breathing in the scent of the leather-bound volumes of knowledge carefully slotted against each other upon the tall shelves. He loved books; he loved to read and he yearned to travel the world. His father had promised to take him to all those places he had served: Afghanistan, Aden, Ireland, India and lately South Africa. He had been a proud member of the Second Battalion of the East Yorkshire Regiment.

Charlie knew his mother had no such inclination for travel. She openly admitted that she preferred the life in England to any which she had experienced abroad. She was a homemaker; his father was an adventurer.

His mental wanderings brought him to sit in his father's chair at the ornate oaken desk. The leather inlay was gold-embossed with 'EJP'—Ernest John Pinnock. Lieutenant Colonel Ernest John Pinnock, dead at forty-seven.

Unmanly tears once again swelled in his eyes. Bitter tears. His mother's words echoed in his head and he angrily wiped away his mind's treachery. He looked up and his sight fell

upon the large old family bible that had followed the family around the world. It was the word of God and inscribed therein were the names of each successive first-born son. It was his duty, as it had been for each eldest son, to complete the entry for his father: his date of death.

With a reverence that was borne of sorrow, he took the heavy, ancient volume to the desk and opened it to the fly leaf. There, written in flourishing curves by different hands, were his forebears, from father to son, in an unbroken line. Even though the bible was printed in 1750, the list extended back to 1697. He read down the list of great-great-greats, right down to the last entry squeezed in at the very bottom of the page: George Edward Pinnock, his grandfather who had died only the year before, 1900. He recognised his father's script. It was his time now.

Turning the page, the first name on the recto, as expected, was his father's. The second name gave him pause. It was not his name and it had been crossed out: William Patrick. Beneath that was his, Charles David. Both names had been written by his father and, strangely, the date of birth for both was the same: twelfth of March, 1886.

Who was this William Patrick? Why was his name scored out? Was he Charlie's twin? If he was, why was it kept secret? What happened to him? Did he die?

#

The mourning visitors had left the wake many hours before to resume their normal lives, leaving Charlie and his mother picking at their supper across the table from each other.

"Mother," Charlie said, quietly interrupting the silence, "who is William Patrick?"

The question caused the widow to raise her puffy eyes to her son. "Who?" she queried.

"William Patrick. The name in the bible, above mine."

That explanation caused Mrs Pinnock to start. "Em..." she stuttered, searching for a viable answer, "em, no one. That is, em...a name we...we were thinking of giving you," she said with an awkward smile; a smile that Charlie had come to know to mean that his mother was not being completely truthful.

"Oh," he accepted and resumed picking at his food. He wasn't entirely convinced.

#

His mother's unsatisfactory reply only caused Charlie to be even more curious about the fate of the boy who bore the name that had been so unceremoniously crossed off the family records. However, Charlie was reluctant to bring up the subject with her again. His mother was profoundly depressed by the sudden loss of her cherished spouse and locked herself

away day and night, consoled by the medication their family doctor had so copiously provided.

Charlie was left to his own devices, under the watchful eye of their. When their solicitor, as executor of his father's will, sent his ageing clerk along to collect documents relating to the process of probate, Charlie took the opportunity to ask him if he knew where to find papers relating to his own birth.

“Of course, Master Charles,” the clerk obliged, “they should be right here,” indicating a drawer in the desk and, with a flourish, produced from the lowest drawer a bulging file tied with ribbon and labelled ‘India’.

Charlie took the folder, puzzled by the label. “India? I was born in India?”

“Did you not know?”

Charlie didn't answer. He always believed he was born right there in Chelmsford. This revelation puzzled him.

“I have what I need, young Master Charles. Please return the file whence it came. ‘A place for everything and everything in its place,’ I always say. No fuss finding it the next time, right?”

“Huh? Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you, Mr Simpson.”

With a generous smile, Mr Simpson, their solicitor's clerk, took his leave with the documents he required.

Charlie flopped himself into his father's chair and stared at the ribboned file sitting on his lap. It was daring him to open it.

#

1905

Monday, 18th December– 10 p.m.

Lilyfield Manor, England

The day before, discovering the old mediaeval castle and exploring the private chapel of the Delaneys had gone well, even with the dredging up of painful memories for Lady Katherine. I knew what it was to lose one parent; my own mother was taken from me when I was only twelve, she finally succumbing to the consumptive disease of tuberculosis. But losing both parents so unexpectedly...my heart ached for her.

Today had been a stay-at-home day, the weather being most inclement. But now, with a thunderstorm echoing through the darkened fields outside, we found ourselves in the countess' boudoir, draped on a very comfortable settee, feet up on the ottoman and in front of a crackling fire. Lady Katherine and I sipped on cups of hot chocolate, mesmerised by the flames leaping upward toward the chimney's flue. The servants had been excused for the night and, whether it was the heavy woollen plaid that enveloped us, the raging fire or the chocolate—or the warmth from our entwined bodies—we were at peace with the world and at Sleep's door. I had never felt so serene and complete as at that moment.

My eyes closed and my body relaxed; all was indeed well with the world.

I felt Lady Katherine's hand rest gently on my chest and fold back the neck of my nightshirt.

"You always wear that silver locket," she whispered, the words uttered more as a quietly posed question than a statement. "It must be of great sentiment to you."

"Hm-mm," I replied, looking languorously into her deep brown eyes. "It belonged to one of the two great passions of my life," I murmured lazily, "Sarah. Many years ago."

The countess turned the locket with her fingers.

"What became of her?"

I hesitated, not wanting to raise those demons from so long ago. Lady Katherine must have sensed the anguish I was trying to conceal in the long breath I exhaled.

“It’s beautiful,” she said as she released the locket and snuggled close to me, concluding that discourse but adding, “Did your second great passion give you anything?”

After some deliberation, I sighed, “Nothing of value...only my life. And this cup of hot chocolate.”

It took her a moment to realise who I was talking about. Her unwavering courage saved me from certain death when Dickie, the Mad Colonel’s accomplice, shot me twice. I would have bled to death had she not stayed with me and stemmed the flow.

She reached up and caressed my face. The kiss that followed was long and soft and when she broke from it, her hand was still at my cheek and tracing the line of the long scar that ran from my temple to my jaw.

“The scars...you have so many...how did...?”

I sensed the reluctance in her curiosity and I was equally reluctant to reply. How could I explain the circumstances that had subjected me to these? And the consequences of those circumstances? Horrible circumstances and regrettable consequences that I did not want to revisit and that would cause her distress, and possibly alienate her from me.

“Katherine,” I apologised, “that’s all in the past. The long, distant past. It has no bearing on my life—our lives—today.”

Could I have been more wrong?

#

1885

January

Bombay, British India

The silver locket hung about my neck and glistened in the morning sun.

It had belonged to my first and only love and it had held her photograph and that of her husband. Now, it held only hers.

I loved Sarah and she loved me. Eleven years had passed since her death at the hands of her profligate husband and no one had taken her place in my heart. I had travelled far and I had loved many. Not the selfless, unconditional love I had had for Sarah, but the carnal, erotic lust that I craved but found little solace in. Never again would I find the love I had for Sarah, nor would I seek it out.

And it was eleven years since I had trod Australian soil and spoken to my beloved foster brother, Patrick. I had written him scant triflings of information of my whereabouts and adventures in Asia and, of course, had heard nothing from him. What was I expecting? I had not given him a return address. My intentions were obvious: I did not want him to know where I was or how I could be found. I just wanted him to know that I was still alive and well, and had deviated from my declared plan of visiting the Mother Country and Wales, the birthplace of my mother.

I was praying that my sins would be left there in Australia, undiscovered and forgotten. Yes, I was running away from justice—man-made justice—but not from righteous retribution. The five men that had died by my hand deserved nothing less however I will always regret that Percy's life had been sacrificed because of me, and that I was the guileless lure that had caught twenty soldiers in a death trap. Even after eleven years, their ghosts still haunted my dreams.

My compensation for these mortal sins was the cash and gold stolen by the now-dead bushrangers. This was keeping me in relative comfort as I travelled from Melbourne through the Far East.

The Nubia was a 450-horse power ship of the Peninsular and Orient Steam Navigation Company. It left Williamstown on 16th June, 1874 with me onboard, for Point de Galle, Ceylon. My business with the courtesan Madeleine Dubois was complete and her plans to leave Melbourne for England with Daphne, the waif she adopted, well underway. Daphne had all but fully recovered from the abuse by that monster I sent to Hell, Harry Kepple.

I was an adventuress now, visiting all those exotic places I had read about in my books. Books I treasured. Books I had left behind in the home I had known since my birth, Paddington. Books that arrived from London every month, without fail, from the moment my mother taught me to read. Books I abandoned when I abandoned Sydney Town.

I had now seen all of those places I had read about—Ceylon, Singapore, Sumatra, Borneo, Malaya, and now, here in India—Madura, Mangalore, Goa and now Bombay but without Sarah. How I missed her and wished she could be with me. Travelling alone was fraught with danger, especially for a woman so, when wiser to do so, I dressed as Robert. I was tall enough and plain enough to carry the charade undetected. But in more civilised places, such as Bombay, I dressed as my true self, Rebecca, albeit far less formally than was required in Australia. Lightweight cotton fabrics made up my *ensemble* of loose blouse and skirt and a colourful shawl employed to keep the sun off my head. Of course, my blonde hair was kept short—very short—for cleanliness and coolness, but mainly to be able to swap from Rebecca to Robert with minimum of fuss.

Even though wherever I was I picked up the local languages easily, here in British India it was easier; there was always someone who spoke English.

Bombay was the third largest city, area-wise, in British India after Calcutta and Madras and the second largest, after Calcutta, in population and I think I must have already bumped into each of the seven hundred thousand that lived here. It was as crammed as London and almost as modern. Much had been spent on capital works by both private and government enterprise and many new and opulent buildings were reaching for the heavens. It was a busy mercantile port city, humming with trade and manufacturing. With the United States of America still recovering from their Civil War, the cotton industry here was booming with mills popping up everywhere and ships distributing their product around the globe, creating wealth for both the foreign English investors and the local native entrepreneurs. Notwithstanding the insurrections of the past—mostly railing against the corruption and misdeeds of the East India Company—the natives seemed to be content with their present situation.

I had settled into a moderately-priced ladies' boarding house in the centre of Bombay and the Bank of Bombay held my funds in a British account from which I could easily draw a draft or a letter of credit. It had been relatively inexpensive to live in this part of the world so my monetary assets were holding out quite well and, with the interest rate at five percent, my capital was being preserved.

Booth's Lodgings for Ladies was a large hotel-style building situated on a very pleasant street and, as the name indicated, was exclusively for 'ladies'—spinsters and widows, and of a certain class. The fact that I paid for my room and board in British pounds sterling rather than rupees, lifted my status somewhat, not to say that Mrs Booth was averse to having Australian colonists among her lodgers.

Mrs Booth was an engaging woman, a widow and of the same age my mother would have been. Her merchant husband had been unwittingly caught up in Delhi during the Sepoy Mutiny of May 1857 and, along with other European personnel and Christian Indians, fell victim to the rabid insurgents. With no immediate family and a business she had inherited from her husband, the now widowed Mrs Booth determined to remain in India, in Bombay, where the Bombay Presidency had remained relatively untouched by the mutiny.

With her innate business acumen, she prospered and soon sold her husband's small importing company and, with the profits, bought a hotel and established a much-needed lodging house for single European—and Australian—ladies.

I had a very comfortable room to myself and while Mrs Booth employed a vast contingent of male servants from *khansamas*, *malis*, bearers, *doodh-wallahs* and *pani-wallahs*—she even employed a *khitmagar*—only *ayahs*—female maids—were permitted into the bed chambers. In the dining room, there were even four *punkah-wallahs* whose sole duty it was to fan the ladies during meal times.

Although Mrs Booth was a staunch Christian, she was also a tolerant one and averted her eyes to the partaking of alcoholic refreshments so long as it was done in one's own room. She wasn't aware that in that same room I kept a loaded pistol, the same one that I had taken from that murderous bushranger Pitt when he was ordered to kill me.

I arrived from Goa three weeks before and planned to stay in Bombay for about a year. It was a good hub from which I could venture to all parts of this great sub-continent. The Sindh and Punjab interested me but I was particularly eager to view the magnificence of the Taj Mahal. Then, after seeing all that had to be seen, I planned to move on to England and Wales.

The history of this ancient land enthralled me, as did its people, but every now and then, the guilt from my past would bubble to the surface of my consciousness. It was at these times that I sought out the mind-numbing effects of alcoholic spirits. This evening was one of those times. My enquiries with the *khitmagar* directed me to a wine shop in nearby Forbes Street. I hoped I wasn't too late and the shop was still open.

I was and it wasn't. But I did see movement inside so I knocked on the windowpane and was admitted by a young local bearer who, to my surprise and confusion, led me into one of the rooms at the back.

Congregated there was a small group of European gentlemen...and one lady. One elegantly-dressed fellow was standing holding court, addressing the assembly in English but with a very distinct Italian intonation.

His speech enthralled me. I stood there, in a corner, enraptured by his presentation and the passion in his plea for financial support and volunteers.

The adventuress in me told me I should know more.

After the presentation, I introduced myself to the orator and discovered he was Dottore Silvio Alberti, an Italian archaeologist of some note and the group he was attempting to seduce with his vision was the newly-formed Bombay Natural History Society. This was the society's temporary meeting room—the back room of one of its members, a wine merchant. These members, however, were not convinced that the little bronze statue of a dancing girl Dr Alberti exhibited was four thousand years old or from a long-since vanished civilisation in the Indus Valley.

“What sort of financial assistance do you need?” I asked the bewhiskered gentleman.

“My government, he promised to match what funding I can raise. Now, I have almost enough. But I hope Bombay Natural History Society to see the value in my expedition and contribute funds and volunteers. But...” he shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

“They seem to be debating the point. Perhaps they'll see the benefit,” I said.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. *Chissà?*”

“*Lo so io,*” interjected the only other woman in the room as she joined us. She was as well-turned out as Dr Alberti and possibly thirty-five years of age, five years his junior.

“Ah,” said the archaeologist, “let me introduce you my wife, Signora Rosanna Alberti. *Cara, questa ragazzina e Signorina Rebecca Davies. Inglese.*”

“Australian,” I corrected. “Pleased to meet you, Mrs Alberti.”

“*Piacere,*” she replied with an indifferent inclination of her head.

“Alas, my wife, she does not speak English and she understands very little of it but she is capable as I in the field. If not better.”

A glowing compliment, indeed, I thought. And she was quite attractive as well, in spite of—or perhaps, because of—her aloofness. With dark features and an aquiline nose that betrayed her Roman heritage, her steely gaze was intimidating.

I was becoming more and more interested in this archaeological excursion, a subject that had always held my attention...something Mrs Alberti was beginning to do as well.

My offer to join the Alberti Expedition, free of charge, was gratefully accepted by the *dottore*. With a little more persuasion, the Bombay Natural History Society tipped in a total of one hundred pounds sterling, pleasing the Albertis immeasurably.

It would take another four weeks to plan and organise everything we needed: letters of introduction to the local Amir, letters of credit to pay the workers at the dig who would be hired from the local town, transportation by sea and land there and back, permissions to carry out the dig, food, accommodation...and so much more. In Bombay, a boat was arranged to take us from Front Harbour up to and into the mouth of the Indus River. We were to sail a further hundred and twenty miles upstream where we would disembark and meet the camel caravan that would take us and all our provisions and equipment to the archaeological site.

I arranged for my room at the boarding house to be kept for me until my return. Mrs Booth was most grateful to have all my rent in advance and, in return, she would only have to clean my room once, a week before my intended arrival.

This was a monumental undertaking and I was learning so much about archaeology and the logistical gymnastics it took to even get the venture underway. Mrs Alberti hardly acknowledged my presence but it did seem that she was not so cold toward me as she had been.

We would be travelling as far west as we could in British India, to a province known as Sindh and very close to the mountainous frontier with Baluchistan to the west. Afghanistan lay to the north and that whole area was a powder keg ready to explode. Numerous wars with the various tribes over the past forty years had resolved nothing. The brokered peace had left many dissatisfied. The Russians were continuing to push into Afghanistan and the various tribes there pushing back. Mr Charles Marvin had warned in February, '84 that Russia, “...will continue her swift advance until she triumphantly lays down her Cossack border alongside the Sepoy line of India.” Czar Nicholas and his Imperial Russian Army was intent

on occupying all the lands between the Baltic and the Danube, the Caucasus and the Caspian along the Persian frontier to Merv and Turkistan. British India and, indeed, Great Britain, was in her line of fire and we all had to be on our guard. A number of British regiments were already deployed along the borders to keep the peace between the various warring tribes and to stop the southward creep of the Russian Imperial Army.

With the singlemindedness only a blind passion could engender, Dottore Alberti would not be deterred; the dig was going ahead.

#

The expedition was planned to take six months and it took nearly two of those to finally reach the dig site.

It was hot.

Daytime temperatures of 100 degrees were normal, dropping to 50 degrees at night. And this was the middle of winter! We had to be home and hosed, done and dusted, before the July monsoon set in and when the temperature would be even hotter and the monsoonal rains would make work impossible.

The *dottore* and his wife persisted in dressing like the European sahib and memsahib they were. The only concession to the wretched heat was the white topee each wore to keep the sun off their heads. I opted for the light and cool cotton garb of the locals: long, baggy salwar trousers tied with a drawstring at the waist and caught at the ankles, topped with a blousy, long-sleeved kurta reaching to the top of my legs. Left loose, it allowed for good ventilation when working at the site. With sandals strapped to my feet, I finished off my *ensemble* by wrapping a turban to cover my short blonde hair and to keep the sun at bay. I became quite proficient in folding and winding my *pagari* neatly and so it stayed in place. The local workers may have made me the butt of their unkind jokes but I was far cooler than sahib and memsahib.

Our camp was pitched on a ridge jutting up from the flood plain of the Indus River Valley, near a formation of land that seemed incongruous to its surrounds. It was an anomalous mound that seemed to have thrust itself up from the surrounding plains of the fertile valley. Dr Alberti believed that this was the buried ruins of a four-thousand-year-old long-forgotten civilisation. He opined that, over the centuries, subsequent flooding of the Indus had buried the deserted, dilapidated buildings in silt deposits. He was convinced that this had been an important ancient trading hub and was determined to prove it. His exploratory digs here a few years before had unearthed the little bronze statue that he had proudly exhibited in Bombay.

My relationship with Rosanna grew to an amiable coexistence once she was convinced that I was not interested in her husband, however our conversations, such as they were, comprised gesticulations, nods, grunts and one syllable verbalisations in both Italian and English. I was becoming quite proficient in vocalising, “*si, no, forse, certo,*” and “*grazie*” at the appropriate moment, and she, “yes, come here, dig, carry” and the occasional, “thank you”. She was quite a taskmistress.

Five months had now elapsed since the beginning of our quest and we had discovered nothing—that is, nothing relevant. Everything we unearthed proved to be only two or three hundred years old, which, when I thought about it, was in itself quite astonishing. In Australia, we would find nothing that was older than ninety-seven years. Nothing, that is, from British colonisation. There was, of course, evidence that our own Aborigines had occupied the Australian continent for many thousands of years but, unlike the indigenes here on the sub-continent, ours had remained in the Stone Age.

Dottore Alberti had not given up hope; he was adamant that we were close. But he needed more time and funds to pay the diggers, feed the animals and to continue until the monsoon season.

The ruling Amir had shown negligible interest in our dig other than to give his permission and to lay claim to a bounty on whatever we uncovered. It was then with great courage and determination that Dr Alberti decided to appeal directly to the Amir for funding, with the promise of a greater portion of *baksheesh* from the treasures we would, hopefully, uncover.

I was surprised when the *dottore* requested that I accompany him and his wife to lay this proposal at the Amir’s feet. Perhaps he wanted to present himself to the Amir as a man with a *harem*. He also requested that I dress appropriately—as a European woman.

The small town of Naibah-Drayah stood on the western bank of the Indus only eight or nine miles further northward along the river and was possessed of the usual mud walls with towers. The walls enclosed a space of about seven hundred yards in diameter. The Amir, the chieftain of the ruling tribe, lived in the town, as did most of his four hundred armed and bearded tribesmen. I learned that most of these were currently away on a sortie chasing some Balochistani invaders back into the foothills to the west.

Only two gates allowed access to the town: the Mezhed Gate to the south and the Bokhara Gate to the north.

The Mezhed Gate, the one we were about to pass through, had a tower and was heavily guarded for, just behind it stood the Arg, the citadel surrounded by another wall, that accommodated the Amir and his wives, children and concubines. Also housed there, were his personal body guards and the eunuchs that protected his wives.

There was a ditch of perhaps ten or twelve feet deep and nearly twenty feet wide around the outer wall and, inside the wall, a covered way, or *chemin de ronde*, ran around the top for defence from attack. It seemed bizarre to me to see a number of small brass cannon poking out of the walls when those mud walls would never withstand a barrage from Russian—or British—artillery. All for show, I thought.

The fearsome-looking soldier stopped our canopied tanga as we approached the outer gate. Our driver greeted him like an old friend and explained who we were and what our business was, showing him Dr Alberti's letter of introduction and the appointment note the Amir had personally sent.

We were ushered through the first gate and, although the walls surrounded a large area, there were very few people about. Those that were, were going about their business with some rapidity; this was obviously no place for loitering.

I was even more surprised to see a small unit of khaki-clad soldiers—quite obviously Sikhs—bivouacked in neatly-spaced tents. I had never seen soldiers dressed in this way. They usually wore uniforms of red or blue, sometimes black, but this dust-coloured costume was most unusual. This must have been a cavalry unit as horses were tethered in a shaded area near the wall. I spied only one European face among them, a young man, quite handsome, who was conferring with one of the native soldiers who wore the chevrons of a sergeant-major.

I tapped the driver on the shoulder, “Who are they?” I asked, indicating the soldiers.

“The Queen's Own Corps of Guides, memsahib, Britishers here to protect the Amir from the Balochi marauders. Big camp at Bokhara Gate. Small camp here. Very bad, memsahib, very bad.”

I didn't know if he meant the Balochi were very bad or the soldiers. It mattered little to me as I doubted that I would have to deal with either.

Leaving our driver to find some refreshment outside, the three of us were met by a tall, elegantly-dressed man of Negroid appearance, who greeted Dottore Alberti with a broad smile.

“Welcome, Dottore Alberti.” His reply was soft and gentle and the timbre fell somewhere between male and female.

“*Buon giorno, Abdul,*” replied the *dottore* cordially.

“This way, please.” Abdul ushered us through the large house of the Amir and into his reception room. I was the only one of us to be awestruck by the opulence inside. It belied the frugality of adornment outside. The floors and walls were clad in tiles of the most intricately designed arabesque patterns. Rugs and carpets of equally superb craftsmanship adorned the floor and, around a low table were three ornately carved chairs, two of which were occupied. In one was a small man, lean and grizzled, dressed in an odd combination of Western and Eastern clothing. In the other, a dark, corpulent man dressed in shimmering brocade and excessively bejewelled from turban to turned-up slippers—the Mir Tareef Nasir Talpur, no doubt. He was the man we were here to dicker with.

The thoughts that followed were quite inappropriate: were we about to play a round of musical chairs, and was one of these carpets a magical flying one as used by Prince Husain in *One Thousand and One Nights*? The question of the chairs was quickly answered when our usher diverted Signora Alberti and me to an antechamber.

“*As-salam alaykom,*” I heard the chubby *Shahryar*-impersonator say to Dottore Alberti.

“*Wa Alykom As-salam,*” was the archaeologist’s cordial greeting in reply.

Abdul led us through a maze of corridors to a large, ornate door. He grasped the handle and, acknowledging us with a gracious tilt of his head, opened the door and followed us into a large room that was equally ostentatious as the reception room. It was then that I realised that Abdul must have been a eunuch to be allowed to remain. Here large pillows and cushions were strewn around the floor and on the various chairs and couches that were arranged somewhat haphazardly. A number of small tables carried silver platters of fruits and other tidbits: figs, dates, pomegranate, muskmelon and grapes. I had grown very fond of these and the almonds and pista nuts were a particular favourite. All were offered here in generous supply. On one table was a small stove with a brass pot brewing steaming hot *kahwa murrah*, which was also becoming a favourite. This was an extremely strong coffee drunk with copious amounts of sugar and taken in tiny cups. And, of course, with sweetmeats.

The room was occupied by six women and four children—two boys and two girls, all of pre-teen age—and another man of similar origin and dress to Abdul. The girls were playing *nard*, a form of backgammon, and the boys *shatranj*, a form of chess. Three of the

women were busily ministering to the children or the other women and were obviously their attendants. The remaining three women were reading or sewing and chatting among themselves.

The door closed behind us and our presence immediately drew their attention.

“*Sabaḥu Al-khair*, Rosanna,” said one of the women, rising to greet Signora Alberti with a warm smile and touching her hand to her heart.

“*Sabaḥu An-Nur*, Uzma,” replied Rosanna touching her heart and returning the smile. They obviously had met before.

They immediately began a conversation in Arabic as I followed them to a pile of cushions. My understanding of Arabic and Sindhi was adequate but not perfect and I understood I was being introduced to this woman, Uzma, whose perfect, light-brown skin covered an exquisitely alluring form and whose dark, kohl-enhanced eyes darted from Rosanna to me. Was she flirting with me?

I caught my name and the word, ‘*al’iinjlizia*’ and quickly corrected Rosanna with a smile, “Australian.”

“Ah,” said Uzma addressing me directly, “We must speak English, then. I have so little opportunity to speak it here.” Her command of English was faultless and her lilting Indian intonation of it charming. She smiled and her eyes captured mine. Again, I asked myself, was she flirting with me?

We spent the next few hours comfortably seated on a circle of cushions and partaking of the coffee, sweets and fruits, waited upon by one of the women attendants, Junal, who spoke to Uzma not in Arabic but in Punjabi.

The three of us exchanged views and comments in the oddest of fashions: Rosanna to Uzma in Arabic, Uzma to me in English, and Uzma directing comments to and from Rosanna and me, translating from Arabic to English and *vice-versa*.

I learned much about this appealing young woman, Uzma. She was the second wife of the Amir and had borne him two children, Naathim and Jameela. The other women being waited upon by their personal attendants were First Wife, Wafa and Third Wife, Sadia, who appeared to be with child. The remaining two children were Wafa’s—Farah and Tariq—and it would be Tariq who would step into the Amir’s slippers when the time came. All four children appeared to be between the ages of six and ten.

The ages of the three wives were only a few years apart and each had been married off to the much-older Amir to strengthen alliances between the various tribes of the area—

very much in the mode of our own monarchy—to secure peace or power. We were all pawns in the game, women, regardless of state or religion. Would this ever change?

I tossed off any commencement of philosophical debate to wallow in the fantasy of being in Uzma’s company—alone. I wanted to know more about Uzma.

“Where did you learn to speak English so well?”

“My father is a Punjabi prince and he insisted all his children—boys and girls alike—learn as much of the British people as possible. So, in turn, he sent us each away to England for education and enlightenment and brought us back when we attained it.”

“To make assimilation easier?” I surmised.

“To overthrow them!” She laughed at the absurdity of her father’s thinking. “‘To know your enemy is to know his weaknesses,’ he said.”

“Your father is planning an insurrection?” I was quite concerned.

“I must own that he had planned just that but was persuaded not to by his advisers—us! He had underestimated the might of the British. He is now enlightened.” She paused a moment, then added, “I am hoping to convince the Amir to do the same with Naathim and Jameela. If only to take in the wonders of the Western world.”

“Did you like living in England?” I asked, almost wistfully.

“Oh yes. Have you not lived there?”

“Not yet.”

“And yet, you are British.”

“Mama!” The call came from one of the two boys in the room, Naathim. He ran to Uzma, excitedly pronouncing that he had won. Both Rosanna and Uzma cheerfully offered him congratulatory words.

Uzma returned her attention to me and explained, almost as excitedly as her son, “Naathim has defeated his brother. Tariq always wins at *shatranj*.”

It was then I noticed that her son was staring at me. He turned to his mother and asked a question that surprised both Uzma and Rosanna.

“He wonders why your hair is the colour of *taraxacums*...er, dandelions...and your eyes blue as the sky. He is concerned that a *Shayatin* may have cursed you.”

While this question greatly amused Uzma and Rosanna, I was a little disconcerted. Looking around the room, I was, indeed, the only person there that didn’t have dark brown eyes and black hair. Even Rosanna had the hues of a Mediterranean. I was different, something I never noticed before.

It was Rosanna who allayed the boy's concern while Uzma explained his comment to me.

“My son has never seen a northern European before.”

Had the boy not been beyond the walls of the Arg? There, he surely would have seen that British soldier among the Sikhs stationed to protect him and his family. This youngster would be flabbergasted to know how many more victims of a possible *Shayatin* curse there were in the world. Uzma must have caught the irony on my face.

“My son will learn much of the world and its people. But, for now, you are the link to all the differences—”

“Naathim!” The high-pitched squeal that interrupted Uzma came from one of the two girls watching us from their game of *nard*, Naathim's sister, Jameela. “Naathim! *Yalla!*” she insisted, “*Yalla!*” and, like an obedient servant, the young boy returned to his table, glancing back at me with obvious apprehension. Being stared at by a coterie of children didn't usually concern me but, I must own, the distrust those stares conveyed did, particularly from Naathim's sister.

“You must visit again,” Uzma resumed, sensing my discomfort, “Soon. I am certain they will come to like you as much as I do.”

She held my gaze for a long moment, then lowered her eyes. She was flirting with me!

The way back to the dig was full of promise.

Dottore Alberti had convinced the Amir to stump up a significant amount, but the crafty old Amir did extract a larger than anticipated remuneration for this. As we approached the Mezhed Gate, we again saw the cavalry unit. This time they were mounted and heading out ahead of us. They were led by the British officer, who, I could see by the pips on his epaulets, was a lieutenant.

While the *dottore* and his wife conversed to each other in rapid-fire Italian, I mused on what had transpired in the *harem* between Uzma and me.

Did I interpret her signals correctly? Or was this interpretation coming from need and loneliness? And was that need and loneliness hers or mine?

It didn't matter much. She had captivated me and I wanted to see her again even if it was only to speak to someone in English about anything other than the excavation. Hardly any of the workers spoke anything but their native dialects; Rosanna's conversations were minimal and always in the form of commands and Dottore Alberti's were always about the

quest for his own Troy—he saw himself akin to Heinrich Schliemann. It would be a relief to just natter about anything else in my own mother tongue. Then, of course, there was always that other possibility...

The Italian chatter stopped. As though he had read my mind, Dottore Alberti turned to me, taking me out of my intimate reverie.

“Rebecca,” he began—his tone was fatherly, “you must be very careful. Here, the men do not respect the women who go about *senza*...mmm...no company, you understand?”

I did, but what was he getting at?

“European women especially. If you go to see the wife of the Amir, you must take a man with you. For *protezione*. Protection. *Si?*”

“*Si, Dottore,*” I replied unconvincingly, “for *protezione*, I understand.”

Alberti gave me a hard look, as any father would, then turned to his wife. The look he gave her said that he had done his best and the look Rosanna gave me was one of disappointed admonition.

#

It was late afternoon and the heat of the day had lessened considerably when I joined a cartload of workers from the dig as they made their way back to their homes in the township of Naibah-Drayah. We would arrive just before sunset and in time for the fourth call to prayer, *Salat al-maghrib*, just after sunset.

The past week had been one of receiving and sending numerous messages between Uzma and me. The result of those correspondences was an invitation to meet her for a repast and conversation in her private quarters.

I carefully had considered what to wear to this special occasion and, unlike my English counterparts, I forsook the corset and bustle, jewellery and hat festooned with dead birds and artificial flowers, and opted for the more comfortable and cooler white cotton long-sleeved shirtwaist and skirt, neatly belted at the waist. Mine wasn't the hourglass form that was attempted by those that shouldn't have even tried, but I was dressed in my finest, and comfortably cool. I carried with me a satchel containing my other self: Robert and 'his' work clothes. I had done it before and I would do it again—pass myself off as male. In this culture, even European men were allowed freedoms of movement that women of any age, caste or ethnicity were not. My work clothes would serve me well in this affair. I considered taking my revolver but thought better of it—best not to incite the indigenes.

Dottore Alberti had exacted a promise from me that I return by the start of work the next morning, with the diggers—more for my '*protezione*' than anything else.

Uzma's invitation was in hand and passing through the Mezhed Gate would be straightforward; my fellow travellers were known to the guards and I was known to my fellow travellers. Getting out again depended on timing. The workers would leave for the dig shortly after *Salat al-fajr*, the first call to prayer before sunrise, so I had to be at the gate by dawn and ready to be collected for the return journey.

The alternative was to leave Uzma's company in the dead of night and, dressed as a woman, would have been perilous—ergo Robert in my satchel. Then, dressed as a male, I could wander the streets of the town unhindered however it would be a long walk, in the dark, back to the campsite. But the notes from Uzma had hinted very strongly that I would spend the night with her. If that came to pass, then I would join my fellow-workers on their early morning journey back to the dig, dressed as memsahib Rebecca, and keeping my promise to Dottore Alberti.

That was the intention.

Making my way to the Arg was easy and went as planned. As we passed the row of Guides' tents, I noticed that there was no activity and all of the horses had gone. I gave it no second thought—I had other things on my mind.

At the gate to the Arg, my co-diggers dropped me off and, as arranged, Uzma's Punjabi attendant, Junal, was there waiting for me at the entrance to the garden.

“*Satsriakaal jii*,” she said cordially, bowing her head and clasping her hands as in prayer.

“*Satsriakaal*, Junal,” I replied and followed her through a maze of corridors I had not seen before. Before long, we arrived at a door and Junal opened it for me and closed it as soon as I entered. I dropped the satchel that contained Robert at the door and looked around.

These were Uzma's private rooms for her use alone, decorated as extravagantly as the others I had seen. A sumptuous meal was waiting to be consumed at the low table in the middle of the room but Uzma was nowhere to be seen. The spicy aromas filled the air and reminded me that I hadn't eaten since midday. But another hunger was churning my insides. I was determined to suppress it as I may have misinterpreted Uzma's invitation. Many *faux pas* had been taken by people misconstruing expressions of intention and I didn't want to fall victim to a misjudgement.

A whisper of movement drew my attention to the beautiful creature that emerged from an adjoining room. Uzma, swathed in diaphanous silks of brilliant hues, floated toward me, her arms open wide in welcome.

“Rebecca,” she said with a softness that reignited my dampened desire, as she enveloped me in her arms. Her embrace was strong, pressing her body against mine. “I am so happy you are here,” she whispered in my ear. I could feel every nuance of her form, every soft, private part of her. I was stunned by her boldness and I didn’t know how to respond. This is what I wanted but not what I had expected, that she would be so forward and without any preamble. My hesitation was evident. Uzma looked at me, confused and concerned, her arms still clutching me tightly to her.

“Uzma...I...you—” the words got in each other’s way.

“Rebecca, this is the way good friends greet each other in the Punjab,” she chided, “Women friends. Have I shocked you?”

“No...Uzma...I was unaware...good friends, of course.” I felt deflated: ‘*good friends*’.

“I hope we can become more than good friends,” she said searching my eyes for my true response.

The only reply I gave was to return embrace with equal intensity and fervour. Her hands gently explored the span of my back as I held her tight.

“You are not wearing a corset,” she whispered.

“I avoid them at all cost,” I replied honestly.

Noticing the silver locket around my neck, Uzma asked, “A gift from a lover?”

“A memento of someone I loved.”

“I hope you will have more of such mementoes.” She looked up into my eyes and whispered, “How long can you stay?”

“As long as you’d like me to stay. Will we be disturbed?”

“No, we won’t be disturbed.” Her hand caressed my cheek. The tenderness of that touch and the warmth of her body pressed against mine were having a devastating effect on me. My heart was pounding and other parts of me were throbbing with desire.

“You are a handsome woman,” she whispered. The breath that impelled her words touched my mouth. Her fragrance filled my senses: jasmine, rose, sandalwood. My eyes closed and I breathed in her essence. When her lips touched mine, it was like an explosion; I felt weak and yet strong, strong enough to deepen that kiss with a fervour borne of want and need.

By the time we returned to the table, the hot food had become cold. We had explored each other’s bodies for hours in intimate congress, reaching rapturous climax time and time

again. She showed me things I never knew existed and reached secret parts of my body and mind that I never thought could be reached. I was exhausted. My sexual *Kama* had been sated. Uzma was pleased that she could enlighten me in this way. We had certainly become ‘good friends’.

Now, each clad only in a loose, silken *kaftan*, we lazily partook of the bountiful supper laid before us, hardly saying a word. We didn’t have to speak, her eyes told me everything. I knew I had been an object of conquest, and I willingly and unreservedly capitulated. She did not love me and I was not in love with her but I was captivated and hoped she would summon me again. But, before then, we returned to the bedroom and resumed conquest and capitulation until we eventually fell asleep.

#

The sun was relentless in its annoying insistence in getting me to open my eyes. I was far too comfortable lazing in Uzma’s bed and reliving the cause of my current lethargy. Outside, birds were chirping and the muted hubbub of life wafted over me with the breeze. In the distance, I could hear the call to prayer.

It hit me with a jolt! The call to prayer! The sun was up! This was the *Salat al-zuhr*! It was after midday! I missed the *Salat al-fajr* before sunrise! I missed my ride back to the dig!

I jumped from the bed, gathered my discarded clothing and found my satchel.

“Rebecca, my love, what are you doing?” Uzma mumbled sleepily from beneath the bedclothes.

“I’ve missed the tanga back to the dig,” I replied as I frantically shook Robert out of the satchel and donned him. “I promised I’d be back in the morning. Damn! I don’t know how I’m going to get there!”

“Do not fret so,” Uzma soothed as she sat up in bed. “I will summon Abdul to fetch a horse for you. You do ride?”

“Yes. Yes, of course I do,” I replied in a tone that was far more annoyed than it should have been.

#

The panic had subsided somewhat and, comfortably dressed in my salwar and kurta, I was on my way to the horse Abdul had prepared for me and my flight back to the dig. Rebecca was hastily shoved in the satchel slung on my shoulder and, dressed as Robert, it would be much easier to ride back. But, first, I had to find my way back to the garden through this labyrinthine maze of corridors.

Where the hell was I?

Nothing looked familiar but it all looked the same. There was no one about—most likely all at prayers or lunching.

Finally! A glimpse of the garden through an open doorway.

I hastened to it and emerged in a small courtyard but not the one by which I had come in. It was more of an alleyway with a low-walled well in the middle of it. I caught sight of one of the Guides' tents at one end of the alley but, unless they moved them overnight, the tents should have been to my left, not my right.

And no horse!

“Ei!”

The shout came from behind me. I turned expecting to see Abdul and a horse even though the command was most inconsistent with coming from that gentle servant.

To my shock and horror, there stood three fierce, bearded Mussulman warriors. The biggest of them had an incongruous, rust-coloured beard and held a short whip in his hand. Each was armed with a knife and sabre nestled in his belt. In unison, they took measured steps toward me and stood barely three yards distant. I held my ground determined not to show the fear that was causing my heart to thump wildly in my chest. ‘Red-beard’ looked me over and then addressed his cohorts with a sneer, “*Al'iinjilizia.*”

He returned his deadly gaze to me and spoke with a heavy Arabic accent, “What you do here?”

I didn't answer but returned his gaze, wondering where the hell Abdul was with the horse.

He took a step towards me and loosened the tail of his whip. “*Harem. Forbidden for men. English men. Bad. Very bad. For you!*” Without warning, he flicked his whip at me. My reaction wasn't fast enough and the tip caught my arm and it stung like hell.

I suppressed my impulse to cry out and stepped back holding onto my arm. Thoughts flashed through my mind at a million miles a second: *Do I tell him I'm not a man? Do I tell him I'm a woman? What then? What happens if I do? Or don't?*

Before I could utter any excuse, ‘Red-beard’ signalled his accomplices to grab me. They were on me before I could move, each grabbing and pulling on one of my arms. I struggled and kicked but they were far too strong for me.

Another command from ‘Red-beard’ and I was swung around, my back to him. I pulled and pushed and kicked and struggled; my arms seemed as though they would be torn from my body.

And then I heard it and felt it! A stinging crack of the whip across my back! My knees buckled and I fell to the ground still suspended upright by my arms. Another crack! The pain was excruciating!

‘Red-beard’ was shouting profanities at me. He struck me again.

The blows from the whip must have cut into the fabric of my kurta. The two holding me by my arms grabbed the sleeves and tore the garment apart, exposing my back and the welts and cuts caused by the whip. Another wrench of my shirt-sleeves and it was torn completely from my body.

Everything stopped.

They let go of my arms with an accompanying expletive. My satchel fell to the ground.

I crumpled forward. The silver locket swung from my neck. I hadn’t experienced pain such as this since the beating John Harper gave me. And he had intended to kill me.

Incomprehensible words were being bandied back and forth; words of surprise, shock and then mirth and despicable mockery.

Another brusque command from ‘Red-beard’ and I was hauled back onto my feet and spun around to face my tormentor. Propped up by his ‘chums’, he ogled me up and down, his eyes resting lecherously on my naked torso and breasts. The silver trinket around my neck caught his eye and he tore it off me.

Not the locket! I screamed internally.

I glared at the barbarian before me and vowed to myself that he would come to regret that.

He reached for his dagger, slowly withdrawing it from his belt and slavering, “Now we see what English women different.”

His intentions were clear. I fought and struggled against my pinions. I wasn’t going to submit to further degradation without a damned good fight.

“You filthy pig-fucker!” I shouted at him and spat a good gob that hit him square on his red beard.

His anger erupted and he slashed down at me with his dagger. I dodged the strike that would have decapitated me only to have the knife slice open my face from temple to jawline. Blood surged from the laceration, covering my face, shoulder and chest.

Another strike from the Mussulman’s blade cut the drawstring that kept my salwar in place. That strike also sliced open a part of my belly. It wasn’t deep but enough to cause blood to trickle down to my nether region.

Now completely naked with my trousers at my ankles, he commanded them to drag me to the well and slung me over its low stone wall.

Almost blinded by the blood running into my eyes and my arms pulled hard on either side, I felt my feet being pushed apart. ‘Red-beard’ leaned over me and breathed in my ear, “I, pig-fucker? Now I fuck pig.”

The pain to my arms, back and face were eclipsed by the pain caused by this man as he pushed himself into me, furiously violating me, his accomplices holding me down hard against the wall of the well. I could not move, I could hardly breath but I was determined not to scream or cry out for mercy. I was being defiled by this filthy, godless bastard.

The merciless pounding stopped only when he withdrew and his place taken by one of the others. Again, I was being savagely raped. Blood from the gash to my face was seeping into my mouth and nostrils.

‘Red-beard’ grabbed my hair and forced me to look at him.

“You English all pigs! We do this to all English!”

I could barely keep my bloodied eyes open; blackness was overcoming me. I felt the third man enter me and continue with pitiless degradation of my body when my world turned black and I lost consciousness. The last thought I had was that they would throw me down the well when they had finished with me.

#

They didn’t hear the squadron of six mounted troops approach at full gallop or, if they did, they flagrantly chose to ignore them.

“Get away from her!” The young lieutenant shouted at the three Mussulmen as he pulled up his mount. His gun was trained on the biggest of the three, the one with the red beard. “Let her go or I will shoot! NOW!”

With a sneer of contemptuous disdain, the red-bearded Mussulman muttered something to his two underlings then addressed the young soldier.

“The English *eahira* is yours, Sahib.” His laughter was callous as they let go of the young woman. His last despicable act before walking away with his sneering minions, was to spit on the lifeless form.

The battered young woman slipped to the ground. She was unconscious—possibly dead. The cavalryman jumped from his horse and ran to the crumpled form, removing his tunic along the way to her.

“Good God!” he uttered as he took in the injuries this woman had suffered: weeping wounds to her back, bruising to her arms and legs and her body spattered by the blood oozing

from the terrible lacerations to her face and abdomen, and between her legs. He could only imagine the damage those three brutes had done to her insides. He threw his tunic over her trying to protect her ravaged dignity as much as possible.

“Fetch the surgeon!” he shouted back at the small mounted squadron that had drawn close. Immediately, the daffadar, Mehtab Singh, repeated the order and another Afridi galloped away toward the northern end of the town.

The daffadar approached the lieutenant and addressed him, “Is she alive, Sahib?”

#

1905

Monday, 18th December – 11.30 p.m.

Lilyfield Manor, England

The cup, emptied of its hot chocolate, rested on my lap as I slouched on the sofa, mesmerised by the burning logs in the fireplace and subdued by the memories of 1885. I wondered what my life would have been had I not craved the memory-benumbing effects of alcohol that night twenty years ago in Bombay.

Lady Katherine's breath was soft against my skin as she lay sound asleep beside me, nestled in my embrace. She had allowed me my secrets. I didn't want my demons to haunt her as they did me; she had her own to keep buried. Time was said to be a great healer but, for me, Time was merely the mileage I travelled between the past and the present. Those I killed were still dead and those I deserted were still searching for me. No, my demons would be kept locked in the deepest dungeons of my corrupt soul. I could not risk losing the love and trust she had so freely given to me.

The mantle clock struck half-eleven. The storm had passed with only the faintest of rumblings echoing over the fields.

"Katherine," I whispered, "Katherine, we should go to bed." I was reluctant to wake her as she rarely had a long or uninterrupted sleep. Nightmares of her captors persisted, albeit now less frequently, but I knew memories of the tragic loss of her parents still plagued her. There was rarely a night that she didn't struggle with nightmares.

#

1901

Saturday, 16th February

Chelmsford, Essex, England

A week had passed since his father's funeral and his mother had ventured out of her room several times. It was also a week since he opened that folder marked 'India' and examined every scrap of paper it contained.

Numerous correspondences, sundry invoices and semi-official documents were neatly bundled in chronological order. His father was methodical and an excellent archivist so it didn't take long to find what Charlie was searching for: his birth certificate. It puzzled him that it would be in this particular file as he had always believed he was born in England. But there it was, the folded page, labelled in his father's hand, 'Birth Certificate'.

He stared at it with a feeling of trepidation. Surely, this would clear up the mystery of why the bible entry of 'William Patrick' was crossed out. Or would it simply add to the enigma?

Carefully opening the document, he scanned the contents. He was staggered to read that it was the birth certificate of one William Patrick—not Charles David—born twelfth March 1886 at the Trimulgherry Station Hospital in Secunderabad in India.

More folded documents in the file revealed official papers relating to the adoption of said William Patrick to Major and Mrs Ernest John Pinnock.

A numbness overtook him. He wasn't his father's son. Or his mother's. He and William Patrick were one and the same. He was adopted.

He read both documents again. On both, the name of his real mother had been carefully blotted out; his real father's name was left blank.

Questions swirled in his head. Why? Why the secrecy? Who were his real mother and father? What had he done to them to be unwanted by them? Why had he been discarded like an unwanted piece of rubbish?

Charlie felt betrayed by those he called Mother and Father—they were not his real parents. They lied to him. All of his fifteen years had been a lie. He wasn't a Pinnock, he was a—what? What was he? Who was he? He wanted to know more. He wanted to know who his real parents were and why they abandoned him.

Charlie found his mother in the drawing room at her writing bureau solemnly attending to her correspondence. Every now and then, she daubed her eyes with her handkerchief; she was replying to letters of condolence.

He stood at the doorway looking at the woman who had loved and nurtured him and wondered why she and her husband had deceived him into believing that he was of their flesh and blood. Charlie felt remorse for her loss—and his own loss, for he did love the man he called Father. And he did love the woman he called Mother and his heart broke for her. He was no longer angry with her but he did want to know the truth.

“Mother,” he said quietly as he approached. The young widow Pinnock turned to Charlie, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“Charlie, my darling boy,” she said apologetically as she once again wiped her eyes, “You have caught me in an embarrassment.” She smiled at her son and his heart melted. Whatever the subterfuge had been, he could never allow this woman to bear such a terrible loss alone. He silently vowed then and there to never forsake her and to take care of the woman who gave him everything he needed and wanted.

“Mother,” he whispered, placing a consoling hand on her shoulder, “It's all right to cry. You're not a man.” He smiled at the absurdity of his statement, which made his mother smile.

#

1905

Tuesday, 19th December – 10 a.m.

DSO, Special Branch, Metropolitan Police, London, England

It infuriated Sir Giles Hawthorne that, after interviewing Yabsley the day before—and given specific instructions—Yabsley had taken unexpected leave, authorised by Quinn! What the dickens was going on? Why was he being kept in the dark like a...like a—Sir Giles rummaged through a stack of files strewn about his desk, his cheeks flushed with frustration and anger.

“Like a damned mushroom—!” he cursed, tossing aside one daily report after another. He struck the desk with both fists, causing the inkwell to spill some of its contents.

“Goddammit! How dare Quinn bypass my authority!”

From the outer office he heard the telephone ring and the muffled response of it by his secretary, Fawkner. Within seconds, the speaking tube on the wall behind him brayed, “Sir Giles, pardon me, a telephone call for you, Sir.”

Sir Giles yanked the cone off the wall and shouted into it, “Who the hell is it?” He didn’t need the interconnecting voice conveyancer.

“Em...em...” stuttered the flappable Fawkner, “Mr Drayer, Sir.”

“Why didn’t you say so, dammit!”

He slammed the speaking tube back into its holder and took up the receiver from the telephone set on his desk. He calmed himself somewhat before speaking.

“Mr Drayer. What is it you need now?” Sir Giles listened, his face set and reactionless. “I gave you what you wanted...I cannot help that...No, I don’t know where she is now...I can’t do that. I’ve already compromised my position. I will not—”

As quickly as his refusal was cut short, his face contorted with anger as he listened to the caller. His face relaxed and his tone mellowed.

“That’s an awful lot of money, Mr Drayer. How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

“Yes. I received your...contribution to my wife’s church charity. All right. But this time, no one is to be hurt. Accidentally or otherwise. Understood?”

With a few flicks of the pages in his personal diary, the requested address was conveyed to Mr Drayer and his wife’s ‘church charity fund’ would be considerably the better off.

And damn Quinn to Hell!

#

1905

Tuesday, 19th December

Rachel's Way, St Columb Major, Cornwall, England

Detective Sergeant Yabsley looked at the address on the piece of paper in his gloved hand and then at the cottage that stood before him. A light dusting of snow had settled on the well-maintained garden that surrounded the temporary home of Major Reginald Williams, his wife Cornelia and their young son Reggie Junior. And their little dog, Mikey. They had all suffered much at the hands of Colonel Humphries and Kieran Byrne and were recuperating here, unknown to anyone but Mr Quinn and now, Yabsley himself.

Upholstered against the chill by layers of coats and scarves and his hat pulled down tight, Yabsley came ready to swallow a good, hot cup of tea together with a generous dollop of his own pride. He and Williams had been at loggerheads for years, the conflict having been brought about by the contrived appointment of Davies as 'Assisting Clerk' to the major. *Miss Rebecca Davies*, mind you, a woman of all things, and a Sapphist to boot! The DSO was no place for a woman and he had no place for a deviant in his working life.

That's how he felt two months ago.

The intervening events proved that she was as capable as any man to carry out the duties of a specialist 'policeman' but he still couldn't fathom why her predilection was to lie with women. He pushed all those thoughts aside and swung open the gate. Within a few strides, he was at the front door and before he could strike the brass knocker twice, the door opened.

"Yabsley," Williams said coolly, holding the door open with his right hand; his left arm was in a sling, "Come in." The invitation was more formal than personal; these two men had had their differences but each understood that they were both working toward the same end. Yabsley removed his hat and stepped inside.

"Major."

There he was greeted more cordially by Mrs Williams and her son.

“Mr Yabsley, welcome,” she said stepping forward and giving her husband a chastising glance.

“Thank you, Mrs Williams.” He looked at the major’s wife with restrained sympathy; Yabsley was not one to show his emotions readily. “And how are you? And young Reginald?”

The unexpected compassion took Mrs Williams by surprise but replied with a generous smile. “We’re fine, Mr Yabsley, just fine. Let me take your hat and coat,” she offered, helping him off with his greatcoat. “Please, make yourself comfortable in front of the fire. Tea?”

“Er, no, thank you—”

“Come now, Mr Yabsley, you must be frozen stiff. I’ll bring a pot of hot, freshly brewed tea. Do sit. Reginald...” she said giving her husband another warning look.

“Perhaps a brandy...Keith?” Williams offered doing his best to be friendly toward his rival.

Yabsley’s stiff bearing relaxed a little. He was as willing as the major to meet halfway.

“Thank you, Major. Would be most welcomed.”

Williams poured two measures of the amber spirit as Yabsley found comfort in a chair close to the fire. He wanted to make small talk but it was obvious to Yabsley that Williams was still holding a grudge over his involvement in having Davies arrested.

“How is your...” Yabsley began indicating his shoulder.

“Wound?” Williams finished, handing Yabsley a glass. He didn’t want to discuss his incapacitation at the hand of that Irish rebel, Byrne, but he considered it better not to upset Cornelia any further so replied, “Healing. I almost have full use of my arm and shoulder.”

“Punctured lung and fractured scapula, I heard.”

“If it hadn’t been for the quick thinking of young Henry Pitman and the village doctor in Wickham Upper, Cornelia would now be a widow, not a wife. Your telegram said there was a break-in at Louisa Mansions. Does Hawthorne know you’re here?”

“No. And Quinn wants it that way.”

“Good. Was anything taken?”

“The place was turned inside out. Difficult to know if anything was taken. The old caretaker, Grayson, was killed.”

“Grayson? He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“I believe it to have been accidental.”

“Any idea who did it?”

“Three of them. By the description the witnesses gave, Mussulmen. This was in Grayson’s hand,” Yabsley said, retrieving the gold fob chain seal from his pocket. “I believe it came off one of them in the struggle.”

Williams examined it carefully.

“It appears to be Persian or Arabic.”

“Can you read it?” Yabsley asked.

“No, but I know someone who can.”

Yabsley took the plunge into unfathomed waters and stated, “I understand that you met Davies in the Middle East.”

Williams’ reaction belied his thinking that what transpired in the Middle East with Davies was none of Yabsley’s business.

Yabsley continued somewhat reluctantly, “When Byrne and I searched Davies’ flat—regrettably now—I found a small packet hidden behind a kitchen drawer. A black box.”

Williams listened intently; he knew what was coming.

“I didn’t put it in my report and gave it back to Davies. She said it came from Afghanistan.” Yabsley paused and looked up at Williams who stood stoic. Yabsley continued, “You know what it contained, I take it.”

Williams said nothing; Yabsley peered up at him.

“Tea, gentlemen, and fresh scones,” Cornelia announced as she placed the butler’s tray on the table. Reggie followed with a plateful of hot, steaming scones and placed it on the table as Mikey bounced around them willing a morsel to fall.

The men made themselves comfortable at the table while Cornelia served the hot tea. There was a long silence between Yabsley and Williams each pondering why Davies’ flat had been broken into by three men of Middle Eastern appearance. The only apparent connection being a small black box that had originated from their part of the world.

“Major, if I may put forward a possibility?” Yabsley said almost deferentially, wrapping his large hands around the steaming teacup.

“Do.”

“You know the turmoil the Russians are stirring in Afghanistan, some of the tribes are resisting the Russkis’ attempt at invading but they need capital to buy weapons.”

“Feasible.”

“Perhaps this was an attempt to reclaim lost property.”

Williams stared at Yabsley, organised his thoughts, then spoke.

“That supposition rests on very shaky grounds, Sergeant. First, that the intruders were Afghans and Mussulmen—not all Arabs are. Second, that it was the black box they were after. Third, that Davies ‘acquired’ the contents by nefarious means. What makes you think that anyone could connect her with something that may have taken place twenty years ago? It doesn’t wash, Sergeant.”

“I know you want to protect her, Major, but I believe that charm, that seal you hold, is the key. I want as much as you do to find the culprits.” He hesitated. “I would very much like to work with you on this, Major Williams.”

Williams looked at the golden seal and turned it in his fingers. That script had to mean something and, as reluctant as he was to admit it, Yabsley could be right.

“I will write to the Military Secretary of my regiment for the current address of my former daffadar, Mehtab Singh, an Afridi of the Guides cavalry.

#

1901

September

Chelmsford, Essex, England

The past seven months had been difficult for both Charlie and his mother.

Before the appropriate period of mourning had elapsed, Charlie returned to school leaving his mother to spend her days alone. Without a patriarch and provider, Charlie feared his mother would fall into the dire straits of debt and had suggested he leave school and take an apprenticeship or a position as clerk with someone. His mother dismissed that idea immediately. She explained that her pension, together with the benefits of her husband's estate and a special provision that had been made for Charlie, would see them both with enough to carry them through.

“‘Special provision’?” Charlie queried. He wasn't aware of any special bequest. Nothing like this had been mentioned in his father's Will.

“My darling boy, do not trouble yourself with such matters. Everything has been provided for,” his mother stated softly. “It was your father's wish that you complete your secondary education and go to Sandhurst. Carry on the family's military tradition.”

Indeed, it was Charlie's secret wish as well to apply to the Royal Military Academy but it was his mother's wellbeing that was at the fore of his thinking. “But how—?”

“All is well, my son, we will not see the inside of the Debtor's Court.”

Although Charlie could not understand how the funds would be provided, he did not doubt his mother's words. She was a gentle, honest woman and apart from the mystery of his birth, she and his father had never lied to him. He never again spoke of William Patrick to her but he was determined to uncover the fate of his natural parents. He had to know more; he had to know everything.

To this end, and without his mother's knowledge, he scanned all the documents in his father's 'India' file again and again, gleaning every fragment of clue therein. There were many letters from military colleagues in India and Charlie read and re-read every one.

Several letters in particular kept coming to the fore. They held vague sentences enquiring, ‘and how is the boy faring?’ and, ‘is he happy?’ and referring to a promise—surely these were references to himself. All were dated from six months after his birth and addressed to a garrison near Bombay. His father’s regiment had been garrisoned near Bombay. The envelopes to all were missing and, most annoyingly, on each of these notes, the sender’s address was an initialism and one he didn’t know but he was sure it was army. The signature on each was an almost illegible—a scribble—but comparing one with another, he was able to conclude that the writer had been one ‘Thom Stokes’. Charlie avowed he would find and make contact with this ‘Thom Stokes’ whoever he was.

Meanwhile, he had written to the Director of the Station Hospital at Trimulgherry in Secunderabad, India, asking for any information relating to one William Patrick born twelfth March, 1886 but, to date, had not received any acknowledgement. He also wrote to the relatively new Archdiocese of Bombay, requesting information of a baby boy who had been adopted by then Major Ernest John Pinnock through the Catholic church of St. Andrew’s there. He had received a reply but it was only to say that it would take some considerable time to scour their records as thousands of children had been placed through their various parishes over the years. They added that a small donation would assist in this arduous endeavour. They didn’t indicate how small ‘small’ would be and the funds he had available most likely would have been deemed miniscule in their eyes. He decided to let that avenue close to him until he had exhausted all others.

He enquired also to his father’s regimental command. Surely, they would have records of a new dependent—himself—should any fatal mishap befall his father. This, too, had received only a cursory reply acknowledging receipt of the enquiry. And, this, too, would take time but time was all he had...and patience.

All this was carried out by diverting any return correspondence to the post office near his school. He had come to be on very familiar with the post master, dropping by several times a week to see if anything had arrived for Master Charles Pinnock.

#

1885

June – Sunday

Naibah-Drayah, Sindh, British India

Blackness.

I couldn't see anything. All I could hear were muffled commands coming from far away. Then, a painful stinging sensation to my face as though I were being stung by a wasp. And pulling. My face was being pulled. I cried out in pain.

“Chloroform,” someone said and all became still and quiet again.

My eyes fluttered open and slowly adjusted to my surroundings.

Where was I?

A kerosene lamp lit the room. I was in a tent, lying on a camp cot. A blanket was strung up shielding me from someone on the other side who coughed and spluttered almost incessantly.

My senses were muffled and muddy. I felt as though I were drifting on a cloud, enveloped by that cloud. Dull pain emanated from every part of my body but it, too, was benumbed and distant.

The smell.

It reminded me of hospital. St Vincent's Hospital and carbolic acid. I was uncomfortable lying on my back; it burned and prickled. My abdomen was sore and my arms felt as though they had been unhinged. My face felt singed and tight. My nether region was sore; it throbbed and felt hot, as though I had wet myself.

Slowly, the memories pushed to the surface...the whip...the knife...the three...

My breath laboured with the memory of each brutality they had inflicted on me. If only...If only I hadn't slept late; if only I hadn't lost my way; if only I hadn't made that stupid act of provocation by spitting on that Mussulman bastard. Did I really think I would have come away unscathed? I gingerly lifted my arm and touched the side of my face. It was

swollen and it burned and stung. The long rent in the skin was closed by intermittent knots of thread. A gasp of self-pity escaped.

“You’re awake.”

The soft male voice that made this statement came from across the small canvas room. His was a cultured English voice. I turned my head to see who spoke.

“How are you feeling?” he gently asked as he closed the book he was reading by the pallid light.

It was the young British officer I saw a week or so ago, at the Guides’ tents. I wondered who he was. He must have read my thoughts.

“Lieutenant Williams, Miss, of the Queen’s Own Corps of Guides. Reginald Williams. Reginald. At your service.” He smiled at me and reiterated compassionately, “How are you feeling?”

How could I answer him? How did I feel? Abused. Violated. Angry. Hurt, distressed, sorry. Perhaps even grateful. Many words came to mind but none that could adequately express what I felt at that moment. I simply closed my eyes and turned away.

Shame. That is what I felt at that moment.

He brought his chair close to my cot and sat down.

“Miss...” His hand gently rested on my arm. “Miss, they will pay for this.”

I turned to him. Only then did I notice his vibrant blue eyes and his handsome face. He was clean-shaven with neatly trimmed side-whiskers that reached to his earlobes. I saw nothing but sincerity there. I felt his sympathy wash over me.

“Miss, I know who did this to you and I swear to you that I will do everything humanly possible to bring those Mussulmen to justice. I have already filed my report and strongly urged that they be brought before a criminal court to face charges.”

His earnestness brought an acknowledging nod from me but I knew it would come to nought. ‘Justice’ in this part of the world favoured men. Women were chattels to be owned, used and abused, then tossed aside. We had no say and were given no respect. Justice here was as good as that which I encountered eleven years before in my part of the world. John Harper evaded ‘Justice’ after murdering his wife. But he didn’t escape vengeance. My vengeance.

“Where—” The first word I uttered brought a searing pain to my face; even grimacing was agony.

The lieutenant intuitively replied, “In the field hospital tent of our surgeon, Major Cunningham. We’re just inside the Bokhara Gate at the northern end of Naibah-Drayah. It’s

Monday night...” he consulted his fob watch, “no, Tuesday morning, one twenty-three. We brought you here yesterday afternoon. You were r—” He stopped short, then resumed on a different tack, “Incoherent.”

Lieutenant Reginald Williams was straightforward as well as honest and caring, I thought. But he hesitated asking me the next question.

“Miss, why were you in the Arg?” then thought the better of it. “Beg pardon, Miss,” he apologised, tucking the light army blanket in around me. “It’s best you rest. Major Cunningham left this draught of laudanum for you. Take this now. It’ll ease the pain.” With much care, he helped me sip the medication then added, “We can talk in the morning.”

With that kind gesture, he went to the lamp and turned it down. He gave me a final compassionate look and left the tent, leaving me in the dark with the disembodied convulsive hack but otherwise alone to suffer the agonies of my body and the degradation of my soul until the opium tincture had its desired effect.

#

Tuesday

“Ah! You’re awake,” said the grey-haired uniformed officer as he entered the tent, carrying a wooden case. “How did you sleep? Was the laudanum of any help? Did that fellow keep you up?” he asked sitting next to me in the chair that Lieutenant Williams had vacated hours before. I could see by the St. Edward’s Crown insignias on his epaulets that he was a Major—Cunningham, I presumed. Before I could reply, the Major continued, “Let’s see how your wounds are. Can you sit up for me, please?”

He was all-business, no-compassion. I complied with great effort. My whole body screamed in agony and my face was hot with searing pain. It was only then that I realised I was completely naked save for the bandages on my abdomen and back. He was unconcerned by my embarrassment and swift in his assessment of my injuries—well practised in emergency treatment of both men and women in the field, I imagined.

“Hmm,” he said peeling away the dressing on my back, “After I’ve redressed these wounds, you’ll be removed to other accommodation. This place is not appropriate for a young lady. Lieutenant Williams—the fellow who found you—has requested he take charge of your care. He will locate any next of kin or the like, and arrange your transfer accordingly.”

I didn’t say a word during his recitation of my agenda; I was in too much pain and filled with too much humiliation to be able to utter a word.

He stopped, looked me straight in the eye and proclaimed, “I know these natives. And I’ve seen what they can do. You’re lucky to be alive.”

That was the extent of his compassion. The rest of his medical consultation proceeded without another word uttered by either of us, the only sound to be heard was the consumptive hawking from the chap behind the curtain.

#

Thursday

The last thing I remembered was Major Cunningham giving me another draught of laudanum and the first thing I saw when I awoke was that my environment had changed. My disoriented mind and blurred vision sharpened as my eyes darted about the room, taking in whatever information I could. This tent was much smaller, barely able to accommodate the two cots in it, one of which I already occupied.

A handsome military chest, with polished brass strapping, stood near the entrance flaps and carried a standing mirror and an enamelled basin and water jug on its top. Suspended from one of the eyeleted tabs was an unrolled canvas holdall replete with brushes of all sorts: hair, clothes, tooth, plus a shaving brush and glass, razor, shoe horn, button hook, pocket knife, nail scissors, comb, sewing kit and soap box. Very neat and organised, I thought. A folding wooden and canvas Roorkee chair stood nearby with my satchel hooked over the top. Folded on the seat were scraps of cloth, soiled and bloodied—the remnants of Robert.

After taking this mental inventory of my surrounds, I closed my eyes but could not stop those painful images replaying in my mind’s eye. The aches to every part of my body only brought those memories to the fore. What they did to me; how could I face anyone who knew I had been violated so? I didn’t want pity or understanding. I simply didn’t want anyone to know. I was deeply ashamed.

The slap of the tent’s flaps being thrown aside disrupted my self-pity.

“Put it on the chest,” said the English voice from outside the tent.

“*Haan, sahib,*” said the young native man, bringing in a tray and placing it where instructed. The bearer saw me and stopped, his eyes wide with stunned surprise, the whites contrasting against his shiny umber skin.

“*Memsahib...*” he whispered. I must have been a sight to behold.

“*Jaldee karo, Ashish, jaldee karo,*” Lieutenant Williams said, stepping into the entrance of the tent, hurrying up the bearer.

Ashish, the bearer, took one last glance at me and hurried out, the lieutenant taking his place in the small confines of the tent, pulling the tent flap closed.

Williams brought the tray to me and sat on the cot beside mine.

“Your face seems a little less swollen. Major Cunningham says there’s little or no infection. He got to your wounds in time.”

“How...how long...” Words were painful to utter.

“It’s Thursday. Four days.” His words were kind, his eyes sympathetic. “You must be hungry. I’ve brought you some *kitcheree*. Doctor says you’ll have trouble chewing for a while. This will go down easily.”

Dahl and rice. After the sumptuous meal I had enjoyed ‘that’ night in the company of an alluring woman, I was to be fed the food of the commoners in the company of a soldier, albeit a handsome one. I was grateful, very grateful.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, barely able to move my mouth.

“Let me help you.”

With great effort on my part and extreme gentleness on his, I was once again sitting upright. It was only then I noticed that I was wearing a nightshirt. As I pondered whose, the lieutenant spoke.

“Mine. Yours...” he looked to the sullied pile of rags on the chair. “Try to eat this,” he coaxed, carefully placing the tray across my lap. “Major Cunningham said you were extremely lucky that the gash to your face wasn’t deeper. It could have severed nerves and done some very serious damage. In time, he believes you’ll be able to eat and speak properly...assuming, of course, you were able to do that in the first place.” He gave me a very mischievous smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling with mirth. “Very lucky, indeed, Miss.”

Was I lucky? I supposed I was lucky—lucky to be alive. But could I face those who knew what happened to me? Would I have been better off dead? If everyone were to be as considerate as this soldier sitting beside me, I possibly could face a world that knew of my humiliation and abasement.

“Please, eat,” he urged and watched as I took a small spoonful of the yellow soupy rice. It was very pleasing. The handsome Guide watched me as I took a few more sips of my *kitcheree* and considered the events that brought me here.

“—tenant Will—s,” I began. Forming my mouth to make intelligible words was difficult but I persisted. “Was it you who found...?” My query brought me his slight

affirming nod. “Thank you...” I wheezed, doing my best to push through the pain and added with solemn gratitude, “You saved my life...”

An engaging smile lit up his face. “‘Tenant Wills’. ‘Wills’. I like that. Wills.” His self-satisfied grin told me much about this affable young officer and I wanted to know more.

“—married?”

“No.”

“Sweetheart?”

“I have a young lady in Cornwall with whom I correspond. But she’s not my sweetheart. You?”

My thoughts flew to Sarah’s silver locket and the Arab snake who ripped it from me.

“No. No...”

‘Wills’ must have sensed my anguish and rose to his feet.

“I’ll leave you to your *kitcheree*. We’ll talk more later. Ashish will be about. If there’s anything you need, just ask him. This is my tent. You’ll be safe here.” He turned to leave then stopped to add, “By the way, I’ve made enquiries and understand that you were with the archaeological dig downstream. We’ll work something out.” He took the few steps to the entrance of the tent and paused. He faced me once more and said sombrely, “No woman deserves what was done to you.”

Images filled my head of other women I knew who hadn’t deserved their fate either: of Sarah, of Madeleine and of young Daphne, and the torment they had all been subjected to. I looked up at Wills. “No child, either.”

All Wills could do was lower his head in shame for his gender.

“I’ll leave you now,” he said regaining some of his self-respect. Raising the tent’s flap, he added as an afterthought, “Oh, you don’t snore, do you?” He smiled and left.

My *kitcheree* was pleasing and so was this young cavalry officer.

#

Saturday

It came to pass that not only was Lieutenant Reginald Williams of the Queen’s Own Corps of Guides an officer and a gentleman, he was also a man with a keen sense of duty, high morality and a bit of a japer. I was beginning to like him very much.

He was very considerate and always came in late at night and rose early. He was up, washed, shaved and dressed before I awoke and made sure Ashish had breakfast waiting for me when I did wake.

I slept for most of the next day and a half, my battered and bruised body slowly healing itself. My mind was slowly coming to terms with the humiliation I suffered at the hands of those three gutless curs and shame was slowly being replaced by anger. Thoughts of retribution were creeping into my consciousness.

The rustling of the tent flap brought me back to the present and to Ashish bringing in a tray of sustenance.

“*Shubh dopahar*, Miss,” Ashish sang pleasantly, wishing me a good afternoon, “*lanch*.”

“*Shukriya*, Ashish.”

I pulled myself up as the agreeable young bearer placed the tray across my lap. There, along with the fragrant soupy curry, was a sealed note written in a delicate hand.

“Junal, Miss,” Ashish explained and nodded in deference as he backed out of the lieutenant’s tent.

The curried soup was cold by the time I had read and reread the letter. It was from Uzma telling me how shocked and sorry she was when she heard what happened to me and expressing her deep regret over my horrific treatment. She was aware of these three so-called body guards of the Amir. Poor Junal also had been ravaged by them. For her, there was no recourse; Junal was a servant—as good as a slave in their eyes. They even stole her meagre jewellery. Uzma closed by saying that she wished she could come to see me but that it would be impossible. She added that if there was anything she could do for me, she would do it if it was within her power to do so. She would make both Junal and Abdul available if needed but, she warned, the Amir must never know of our encounter.

It was early evening when Wills poked his head into the tent.

“I trust the curry was not too spicy?” he asked as he sat on his cot next to me. “The director of the dig has replied,” he continued, “a Doctor Alberti, is it? He tells me you were in the Arg at the invitation of one of the Amir’s wives, Uzma. Your name is Rebecca Davies and you’re Australian, not English and, as far as I can ascertain, you are twenty-nine years of age and unmarried. It appears you are well off and live in a respectable boarding house in Bombay. Until you joined the archaeological expedition, you were travelling the Far East alone.” He paused to look at me—not a look of scorn but one of puzzlement. “And it’s reported you occasionally dress as a male.”

I was equally puzzled. How did he know so much about me? Who did he speak to? What more did he know? Australia? Paddington? John Harper? The gold escort? I said nothing, very aware of his gaze assessing me. I was going to give nothing away.

“Why?” he asked. The question was not put to me interrogatively but more to understand my motives.

“Why what?” I innocently tossed back and met his eyes.

“Why everything. Why were you invited to spend the night with one of the Amir’s wives?”

I pondered the question and tried to smile—it still hurt. Finally, I asked, “Wills, have you met Uzma?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Let me tell you she is beautiful. And sensuous. And alluring. And if a beautiful sensuous woman invites you to spend the night with her, would you?”

“W—well...I...” He seemed most flustered by my proposition but posited, “but you’re a woman. And she’s a w—” It suddenly became clear to him. “Oh. I see.” His disappointment was obvious. “That’s why you dress as a male.”

“No,” I smiled as best I could, “too dangerous to go about alone as a woman. Safer as a fellow.”

We had reached a void in the conversation. I could see that the young lieutenant’s experience precluded dealings with Sapphists and tribades.

“Do I disgust you?”

“No,” Wills replied with a look of genuine relief, “you intrigue me. As a matter of fact, I was wondering how I was going to explain you to my friend in Cornwall.”

“The girl who is not your sweetheart?”

He blushed like a maiden caught in a lie.

“Red beard. You know him?”

The abrupt change of subject caught him unaware. He looked hard at me before replying.

“Ahmed Rashid. Captain of the Amir’s bodyguard. An assassin and a snake. He’ll pay. I’ll make sure he does.”

Damned right, he’ll pay, I thought. “And the two that were with him?”

The answer took its time coming. Lieutenant Williams was searching my eyes, trying to read my thoughts. “His two lieutenants. Arab thugs. Leave them to me, Miss Davies,” he warned.

We had reached an impasse.

#

My injuries were slowly healing. Major Cunningham visited me now only every other day and was his usual disconnected self but his care was efficient and effective.

By the end of the second week in the lieutenant's tent, the swelling to my face had reduced and I was able to move my mouth without so much effort. The slash to my abdomen, stitched up as neatly as was my face, was healing, too. The welts and cuts delivered to my back by the lash were superficial and mending, and bruising to my arms, shoulders and legs had turned from deep purple to green and fading. Any damage done to my internal organs seemed to have healed as well and I was now able to take care of my eliminations without so much discomfort. Only time would tell if any deeper injuries were permanent.

My body still ached but I was now able to get up and move about. I did not want to leave the tent for fear of frightening those who set eyes upon me. I was never a beautiful sight but now I was downright repugnant.

The deepest pain I felt was for the loss of Sarah's locket and cold anger replaced the shame I had felt over the brutal violation of my body. I could forgive neither and time was fast approaching when retribution would be meted out.

Wills was doing all he could to bring justice to the rapists but was frustrated both by the local laws and his own commanding officer. There were three defilers—Mussulmen—men—and one victim, me—Christian—woman. In their law, my word carried half the weight of any man's and they claimed that I had propositioned them. Their laws prevailed. I was labelled a whore and the three were exonerated of their defilement of me.

Then there was the reluctance of the commanding officer, one Lieutenant-Colonel Stokes. His fear of adding fire to the already simmering pot of intrigue with the local Amir who was ambivalent, at best, regarding the British Raj and who could, at any whim or fancy, change his allegiances. In Stokes' eyes, I was a minor, unwanted distraction in the Great Game. He forbade Lieutenant Williams from continuing to pursue any form of justice for me—especially while wearing a British uniform.

Wills reluctantly, and with much regret, brought me the news. While it felt like a blow to my already lacerated stomach, it was not unexpected.

"Wills," I said, "their time will come. They are not the first to try to kill me and probably won't be the last. I prevailed each time then, and I will prevail now."

I saw the surprise on Wills' face. "Each time?"

I wanted to tell him more, and perhaps I would in time but, for now, reticence and ambiguity were best.

“Lieutenant Sahib!” Ashish’s call came from outside the tent, “Letter for memsahib, sir.”

Wills opened the flap and took the letter from Ashish who seemed to have run all the way from the dig with it.

“*Shukria*,” and, releasing the flap, handed the letter to me.

The note was from Dottore Alberti in response to Wills’ notification that I had been ‘injured’. It took all of two weeks for the archaeologist to express his regret over my ‘accident’, alongside his apologies for not being able to attend me personally. He explained that the dig had uncovered some very important artefacts that were in line with his predictions of the existence of a prehistoric civilisation. He did, however, arrange the various permissions required to send along a trusted worker and tanga to escort me back to the dig. All I needed to do was to let him know when I would be ready to travel. I showed the note to Wills.

“I won’t be ready to travel just yet, Wills. I’d like to stay a few more days, if you don’t mind. I have to finish something.”

“What would that ‘something’ be?”

“A personal matter,” I replied as I retrieved a sealed note from my satchel. “Could I ask Ashish to take this note to Uzma, please?”

“Miss Davies...” Wills’ tone was laden with warning, “Rebecca—”

“I’d like to see her once more before I leave. To thank her.” I was not convincing him. “For her hospitality,” I added.

“Ashish,” Wills called taking the note from me and pulling open the tent’s flap.

“*Haan, sahib?*”

Giving me a long doubtful glare, Wills turned to his bearer and handed him the note. “See that this is delivered to the Princess Uzma, the Amir’s second wife. Clear? Uzma. No one else.”

“Yes, sahib, Uzma. *raajakumaaree* from Punjab,” and, with a broad smile and quick bow that was more like a spasm, he was off and running again. Wills turned to me.

“I hope I won’t come to regret that.”

“I’ll be done and gone before you know it.”

Over the following days, I had Ashish run further errands for me—without Wills’ knowledge—which he did with speed and efficiency. Among my requirements, Ashish obtained a small portable lantern as well as dark-coloured salwar and kurta and a length of black cotton cloth, enough to be wound as a turban. Black footwear would be more difficult to find but he managed to source a pair of used boots that did the job perfectly.

Arrangements were made and the time and date set. Everything was ready.

#

PART III

1905

Wednesday, 20th December– 8.30 a.m.

Lilyfield Manor, England

The glorious morning sun brought with it a chill in the air. Two days of rain made the grass greener and the sky bluer but it was not to last.

“The forecast is for snow,” Lady Katherine announced, as she sipped from her cup of tea, reading from the newspaper laid out across the breakfast table. “They’ve predicted a white Christmas.”

“I doubt the meteorologists can be so accurate. They barely get it right one day to the next,” I scoffed finishing off a freshly brewed cup of excellent coffee. The moment I returned my cup to its saucer, Peter was at my side pouring me a fresh cup.

“Thank you,” I said looking up at the expressionless face of the butler. He, like many of Lady Katherine’s household staff, had been in the countess’ employ for almost all of their working lives. A few had even served Lady Katherine’s mother, Lady Agnes. One was Cook, Mrs Morton, who began her service as a scullery maid at Lilyfield Manor and the other was Mrs Macpherson, the housekeeper, both now in their sixties.

Mrs Fiona Macpherson was the longest-serving of all the staff and Lady Katherine looked upon her ‘Nanny Fee’ as a mentor, confidant and surrogate mother whom she had known all of her forty years.

After the near-catastrophic events of only a few months prior, life was slowly returning to near normality at the Lilyfield household. It was hoped that Christmas and its accompanying joyfulness would prove to be the oil on turbulent seas and the salve on painful memories.

Having a hot breakfast and coffee served to me every morning was a luxury I enjoyed and looked forward to. And, being in the company of such an elegant and beautiful woman as Lady Katherine, I had reached my own nirvana.

One of the two footmen entered the breakfast room carrying a silver salver stacked with unopened letters. He passed it to Peter who brought it to Lady Katherine, offering it to the countess with a bow.

This was the morning's routine: breakfast reading the latest edition of *The Times*—the financial section—followed by receiving the morning's post and opening it, upon which the rest of the day was arranged. At 9 a.m. precisely, as was done every day except Sunday, George McPherson, her private and business secretary, would be waiting for Lady Katherine in her study to receive the day's instructions.

"There's one for you, Rebecca," the countess said handing me the letter. I recognised the handwriting immediately.

"It's from Wills," I announced, opening the seal and reading the contents. My demeanour must have changed for Lady Katherine to notice.

"What is it? Has the Major's health deteriorated?"

"No...it appears that my flat in Newington has been broken into." I was most concerned as to who would single me out and why.

"Has anything been taken?"

"Hm? No. There's nothing of value there."

"Thank goodness for that."

Wills' letter was short and to the point. We needed to meet. This was not a chance robbery; it was planned and I was the object of the burglary. And there was evidence that brought my past back into focus.

"I need to return to Newington. Meet Wills."

"Oh," said Lady Katherine dismayed, "does that mean you won't be here for Christmas?"

"I can't say, Katherine, until I know why this has happened. I should leave on this afternoon's train." I reached over and wrapped her hand in mine. "I will telephone to you as soon as I reach London and know something. I will do my best to return and spend Christmas with you."

#

1885

June

Naibah-Drayah, Sindh, British India

“Are you mad? Do you know what they’ll do to you if you’re caught? And you will be caught.”

“Unless there’s a shooting star, Wills, all will go well.”

He looked at me, mouth agape, perplexed by my *non sequitur*. “You are mad!” Wills had come back to his tent early that evening—something I had not anticipated—he usually returned after eleven. It was only ten and he discovered me putting the final touches to my black *ensemble*. I had stuffed a piece of rag torn from my ruined kurta in the *kamarband* sash about my waist and had almost completed winding the black *pagri* about my head when he surprised me. Fortunately, I had already concealed his razor in my *kamarband*.

“I take it your loyal bearer, Ashish, informed on me.”

“What are you planning!” It was clear that Wills was horrified but was it because I was going into the mouth of Orcus and may not emerge alive? Or was it because my actions could put him and his company in serious compromise with the Amir? Either way, neither mattered to me.

“I’m going to get back what belongs to me. It’s all arranged.”

We stood there, eye-to-eye: he, edgy and apprehensive; me, stoic and detached. I was not going to be discouraged.

“All right,” he said, finally breaking the deadlock, “but you’re not going alone.”

That took the wind out of my sails.

He strode to his chest, opened one of the drawers and retrieved a neatly folded pile of black clothing.

“What...?” I was confused and he only added to that by quickly removing his uniform down to his underwear and donning the black trousers, black pullover jersey and an item I

hadn't seen before, a black close-fitting, knitted cap that covered his head, neck, and the top of his shoulders: a balaclava.

He took in my stunned expression and stated, "The purpose of the Guides is to gather information for the infantry and cavalry. We don't always do that by charging in, sabres drawn."

"You're a spy?"

"And a damned good one, if I say so myself."

"But...but Lieutenant-Colonel Stokes forbade you from—"

"While wearing a British uniform. We have an understanding, the old man and I. What's the plan?"

#

The waning crescent moon reflected very little light across the darkened township of Naibah-Drayah as Wills and I slipped silently through the narrow alleys and deserted streets southward toward our objective: the Arg and the sleeping quarters of the Amir's bodyguard. No light broke through any window. All was quiet.

We were swathed in black from head to toe. The only visible part of Wills was his expressive blue eyes and, of me, my eyes and hands. I had wrapped the trailing end of my turban around my face, covering all but my eyes, but I should have asked Ashish for a pair of black gloves.

Wills had armed himself with a length of tape about an inch wide, and a sheathed khukuri, a recurved knife from Nepal—a gift from a Ghurkha. I carried nothing but the little lantern and Wills' razor concealed in the band about my waist.

It was around two o'clock and it had taken us about fifteen minutes to traverse the township from north to south. We were now standing at the gate to the garden, the same gate I had been shown through by Junal, Uzma's attendant, those many days ago.

As agreed, the gate had been left unlocked and unguarded. Finding our way through the labyrinth of darkened corridors to the bodyguards' quarters would be extremely difficult and dangerous and we had to proceed swiftly and silently there and back. But I trusted that Uzma did as we had arranged.

We found the doorway through which I had mistakenly existed. This would take us through the corridors to our objective. This door, too, was not guarded or locked. I carefully opened it and we both carefully stepped over the threshold and into the gloom.

It was pitch-black, even the glazed tiles on the walls could not reflect light that was non-existent. Wills looked at me; I could just make out the puzzlement in his eyes. I fumbled

with the small lantern Ashish had procured and turned the wick up, shining the concentrated beam along the corridor. As quickly as I shone the light, I pulled down the lantern's lens cover and, to my relief and Wills' amazement, the walls were intermittently dotted with small smudges of luminescence.

Like Hansel and Gretel, we followed the luminous marks through the maze of corridors, alternatively uncovering and covering the lens and shining the light onto the walls.

We finally came to a short, dead-end corridor with six doors to it.

Wills and I looked at each other. I thought I could hear his heart pounding; perhaps it was my mine. We had reached our objective. We silently crept along the passage, the only sounds were the snuffles and wheezes of the sleeping bodyguards.

Only two of the doors were marked: one had a single smear of luminescence and another, on the opposite side, had two. I indicated to Wills that these were the sleeping quarters of Ahmed Rashid and his two accomplices.

I gave the lantern to Wills and, as pre-arranged, he stood guard outside the door with the double mark on it, while I opened it slowly. There was no movement from inside the chamber, only the sound of two men in deep slumber. I closed the door behind me. From what I could make out, the room was barely eight feet wide and ten feet long with a chest at the end of each of the two beds that lined opposite walls. Even in such obscurity, I recognised these two as my violators. I scanned the tiny room and found what I was looking for. Making as little sound as possible, I unhooked one of the bodyguard's sabres and scabbard from the wall and unsheathed the curved blade, propping the scabbard against the bed.

The sabre was heavy but well balanced and my two hands fit neatly around the grip. I inched up to the head of the beds between the sleeping rapists and watched their chests rise and fall with each inhalation and exhalation. They were at peace with the world.

I raised the sabre high and, with all the might I could summon from the darkest corner of my soul, I brought the blade down with such concentrated fury that it decapitated the first of my assailants.

The second man roused and opened his eyes only to see the blade descend across his neck. It was the last thing he would witness on this earth.

I watched as their blood spurted from severed arteries and pooled on their beds and onto the floor. Their bodies twitched and convulsed involuntarily for a few seconds. They were now at peace with the world and the world was more peaceful without them in it.

My mission here completed, I dropped the sabre onto the bed and returned to Wills in the passageway. Before I could close the door behind me, he peered inside and took in the

results of my retribution. All he did was look at me and close the door. Was it admonishment or admiration? It mattered not to me. I had another task to complete.

Taking the rag from my *kamarband*, I wiped the two luminescent smudges from the door. We crossed back to the other side to the door with one mark on it. Again, Wills waited outside while I went in as quietly as I could and closed the door behind me.

There he lay, alone in his bed, the snake and mongrel dog, Ahmed Rashid, sleeping like an innocent babe. He was anything but innocent; his soul was blacker than mine. His room was a little larger than the other and it held a few more furnishings; the benefits of his status, I presumed. He wouldn't have the need for any of these very shortly.

I approached the head of the bed and stared down at him. How many other women had he defiled? Junal for one; Uzma had confided that to me. I withdrew Wills' razor from my waistband and opened it, and knelt down beside the bastard. I needed a quick, deft hand for I knew I would never be able to overcome his strength should he waken before the job was done.

I took a deep breath and held it.

Now!

In one fluid motion, I grabbed a handful of his red beard, yanked it up and sliced his throat deeply and quickly, severing windpipe, arteries and veins. His blood gushed out in pulsating rhythm; I knew from my experience with Kepple to keep well away.

His eyes flew open and his breath was ragged and gurgling. I knew he could see and hear me.

"Say hello to your seventy-two virgins, you bastard dog," I whispered in his ear. His eyes fluttered closed as the last of his breath escaped his lungs through the gaping laceration to his throat. His was an easy and quick death. He deserved more. If I had had the luxury of time, he would have come to welcome the peace death would have brought him just as it had for Kepple. As it was, it had to be done swiftly.

At that moment, I felt the same for this man as I had felt for Harry Kepple: nothing. They both deserved what I dealt them.

I rose and looked about the room. Sarah's locket had to be here somewhere. Quickly rummaging through his few possessions in the chest and drawers, I came across my precious silver locket nestled in a piece of cloth with other such jewellery. Were these souvenirs of his 'conquests'? I took those along with my locket and felt something hard beneath some clothing. It was a large leather pouch and felt heavy. The objects inside clattered when I palpated the bag. Even in the blackness of the room, I was surprised by the brilliance that

emanated from the contents of the bag when I opened it. It was filled with gemstones and small, rough ingots of gold! Some of the stones had been cut and brilliantly polished and others were like rough-hewn pebbles. I immediately closed the bag and stuffed it and the other jewellery in my sash, next to Wills' razor.

Leaving the room, Wills peered in and shone the lantern onto the bloodied corpse of the rapist. He gave me a nod, then closed the door on this Mussulman's wretched life.

I rubbed away the mark on the door and we proceeded back the way we came, lighting up the marks and erasing them as we passed them. They wouldn't be seen in daylight but it was best to leave nothing to chance.

We had reached the final corridor when, from one of the rooms, the door opened and a small voice timidly enquired, "*Min hunak? Mama?*"

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Naathim, Uzma's son, stepped into the passageway carrying a burning oil lamp. His dark eyes widened upon seeing two dark shadows in front of him with only our sky-blue eyes shimmering in a pond of pale flesh. He looked from me to Wills and back. The lamp in his hand trembled and he whispered, "*Sh...Shayatin.*"

Our blue eyes had terrified the boy. Wills unsheathed his knife, a threatening move which only scared him more.

"Shhh..." I shushed, raising a finger to my covered mouth and urging Wills to put away his knife, "Shhh..."

With utmost care we stepped around the quivering boy and left him wide-eyed and rooted to the spot. Another couple of strides and we had turned into the last passageway. Thankfully, the boy had not followed us. We reached the door to the entrance and were about to open it when we heard voices from outside. Two of the Amir's bodyguards were patrolling and had ambled across our escape route. Wills looked at me and again withdrew his knife. His intent was obvious but he wouldn't be able to neutralise both at the same time. I extracted his razor from my sash and unfolded it. His eyes expressed surprise then nodded, 'ready?'

He opened the door a mere crack. The two shared a laugh and one ambled off, leaving the other to guard the doorway to our escape. Wills re-sheathed his knife and took out the length of tape and wound the ends around each hand. He indicated to me to wait and, when the guard's back was to him, Wills pulled open the door and, in one swift and silent movement, was on the guard, wrapping the tape around his neck and pulling tight. He dragged the struggling guard into the shadows, forcing him down onto his face and tightening the tape relentlessly until the guard's silent fight eventually subsided. Wills uncoiled the tape

and checked the fallen guard for signs of life. Satisfied, Wills looked back to me and signalled that we should go.

A few moments later, we were outside the garden gates and slipping through the shadows toward the northern end of town and safety.

“You killed the guard,” I whispered, trying not to show my dismay. He had done nothing to us.

“No, I just incapacitated him. He was breathing when we left. He should recover.”

As we moved quickly and furtively along the back alleys, I was even more impressed with Wills—he could have killed the guard but chose not to.

#

“Who was that boy?”

“Uzma’s son, Naathim,” I replied. “Would you really have killed him?”

“He was a witness.”

“He was scared stiff. You wouldn’t really have killed him?”

Wills demurred from answering and gave only an enigmatic smile.

We had returned to his tent unhindered and were now preparing to bed down for the remainder of the night. He was changing from his black stealth-garb to a nightshirt as I, with my back turned to him, undressed out of mine and donned my borrowed nightshirt. I dropped the contents of my sash onto the cot and found my silver locket among the disparate pieces of jewellery. The chain was broken. It brought back bitter memories of the last time it had been torn off Sarah and how Patrick had had it repaired while I recovered in St Vincent’s Hospital.

“I can have that repaired,” Wills whispered over my shoulder, “There are many fine silversmiths here.” He picked up his razor from the cot and looked at me. “I expect you to clean this,” he said with a look of admonishment. “Those aren’t yours?” he asked fingering the other pieces of assorted rings, bangles and anklets.

“No. I expect they belonged to his other victims,” I replied. “I’ll give them to Uzma. Some of them may belong to Junal, her attendant.”

“He, um...?”

“Yes, he ‘ummed’ Junal,” I confirmed. “He won’t be ‘umming’ anyone anymore.”

It was then Wills noticed the large pouch. “And that?”

Without any explanation, I handed the pouch to him. His eyebrows shot up when he saw the contents. “There’s a king’s ransom here,” he said handing it back to me. “A good haul.”

I looked at him.

“To the victor, go the spoils,” he said and turned to his washbasin to wash his face.

He was right. Just as I had relieved the gold from the bushrangers, I had won the right to this prize. But it was no compensation for the disfigurement of my face that would repulse people for the rest of my life; no restitution for the scars to my back and belly and the bruising to my body, and certainly no reparation for the violent rape perpetrated by those three bastards on me and the damage they had done to me. They stole my maidenhood and, while I never imagined I would have lain with a man, this was not the way I would have wanted it to be taken.

I closed the bag and stowed it in my satchel.

The silence was broken when Wills said, “Those smudges, I’ve never seen that done before.”

“I got the idea from a book on Pompeii I had. No gas streetlights in those days, so the ancient Romans embedded little squares of phosphorescent stones in the paved roadway to help them find their way home at night. The little stones would give off a slave’s torchlight when he preceded his master. I know of several minerals that have this property: calcite, fluorite. I asked Ashish to obtain some, grind them up and give the powder to Uzma. She arranged to have the powder daubed on the walls. I don’t know who did this for her—for she wouldn’t have done it herself—but I was relieved to find that it had been done. And that it worked!”

Wills was stunned. “You mean to say it may not have worked? We would have gone in...?”

I could only shrug my shoulders; he could only shake his head.

“You are mad. And what was all that about ‘shooting stars’?”

I took the time to tell him of my mother’s prediction that, because I was born during a meteorite shower, I would be taken away during another. He found that amusing.

“You really believe that?” he laughed.

Again, I shrugged my shoulders. “It gives me confidence to take on the impossible. Check the skies and, if all is clear, proceed with vigour.”

Again, he shook his head.

“And the...ah...Where did you learn those...skills?”

I hesitated. I really didn’t know where or how I learned to kill, or had become so inured to it, only why.

“It’s not a skill. It’s something that comes from deep within. And it only rises to the surface when justice has been thwarted. Couple that with the lack of meteorites—” I laughed at myself. “That sounded absurd. I’m sorry—”

“No. No, I know what you mean. I’ve seen enough injustice to feel the same way.” He turned down the lamp and climbed into his cot. “Lights out. Reveille is a few short hours away and I have a report to conjure up for the Old Man. Good night.”

It was a good night. Three fewer rapists walking this earth but three more ghosts to haunt my sleep.

#

The sun was up and I had successfully ignored reveille and *Salat al-fajr*. Ashish had brought in a breakfast tray and left it in the usual place. I ignored that, as well.

Now the bugle was blaring the men’s second meal call and I was just about to rise when the tent flap flew open and Wills strode in.

My first impression was how dashing he looked in his khaki uniform. Was I falling in love with him or was I simply grateful for his friendship?

“Good afternoon, Rebecca. I had my private debriefing with the Old Man this morning,” he announced with flair and assurance, “after which we had an emergency general officers’ call. It has transpired that, during the night, the walls of the Arg were breeched and a number of the Amir’s key bodyguards were brutally murdered in their beds. And the Amir has insisted that Lieutenant-Colonel Stokes find these craven perpetrators and bring them to him for punishment.”

I propped myself up on the cot and wondered why the theatrics. Wills took a seat on the cot beside me and continued in hushed tones.

“When the officers were told who had been despatched, they gave three hurrahs. Nevertheless, the old man has to go through the motions to appease the Amir.”

I raised my eyebrows; was Wills suggesting we give ourselves over to the Amir to be tortured?

Once more, with creepy proclivity, he read my mind. “No. The Amir is adamant it was the Nashin Hazaras tribe out of Balochistan who did this.”

“Why would he think that?”

Wills smiled that all-knowing smile of his, which I had come to know and like very much. “The Amir doesn’t know that we know that Ahmed Rashid led a small raiding party and ambushed some of the Nashin Hazaras tribesmen, relieving them of a small fortune.” He glanced knowingly to my satchel.

“The pouch?” I was astonished by this revelation.

“I led a small squadron that followed him the day you came to visit Uzma.”

I remembered noticing that the small camp at the southern gate was empty; that’s where Wills had gone.

Wills continued, “We pursued the raiding party and witnessed what took place. Rashid and his men ambushed and slaughtered the tribesmen and stole the gems and gold. We believe that the Amir is planning a coup and needs financing.”

“Against the British Raj?”

“Against the other tribes in the region. He’s power-hungry. We’re here to prevent these intertribal massacres.”

“But why would he leave such valuable treasure with Rashid. Doesn’t he have some sort of safe? A treasure room?”

“That’s where any thief would expect it to be, right? So he put it with Rashid, his most trusted bodyguard. You’ve won quite a prize there, old girl.”

“Does the Lieutenant-Colonel know—”

“No, and he doesn’t want to know,” Wills confirmed adamantly. “So long as the money is not in the Amir’s hands, peace will be maintained in the area. I’ve been ordered to take a squadron of ten of my Afridi cavalry to the foothills to search for the marauders and bring them back.”

I was puzzled. “But—”

“We must be seen to be doing the right thing. Of course, I won’t find them and the Amir will have strident words to the Old Man about my ineffectiveness but what the hell? The Amir will calm down. I’ll be leaving first light tomorrow and be back in three days.”

While this news was of some relief to me, I needed extra reassurance.

“Wills, did the Amir indicate there were any witnesses?” I was most concerned that Naathim had recognised me and told Uzma or, worse still, informed his father, the Amir. It crossed my mind that perhaps Wills was right to leave no witnesses, as much as it grieved me to hurt a child. While I hadn’t been a good practising Roman Catholic since Sarah’s murder, I still believed that children were innocents, born with pure souls—save the Original Sin, of course—and needed to be protected.

“No one’s come forward. How old is that boy? Six? Seven?”

“Seven, I think.”

“He thought we were *Shayatin*’s toadies. He won’t be believed if he does tell. Children are told these nightmare stories to keep them in line.” He stood up. “When I return,

I'll remove those stitches from your face. Meanwhile, stay here and out of sight. Ashish will fetch you whatever you need." And with another sweep of the tent flap, he was gone.

I was not entirely convinced that Naathim would not tell but, for now, I would do as the lieutenant ordered and lie low. Ultimately, however, I determined to return to Bombay as quickly as possible and, from there, secure passage to England. The only clothes I had with me were the crumpled skirt and shirtwaist stuffed in my satchel and the black pants and shirt Ashish had procured for me. Scribbling a quick note, I called on Ashish to deliver it for me to the dig.

It took all of two days for Dottore Alberti to collect together my possessions and return them to me in my two battered red valises. Everything I had brought from Bombay was there: my feminine under- and outerwear, some male outerwear, boots, my toiletries, various papers and notebooks, and my revolver and cartridge pouch. I would rely on Dottore Alberti's word that he had arranged the necessary documents and passes to get me onboard a vessel back to Bombay.

For the sake of courtesy, I decided to wait for Wills' return before making my way back to the dig and onward to Bombay.

#

1905

Wednesday, 20th December

The Royal Military College, Sandhurst, England

It had been four long years of fruitless searching for his natural parents but Charlie had not given up hope of discovering who they were. Over those four years each enquiry, one after the other, had encountered a brick wall or a dead end. The Station Hospital at Trimulgherry; the orphanage in Bombay; even the War Office in his own country, England—each seemed to be conspiring to keep the truth from him. Apart from going to India himself, he had exhausted all possibilities—and he would go to India, he promised himself.

Charlie, having completed his secondary schooling and successfully applying to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, was among the intake of one hundred and twenty cadets on 25th January, 1905 as Charles David Pinnock, son of Lieutenant Colonel Ernest John Pinnock, deceased.

It was now the end of his senior term and he was looking forward to the time after 21st December when he would be free to resume his quest.

The year saw him achieve excellent marks but he knew he was a few marks short of the best cadet and would miss out on receiving the coveted prize of the Anson Memorial Sword. However, his mother was very pleased with his achievements and that was reward enough for him.

The passing out formalities were almost over.

Charlie glimpsed his mother and aunt in the large crowd gathered to witness the spectacle. When all this ceremony was done with, the three of them would take the long train journey back to London to the rooms they had let and complete their Christmas shopping in the most cosmopolitan city in the world. It had been a long and exhausting journey for Mrs Pinnock and her spinster sister. It was as far from Chelmsford to London as it was from London to Sandhurst—more than four hours by train—but it was worth the exhaustion to see

her son achieve what she and her husband had hoped. And having her sister along made the journey more bearable.

The concluding part of the ceremony had begun. The cadets were assembled in formation in front of the Entrance Hall after having been paraded and inspected, and the prizes given over and done with. All that was left now was the speech by the invited guest and the final march past to the tune of Auld Lang Syne.

The honoured speaker was announced: Lieutenant-General Stokes. As the grizzled and bewhiskered army officer stepped forward on the landing of the Hall, something familiar about this chap struck Charlie. Some of his father's correspondence had been with a *Thom* Stokes, stationed in Bombay. Could this be the same fellow? If it was, it was this fellow who had not replied to Charlie's numerous enquiries over the past four years. He listened carefully to the Lieutenant-General's speech which regaled the captive listeners with the old soldier's times in the Crimea as a youth, in Egypt as a captain, and exploits in the First and Second Afghan Wars, and of his assignments in India and the Sindh where he led a company of the Queen's Own Corps of Guides of which he was particularly proud.

It was the same Stokes! It had to be.

Why didn't he reply to his letters?

He would find out. Here was a man who could lead him to his natural parents. He wouldn't leave until he had the information he was after.

The formalities of passing out were over. Charlie found his mother and aunt in the crowd.

"Charlie, my darling boy," Mrs Pinnock doted, "I'm so proud of you. Your father, God bless his soul, would have been so proud—"

"Mother, thank you, please forgive me, there's a fellow I need to see urgently. I'll be right back. Aunty," he excused himself and rushed back through the crowd.

Charlie followed the correct procedure and found his Commanding Officer and requested an urgent interview with the Lieutenant-General. His Commanding Officer approached the Lieutenant-General's adjunct with the formal request. It was denied. The Lieutenant-General was on a very tight schedule, he explained. That explanation was relayed to Charlie but it did not satisfy him.

Never one to surrender in defeat, Charlie found an opportunity and seized it. Following the elderly Stokes when he had to make use of the necessary, Charlie was right

behind and waited in the anteroom of the washroom, making sure no one else interrupted them.

When Lieutenant-General Stokes exited his cubicle, and before he could return to the assembly, Charlie politely interceded.

“Lieutenant-General Stokes, sir, may I have a word?” Charlie asked, standing at attention and saluting his superior officer.

“And who are you?” Stokes replied annoyed at this outrageous interruption.

“Pinnock, sir, Charles David Pinnock.”

Stokes took in the nineteen-year-old standing stiffly in front of him. Puzzlement crinkled his aged forehead.

“Pinnock, you say. I was acquainted with a Pinnock. Ernest Pinnock, a Major in the East Yorkshire Regiment.”

“My father, sir. He passed away four years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, son. He was a good man.”

“Yes, sir, he was.”

“Well,” Stokes concluded, “it was a pleasure to meet you, son. Now, if you’ll—”

“Sir!” Charlie didn’t want to let the old soldier pass before he could ask him, “Sir, I beg your pardon, sir. If you would spare me a moment, please, sir.”

This contravention of protocol irritated Stokes but before he could order the youth to stand aside, Charlie spoke up.

“I wrote to you on numerous occasions and never once received a reply.”

“I have not seen any of your letters and know nothing of them. My adjunct may—”

“It’s about my parents, sir,” Charlie interrupted, anxious not to let the officer pass, “My real parents. I need to know who they are.”

Stokes was no fool. He knew exactly what was coming. He may not have seen Charlie’s letters but he was certainly well aware of Charlie’s background.

“What makes you think I know anything about that, Pinnock?”

“Sir, you corresponded with my father. In your letters to him, on occasion you enquired after me and how I was faring, if I was happy and if my father was going to tell me of my beginnings. You asked this wanting to know if the promise you made him, and my natural mother, was still binding. I imagine my father told you that it was, as neither he nor Mother ever told me that they had adopted me.”

“Have you asked your mother?”

“Sir, she is in too delicate a disposition. I do not wish to upset her.”

“I see. And now you want me to break a solemn promise I made to your father.”

“He has passed, sir, and I believe such a promise no longer holds.”

“That’s where you deceive yourself, young Pinnock. A gentleman holds his promise, no matter what.”

Charlie’s shoulders slumped in defeat. This was the closest he had come to linking with his past.

“Stand aside, soldier,” Stokes commanded and, as he passed Charlie, he stopped and, with a kindness that was contradictive to his gruff appearance, he said, “I promised not to reveal your true parents to you but I cannot stop you from asking others. Find Lieutenant Williams, Reginald Williams, of the Queen’s Own Corps of Guides. I believe he’s now with the Special Branch, Metropolitan Police.”

With that, Lieutenant-General Stokes left the privy room and Charlie with renewed hope.

#

1905

Wednesday, 20th December– 1.47 p.m.

Rusby Village Train Station, England

Rusby's train station was a whistle stop for the little village that grew up to serve the inhabitants of Lilyfield Manor and its surrounding farms. Here, in one of the little cottages on the periphery of the cluster, the final vindictive act of 'Mad Colonel Humphries' was played out. I had determined then that either he was going to die for what he did or I would die trying. I was still alive but he, only by intervention of Yabsley, didn't die. His fate was to be worse than death: incarceration in a lunatic prison for what was left of his detestable life.

It was only a couple of hours to sunset as this, the only train to London left the village on time and with me and one other passenger, a man, boarding it, I in first class and he in second. The fellow's appearance struck me as being out of place in this little country hamlet. Instead of a woollen cap he wore a ushanka which would have been more at home in a cosmopolitan city like London or somewhere in Eastern Europe. My thoughts quickly returned to the violence that took place here only a few months earlier. That poor old widow, Mrs Henderson. Her demise by Humphries' hand was unnecessary and brutal. Life was precious but only to him who owned it; to any other, it was expendable, to be snuffed as quickly as a candleflame. And I was as culpable as he...

I pushed those violent memories aside and looked forward to the several long hours it would take to reach Paddington station where Wills would collect me and my luggage. It would be good to see him again for I truly missed him.

My thoughts drifted to Lady Katherine and the circumstances that could have caused her parents' sudden death. Obviously, she had not completely accepted that she would never see them again and had difficulty in ridding herself of grief. She would tell me of their fate in her own time just as I would tell her of my own deeds that had blackened my soul beyond redemption.

4.39 p.m.

Paddington Railway Station, London, England

It was two days away from the shortest day of the year and the sun had already set well before the train pulled into Paddington Station. When I stepped onto the platform and looked around for Wills, I again noticed the fellow who boarded at Rusby getting off as well.

“Rebecca!”

There to greet me with a warm smile was Wills, rugged up against the cold in greatcoat, scarf and gloves and wearing his favourite Homburg. It felt like I was coming home. We had been through so much together. He was like a brother and a father to me; my protector and my mentor; he was my family and had replaced the one I forsook in Australia. His embrace was comforting and generous and I reciprocated, perhaps a little to enthusiastically, causing him to wince.

“Oh!” I apologised as I released my grip a little. “How are you otherwise?” The bullet he took from the Irish revolutionist Kieran Byrne almost cost him his life. Had it not been for the bravery of young Henry Pitman, both Wills and I would not be walking the earth now.

“Fighting fit,” Wills lied. “And how are you, my little bastard colonist?” he asked with a loving smirk.

I could only accept his bold familiarity graciously; the truth was the truth, after all. Being Australian, I certainly was a colonist and being illegitimately born, I certainly was a bastard. But ‘little’? I was almost a head taller than most women and only a few inches shorter than Wills who, himself, was nearing six foot in height.

“Limp’s gone and my arm’s stronger than ever,” I replied referring to the gunshot wounds I had received. “And I’m ready to take you on anytime,” I threatened.

“And Lady Katherine? How is she faring?”

“Well enough. Her nightmares are still with her but I’m able to settle her.” I didn’t want to mention that she had other ghosts that haunted her, those of her parents, something I hoped to discover in the future. “And how are Cornelia and little Reggie coping with...?” Their abduction by the Mad Colonel would have scarred them even though I knew that Wills’ wife had a core of granite concealed by a layer of soft motherly love.

“We’ve had long talks about what happened and they both seem to accept that it is all over with and we are all safe and well.”

We stood entwined in each other’s arms smiling soppily at each other. There was nothing sexual between us, just a genuine transcendental love.

“Ahem.” The clearing of his throat drew my attention to the man emerging from the shadows.

“Yabsley?” I queried, disentangling myself from Wills’ arms and peering from one man to the other. “What is he doing here?” I asked barely able to hide my antipathy.

“He’s here to help, Rebecca.”

I glared at Wills. He knew how I felt about this blatant misogynist standing before us, and Wills was well aware of Yabsley’s assessment of women like me, and of me in particular.

“Davies,” Yabsley offered in his usual cold manner, “Things are different now.”

These were the only words of remorse I received from him. I did not know if I believed him. Or if I trusted him. Wills broke the impasse.

“Come. There’s a cab waiting.”

#

Newington, London, England

The evening traffic on the streets of London was horrendous. Horse-drawn carriages of every description jostled with noisy motor cars and motor cycles as they dodged omnibuses and pedestrians, crisscrossing from one end of the great city to the other. London traffic was always a nightmare but more so at this time of the year. Christmas was only five days away and shops were luring customers from far and wide with offers of exotic and expensive goods to bestow upon loved ones.

Incandescent electric street lights blazed along the five miles to Louisa Mansions and, oblivious to the hustle and bustle that surrounded us, the three of us sat in silent contemplation of our own thoughts. Every now and then I caught Yabsley glancing at me. What was he thinking? His demeanour was, as usual, stone-cold and inscrutable.

It was bitterly cold when we arrived at Louisa Mansions and a recent flurry of snow had turned to slush underfoot. Wills helped me with my bags as we entered the foyer of the building and, before ascending the stairs to my rooms, I collected the few letters from my letter box and stuffed them into my portmanteau.

“Um, I’d like to say something before we go up,” Yabsley declared, stopping both me and Wills in our tracks. His voice was even and his words measured. “I know I was beastly toward you, Davies. That is, *Miss* Davies. But I understand your motives better now than I did then. While I still don’t quite comprehend your...propensity, shall we say, I acknowledge that you possess fine intuitive skills and undeniable courage under fire. I would like to add that any trust you put in me will not be misplaced.”

I was utterly astonished by this proclamation and didn't know whether to make light of it or thank him earnestly for his apology. He spoke before I could.

“Shall we proceed?”

As we scaled the stairs my thoughts were on what had just transpired rather than the more pressing matter of the invasion of my home. His about-face was confusing, to say the least.

Reaching the third floor, we found a carpenter attending to the broken door and jamb. A police constable stood nearby, ensuring my property, such as it was, would not be tampered with any further. Upon seeing us, he snapped to attention.

“Detective Sergeant Yabsley. Sir.”

“Stand easy, Constable,” Yabsley returned, in his usual military persona. “Major Williams and Miss Davies,” he introduced, “Constable Brown.”

“Miss Davies,” the young constable gushed, “it's a pleasure to meet you. I've heard what happened and how—”

“Constable,” Yabsley interrupted, “has anyone been snooping around?”

“Uh, no, sir. The only people around are those who live on this floor.”

“Miss Davies!” The gruff call diverted our attention to the older gentleman who emerged from a flat a few doors down the corridor.

“Brigadier Lambros,” I said, acknowledging my neighbour as he approached us.

“Dreadful business that. Poor Grayson. Three Mussulmen, you know. Dreadful. Why they would want to burglarise your flat is incomprehensible. Must have been in error.”

“Yes, Brigadier, I'm sure.”

“Yabsley. Any progress?”

“Working on it, Brigadier.”

An ungainly silence took hold, the old soldier looking to me, then to Wills, then to Yabsley and back to me again, broken only by the carpenter hammering the new door jamb in place. The Brigadier obviously was expecting to be introduced.

I relented. “Brigadier, may I present my friend, Reginald Williams. Reggie, this is my neighbour, Brigadier Lambros of the Hundred and First Royal Bengal Fusiliers. Shadipur.”

“Retired,” added the Brigadier extending his hand to Wills. “I've seen you here before.”

“Yes, sir. Miss Davies and I are friends.” Wills replied, releasing my portmanteau and grasping his hand.

“Ah.”

“Well, Brigadier, it was a pleasure to meet you,” Wills said concluding the interview, “If you’ll excuse me, I need to see to the door. Miss Davies, being a woman...you understand.”

“Right. Right. Right-o, then. Carry on. Nice meeting you. Look after yourself, Miss Davies. Nice young man. I do approve. Yabsley, do call upon me if you need assistance,” he said as he strutted back to his own flat.

I glared at Wills, quite annoyed, ““Being a woman’?” Before Wills could wipe the smirk from his face, I addressed the carpenter, “How long before you’re done?”

“Almost there, Miss. The painter will be in tomorrow to finish up.” With one last strike of his hammer, he was done and proudly demonstrated how the door closed flush and the new latch and lock worked perfectly.

My flat looked as though a cyclone had swept through.

“Ah, you’ve redecorated, I see,” Wills sarcastically observed, closing the door behind us. “Vast improvement, I must say.”

“This is exactly how we found it,” Yabsley added.

My meagre possessions were strewn everywhere. Rugs pulled up, furniture upended, drawers emptied and cupboards turned out. Food jars were smashed, the contents of my tea and coffee cannisters thrown about and the few items of cheese and tinned meat in the ice box left to spoil.

The rest of the flat was in the same state of total vandalism; nothing in my bedroom or bathroom was left untouched. It was dispiriting to see my possessions destroyed but I consoled myself by knowing that the most precious of these was always with me: my silver locket. Anything else could be replaced.

We returned to the main room where Wills and Yabsley righted the sofa and an armchair and, slumping ourselves into them, took in the devastation that surrounded us.

“This is one hell of a mess for my charwoman to clean,” I announced stating the obvious. “And I can’t offer you tea and biscuits unless you want to eat them off the floor.”

Wills fumbled about in his waistcoat pocket. “Yabsley found this in old Grayson’s hand,” he said, handing me the golden seal. “I contacted my former daffadar in Naibah-Drayah, Mehtab Singh—he lives here in London, now—and he was able to interpret the inscription. That is the seal of the Amir of Northern Sindh, one Mir Tareef Nasir Talpur.”

I examined the seal. “But he’s dead, isn’t he? His son, Tariq, succeeded him. Five years ago.”

“Quite so,” Yabsley confirmed. “The seal might have been given as a reward to the malefactor who lost it here. We know what those three Mussulmen were after. The question is did they find it?”

I looked at Wills for a lead, uncertain as to how much I should divulge to Yabsley about the gemstones and gold. The booty.

“Yabsley knows, Rebecca.”

“The black box I returned to you after...” Yabsley confirmed.

“You and Byrne tossed my place?” It was only a few months before since I had been set up as an accomplice to the Mad Colonel Humphreys by the planting of false evidence in my flat by Byrne and a warrant was issued for my arrest by Sir Giles. While I had been exonerated of all wrongdoing, the incident still brought forth anger and mistrust.

“I have no issue with the contents or how they were obtained, Miss Davies,” Yabsley offered. “We’ve all done it at one time or another. In times of war. Souvenirs, mementoes, booty, call it what you will. A blind eye turned to it but frowned upon if mentioned. Yours was quite a haul.”

“Hers was compensation,” Wills added, “and not nearly enough for what she endured.”

Yabsley’s suppressed his curiosity as to what I may have endured and looked around the room, “Would they have found it?”

“No.”

“Is it in a safe place?”

“Yes.” I was not about to tell Yabsley where I had left the black box. It would take much more than a well-rehearsed speech for him to gain my trust.

“Good.”

Wills captured my attention. “Yabsley and I believe that was what the Mussulmen were after.”

“Why?” I asked, “Why go looking for something that went missing twenty years ago? And who knew it went missing? And that I took it? The old Amir is dead. His first son, Tariq, is Amir now.”

Yabsley replied, “There’s an undercurrent of disillusionment to Tariq’s regime. Tariq is weak and is being propped up by outside influences.”

“The Russians?” I offered.

“Most likely. The War Office is being very cagey. Not even direct enquiries by Alexander Quinn himself has garnered any useful intelligence.”

Wills added, “The gems would fetch a comely price in the Netherlands, enough to fund any insurrection by disgruntled underlings.”

“But who is leading the supposed rebellion?” I asked, “Certainly not Tariq? If he is as weak as reported, he’d be happy to dance to the Russian tune. Why would he want to disturb the status quo?”

“Perhaps it’s his Vizir. He has a strong following within the palace guards—”

Suddenly, all became clear to me. The pieces fell into place.

“Naathim,” I whispered, “Naathim, the Amir’s second son. Uzma’s boy. It is more likely that Naathim wants to rid himself of Russian domination and a feeble brother. He would need funds to do that.”

Wills and Yabsley listened intently as I threw out snippets of information.

“He recognised me,” I continued. “Us. You and me, Wills. That night twenty years ago. The trinkets I gave to Uzma. Some must have been Junal’s. Naathim must have discovered that the bastard, Rashid, had taken them from her when he violated her. The old Amir must have told his sons about the secret raid he had ordered and that Rashid was holding the plunder from that raid. It would follow, then, that whoever killed Rashid must have taken Junal’s jewellery. And the plundered gems and gold. And Naathim was the only witness that night.”

“Perhaps I should have...”

“You don’t mean that, Wills.” I rebuked.

“He’d be, what? Twenty-seven now?”

“And he’d be here,” I realised, perplexing both men somewhat. “Uzma said she wanted her children to be educated in England as she had been. It’s quite possible that Naathim Nasir Talpur is a graduate of Oxford, or Cambridge, or any British university, for that matter. But how did he discover where I lived? After all these years.” Another alarming realisation came to mind. “Wills, your family’s still in Cornwall, correct? Have you checked if your house here in Dulwich Village has been broken into?”

Wills became quite concerned.

I continued. “It still leaves the question of how he found my address.”

“The Home Office,” Yabsley stated, “It’s a matter of record.”

“But surely that information would not be given out willy-nilly.”

“No, Miss Davies. But with his possible diplomatic connections, and enough graft and wheedling, nothing is beyond reach, as we all know. And I have my suspicions as to who has been approached.”

“If that is the case, how long will it take for him to discover my connection to Lady Katherine? Or where your Cornelia and Reggie are right now, Wills.”

Wills took a deep breath and stated the obvious. “We need to find Naathim before he finds us. Who knows what he has planned. He won’t ask politely to hand over what he believes to be his.”

“Where to start? Universities? Is he using his real name or a pseudonym?” I asked.

“Do you have any idea how many Indian students there are here?”

“Leave it to me, Miss Davies, Major. I will request Quinn put all the DSO officers onto it immediately. We will locate this fellow, Naathim Nasir Talpur, as quickly as possible and put an end to these games. His henchmen did murder a subject of the king. That’s a capital offence.”

We were visibly puzzled by Yabsley’s assumption of power.

“Quinn’s put me in charge of the investigation. I report directly to him.”

“Not to Sir Giles?” I queried. “Going over his head would certainly put his nose out of joint.”

“I have my orders and the condition of Hawthorne’s nose is none of my concern.”

I was astounded by Yabsley’s lack of respect for his immediate superior. This was the first time I had ever heard him refer to Sir Giles by his last name. I had always thought of Yabsley as Hawthorne’s lap dog and lackey. He may be more trustworthy than I was willing to accept.

“Are you both armed?” Yabsley asked.

“Always,” I confirmed for the both of us.

“Good. Let’s see what Dulwich Village holds.”

#

PART IV

1905

Wednesday, 20th December – 11.00 p.m.

Dulwich Village, South London, England

The night sky was veiled in dark grey clouds that blotted out any moonlight. Snow or rain was imminent. I left my luggage in my flat in Newington and locked it up, giving final orders to Constable Brown, and found our way to Wills' two-storey cottage in Dulwich Village. The cabbie was not very happy to go so far out of his way but the bonus of half a crown made him more agreeable.

It was a desolate sight, Wills' house, deserted since his incapacitation at the hands of the murderous Kieran Byrne. The once immaculately tended garden was unkempt and overgrown with weeds and in stark contrast to the orderly shrubbery of the neighbouring residences. Windswept banks of fallen leaves huddled in trembling clusters in every corner and tattered paper fluttered frantically in the breeze awaiting to be rescued from the thorns of the rose bushes.

The Williams family home was dark, cold and abandoned. It looked forlorn and unloved, contrasting its neighbours which, even at this time of night, were warmly lit. Curls of white smoke swirled from the chimneys and were carried along by the icy breeze.

The cab had left the three of us standing in front of the fence. No one was about at this time and in this weather save for a solitary brougham that trundled past us with its blinds drawn. The recent snow flurry had left very little in its wake but there was just enough to see footsteps tracking through the slush from the gate to the front door.

We looked at each other with the same simultaneous thought: intruders.

Wordlessly, we unholstered our revolvers. Yabsley signalled to Wills that he would circle to the back and indicated that we should go through the front door.

A flash of light across an upper floor window caught our eye and we immediately moved into position: Yabsley around the side of the house toward the back door, Wills and I to the front entrance.

Wills slipped his key into the lock and opened the door slowly, carefully. He gave me that look that signalled, “At the ready” and stepped into the darkness and the unknown.

Although I had rarely visited Wills at home—Cornelia was not particularly fond of me—I was familiar with its layout: a corridor ran along the length of the house from the front door to the kitchen and lavatory attached to the back of the house. On either side of the corridor were doors to the rooms: parlour, withdrawing room, dining room, sewing room and Wills’ study. Also in the corridor was the staircase leading to the upper floor, which accommodated several bedrooms, dressing rooms and a bathroom.

It was from upstairs that came the distinct sounds of someone rummaging through wardrobes and drawers.

Wills led the way toward the stairs, I followed a few yards behind, our Webleys at the ready and our senses on high alert, feeling our way forward in the gloom, our footfalls muffled by the runner that lined the floorboards.

Wills passed the doorways, to his left and right, to the darkened parlour and dining room. Without warning, a large figure burst from the darkened room on Wills’ right and barrelled into him, knocking him heavily against the wall. His injured shoulder took the full force of the impact. Wills slid to the floor in agony, cradling his re-injured arm.

Immediately, I was upon the burly aggressor and crashed my pistol across the man’s head, knocking off his hat and momentarily stunning him. His recovery was swift and uncompromising. The backhand he dealt me sent me reeling down the passageway and felling me. My gun flew from my hand.

“Stop!” I cried in desperation, scrabbling in the dark to locate my gun, “Stop or I’ll shoot!” I yelled once more hoping he wouldn’t discover my bluff.

“*Yalla!*” he cried and tripping over Wills’ legs as he scrambled toward the back door. “*Yalla! Yalla!*”

Arabic!

“*Quf! tawaquf 'aw sa'utliqalnaar! Tawaquf!*” I yelled still unable to locate my pistol. My commands for him to stop or I’d shoot only impelled him to make his desperate escape more desperate. I hoped Yabsley was ready for him.

I scrambled to my feet and rushed to Wills.

The pounding of footsteps rushing down the stairs pulled our attention to another two making their escape. I could only make out the whites of their eyes; they were fearful, not murderous. They flew down the corridor.

“I’m all right. After them, Davies!”

“Your gun!”

His gun in my hand, I bolted down the corridor in pursuit. They were unarmed. It was pointless shouting for them to stop and shooting them was not an option. We had to catch them and interrogate them. I was certain Yabsley would tackle at least one of them.

The back door was wide open. I could hear the sounds of men running. They were getting away! I burst into the back yard only to see the three men fleeing in different directions and disappearing into the depths of night.

Where was Yabsley?

A groan to my left.

Yabsley staggered to his feet clutching his head.

What happened? Thoughts flew into my head: was he set upon? Was it one of those three? Is he all right? Is he feigning? Was my distrust of him well-founded?

Giving Yabsley assistance in standing upright, I saw that his face and clothing were covered in blood seeping from a deep gash to his forehead.

“What happened? Who did this?” I asked as I helped him sit down on the ground.

“Don’t know...Someone came up from behind and, when I turned, he belted me. Knocked me down.”

Wills emerged from the back door and staggered toward us holding his injured arm.

“One of the three?” Wills asked.

“No. I saw them run past...Before then.”

“A fourth man?” I posed, “An accomplice?”

“Did you see what he looked like?”

Yabsley was struggling to remain alert but managed, “A glimpse. He wasn’t dark...white...European...I think I’m going to vomit—”

We stood back and allowed Yabsley to empty the contents of his stomach.

“We should telephone to the police and get an ambulance here. Take care of you two—”

“No,” Yabsley coughed, “Quinn...Telephone Quinn directly...His number is in my pocket.”

“Do you know what time it is?” I cautioned.

“Anytime...he said to call anytime.”

A rustling of fallen leaves caught my attention and looked up to see a figure retreat into the blackness of night. Even with the briefest of brief flashes, I saw what he was wearing: a ushanka.

1905

Thursday, 21st December – 2 a.m.

Special Branch, Metropolitan Police, London, England

After being attended to by the first aid officers and a doctor summoned by Alexander Quinn, we were taken by them back to Wills' office at New Scotland Yard where the head of the Special Branch was waiting for us.

The gash to Yabsley's forehead had been cleaned, stitched and bandaged and he was obviously concussed but he refused to be taken to hospital. He looked pale and listless slouched in Wills' old sofa. The desk sergeant provided him with a clean shirt and jacket but his blood-soaked linen collar and tie were beyond salvage and discarded.

Wills had not fared much better. The compound fracture to his shoulder blade caused by Byrne's attempt to murder him had all but completely healed. The heavy impact he suffered may have re-fractured the newly-formed callus but Wills, too, refused any hospital treatment or X-ray. His only concession to therapy was to allow the doctor to bind his shoulder and arm firmly in place.

I emerged the best of us three. My only injury was swelling to my cheek where I copped the backhander. It smarted but was nothing compared to my colleagues' hurts. The desk sergeant also managed to scrounge up a pot of tea which we all welcomed but I was in desperate need of a good dose of scotch.

Quinn was no fool and had most likely been briefed by Yabsley beforehand. He asked us straight out.

“Those Mussulmen, what were they after? Miss Davies?”

Quinn fixed his steely gaze on me. He was well aware of my stash of gemstones and bullion and their source and he wanted me to confirm it. I was not about to admit to my speculation of so many years ago or to the retributive execution of those three bodyguards.

Quinn turned his eyes to Wills.

“Major Williams?”

I couldn't let Wills take any of the blame.

“They were after me, Mr Quinn. Something I have that they want. Something I took in eighty-five when I was in Naibah-Drayah.”

“British India?”

“Yes.”

“And you, Major Williams? Why would they ransack your house as well?”

I answered before Wills could.

“Major Williams was stationed there and helped me out of a very...unpleasant situation. That's where the major and I met. In eighty-five. They must have made the connection.”

“I see,” Quinn said. His piercing look told me he wanted to know more but shouldn't ask. He took a deep breath and continued, “That's of no concern to me. To us. The persons who ransacked your homes caused the death of a British subject and attacked members of the Special Branch and, for this, they are to be brought to British justice. Now, tell me all you know.”

We went through the events of the previous days in detail and concluded that, whoever was looking for me and Wills was informed of our private addresses, someone within our ranks; that the three Mussulmen were not intent on harming us for they had had several opportunities to do so. We theorised what would their next move would be and how far would they would go to regain the ‘something’ of theirs I possessed.

Yabsley put his tea aside and spoke.

“Mr Quinn, we need to locate one Naathim Nasir Talpur as quickly as possible. We believe he is behind these games.”

Quinn took details notes and, after what seemed to be an interminable debrief and two more pots of tea, Quinn took his leave, directing us to remain in Wills' office until further notice. The desk sergeant brought up two camp cots and blankets and was instructed by Quinn that no one was to know that we were here. It was obvious Quinn wanted to keep our whereabouts secret.

So we bedded down for a few short hours of kip. As I snuggled into the old sofa, I pored over the events that led us to this point. Would I be willing to give up whatever booty I had left that would quite possibly fund a revolution? Wills and I were the targets. Doing nothing left us vulnerable; we had to find them before they found us. But where to start? Who was the turncoat? I had my suspicions. I looked at Yabsley dozing on the cot. He took a very severe blow that, had he been in league with the intruders, could have been administered with

much less force and still have been convincing. And the intruders were unambiguously from the Middle East; Yabsley's assailant was European. No, not Yabsley, someone else. Someone who knew us and our usual place of residence and someone who didn't know that we were not at those residences. Who was it who had something to gain from divulging our whereabouts? I was very certain I knew who that Judas was.

Tired to exhaustion, I pushed those thoughts aside and pulled the blanket over me and hoped I would dream of Lady Katherine. In a few short hours, all this will start again.

#

1905

RETROSPECTIVE

Early November – 6 p.m.

Metropolitan Police, London, England

Sir Giles Hawthorne, ex-army officer now head of the DSO, a secret section of London's Metropolitan Police, sat at his large oaken desk basking in the self-awarded glory of his recent successes. Yes, he thought as he mindlessly squared up the already neatened stacks of files and papers on his desk, Shakespeare was right: all's well that ends well.

He had been exonerated from playing any part in the abductions, rapes and murders of those three unfortunate women and it was his actions, he unequivocally believed, that saved the fourth from the same dreadful fate. Yes, he saved that woman, that is, *lady*, from a fate worse than death, and from death itself, with his decisive actions, cunning interrogation skills and steadfast leadership. After all, would he still be sitting here, at his expensive desk, in his ample office and as head of the Department of Special Operations if he had not, were not and did not?

The fact that his former friend and army colleague, whose name he chose not to recall, was now incarcerated at His Majesty's pleasure in a lunatic asylum for those outrages, and one on his own wife—poor woman—had had nothing to do with him. Neither did the actions of that Irish insurgent, Kieran Byrne; he paid for his treachery with his life and by the hand of that lunatic himself. And it seemed that both thorns in his side had been permanently removed: Major Reginald Williams and his 'Assisting Clerk', Miss Rebecca Davies. Hah! 'Assisting Clerk' indeed. That murderous deviant invert and her protector were gone, 'retired', and he didn't care to know where to or what became of them. Gone, never to return. Gone and soon to be scrubbed from his memory. And his retirement pension was no longer in jeopardy.

Sir Giles let out a satisfied sigh. Yes, this Christmastime will be the most enjoyable he'd have had in a very long time.

He glanced at his pocket watch. Ah, 6 p. m. His wife would be ready anon with a hot meal for him. Even going home and being with his mother-in-law and wife was better. He was a hero now and his wife and her mother knowing this only made things better at home.

He gathered his hat and greatcoat and strode out of his room, past his nervy secretary, Fawkner without so much as a cursory ‘good night’ and down into the streets of Whitehall.

The night was dark and quite chilly but Sir Giles was warmed by his self-appreciation and didn’t notice any of the strangers who bustled past him as he made his way to his modest place of residence a mere eight hundred and forty-two yards away.

The night air would do him good, even with this damned smog. Yes, it was good to be alive.

“Sir Giles!” The intrusive voice came from behind.

Damn! Who the hell had the nerve to accost him in the street? He stopped and slowly turned to scowl at the interloper.

“Sir Giles Hawthorne?”

“Who the dickens are you?”

“Forgive the intrusion, Sir Giles,” the young man apologised doffing his hat and continuing without a pause, “Permit me to introduce myself. I am Drayer, Tim Drayer, private secretary to the vice-chancellor of Cambridge college and he suggested I speak to you on a private matter.”

Sir Giles was confused. ‘Private matter’? ‘Vice-chancellor’? ‘Cambridge’? He took in the swarthy young man with the sing-song cadence to his voice, standing erectly before him with a most engaging smile albeit tinged with a trace of superciliousness. He was well-dressed, indeed, his attire screamed ‘Saville Row’ but this was still an unheard-of imposition to be stopped in the street by a total stranger, even if one of superior quality if his costume were the measure of the man.

“Out with it, man, what is it you want? I’m already late for dinner.”

“I am seeking the whereabouts of a dear friend of my mother’s. The Vice-chancellor made numerous enquiries with his connections at the Law Society and the palace. Those have led me to you.”

Sir Giles was both baffled and chuffed; what had this to do with him? The palace?

“My mother is—was a *raajakumaaree* and it was her express wish before she passed that I hand a letter to someone she had lost touch with some time ago. A very important letter. A very close friend. It will be worth your while, sir.”

Sir Giles' interest was piqued. This may be an opportunity to add to his retirement nest egg.

“So, Mr...er...Drayer, let me understand you correctly. Your mother was an Indian princess and you are seeking my assistance in locating a presumably long-lost friend of hers. And there is remuneration in doing so.”

“Precisely.”

“What makes you think I would know where to find this...person? More importantly, what sum were you thinking of? And you do realise, of course, that bribery is against the law and out of the question?”

“Certainly, sir. I would never compromise your hitherto unblemished character, Sir Giles. Any amounts exchanged would be as a donation to your favourite charity, sir.”

“Right. Well, we certainly can't conduct business out here in the street, Mr Drayer. What say you give me the details of whom you would like to locate and we can meet at my club. The exchange can take place there.”

“That would be most acceptable, Sir Giles. I have written the name on this, as well as the sum I wish to donate. When can we make the exchange?”

Sir Giles took the folded sheet of paper and, reading it, was doubly surprised—nay, shocked—so much so that his jaw dropped. Both took his breath away. The sum was exceptional and the name? Rebecca Davies. He looked up from the paper to the young man with a look of complete disbelief. The young man smiled and donned his hat.

“Tomorrow, Sir Giles? Six p.m.? The Marlborough?”

Without further verbal exchange, the young man, one Tim Drayer, turned on his heels and strode away into the thickening smog. It was only then that the dumbfounded Sir Giles noticed three large men emerge from the haze and follow Drayer. He stood there glancing at the piece of paper in his hand and back to the disappearing figures. Only then did it occur to him: the Marlborough Club? How the dickens did Drayer know that he belonged?

#

1905

Thursday, 21st December – 8 a.m.

Somewhere in Oxfordshire, England

“And you found nothing? At either place? Out of my sight! Go!”

Breakfast had barely been touched when the leader of the three Mussulmen reported the events of the previous night to his young employer. Tim had now lost his appetite, his patience and his temper, and paced the well-trodden Persian carpet once more.

“You can’t blame them, brother,” the young woman chided as she poured a cup of hot tea for them both. “Your orders were to find the gems and to hurt no one. You’re too soft.”

“But she was there! That woman! He called out her name! She was within our grasp! And they ran off like the cowardly dogs they are!”

“Nothing will be achieved if you don’t take control of your anger, Timmy. They would have taken her had they been told to. They are loyal to you, and to our cause. We are close. And we have time. No one knows of our plans. Come, have your tea.”

Tim Drayer calmed down. His sister was right; they did have time on their side. Perhaps one opportunity was lost to them but there would be others. He sugared his tea, his thoughts elsewhere.

“What now?” she asked unhurriedly, watching the young man stir his tea mechanically.

“Find her. Her and her soldier accomplice. Make them tell us. Make them give it up.”

“No more peaceful coercion?”

“By whatever means.”

“And if they no longer have it?”

He stopped and peered at her. They had had this conversation many times before this day.

“Milly dear, no one can spend that much and have nothing to show for it. I’ll get it back however long it takes. By whatever means necessary. If we don’t return it, we won’t have the armed backing we need. And if we don’t get that, all is lost to us.”

Milly didn’t doubt her brother’s resolve but did doubt that, after such a long time, they would be able to find those two *al’iinjlizia* and all the gems they stole. She supported her older brother’s quest and would use any means imaginable to achieve his goal.

#

1885

July

Naibah-Drayah, Sindh, British India

It was late evening when a very tired and dusty Lieutenant Williams staggered into his tent and unceremoniously tossed two heavy books onto his cot followed by his pith helmet, belt, holster and gun. He deposited a jar next to his washbasin then flopped into his Roorkee chair and proceeded to remove his boots without once looking up at me.

“I’ve just finished a two-hour debriefing with the Lieutenant-Colonel and he’s finally seen it my way,” he mumbled to his discarded boots on the floor.

“You can do with a bath,” I advised, having inhaled a whiff of his three-day body odour and horse sweat. It was only then that he looked up at me standing next to my cot with my two valises nearby.

“Where are you going dressed like that?” he asked almost indignantly when he saw me dressed as Robert—trousers, shirt, collar and tie, and a light jacket.

“Back to Bombay. Tomorrow, first thing with the workers.”

“I see,” he said grabbing the jar and rising. “First, we’d better see to those ugly stitches. Wouldn’t want to frighten the natives,” he said as he retrieved his nail scissors from his canvas carryall. “Sit,” he commanded,” and approached me in his stockinged feet.

I hadn’t encountered this Lieutenant Williams before: assertive and authoritative—toward me, that is. I did as commanded and sat on the end of my cot.

Pulling up his chair to face me, he examined the embroidered laceration to my face.

“Healed nicely. A little red but that will diminish in time. Hold still.” He firmly positioned my head and, one-by-one, he pinched one end of the suture, pulled it up and carefully snipped it open. Pulling the stitch out was not an unpleasant sensation. And he proceeded thus down the length of the wound until all twenty-four threads had been removed.

“You really do need a bath,” I reiterated

“Major Cunningham left this salve to rub into the wound, morning and night,” he informed me, completely ignoring my suggestion. “Now your belly.”

He scoffed at the look of surprise I gave him.

“Rebecca, it’s not as though I haven’t seen your belly before. Take down your trousers and lie back.” He smiled at my look of horror of the imagery that statement evoked but I complied. Just as efficiently as to my face, he removed the eight stitches to my abdomen.

“Sit up, take off your jacket and lift up your shirt so I can rub some of that salve on your back.” Again, I complied, turning my back to him and wondering why he was so dictatorial. “Bombay, you say?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered over my shoulder, “then a steamer to England, through the Suez.”

“Hm...” he said rubbing the lotion into my back. “And what will I tell the Old Man?”

“Lieutenant-Colonel Stokes? That I’m leaving. Am I a prisoner?” Wills’ conversation was confusing me.

“My transfer’s come through. I’ve been re-assigned. And I want you to come with me,” Wills added before I could comment.

The news came as a surprise to me; this was the first time he’d mentioned wanting to leave this place.

“What? Why? Where to?” I shook my head not as a direct rejection of his proposal but in an effort to understand what he was proposing.

“I’ve just spent the best part of two hours convincing the Old Man, so don’t say no.”

I was stunned. Was he proposing marriage or some sort of cohabitation?

“Wills, I’m flattered but...you know...I’m not...I don’t...I prefer the company—”

Again, he had read my thoughts.

“I know exactly what your predilections are, Rebecca, and that’s not what I’m proposing. And besides, you’re much too old for me,” he said with an impish grin. “I’m only twenty-four, you know. You’d be stealing a babe from the cradle.”

Too old? I was miffed. Before I could object, Wills returned to his previous serious demeanour.

“I saw something in you that first night. After you came to yourself. It wasn’t fear or self-pity, or hysteria or shock. It was a resolve that I had never seen in a woman, or in a man, for that matter. You wanted requital for what was done to you and I could see you were determined to mete it out yourself. Then, what I witnessed a few nights ago was not a

timorous act of reprisal but one of absolute objective resolve. You are bold, audacious...and compassionate. And damned clever. I need someone like you.”

“For what?” What he was stating intrigued me but I wasn’t about to commit to something without knowing all the details.

“Before I tell you, you must be straight up with me and tell me all about your past. What brought you here. I will protect you, Rebecca, whatever you’ve done.”

“I doubt that very much.”

I felt Wills’ eyes upon me as silence momentarily filled the space.

“You haven’t harmed any children, of that I’m sure,” he stated, then turned me around to look me straight in the eye. “Who did you kill? And why?”

I stared back at Wills, part of me wanting to confess everything to him but my better judgement telling me that avoiding the hangman depended on keeping my secret past secret.

He didn’t blink, nor did I. His gaze was reaching into my blackened soul, plumbing the depths of my depravity and finally he whispered, “How many?”

I averted my eyes; they had betrayed me.

“Five,” I whispered back, returning to meet his eyes, daring him to condemn me.

“Tell me.” It was a soft entreaty, rather than a strident command and I felt compelled to admit to him all of my mortal sins. I prayed that my trust in him had not been misplaced.

We spoke in hushed tones all through the night—he asking questions, I telling all. It was only when I spoke of Sarah did tears of bitter regret fill my eyes and only when I related how Percy, who had tried to protect me, had been remorselessly shot like a dog, did guilt truly overcome me. I told him of the Push and how I hired them to make the death of Sarah’s husband appear to be suicide; of my unwitting complicity in the massacre of the gold escort; of my flight from the three craven bushrangers who wanted me dead, and of Melbourne, Madeleine and Daphne and their savage treatment at the hands of Harry Kepple who paid with his life for what he had done to them.

And all these deaths by my hand, or a consequence of my actions, were the aftermath of my love for Sarah.

Silence once again filled the space between us. Wills searched my eyes, probing my conscience, looking for what, I don’t know. But he wouldn’t find guilt or remorse for those I had killed.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Lieutenant-Colonel Stokes recommended me to the Directorate of Military Intelligence.”

My focus was rivetted on him; I wanted to know where this was heading.

“I’ve been accepted. It’s a position I am keen to take up,” he continued. “You would be aware of the incident at Panjdeh a few months back. Thirtieth of March, to be exact.”

“Yes, the Russians seized the oasis just south of the Oxus River. The Albertis were concerned that they may have had to abandon the dig.”

“Over five hundred Afghan soldiers at the garrison there were killed. General Komaroff’s actions brought us to the brink of war with the Russians. Only diplomacy stopped further bloodshed. We have allowed the Czar to keep Panjdeh so long as he promised to stop any further encroachment on Afghanistan and, more importantly, on British India.”

“And the Crown Governor took him at his word?” I snorted.

“Abdur Rahman Khan, the Amir of Afghanistan, is overtly displeased with this arrangement as well. Having been left out of the discussions, he may be seeking support from the other Amirs in Sindh and Baluchistan. The Crown Governor fears insurrection. We will be sent to Kurrachee to uncover any schemes afoot.”

“Not Kabool?”

“There is evidence that we have a traitor at work. The grandson of a former East India Company man resident in Kurrachee. Lord Houghton. That’s why we’re going there.”

“As husband and wife? Why?”

“We’re to ingratiate ourselves with the traitor and get to know him and his wife—they are of our age—your age, actually—and gain their confidence. We are to report back to the Directorate with whatever information we uncover. Rebecca, this is a dangerous mission. Two previous attempts to expose these spies have led to the disappearance of the two agents. If you say ‘yes’ you must follow my orders precisely—whatever they may be—and without hesitation or argument. Can you do that?”

“Probably not.”

Wills scoffed. “I didn’t think so.” He reached across and collected the two books he had tossed onto his cot and handed them to me. “You’ll need to be appropriately kitted out. Select suitable ladies’ apparel—and I stress the word ‘ladies’—from these catalogues and I will arrange their immediate supply from Bombay. We leave as soon as they arrive.”

I looked at the two volumes, one, a hefty thirteen hundred page ‘brick’, and the other a more modest three-hundred-page catalogue from a British emporium in Bombay.

“The Army and Navy Stores General Catalogue,” I said, fascinated by the offerings it held as I riffled through the pages. “Most impressive.”

“Concentrate on Crawford and Lafevre’s catalogue, ladies’ section, if you please.”

“You still could do with a bath,” I casually tossed back at him.

It didn't take long at all for the shipment of fine European fashions to arrive from Crawford and Lefevre's Emporium in Bombay and, within a matter of weeks, we, as the beringed couple, Mr and Mrs Reginald Williams, formerly of London and Sydney, were on our way to Kurrachee, with secret orders direct from the Directorate of Military Intelligence. Ashish accompanied us as Wills' bearer and Bibiana, Ashish's very attractive auntie, was engaged as my *ayah*. I was perfectly capable of dressing myself but Wills insisted that to be convincing, we needed to present as a well-heeled English couple and every well-heeled English couple employed at least two personal servants. The only details Wills gave to our personal servants was that we were on furlough—and that we had been secretly married, the announcement of which surprised me more than it did Ashish. Wills did not want to compromise their safety by bringing them into the scheme.

Bibiana helped me to pack everything and I left nothing behind, including my revolver. Nor did I leave behind the good and bad memories of my encounters at the Arg so many weeks before.

Before long, we were packed and ready to engage ourselves in the dark and deadly game of espionage. I was both excited and apprehensive of what may lay ahead.

All was in readiness. The passage by the Indus Steam Flotilla was procured and accommodation at the best hotel in Kurrachee was confirmed for an indefinite stay. We were, ostensibly, merchants on a buying expedition for the finest quality rugs, artefacts and anything that would turn a profit. The Directorate had provided all the documentation and funding necessary.

Wills had briefed me on what to expect when we arrived and had given me some very basic instruction on self-defence, swordplay and unarmed combat. I made myself a promise that I would learn more about these sophisticated fighting techniques once my obligation to Wills was fulfilled. A woman alone in the world was prey to malevolence everywhere and I wasn't about to suffer again without giving a damned good fight.

I had never suffered seasickness or queasiness while traveling before but now, almost every morning, I was nauseated to the point of vomiting or retching.

A dreadful realisation overcame me.

#

Part V

1905

Thursday, 21st December – 8.30 a.m.

Metropolitan Police, London, England

Sir Giles Hawthorne strode past the front reception desk at New Scotland Yard, head down and deep in thought, oblivious to the activity there. His preponderances centred around the addresses he had given that swarthy young man, knowing full well that both Davies and Williams were elsewhere, an ‘elsewhere’ unknown to him. Little matter, though, his coffers were substantially refreshed with very little effort from him. It was only when he heard the name Lieutenant Reginald Williams did his pace falter. He looked up to see a young man—a youth—address the enquiry to his ‘exalted’ superior, Mr Alexander Quinn. Sir Giles was peeved, to say the least, over the way Quinn had treated him of late and now this, taking an enquiry about *his* subordinate, Major Williams?

“What have we here?” Sir Giles interrupted much to the annoyance of Quinn.

“Williams? You’re after my man Williams?” he asked the youth directly. “He’s a major, not a lieutenant, you know,” he added with an air of superiority.

“Sir Giles,” Quinn cautioned, “I have this matter in hand, thank you,” and waited for the rebuked Sir Giles to withdraw.

With a smile that fell a sneer short of contempt, Sir Giles turned on his heels and took the first few steps of the several flights of stairs to his office but curiosity got the better of him. He stopped and, unknown to Quinn, eavesdropped on the rest of the conversation.

“*Major Williams?*” the young man echoed, “So he does work here? Why didn’t you say so, sir?”

Quinn sighed. All he needed right now was this. He looked the young man straight in the eyes and lied, “Mr Pinnock, my apologies, I did not make the connection. However, Major Williams is on assignment at present—”

“Do you know where I can find him?” Charlie was desperate to speak to the only person who could help him discover who his real parents were. He only had a few short days left in London before he would have to return to Chelmsford with his mother and aunt and he didn’t want to let this opportunity go.

“If you leave your address with the desk sergeant, he will make sure the major is informed of your request as soon as he returns.”

“When will that be, sir?”

Quinn was becoming impatient by this young man’s insistence, polite as it was.

“The desk sergeant, Mr Pinnock. Thank you.”

With that, Quinn turned and left a deflated graduate of the Royal Military Academy wondering what to do next.

#

Sir Giles marched into his office, ignoring Fawkner as usual.

“Sir Giles!” Fawkner called out, stumbling out of his chair and following Sir Giles into his office. “Sir Giles, sir. Mr Drayer has telephoned you several times already. He claims he needs to speak to you most urgently.” Fawkner glanced at his pocket watch. “He said he would telephone again—” at which precise moment the telephone did ring, “—now.”

“Don’t just stand there like a fool, man, answer the call!”

As Fawkner ran back to take up the call, Sir Giles wondered what the dickens Drayer wanted now. He’d given the man all the information on those two that he had. Maybe he wanted to thank him for his assistance.

“Sir Giles,” squawked the voice out of the speaking tube, “Mr Drayer, sir, on the telephone.”

“Mr Drayer,” Sir Giles acknowledged picking up the telephone handset, the smile on his face reflecting in the tone of his voice, “good morning and what can I do for you this morning?”

Sir Giles’ agreeable tone was not returned.

“Sir Giles,” Tim Drayer began, his voice somewhat tightened by the threat he was about to pose, “it appears that I have been misled, sold a pup, as you British like to put it.”

“Sold a—? What is it you are referring to?”

“I paid you a lot of money for information that would lead me to Davies and Williams. They both are nowhere to be found.”

“Sir, I hate to quibble, but you asked for their addresses, not where they, themselves, could be found.”

“Logical semantics, dear sir, but let’s put that aside. I need to know where I can find Miss Davies. At this moment. Not where she has been. Nor where she will be next month. But where she is right now.”

Sir Giles mentally rubbed his hands together; another topping up of his pension in the offing he was sure. Only one problem: he didn’t have a clue as to where she or Williams were right now.

“And what should I expect for that information?” he brazenly asked.

There was a pause in the flow of conversation. The reply that followed was not what Sir Giles expected.

“Let me tell you what you should expect if you *don’t* give me that information, Sir Giles. A visit from Mr Quinn after he receives a letter from me with a detailed account of our recent financial transactions.”

Sir Giles was dumbstruck.

“I take your lack of response to mean you have completely understood what I want from you.”

“But...but...I don’t know where they are. Both were given unspecified leave. By Mr Quinn himself. In fact, I believe they have both left the service. Discharged. They could be anywhere. They could be dead, in fact.”

“Oh, they’re not dead, Sir Giles. I have that on good authority. Both are upright and mobile. More or less. But the situation has changed. They have something I want.”

“What do you mean? Didn’t you want to give *her* something? A letter? From your dear departed mother?” Sir Giles was confused.

Tim scoffed, “Yes, yes, the letter, my mother, la-la-la. Sir Giles, your future—your pension—depend on satisfying me. You are the only link I have to that woman. And that man. Do not disappoint me, Sir Giles. Their whereabouts. Now. I will call you in one hour.”

Sir Giles was left with the sound of the line being disconnected ringing in his ear. The only other sound was his laboured breath as perspiration trickled from his brow.

It was a long, long moment of recovery when he finally replaced the telephone handset into its cradle. He was being used. Manipulated. By a young moppet. From the Indian colonies, to boot. How on earth would he be able to find that information? Yabsley was on leave hell-knows-where; ditto Davies and Williams. Perhaps Scott...yes, Scott was in cahoots with Davies during that sordid affair with Humphries...Perhaps one of the other DSO officers. Yes. Yes. He stood abruptly and raced for the door.

#

“Son, you can’t sit there all day,” the desk sergeant warned the forlorn young man slumped on the reception room’s bench. “Time you went home, lad. I’ll make sure Major Williams gets your address.”

“Yes, sergeant, thank you.” Charlie replied and put on his hat and stowed his dashed hopes. The shift was changing at the front desk and, as he made his way to the front door, Charlie overheard the desk sergeant handing over to the new sergeant and officers. Amongst the recitation of preceding events, one item caught his attention.

“...and Mr Quinn has ordered breakfast for Detective Sergeant Yabsley, the major and Miss Davies. It’s to go straight up to Major Williams’ office. Mr Quinn’s orders. No one else is permitted up there. Understood?”

“Understood, Stanley, no one else. You go home and get some bo-peep. I see it’s been a busy night for you lot.”

Charlie descended the few stone steps into the streets of Whitehall.

Did he dare?

It was now or never for Charlie; his time in London was limited. He fished out of his pocket a shiny gold sovereign—more than he could really afford—and waited in the morning iciness outside the busy front entrance of New Scotland Yard.

It didn’t take long for a bicycle sporting the name ‘Fullerton’s Café and Tea House’ to come along, carrying a picnic basket and young porter.

“Hold, matey. What have you got there?”

It was a great relief to Charlie that Sergeant Stanley’s replacement didn’t recognise him, having donned the real porter’s apron and cloth cap and carrying the basket. A guinea’s worth of courage brought him this far.

“Er...the breakfast—”

“No need to be nervous, son,” the replacement sergeant grinned, “unless you done something wrong,” he laughed. “Is that what Mr Quinn ordered?”

“Yes,” Charlie announced with new-found confidence, “yes. I’m to take it to Major Williams’ room.”

“Right. Up them flight of stairs twice and third door on the left.”

“Thank you. Thank you, sergeant.” He hardly had taken two rapid steps when the sergeant called out.

“Wait!”

Charlie stopped everything, including his breathing, and listened for the thread holding the sword of Damocles to snap.

“Don’t forget to collect the money for the breakfast on the way out. Mrs Fullerton will have your knackers if you do.”

#

It had been a long night with very little rest but the few hours of sleep we did manage refreshed us. Quinn was to direct Sir Giles and the officers of the Department of Special Operations to locate one Naathim Nasir Talpur, a probable graduate of one of the many prestigious universities this great country had to offer. We were to await Quinn’s instructions here in Wills’ office.

In anticipation of the breakfast Quinn had ordered for us, I went to the lavatory at the end of the passageway to freshen up, leaving Wills and Yabsley to receive the repast.

“Ah, breakfast,” declared Wills as he made his way to answer the knock on the door.

Standing at the doorway was an ashen-faced, red-headed young man clutching a picnic basket. The young man glanced apprehensively from Wills to Yabsley and back again. Wills speculated if this apprehension rose from their apparent incapacitation: Wills with his arm in a sling and Yabsley with his head bandaged.

“Look lively, lad. On the desk,” Wills directed.

Charlie took a few tentative steps toward the desk wondering who of these men was Major Williams and how he would ask.

Wills dug his free hand into his pockets and, coming up with a sixpence, called to Yabsley, “Do you have a shilling for the lad?”

Yabsley slapped his pockets, “No, Major. Sorry.”

Charlie turned to Wills, he and the basket rooted to the spot.

“You’re...you’re Major Williams?”

“Yes, just like on the door.”

Charlie’s hesitation was obvious and his face drawn almost in fear.

“Sir,” he began shakily, gulping down his anxiety, “I believe you are my father.” It was a bluff but one calculated to draw out the truth.

It took a moment for this statement to be absorbed by both Wills and Yabsley. The resultant reaction by both was to laugh.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Wills answered the nervous young man’s assertion.

“You were in British India in 1885?” The statement was posed as a question, one which Wills conceded to with an almost imperceptible nod. Charlie continued, “I was born there in eighty-six. In the Trimulgherry Station Hospital in Secunderabad. March twelve.”

All became quiet. The mirth that the previous absurdity brought to Wills vanished. Wills knew exactly who this young man was, standing before him making these allegations. He had never supposed he would see him again.

“What’s your name?”

“Pinnock, Charles David. But you named me William Patrick.”

“Well, Pinnock Charles David, I am not your father. Of that I am absolutely certain. Who gave you that information?”

“Lieutenant-General Thomas Stokes, sir. Your commanding officer.”

Wills peered at the handsome young man standing rigidly in front of him. There certainly was a familiarity about him. The shape of his mouth, chin, nose and his eyes were as blue as...

“Why are you here? What do you want?”

“Sir, to know who my mother and father are.”

“Do you not have a mother and father? You don’t look destitute, boy.”

“No, sir, I am not destitute. My...my parents have been very kind. But I must to know who my real mother and father are. I must know why they abandoned me.”

Wills said nothing, leaving Charlie in a vacuum of desperation.

“I’ve been searching for them since my...my father died four years ago. I must know—”

“And when you know that, what difference do you think will it make? To you? To your mother? To your future? Sometimes, Mr Pinnock, the past, like sleeping dogs, is best left undisturbed.” Wills handed Charlie the sixpence and took the basket from him. “I’ll take that. Thank you. And I strongly advise that you do not contact me again.”

Broken and demoralised, Charlie was ushered to the door by Wills who closed it firmly behind him.

Yabsley had remained silent throughout the whole interview but was most interested in the basis of those allegations.

“What was that all about, Major?”

I left the lavatory cleansed and refreshed and looking forward to something to fill the hollowness in my stomach. The swelling caused by the knock to my cheek had lessened and

wasn't bruising. Seeing the delivery boy from Fullerton's emerge from Wills' office gladdened me: breakfast had arrived.

As I approached the youth, I could see that he was distressed and a few steps closer revealed a tear escaping from his eye. What had they done to him, Wills and Yabsley?

"What's the matter?" I asked.

I must have startled the young man who regarded at me with a look of despair.

"Um..." he stumbled, wiping his face, "nothing, Miss."

There was something about this young man standing so forlornly outside of Wills' office. I couldn't put my finger on it; something familiar. A strange thought came to me: he reminded me of my mother. Apart from the reddish hue of his hair, for she was fair like I was, he had the same colour eyes she had.

"Did one of those men in there upset you?" I asked trying to be helpful but still mesmerised by his likeness.

"No, Miss," he snorted with a crooked grin, "I was expecting too much."

I noticed the sixpence in his hand but I knew that was not the cause of his anguish. I couldn't take my eyes off him, something he noticed and something that made him uneasy.

"I must go, Miss. Thank you for your concern." He met my eyes. I saw it at once.

"How old are you?" I whispered.

"Nineteen." His eyes lowered, "I must go."

I entered Wills' office in a trance. Wills and Yabsley had helped themselves to the fare but I had lost my appetite.

"You saw him?" Wills asked softly, "The boy from Fullerton's?"

All I could do was nod.

Yabsley was confused and curious.

"Who was he?"

#

I picked at the eggs and sausages Wills dished out for me after he told me the details of the young man's visit. My thoughts ran rampantly through the events of twenty years before. Memories I had done my best to suppress. Events that led to consequences I had never imagined or ever wanted. But there he was, like a spectre from the past. What did he want? Money? I had left a large legacy for him when I gave him over to the church. That should have taken care of him until he was old enough to earn a decent living for himself. He looked well-cared for and behaved like a gentleman—obviously not a guttersnipe. Who broke the

promise made to me and Wills? Was it the Mother Superior—surely not. Was it Stokes or Pinnock himself? Or Pinnock’s wife?

What good would it do him to know that he had been conceived through an act of violent barbarism? By a barbarian? By a barbarian I killed in an act of revenge?

Foreboding thoughts overtook me. If Naathim knew of his existence, he could use the youth as leverage to get to me. His life could be in peril if the traitor in our midst knew of his relationship to me.

I had to act.

“Where are you going? Quinn said to stay here!” Wills’ words trailed behind me and didn’t catch up to my ears. I was down the stairs like a shot, looking for the young man in the Fullerton apron.

“There you go, matey, twelve shillings, tuppence-ha’penny,” the desk sergeant said handing Charlie the breakfast money. “That was some feast Mr Quinn laid on. I don’t hardly spend that much on the trouble and strife in a year of bubble and squeak,” he chuckled.

“You there,” I called bounding down the last few steps toward the front desk, “I want a word.”

“Is everything all right, Miss Davies?”

“Yes, sergeant,” I said, pulling Charlie away and dragging him outside into the cold morning air and well away from inquisitive ears. I hadn’t seen Sir Giles Hawthorne lurking in the passageway near the sergeant’s desk.

Charlie was silent, apprehensive and wide-eyed as he stared at me in the busy street.

I quite didn’t know where to start or what to say but I needed to warn him.

“You could be in danger.”

“What?” Charlie became quite agitated by this bolt out of the blue. “What are you saying? Why? What have I done?”

“Nothing. It’s who you are. Who they think you are. Your relationship to Major Williams.”

“What relationship? Why? Who am I? Is he my father? He said—”

“Where do you live?”

“Cheltenham. Why? What’s going on?” Apprehension overcame Charlie and he became more insistent. “Is Major Williams my father?”

It was only then that I noticed Sir Giles standing on the top step of the entrance peering down at us and straining to hear our conversation. How much had he heard?

In a flash, he turned and disappeared back into the building.

“No. He’s not. Go home,” I urged Charlie.

He refused to budge. “Tell me what’s going on,” he pleaded, pulling my arm.

I disentangled his hand from my arm and urged once again, “Go home now,” leaving him standing there as I returned to the building and ran up to Sir Giles’ office.

“You!” I said, accosting Sir Giles Hawthorne as he dashed into his office.

“Miss Davies?” Sir Giles declared with feigned surprise, “I thought you were on leave.”

“It was you who gave out our addresses, wasn’t it?”

“Addresses? Addresses? What the dickens are you talking about?”

“If I find you did, Hawthorne, it will be something you’ll regret for the rest of your very abbreviated life.”

Sir Giles paled then gathered his very fragile courage. “You’re mad! Insane! You should be put away! Get out of my office. Fawkner! See this...this *woman* out!”

Fawkner, stupefied by the violent verbal exchange in the outer office, was barely able to move let alone physically evict me. We were at a standstill.

“Davies!” Wills’ voice came from behind me and was explicit in its meaning. “Leave off. Now.”

“Major Williams. You’re here as well.” Sir Giles commented with some little surprise and much relief.

The telephone’s clangour broke the impasse. Fawkner was thankful that he had to answer its call.

“Sir Giles Hawthorne’s room,” Fawkner announced timidly.

Wills grabbed my arm and tugged me backward. “Now, Davies!”

As we left the room, I caught Fawkner’s announcement of the caller, “Sir Giles, Mr Drayer for you, sir.”

Sir Giles sat at his desk staring at the telephone set on his desk. Perspiration dripped from his forehead. He had the information Mr Drayer wanted, in spades, but he was faced with an unpalatable dilemma. If he betrayed the whereabouts of Davies and Williams to Drayer, Davies would most certainly wreak vengeance upon him. Hers was a form of vengeance no one survived. Assuming, of course, that she survived her meeting with Drayer. There was something sinister in Drayer’s pursuit of Davies.

If he did not betray that detestable woman and her abettor, Drayer would carry out his threat and disclose the ‘charitable donations’ he had received. Assuming, of course, that Drayer survived the wrath of Davies.

The choice boiled down to ignominy at Drayer’s hand or death at Davies’. He stared at the telephone’s handset: disgrace or death, money or...

He made his choice and picked up the receiver.

“Drayer, they’re here.” He unfolded a scrap of paper in his trembling fist. “And I know of a way to draw them out.”

“What the hell did you think you were doing?” Wills’ anger was controlled but smouldering.

“Flush them out. They are after me and you Wills and I’m not going to sit around huddled in a corner like a coward waiting to be bludgeoned to death.”

“Without a plan it’s a fool’s game, Davies.”

“I have a plan. Find them. Kill them. Then come back and deal with Hawthorne.”

“Brilliant! That’s just brilliant! Have I taught you nothing in the past twenty years?”

#

PART VI

1885

Early September

Kurrachee, British India

With the monsoon season all but over, we steamed down the Indus from Naibah-Drayah, past the Alberti's now-abandoned dig and onto the Arabian Sea and across the twelve miles of delta to reach Kurrachee to the north-west. It was not an unpleasant sailing but it was very hot; the daytime realising ninety-five degrees and night-time not less than eighty. The breezes of the delta did little to alleviate the humid conditions and even the concerted efforts of the punkah-wallahs on deck did little to keep my queasiness at bay. They weren't to know that it wasn't the heat or the motion of the waves that made me feel so sick. Only one person guessed.

"How far along are you, memsahib?" She and I were in my cabin and the question was posed so nonchalantly by Bibiana that it took me by surprise.

"I...ah...Bibiana, what makes you think...?" Her query left me feeling like a puppy dog that was caught with his master's bacon in its jaws.

Her smile was as beautiful as it was enigmatic.

"Memsahib." That one word was admonishment enough.

"Three months," I confessed.

"Does sahib know?"

"No. I don't know how to tell him."

"He will be very very pleased, I'm sure," she smiled.

I didn't share her confidence but he did have to know. She was right and I struggled with how I could tell him as my *ayah* helped me struggle into my clothing. Wills insisted I wear the impossible costume of a well-heeled English lady: chemise, corset, underbodie, drawers, stockings and a modest bustle—I downright refused to wear one of those "Lily Langtry" feats of engineering that would have supported a good-sized tea tray on my

derrière. All these fine cotton undergarments were topped off by a tight-fitting off-white bodice with elbow-length sleeves and a matching skirt that reached two inches above the ground with yards of it rucked up over my bustle. How I longed for the simple, cool clothing of the local men or even Bibiana's sari.

"Try this," Wills said handing me a tall glass of cold tea. "I don't understand why you're so seasick. The sea's dead calm. There's hardly any movement," he added sitting on the deck chair beside mine.

How could I tell him? It was now three months since the incident that brought us together and three months since I had seen my menses. Unless those three bastards caused untold damage to my reproductive organs, there was no doubt that I was with child.

Wills looked at me; I didn't know what he expected me to say and I didn't know how he would take the news or how it would affect our mission but I had to tell him.

"Wills, I'm pregnant."

The statement seemed to float about Wills, not sinking in for a few long moments and, when it did, it seemed to fight Will's very logic.

"Pr...?" He couldn't utter the word, then announced, "We have to turn back. Are you sure? We can't carry on, not with you in that state. It's far too dangerous."

"Wills, wait—"

"No. No. I'll send word to the Directorate—"

"Listen to me. It can work in our favour. They are far less likely to suspect a married couple expecting a child."

"I don't like it. I don't want to put you or the child in jeopardy. This is not a game, Rebecca."

"Yes, it is. The Great Game, isn't that what Old Man Stokes called it? We can't turn back now. It will work, Wills, it will." I gave him my most confident look hoping it would convince him that all will be well.

Wills took his time to digest the pros and cons then asked, "Three months?"

"Yes."

"You're prepared to carry the child given...?"

I understood his meaning. This was a babe conceived of a violent act by someone I ushered into hell, but the child was innocent. The question I did asked myself, however, was if I could love it as a mother should.

“The child is not at fault, Wills. The alternative to not carrying it would be tantamount to murder.” That statement, coming from me, sounded paradoxical, if not hypercritical.

Wills’ concern was very real. “How will you take care of him? Or her? I can take care of you—”

“And what would your lady friend in Cornwall think of that? Of you?” Wills understood my meaning. He was nothing if not gallant and I would not allow him to ruin his future with his beloved Cornelia of Cornwall. “Wills, when this is over, I will go to Wales and seek out any family I may have there and see what comes of that. And I have the means,” I added, referring to the gems and gold I relieved from Ahmed Rashid. “It will all work out when the time comes. But for now, he—or she—will give us five or so months to uncover whatever we can—”

“Then we head back to Bombay and find a midwife. But,” he added almost as a threat, “any problems or difficulties with the babe, with you, or with anything, we cease the mission immediately. Clear?”

“Clear.”

“And you’re not take any strenuous exercise or make any exertion while you’re in that condition.” Wills’ look of patronising concern was almost comical.

“Wills, I’ve seen women felling trees five minutes before they stopped to give birth. My condition is not debilitating. Apart from a little nausea,” I conceded.

We reached an understanding and remade our plans to incorporate my being *enceinte*. The ultimate goal of our mission was to ascertain if Houghton was, indeed, a traitor and a spy for the Russians but we first had to gain his confidence.

#

Kurrachee was a city of stone buildings sitting on the north-western extremity of the Indus delta and now accommodated some seventy thousand permanent residents. It was also the capital of its eponymous district and the chief port for the rich export of wheat and oil-seeds from the Punjab to the north and for the cotton of Sindh. Many hundreds were employed on the new docks constructed only a few years earlier after the harbour had been dredged by the enterprising British.

It had grown at a tremendous rate since the British East India Company and its army took control of the area in 1839. Now, a mere forty-six years later, it was a thriving municipality with every facility of a modern city. Then, it was not strategically important but now that the Suez Canal was in operation, Kurrachee, overlooking the whole Arabian Sea,

would be the stepping off point for the British Army should the Russian Imperial Army advance any further south and east towards British India.

The hotel we chose was less than a year old and was as modern as the city itself, boasting that its accommodation would please the richest maharaja. Constructed mainly of local yellow limestone with an imposing Italianate façade, it was surrounded by verdant gardens that were tended by the highly-prized *malis*, Hindoo gardeners that every English lady vied to employ. Being situated on McLeod Road it was close to the port and the merchant offices and warehouses of the many established import-export businesses and shipping companies, including those of our intended contacts, Lord and Lady Houghton: Anthony Wellbridge and his wife, Gertrude. Letters of introduction had been exchanged and our initial meeting was to be in two days' time.

We were to discover that the hotel, like so many establishments here run by the British, did not allow non-Europeans to use the front entrances insisting that both Ashish and Bibiana go by the back along with tradesmen and other native staff. Even access to our suite of rooms was, for servants, by hidden internal stairways and doors. This segregation and obvious racialism did not sit well with me for, in my twenty-nine years of life, I had dealt with almost all of God's races and that which deplored me most was my own.

For the sake of the charade, Wills and I shared not only the suite at the hotel, but a bed. We had, after all, shared a tent for three months and had grown accustomed to each other's nightly 'disturbances'.

#

The afternoon was hot as Wills and I alighted from our *gari*, a hackney coach, and took in the grandiose edifice of the building signed, *Wellbridge Import, Export and Forwarding Company, Limited*. I had rammed and squeezed myself into a fine lilac outfit—with the requisite bustle—and a jaunty bonnet while Wills was equally suitably attired for the humid heat in a fine flannel suit, topped by a wide-brimmed straw hat. He had grown an impressive moustache *à la mode de* Lieutenant-Colonel Kitchener that, unlike Kitchener's, matched his blond hair. Wills insisted that it was not hero-worship but merely a ploy to make him look senior to me as he was certain our 'hugely disparate ages'—as he often crowed—would be a cause of concern; he was forever teasing me about our mere five years difference in age.

The street was vibrant with the shouts and calls of *hammals* and bearers, *coolies*, donkey haulers and lascars, all pushing and pulling hand trolleys and carts, full and empty, ebbing and flowing like incessant waves upon the shore. The smell was akin to a mixture of a slaughterhouse and a fishery highlighted with wafts of fresh dung and human sweat. Standing

outside the entrance of the building were two hefty sentinels dressed in Afghan attire complete with turbans and a large scabbarded knife tucked into their belts. Their disturbing appearance brought back painful memories. Wills sensed my revulsion. He took my arm and walked me through the doorway between them. It was a relief to leave them behind.

The foyer of the warehouse was relatively clean and cool compared to the street.

“Mr Williams,” the elegant young gentleman enthused descending the last few steps of the staircase, “I spied you from my window,” he confessed as he extended his hand to Wills. “Wellbridge, Anthony Wellbridge. Lord Houghton if you must. How do you do?”

Wills grasped Wellbridge’s hand but retained formality, “My lord. A pleasure. May I present my wife, Mrs Williams.”

“Mrs Williams—” the cordiality of his greeting stopped short when he sighted the scar along my cheek. “Oh! Er...how do you do? Please. Please come upstairs to my office. It’s a little cooler there and I have refreshments waiting.”

We followed the dapper young man up the long flight of stairs. It struck me that he did not present as the impostor and traitor that I had expected to meet. He was quite charming and, if I had to put a name to it, a bit of a lickspittle rather than the cocky lorum I had imagined.

As we climbed the seemingly never-ending staircase to the upper floor, we could see into the cavernous *godaam* where innumerable *coolies* flitted about into and out of the premises moving crates, barrels and bales, loading them onto ships or otherwise unloading ships all with much noisy endeavour. It appeared to be a well-run establishment with Lord Houghton overseeing several English managers who, in turn, oversaw numerous native clerks and an army of warehousemen.

Wellbridge’s office occupied most of the upper level and was more like a large drawing room, appointed with every luxury, including a *punkah-wallah*. One row of sash windows faced McLeod Road and the opposite wall had fixed windows that overlooked the warehouse and the clerks’ and managers’ rooms. Along the upper reaches of the other two walls was a row of casement windows, some of which were open to allow any breeze to push out the stifling heat within. Sectioned off was an area that appeared to be an office or study where sat a large, ornate desk and several cabinets. The desk was unusually tidy and divested of files and papers.

Wills took as keen an interest in the layout of the premises as I did. Then we noticed it: ensconced in a darkened corner, our eyes fell upon another large Afghan of similar appearance to the door sentries, peering at us, standing motionless with his arms folded.

Wellbridge noticed. “Oh, never mind Rahim. Please, make yourselves comfortable,” he invited, indicating the fine settee. “Tea?” and without an accenting nod from either of us, the tea-bearer commenced serving. Wellbridge sat opposite us and began, affably but business-like.

“The letter of introduction from our mutual acquaintance, Mr Garvan, indicates you are seeking the services of a forwarding agent, is that correct?”

“Yes, my lord. My wife and I are new to British India. Land of opportunity, we were told. This...er...venture is to secure our future—and, as we are expecting our first child...” Wills said, giving me a loving smile. “We have procured certain...er...merchandise and we seek to offer it—at a profit, of course—to our countrymen back home.”

“It’s very commendable to begin a new venture so early in your lives. I inherited this from my father—along with the title—who inherited it from his. East India Company-man, you know. Grandfather. Tell me, what is it you wish to export? Wheat? Cotton? Poppy-seed oil?”

“Er, no,” Wills said feigning discomfort, “something a little more ‘exclusive’.”

“Oh? In which way ‘exclusive’?”

Wills hesitated for effect, “Lord Houghton, I trust you are the soul of discretion. Mr Garvan assured me that whatever I discuss with you within these walls, remains between us three.”

“Of course, dear fellow!” With a wave of his hand and a curt, “Leave us!” he dismissed the tea-bearer leaving the monolith Rahim skulking in the corner and the *punkah-wallah* moving the humid air with his large fan.

“They don’t understand English,” Wellbridge explained. “Now, tell me all without fear or fluster.”

“I, that is, we, have acquired quite a large assemblage of artefacts from digs in the Indus Valley. Articles of great interest to collectors. Unique. Ancient articles.”

“Valuable?”

“Very.”

“Digs that that were funded by the British Museum, I presume?”

Wills squirmed in his seat for added effect as Wellbridge continued, “Articles that belong to the British Museum?”

“Articles that are of more value to others.”

“Such as you and your wife?”

Wills' reply to Wellbridge was a sheepish smile. "Our mutual friend indicated that you facilitate the expediting of such articles and can land them in England without, shall we say, difficulty?"

"That certainly can be arranged."

"Without interference by Mr Erskine? I understand the Sindh Commissioner is averse to such enterprises."

"Let me assure you that the Sindh Commissioner takes no interest in what takes place here in Kurrachee."

"You have him in your pocket?" Wills was impressed.

"No, no. What his underlings don't tell him..." Wellbridge trailed off with a knowing wink.

"I see." We certainly did see. A little *backsheesh* to those who oversaw exports ensured they would turn a blind eye to shipments such as ours. Did this form part of his conspiracy with Russia?

"But there is risk involved, you understand. And it comes at a price."

"We understand risk and we can pay whatever you ask. Within reason, of course."

"Of course. Where are—" Wellbridge was interrupted by a portly man whose ruddy appearance indicated he wasn't coping well with this tropical climate.

"Lord Houghton, sir, pardon the interruption," he began in whispered tones, "an urgent message from..." his hesitation was accompanied by a furtive glance toward us, "*l'venok*."

"Thank you, Mr Somerby," Wellbridge said instantly, "the desk."

We watched as the chubby fellow puffed his way to the office corner, unlocked a drawer in the desk and placed the note inside it.

"Mr Somerby, my general manager," explained Wellbridge drawing our attention back to him as Somerby locked the drawer and returned to his own office. "Where were we? Ah, yes, these articles, where are they now?"

"In Quetta, ready to be loaded onto the next train here. Eight crates to begin. Six hundredweight in total. Marked 'household goods'."

"We have a ship leaving every week for London, stopping at Bombay, Aden, Port Said. We have the fastest fleet of clippers and our contacts in London and Liverpool see that there are no difficulties landing 'household goods'."

Wills and I looked at each other, much relieved that the first phase of our mission was put in motion.

“Thank you, my lord,” Wills said earnestly, standing to shake Wellbridge’s hand. “You have lifted a heavy burden from my shoulders.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Mr Williams, you haven’t seen my fees,” he smirked.

“I must say, my lord,” Wills enthused looking about, “your operation is quite impressive. We didn’t expect to see such an expansive organisation.”

“Oh?” Wellbridge said standing, “Let me show you around.” Lord Houghton ushered us toward the stairs and, as we approached the offices, he called, “Mr Somerby, if you would join us.”

We made our way back down the same stairs we had ascended not long before, Wellbridge leading me and Wills, followed by a gasping Somerby and shadowed by the Afghan, Rahim. I wasn’t sure if the burly Afghan really couldn’t understand English or if he could speak at all. But he certainly was obedient. Like a two-legged *bully kutta* dog and most likely just a fierce when provoked.

As we strolled through the numerous stacks of merchandise, the *coolies* parted to make way, like the Red Sea for Moses, showing their deference to ‘Lord sahib’.

“These are destined for Kabool,” Lord Houghton proclaimed, indicating a large consignment of crates. “The Amir of Afghanistan has purchased fine antique Sheraton furniture for his palace. Plus a few hundred gallons of fine Irish whiskey,” he added with a smirk. “We keep those barrels locked away until ready to rail. That will be tomorrow.”

“You have quite an enterprise here,” Wills commented, “You must work these poor natives day and night.”

“No, no. Twelve hours only. We begin at six and finish at six. The clerks may start a little earlier and finish a little later, but twelve hours usually gets things done. And these are the storerooms where the more valuable cargo is kept until despatch,” Wellbridge announced. “Only I and Mr Somerby have the keys.” Somerby made a show of jangling the numerous keys on the ring he had attached to his belt, the same ring that held the key to that desk drawer.

The four locked storerooms were situated side-by-side along the wall and reminded me of prison cells. The walls were made of mud brick and each room had a heavy steel-clad door with a small barred viewing window cut into it. Each was secured by an iron, hand-forged slide bolt fitted with a large padlock.

We were then led out the wide back door to the broad wharves extending to the right and left of us as far as the eye could see. This particular section belonged to Wellbridge but the entire length of the quay was a commotion of bustling activity as bales, sacks, crates,

barrels—even livestock—were being loaded or unloaded by the *coolies*. Many ships had lifting cranes to haul the nets full of merchandise but many used lines of workers to carry the loads along the gangways into and out of the holds of the ships.

“I’ll be installing a steam crane soon,” Wellbridge announced, “Should expedite the process. So, Mr Williams, Mrs Williams, shall I see you tomorrow to finalise the shipping documents?”

“Absolutely.”

“Remember to bring the letter of credit and we’ll discuss my fees then.”

We returned to our hotel after stopping at the Kurrachee Post Office along McLeod Road to send a telegram to our contact in Quetta instructing him to rail the first eight crates of ‘household goods’. Wills also instructed to have them arrive in Kurrachee at the last moment before the clipper was to sail. We were counting on Wellbridge not wanting to inspect the contents for, in reality, the crates held six hundredweight of straw-wrapped ballast.

In our suite, we reviewed our meeting with Wellbridge.

“What do you make of that Mr Somerby and his announcement of that message?” I asked. “It all seemed rather mysterious. And the name, ‘Levenock’?”

“*L’venok*,” Wills corrected, “Russian. Means lion. Young lion, actually.”

That was our first indication that Wellbridge was, indeed, corresponding with the Russians, or, at the very least, with someone who went by a Russian name.

“I believe that drawer,” Wills continued, “holds the information we seek.”

“How do we get into it?”

“I, not we,” was his firm and only response.

#

“I’m coming with you.”

“You’re staying here.”

“I can be your lookout.”

“You’re staying here.”

Wills was adamant that I was to remain in the hotel while he went on reconnaissance to see if there was a way to enter the Wellbridge premises undetected. He had swathed himself in the same black uniform of our sortie at the Arg and had daubed the visible part of his face with black boot polish. I had unpacked a similar outfit he had supplied me and was preparing to don it.

“But, what if—”

“No. That’s an order.”

It was just after two in the morning and we had dismissed both of our servants hours before so Wills' departure through the servants' stairwell would go unobserved.

"And if you get caught?" I persisted for my concern was real.

"I won't. I'll be back in a few hours. You know what to do if I don't return."

His parting words sent a shiver through my being. As pre-arranged, if Wills didn't return from any mission, I was to pack up essentials and leave immediately with Bibiana and Ashish and make our way to the office of the Sindh Commissioner.

#

McLeod Road, usually a din of uncoordinated activity, at this time of the morning was as quiet as a graveyard. Wills kept to the darkened edges of the footpath, sliding silently from doorway-to-doorway unseen except by the odd harbour rat. When he approached the Wellbridge warehouse, he dropped to a crouch and surveyed the area, looking for anyone who may be lurking about. Satisfied that there was none, He broke into a slouched run and went around the periphery, squeezing himself through the narrow alleyways between adjoining buildings. As he came upon each doorway and window, he tried them but each was locked tight. He looked up to the high casement windows that admitted daylight into the warehouse and noted that most were open and swung vertically, permitting whatever breeze the day offered to flow through. Along another wall, a very small window, about head-height, was open but it was far too small for him to climb through.

There had to be a way in.

He considered the height of the building and of those adjoining. There was barely two feet between each of the buildings along the whole wharf. If he could find a way to scale any of those buildings, he could clamber over the rooftops and reach the top windows that way.

Wills surveyed one building after another and finally found what he was looking for: an external staircase that, with a little gymnastic effort, would get him onto its roof and eventually onto the Wellbridge roof.

"*Qaf!*"

The shout came from behind Wills. He turned to see a guard approach with his dagger drawn.

"*Madha tafeal!*" he shouted again.

Wills turned to run only to see another guard, sword drawn, running up to him from that direction.

Trapped!

They were now within striking distance of Wills and approached him cautiously. Wills waited until the very last moment before taking action. In one synchronised move, he mule-kicked the sword-wielder, knocking him flying backward and punched the knife-carrier in the stomach winding him. Quick to scramble back to his feet, the swordsman loped toward Wills, weapon raised ready to swipe. Wills evaded the slash and grappled with the guard, disarming him. The other guard caught his breath and ran to his comrade who was struggling to overcome the taller Wills. Just in time, Wills saw the onslaught and twisted his opponent around, shielding himself from attack. The scuffle was long and strenuous and Wills was losing. The disarmed man caught Wills' arms behind his back and turned Wills to face the knife-wielder who raised his blade high ready to deliver a fatal blow.

It took two blows from the rock in my hand to quell the knife-bearer and my advance on the second man with my arm held high ready to strike saw him release Wills and flee. Wills and I immediately escaped in the opposite direction into the black of the night until we were out of breath and safe from detection.

Wordlessly, we surveyed our position and found our way back to the hotel unobserved.

Wills hadn't spoken a word during our flight, or now in our hotel room washing the black from our faces. Finally, I broke the silence.

"You haven't thanked me."

"You didn't obey orders. Direct, specific orders."

"You still haven't thanked me."

I could tell he was angry so didn't push for any gratitude that wasn't forthcoming. He went about his business getting ready for bed and, as I watched him, he glanced at me several times and I could see the hard expression of anger dissolving into a softer one of—was it gratitude?

We had had very little sleep but kept our appointment with Lord Houghton, letter of credit in hand. He welcomed us as friendly as always. Only Somerby seemed a little wary—it could have been my imagination. Tea, as before, was served by the same tea-bearer immediately upon our arrival.

"Mrs Williams," Lord Houghton remarked, "you seem not yourself today. Are you unwell?"

"Lack of sleep, my lord. Our unborn is determined to disrupt our lives even before drawing its first breath."

“Yes, I can but only imagine it.”

“My lord,” Wills interposed handing over the document, “we are well pleased with our dealings thus far. We are looking forward to arranging our next consignment if it’s not too early to discuss such.”

“No, no. We’re well pleased also, Mr Williams. In fact, I would like to invite you and Mrs Williams to dine with me and my wife at the Sind Club. This Saturday night.”

“Oh?” Wills queried, “I was of the belief that the Sind Club was an exclusively male establishment. No ladies permitted.”

“Quite so, Mr Williams, but,” he said tapping the side of his nose with his finger, “it’s who you know. I am acquainted with its newly re-elected governor, Mr Henry Erskine, and made special application to him.”

“The same Mr Erskine who is the Sindh Commissioner? But I thought—”

“You’ve heard the expression, ‘keep your friends close’—”

“‘And your enemies closer.’ Yes, but I assumed—”

“Mr Erskine is not a friend, Mr Williams.”

“Oh, I see.”

“So, eight o’clock, shall we say? Tell your *gari-wallah* to take you by the private entrance and, from there, make your way up the stairs to the private dining room. Formal attire.”

While Wellbridge had not mentioned or even inferred anything about guards grappling with two black-clad intruders, was it because he was unaware of such or because he was planning to trap them—us? Were we friends or enemies? We had to be alert and on our guard. We did not want to suffer the same unknown fate of our two predecessors.

Saturday night was upon us and we had to present as an innocent, well-to-do couple, albeit one involved in criminal activities.

In our separate dressing rooms, Ashish assisted Wills and Bibiana fussed over me like a nervous mother hen, making sure every stitch of clothing was in order. There was nothing she could do about my short hair except to place a lace opera bonnet on it and swathe the long lace trails about my shoulders effectively concealing all but a topknot of hair. My sky-blue evening dress was low-cut in front but high enough at the back to cover the fading strokes of the whip. Bibiana had gasped when she first set eyes upon them but asked no questions; I assumed that Ashish had told her of how my injuries had been sustained. The opera gloves covered my arms up past my elbows and the bustle was in place but the corset

was strangulating my innards. How I coveted the freedom of a few nights before and longed to be Robert again.

We emerged from our respective dressing rooms and stood in admiration of each other.

“You look beautiful, Rebecca,” Wills gasped.

“So do you,” I replied with equal approval. Wills cut a dashing figure in his black evening suit of cutaway dinner jacket, vest and matching trousers. His white shirt with stiff linen cuffs and an impossibly high winged linen collar was completed with a white bow tie and gloves topped off by a black silk top hat and black patent leather shoes.

Ashish and Bibiana stood by with self-satisfied approval of jobs well done.

“What do you make of Wellbridge?” I asked Wills in the carriage on our way to the Sind Club.

“He’s an affable fellow outwardly but I have a sense of underlying distrust from him.”

“So do I. Why do you think he’s become so friendly?”

“We may discover that tonight. Take care with what you say.”

As instructed, the *gari-wallah* manoeuvred our hackney coach to the private entrance at the side of the large premises of the Sind Club and, after announcing ourselves to the concierge, we were accompanied up the stairs and into the private dining room where we were greeted by Wellbridge.

“Welcome! Punctual, as usual. Come, let me present you to my wife.”

Standing beside a buffet sideboard was Lady Houghton, Mrs Gertrude Wellbridge, tall, elegant, stern-faced, her dark hair pulled back tight and swept up onto the top of her head and held in place by jewel-encrusted tortoiseshell hairpins. Her emerald green *ensemble* was exquisite and her bustle *could* have held a tea tray. Inappropriately, I hoped that the waiter who carried in a tray with refreshments wouldn’t mistake that with the sideboard she stood next to.

The lady Houghton scanned every inch of both Wills and me; it wasn’t her height that caused her to look down her nose at us.

“My dear, may I present to you Mr and Mrs Reginald Williams, connoisseurs of all things ancient and valuable. My wife, Lady Houghton.”

Wills produced a stiffened deferential bow and I curtsied, both of us waiting to be addressed by her Haughtiness.

“Pleased to meet you Mr Williams,” Lady Houghton conceded, extending her hand. Wills gently took it and bowed again.

“The pleasure is mine, my lady.”

“Mrs Williams,” she said extending me the same courtesy.

“My lady,” I demurred, refusing to curtsy again.

“My husband tells me you’re from Australia. Sydney Town. Is that correct?”

“It is, my lady, a village called Paddington, after the one in London.”

She gasped audibly when she caught sight of the healing wound to my face. She hesitated but her curiosity got the better of her. “How did...?”

“Oh...A carriage mishap. A few months ago, my lady. The poor horse took a tumble and the carriage overturned. One of the lanterns became dislodged, the lens broke and I fell upon it.”

“How unfortunate.”

“Actually, my lady, quite *fortunate*. It cut on the bias,” I indicated the line along my cheek. “Had it cut along the weft...” I drew my finger across my throat, “I would have gone the same way as the horse.” I smiled knowing that I had the left poor Lady Houghton a little more discomforted than I should have but I thought the story well told.

“Ah, yes,” Wills adjoined, “my apologies, Lady Houghton. My wife does like to suck the wind out of people’s sails. Australians do tend to be a little more forthright than their cousins at home. Is that not so, Rebecca, dear?”

“If you say so, Reginald, dear.”

Wellbridge interrupted, “An aperitif?” and beckoned the young English waiter. “Sherry?”

Dinner was excellent, served by four English footmen with not a native bearer to be seen anywhere. This club certainly was exclusive—exclusive of anyone not British or male.

Wills and Wellbridge had excused themselves and were on the verandah, smoking a cheroot and sipping on some fine Scottish whisky while the Lady Houghton and I remained at the dining table, there being no withdrawing room for us to withdraw to. My corset was causing me all sorts of vexation and I longed for a dram of that whisky but had to settle for port wine.

“Anthony tells me we are assisting you in dealing in antiquities,” Lady Houghton began. The coldness in her voice did nothing to alleviate the heat in the room. “Quite unconventionally so. How came you to that?”

Was I being interrogated? If so, I was prepared.

“Reginald’s father was an archaeologist, not university trained, but very knowledgeable. Some twenty years ago, he discovered a site in the upper Indus Valley rich with artefacts from an ancient civilisation. He immediately knew its historical value and, when he attempted to claim it, the Bombay Presidency—that is to say, one man in the Bombay Presidency—decided the discovery was worthless and forbade Williams Senior from continuing. He went so far as to expel him from the excavation site. It wasn’t right. This government official, this minion of the British Raj, wanted the fame and glory for himself. Not to mention the wealth that accompanied such a discovery.” I paused to take a sip of port; Lady Houghton was hanging on every word. “Reginald’s father was given a week to pack up and leave. It only took him six days and nights. In that time, he had filled twenty-seven crates with ‘worthless’ antiquities and sent them by donkey train to Quetta. There they remained until now, awaiting export to our Mother Country. Thanks to you and Lord Houghton.” I raised my glass and sipped from it, peering over its rim to see the ice slowly melting away from the lady’s face.

“What became of Mr William’s father?”

“Alas, he died a broken man. Bitter and ashamed that he couldn’t provide for his wife and young son. Going through his father’s papers, Reginald found documents and maps that led us to this veritable Aladdin’s Cave. Conversely, my father was a very successful wool merchant in Sydney and it is my inheritance that has provided us the means to right the injustice. And here we are.”

Lady Houghton sipped her port; she seemed to be struggling with her thoughts.

“Governmental interference,” the lady snorted, “My husband has a similar story,” she stated, her attitude somewhat softened. “His grandfather, as Anthony may have already related, came here with the East India Company as a captain in the army. Kurrachee was nothing as it is today. Then, it was a marshy, sandy part of the delta, a small trading post. A fishing village. But he saw opportunity here and he took it. He built a profitable business trading goods from Multan to Bombay and Goa, and back to the cantonment here, eventually exporting to England and importing essentials and fancy goods from home and distributing them all over British India.” She toyed with the remnants of the port in her glass before continuing. “But the then Commissioner of Sindh, one Richard Pringle, decided that Captain Wellbridge had exceeded his authority and stripped him of everything, including his commission.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Pringle was of the opinion that Grandfather Wellbridge was carrying out illegal dealings with the natives.”

“And was he?”

“They all were at that time. But Grandfather Wellbridge was made an example of what would happen should the illegal trade continue.”

“But your business continues.”

Lady Houghton smiled. “Yes, and it will continue to prosper. Anthony’s father re-established the business and Anthony himself has taken it from strength to strength.” She gave me an enigmatic look, one that spoke of unshared secrets. “Kurrachee is now a place of significant strategic importance. When the Russians choose to expel the British, they will control the whole of the Arabian Sea from here. Kurrachee.”

“‘When’? Not ‘if’?” I asked naively.

“No matter who controls Kurrachee, Rebecca—I may call you Rebecca, mayn’t I? No matter who controls it, Lord and Lady Houghton are assured of continued prosperity.”

There was no mistaking the inference of that last statement.

Back at the hotel I told Wills what Lady Houghton had told me. He was not surprised for Lord Houghton had detailed a similar account and sentiment towards the British and undeniable sympathy for the Russians. But were they spying for the Russians? Wills and I had to find proof of their complicity with the British enemy.

#

That first shipment went off without a hitch and another being prepared for despatch in two weeks’ time. Meanwhile, we had received word from the Directorate of Military Intelligence that they were already aware of a contact of Wellbridge’s named *L’venok*—the Young Lion—and suspected that he was based in Merv in Turkestan lying just within the Russian Dominions in Asia and close to the border. All efforts to unmask him had to date failed. We were cautioned to be on our guard as Wellbridge, young as he was, most likely had been the instigator in the disappearance of our two previous infiltrators.

During that fortnight, we had had scant contact with the Wellbridges other than to call by the warehouse whenever we were in the area. Wills and I made it a point to partake of early morning and late evening promenades around the city of Kurrachee, taking in as much of its features as possible. The object of these outings was ostensibly to enjoy the city’s sights at its coolest times of the day but, in reality, to do detailed reconnaissance of the city’s streets

and habits. Upon returning to the hotel, we drew maps and made comprehensive notes of when shops and establishments were open and which of those employed guards or had extended trading hours. Before long, we had devised a route to and from our objective that would encounter the least interruption or resistance.

We were now ready.

Our second shipment was about to arrive from Quetta to be loaded onto the *Bengal Tiger*, a full-rigged composite clipper built in Glasgow and owned by Wellbridge. Timing was critical as all manifests would have been drawn up with supporting documents. It was hoped that in those documents would be evidence that Wellbridge was dealing in contraband with the Russians. We needed to obtain proof of this and links to the Young Lion.

After much cajoling on my part, Wills finally conceded that my assistance would be beneficial in breaking into Wellbridge's warehouse and office. We dismissed Ashish and Bibiana and, once again, covered from head to foot in our black garb, we left by the servants' stairs. The only departure from before was that both Wills and I were armed.

Our reconnaissance paid off: we reached the outer stairs of a nearby warehouse undetected and had climbed to the roof top and scampered over building after building, hurdling over the narrow alleyway chasms until we reached the Wellbridge building.

Now came the difficult part: lowering ourselves into one of the open casement windows. We were a good thirty feet up on a gabled roof and a slip would result in death. Wills went first. Holding onto the narrow eaves, he lowered himself until his feet rested on the window sill and with one hand swung the casement window open and away from him and eased himself through it. He was on the upper-level floor as we had calculated.

Now it was my turn. With Wills standing at the window, I followed suit and lowered myself by grasping onto the eaves as he had done. He was there to grab me and hauled me inside.

We dropped and crouched on the floor allowing our eyes to adjust to the darkness. This was the clerks' office and we could make out the windows that opened onto Wellbridge's fancy drawing room. Holding our breath, we listened for any movement and, satisfied that there was no one around, took our first steps to Wellbridge's office.

An interconnecting door led to Somerby's room and he, being the general manager, would have the documents relating to the forthcoming shipment. That door was locked but Wills made short shrift of opening it. He signalled me to look for the papers while he made his way to Wellbridge's office to look for anything that pertained to *l'venok*.

I noticed that the ring of keys that Somerby had so brazenly jangled before us rested on a nearby hook with various other keys. Returning to the job at hand, I rummaged through Somerby's cabinets and files, completely immersed in my quest for incriminating evidence when I became aware of someone standing close behind me. I spun to see the menacing form of a native guard barely an inch away from me and pointing a long knife at my throat. I leant back and, without a word of warning or a demand of surrender, he slashed at my throat. My reflexes saved me from my head being severed, his knife catching the neck of my balaclava instead. I had no means of escape; he had me pinned against the cabinet and all I could see were the whites of his maniacal eyes. Before he could slash me again, a cord dropped between us and caught him by the neck and pulled him off me. The guard struggled—he knew what was happening. He turned the knife in his hand intent on stabbing his assailant wherever he could reach. In an instant, I was upon him and grabbed his hand, twisting it hard until he released his grip on the knife. It wasn't my superior strength that had wrested the weapon from the guard but the strangulation by Wills that had taken effect. The guard was now unconscious and slumped to the floor but Wills did not let go, pulling with as much force as he had until the guard's eyes all but burst out of their sockets. The contorted rictus of the guard in his death throes brought back horrific visions of John Harper hanging from the rafters of where he and Sarah lived. My Sarah...my dead Sarah...the Sarah John Harper murdered...the John Harper I had killed...

"Rebecca!" It was a whisper but an insistent one. "Rebecca, we must leave," Will iterated anxiously.

I pulled myself out of my trance—why did this have such an effect on me? I had seen dead men before, many of them. Why did this one bring back memories of...of him?

"Rebecca, I found what we need," Wills said showing me some carbon copies of correspondence, "Come, quickly now."

"What do we do with him?"

Wills looked about. "Are those the keys Somerby had?" I nodded. "Bring them. We're going out through the docks. Help me."

The dead guard was indeed a dead weight but we managed to drag him to the open window through which we had entered and with some effort, we pushed the poor fellow through it and watched as his body hit the ground with a dull thud displacing clouds of dust on impact. It lay there in a crumpled heap. Had he not died by strangulation, the fall certainly would have sealed his fate.

We made it down the stairs and through the cavernous *godaam* without coming across any further impediment to our escape and were back at our hotel in very quick time.

As we stripped off down to our underwear, the guard's face haunted me.

"Did we have to kill him?"

"He was close enough to see the colour of your eyes, Rebecca. Yes, I had to kill him. What have you there?" he asked as he touched my neck. "Blood?"

I felt my neck and, indeed, it was bleeding. Only a small wound but one that was only a hairsbreadth away from an artery.

"My God, Rebecca! If you hadn't pulled back, you'd be..."

"Piffle! There was no shooting star," I mocked doing my best to make light of the situation. Changing the subject, I asked, "What did you find?"

"Carbon copies of correspondence to the Young Lion. On one there is a partial address and some names. I will have Ashish deliver these by the usual means tomorrow morning while you and I are at Wellbridge's finalising our second shipment. Now, let me tend to that."

The next day, we went about our business as normally as possible, pushing away all thoughts of what transpired in the early hours of that day. Our *gari-wallah* stopped short of our destination, Wellbridge's warehouse.

"Police, sahib," he called to us.

We alighted and saw that, indeed, Wellbridge's building was infected with native police swarming over it, overseen by two European constables. Lord Houghton was outside with Mr Somerby speaking to a man in European mufti.

"Mr Wellbridge, Mr Somerby," Wills said, interrupting the conference, "what has happened? Is everything all right?"

"Nothing of consequence, Williams," Wellbridge replied with some annoyance in his voice, "It appears one of my flunkies has fallen out of the window," he explained indicating *that* window.

"And you are?" the European man asked quite impertinently.

Wellbridge interceded, "Mr Williams, a client of mine, and his wife. We have an appointment this morning."

"Is he all right?" I feigned with as much concern as I could muster, "Will he recover?"

"No, Mrs Williams, he's quite dead actually. No chance of recovery, I'm afraid."

“Good Lord! How did—? Why—?”

“There, there, my dear,” Wills assured, “I’m sure the police will sort it out. Sir, may I ask who you are?”

“Hmp. Inspector Clarence Foreman.”

“Inspector Foreman,” Wellbridge said, exasperation creeping into his tone, “when will this circus pack up and leave? It’s clear the fellow fell out of the window. Possibly even jumped out, who’s to say? These natives are slaves to their inner demons. Can we have this sorted quickly? I have a ship to load and a business to run.”

Inspector Foreman took umbrage at being talked down to by this young upstart.

“Lord Houghton, I sincerely hope that your attitude is not based on prejudice for these natives. We will leave as soon as our investigations are complete. Good day to you, sir.”

Leaving the police to their investigation and the removal of the body, Wellbridge brought us up to his drawing room-office and ordered the familiar tea-bearer to bring brandy, rather than tea, to calm our nerves. The ever-present Rahim was ensconced in his corner and Somerby had retreated to his office to prepare for the delayed loading of the ship. Wellbridge was annoyed and suspicious but restrained.

“What I don’t understand,” Wellbridge began, pouring out a measure of spirits and handing the glass to me, “is why Somerby’s keys are missing.”

“Keys?” Wills echoed.

“Mm, keys.” He poured another glass and passed it to Wills.

“Are you saying that someone broke in? To steal keys?”

The only reaction Wills’ question brought was a glare from Wellbridge, a glare, I thought, purposely given to unsettle Wills. Taking the focus off Wills, I asked, “Does the inspector have any assumptions?”

“My dear Mrs Williams, the inspector does not have a clue. Quite literally, I’m afraid. If this was a burglary, as I believe it to be, I don’t want the police snooping about, as you would well understand.” He turned to Wills. “I will discover who it was who broke in and I will discover why. And the crime will not go unpunished.”

“Here, here!” Wills said raising his glass, his bravado coming to the fore.

I couldn’t help but notice the way Wellbridge looked at Wills: it was an odd mixture of distrust and feigned appreciation.

#

No further news or discovery by the police, or by Wellbridge, alleviated our anxiety but we remained vigilant as ever.

The documents that Wills had sent to the Directorate were extremely informative providing firm links to the spies within the British government who were in the employ of the Young Lion.

We were directed to continue with the pretence as more information was needed to round up all of those involved in the spy ring.

Our third consignment was about to leave for Kurrachee from Quetta and I, now five months along, was feeling much better than I had been. Without my corset, I was starting to show.

We had spent a good part of the day with Wellbridge and Somerby—and Rahim. Somerby seemed a little offhand with us; we put that down to his inability to cope with the heat. Wellbridge, by contrast, was most effusive, confusingly so; he seemed to be playing games with us, treating us with friendly contempt.

It was nearing six o'clock when, to our surprise, Wellbridge offered to take us back to our hotel.

"It's on the way and no bother, I assure you. Allow me the time to fetch my hat and case and I will meet you on McLeod. Mr Somerby will see you through."

And, no doubt, so would Rahim.

It was a short journey to our hotel dodging carts and carriages along the way and, as the *gari-wallah* pulled the carriage up outside our hotel, we were met by a much-agitated Ashish, waving a piece of paper in his hand that appeared to be a telegram.

"Sahib! Lieutenant sahib! Urgent for you, suh!"

Wills alighted from the carriage and took the telegram from Ashish. I could see Wills had been rattled by the call as had I.

"Lieutenant?" Wellbridge queried. "Did your man call you lieutenant sahib?"

"Yes, the fool," Wills replied as I stepped onto the street. "I got him off a lieutenant in Bombay and he simply doesn't understand that I'm not in the army."

"I see," Wellbridge said with an unreadable smile, "these natives are quite stupid, are they not?"

"Indeed."

"Well. Until tomorrow, Mr Williams, Mrs Williams. Do have a pleasant evening."

We were left standing in street watching the coach trundle away. Ashish knew immediately what he had done.

"Sahib...I am so sorry...sahib—"

“What’s done is done, Ashish. He has accepted my explanation.”

It wasn’t until we had reached the sanctum of our hotel suite that Wills opened the telegram and read it. He paled.

“The warehouse in Quetta has been broken into. Some of the crates that were ready to ship were smashed open. Their contents have been discovered. The guards captured the burglars—two of them. There may have been more. They’re being interrogated. We’re to suspend activities and await further orders.”

“Our ruse has been exposed?”

“That could explain Wellbridge’s attitude today. He could be behind the burglary.”

“We have an appointment with Wellbridge tomorrow.” I said as I watched Wills pace the room. “Wills, we can’t cancel it. He’d become suspicious. Especially if he is behind the break-in.”

Wills stood by the window that overlooked McLeod Road and turned to me.

“You’re right. But you’ll stay here. I’ll tell him you’re not well.”

“No. I’m coming with you. He’ll—”

“No.”

“But that will make him only more suspicious—”

“No! You’ll do as I say, Davies.”

The sudden change of Wills’ attitude from sociable to authoritative took me by surprise. It was the first time he addressed me by my surname and so unequivocally.

“Davies?” I queried.

“It’s far too dangerous for you in your condition. I’m in charge. I make the decisions. You’ll stay here until I return. Clear?”

He certainly took the wind out of my sails.

“Clear?” he repeated more forcefully.

“Clear,” I replied. But I was not convincing and he was not convinced so we stood there, staring each other down.

Wills was up early the next morning and had shaved, bathed and dressed by the time I joined him at the breakfast table in my dressing gown. To my surprise, it was Bibiana who was waiting upon us, not Ashish.

“Good morning, Bibiana. Is Ashish unwell?”

“Good morning, memsahib,” Bibiana returned as she poured me a cup of tea. “I have not seen my nephew. He told me what happened yesterday. Perhaps he is a little embarrassed.”

That struck me as odd however I accepted that the young bearer was indeed ashamed of possibly having compromised our mission.

“I’ll make enquiries at the servants’ quarters when I leave.” Wills said. “Did you sleep well, Rebecca?”

“Rebecca did, Davies didn’t.” I still felt slighted.

“Well, Rebecca, you tell Davies that it’s for her own good. Pass the marmalade, please.”

“Williams! Mrs Williams not with you?” Lord Houghton’s welcome of Reginald Williams to his office-cum-drawing room was so genial and cheerful that it took Wills by surprise. He sensed something was amiss.

“Er, no, Lord Houghton, she’s not well. The baby and all.”

“And all, yes. Please, sit. You have the letter of credit?”

“Yes. I collected it this morning from the bank,” he said handing the document to Somerby.

“Tea?”

“No, thank you, my lord. I’ve telegraphed my man in Quetta to forward the remaining crates to you by the next train down.”

“Your man in Quetta,” Wellbridge mocked, “Yes. Good, good. Tell me, Williams, something’s been bothering me.”

“Oh?” Wills was steeling himself against what he thought was coming.

“Your man, the bearer, Ashish, is it? Why would he call you ‘lieutenant’?”

“I explained that yesterday, Lord Houghton. He doesn’t realise that not everyone who employs him is a lieutenant, or in the army.”

“As you said. But you are. Is that not right, Lieutenant Williams?” Wills scoffed at the allegation. Wellbridge continued, “The Guides? The Queen’s Own Corps of Guides to be precise?”

“I don’t know where you obtained that information, my lord, but it is not correct. I am a civilian—”

“And your wife.”

Wills became alarmed. “What about Rebecca?”

“You saved her but not before she suffered a fate far worse than death. Is that not correct?”

“Lord Houghton, your allegations are quite preposterous,” Wills asserted rising to his feet. “Mr Garvan himself can vouch for me and my wife. Have we not transacted a number of shipments satisfactorily? To our mutual profit? I demand to know who is making these outlandish accusations!”

“Sit down, Williams,” Houghton commanded, the order backed up by Rahim advancing upon Williams. Wills obeyed and remained ready to fight or flee. Glancing toward the stairs, he noticed another man blocking that exit. “Do you know what I also believe, Lieutenant Williams of the Queen’s Own? I believe it was you who entered these premises that night—uninvited, mind you—that night three weeks ago. I also believe you took some papers from my cabinet. And the guard you despatched? That was Rahim’s cousin. Well, to be quite frank, lieutenant, they’re all Rahim’s cousins. But no matter. Back to your demand, ‘who’. Have you seen your man this morning?” The smugness in that query told Wills everything. “Of course, you haven’t,” Wellbridge scoffed, “Your little native chatterbox is a wealth of information. Given the right encouragement. And he has been well encouraged.”

Wills sprang to his feet, “What have you done with him!” only to be pushed back down into it by Rahim.

“You’ll see very soon. Now, if you please. My turn for questions. Who sent you, Lieutenant Williams of the Queen’s Own?” Wellbridge was relishing the moment like a cat toying with a captive mouse. “The Directorate? Erskine, himself? To what end?”

“You’re wrong, Wellbridge. No one sent me. Let Ashish go.”

“No, I’m right. And you’re wrong, Lieutenant. Dead wrong. And you will tell me. Put him in with the native.”

Immediately, Rahim sprang upon Wills, pulling him out of his seat and throwing him to the floor. The other Afghan rushed from the stairs and grabbed Wills up by his arms. Wills fought back pushing both men off but before he could make a dash for the stairs, he was pulled back by one and punched by the other, overwhelming him with their persistent merciless pummelling until he finally collapsed semi-conscious. The commotion brought Somerby from his office.

“Take him away,” Wellbridge ordered.

The two Afghan thugs collected their insensible victim and dragged him down the stairs and through the godaam followed by Somerby. All the coolies who saw this quickly turned their backs; they knew to see nothing was to know nothing and stay alive.

Somerby quickly unlocked one of the cells and swung the door open. Wills was hauled into the darkened room and tossed like a sack of unwanted rubbish onto the ground. The door slammed shut behind him.

Wills lay there, bloodied and unmoving. He slowly came to himself. The pain to his head and body was intense. Gradually, his eyes opened and adjusted to the darkness. He recognised it as one of the locked storerooms in the warehouse. It was then that he heard whimpering. Lifting his head toward the sound, he saw a bundle of dirty clothes curled up in a ball lying in a corner.

“Ashish...” Wills gasped. He crawled to his bearer and gently turned him only to flinch at the damage that had been inflicted on the young man.

“Sahib...” Ashish faltered, blood seeping from his mouth, nose and ear, “sahib...forgive me...forgive me...”

“Ashish...” Wills’ distress over the pain this young man had suffered overcame his own. His head cleared and his fears turned to Rebecca and Bibiana. They were in danger. They must be warned. He prayed that Rebecca would do what she was supposed to do.

It was past four o’clock and no word from Wills. Every effort Bibiana had made to locate Ashish had come to naught. I was worried for Wills and for Ashish but I didn’t want Bibiana to know that something had gone wrong, dreadfully wrong.

A knock at the door of my hotel suite only caused me more concern; if it was Wills, he had a key; if it was Ashish, he would have used the servant’s entrance.

Bibiana took a few steps to open the door.

“Bibiana,” I said as calmly as possible, “I’ll get it. Would you bring me my satchel, please, and then wait in the bedroom?”

“Of course, memsahib.”

Once she had closed the bedroom door behind her I responded to the second, more emphatic knock.

“Lady Houghton,” I said opening the door, “what a pleasant surprise. And I see you’ve brought a friend.” Standing behind her was, not surprisingly, a large Afghan. “Please, won’t you come in?”

“Rebecca—”

“Please. Call me Mrs Williams,” I corrected with a smile that conveyed my contempt for her and her husband.

“Mrs Williams,” she recommenced, “forgive the unannounced call but your husband has asked me to collect you and your ayah to join us for a celebration.”

“And my ayah,” I mimicked. “What are we celebrating?”

“Why, three months of happy trading.”

“You do this with all of your clients?” I toyed, manoeuvring myself away from the Afghan hulk who had stationed himself behind me. “Of course. But please allow me to change my slippers. These are far too delicate to tramp in through the rough streets.”

I positioned myself in front of the Afghan less than a yard away and lifted my skirts up to my knees to show the slippers. My next move was as sudden as it was effective: with all the strength I could muster, I kicked the Afghan in the groin, the force of which would have sent a football from one end of the field to the other. In this case, I believe I sent that man’s bollocks halfway up his abdominal cavity. He collapsed groaning in excruciating agony much to the distress of her ladyship. She stood rooted to the spot, wide-eyed and gape-mouthed.

I withdrew my pistol from the satchel and aimed it at the shocked woman and ordered, “Please sit, Lady Houghton, and be quiet. I am a proficient shot and will not hesitate to blow your aristocratic brains out.”

The lady was visibly shaken and did as she was told.

“Bibiana, come!” I called. The ayah emerged from the bedroom and was horrified to see what was transpiring but I had no time to explain. “Bibiana, it’s time for us to leave. Pack only what we need and leave the rest.”

“But...memsahib...”

“Bibiana, do not argue with me. Please do as I say. You know what to do and do it quickly.”

Once my ayah was carrying out my orders, I detached cords from the curtains and bound the whining Afghan hand and foot, securing him in a foetal position and ensuring that, if he struggled to get free, the rope around his neck would only tighten. I turned to Lady Houghton.

“Your turn, my lady. Into the bedroom, if you please.”

It took little time to secure the lady to the bed, each limb tied to the bedpost at each corner.

“I shan’t gag you for you and I both know it’s unladylike to squeal like a pig. Besides, no one can hear you. This is quite an extraordinary building,” I enthused, patting a wall.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I must change.”

With that and with Bibiana’s assistance, I removed all of my clothing except for my drawers and camisole.

“You really are pregnant.” Lady Houghton gasped.

“That I am,” I admitted donning Robert’s work clothes of cotton salwar and kurta that served me well on the dig. I slipped on a pair of chappals and deftly tied a length of cotton cloth about my head to form a turban.

“Ready?” I asked of Bibiana. She nodded her response, tentative as it was. I turned to Lady Houghton. “My lady, if all goes well, you will be rescued by evening so do not despair. If it goes badly...well, let me say that the tariff has been paid for another month, so...” I gave her a look of consolation and left her shouting profanities at me. She was no lady.

With our two small satchels in hand, Bibiana and I hurriedly traversed the streets toward our goal garnering little attention: she in her sari and I in my salwar kurta, we blended in with the general diverse population. We arrived at the office of the Commissioner in Sindh and urgently requested to see Mr Prakash Lal, the code the Directorate had given us if we found ourselves in trouble.

We were quickly ushered in to see Major Marcus Belgrave, the head of the operation and, after briefly explaining what was afoot, Bibiana was taken into safe custody and I remained with the major. We were joined by his adjunct, a lieutenant, to discuss the situation but I was in no mood for dilly-dallying or hierarchical vacillations.

“We’re wasting time!” I pressed, “Every minute could mean life or death for Lieutenant Williams and Ashish...if they’re not dead already!”

“Calm down, Miss Davies. We have the situation in hand,” Major Belgrave coaxed.

“How? Bibiana and I barely escaped being captured ourselves! For God’s sake, Major, we must do something and do it now!”

“We have a man there, under cover. We know the lieutenant is not dead and he is, indeed, a prisoner in the godaam. We also know that he will be moved tonight by train. To Merv. We have the train station covered. We will be there and he will be rescued.”

I was confused, panicking. “Why not take the godaam? That’s where he is—”

“The godaam is virtually impregnable. We simply don’t have enough men at our disposal to take it on.”

“And Wellbridge. He’s behind all of this.”

“We know that, Miss Davies—”

“Why haven’t you arrested him?”

“We have him under surveillance. He’ll be at the Sind Club tonight. With Mr Erskine. Establishing an alibi, no doubt. When all this is over, he will be arrested. Leave this to us, Miss Davies,” the major insisted.

“Miss,” the lieutenant added, “you’re but a woman—and with child. You must leave this to us men who know best and who know what they’re doing.”

The lieutenant’s supercilious smile only added to my astonishment at his first statement. I composed myself.

“Right, then,” I conceded, “I’ll join Bibiana and do some needlework while you men who know what you’re doing, do what you know best.”

I turned on my heels and left the two army officers in the wake of my subdued fury and feigned compliance.

“Memsahib, please. You must not go. The major has—”

“The major is an ass. And the lieutenant a bigger one. Bibiana, we’ve wasted enough time. You know what to do if I don’t return.”

“Memsahib...”

I gambled that I was right and Major Belgrave was wrong. I gambled that Wills and Ashish were not dead. I gambled that they would, indeed, be relocated but I didn’t believe it would be by train or to Merv. The other two infiltrators had vanished without a trace and I believed that this was to be Wills’ fate as well.

Our earlier reconnaissance was paying off. At this time of night, the streets of Kurrachee were all but empty as I scurried down the back streets dressed as Robert. Approaching the godaam, I shucked Robert off down to my all-black clothing beneath and blended into the dark night. My satchel hung across my shoulder and held my pistol and Somerby’s keys to the warehouse doors.

I inched my way through the alleyway to the wharf at the back of the warehouse, intending to gain access through the little back door that opened onto it and praying all the while that my presence would not be discovered.

The sounds of a chugging piston engine and voices echoed from the wharf!

They should have been no one there at this time of night. It should have been deserted.

I peered around the corner to see two coolies mooring a steam-engine fishing boat to the dock. The captain of the vessel, a plump Hindoo with oily skin and an exaggeration of a

moustache, remained on board, nervously taking in the activity on the wharf. Then I noticed our tea-bearer, sitting cross-legged on the dock nearby. What was he doing there? It was only when he implored to be let go did I notice that his arms were bound behind his back. That protestation earned him a punch to his head by an Afghan whom I recognised as one of Wellbridge's 'sentries'. The two coolies cowered in fear at this inordinate violence and were ordered to get on with the preparations.

It was at that instant that it became clear: the tea-bearer was Belgrave's undercover man. He had been discovered. I feared for his fate. But I had to find Wills. I slipped by the Afghan sentry unobserved by all except the tea-bearer who seemed to recognise me and who, thankfully, said nothing.

The vast warehouse was dark and I felt my way past the workshop in the corner where the coolies' tools were stored and through the piles of crated merchandise, determined to locate Wills and Ashish.

The door to the cell swung open casting a pallid light onto the bloodied bodies of Wills and Ashish huddled in the corner.

Wills roused at the intrusion and, seeing Rahim and two shadowy figures filling the doorway, staggered to his feet and shouted, "You killed him, you bastards!"

He took a few unsteady steps toward his jeering captor, groggy from the beating he had endured but collapsed to his knees, defeated. "Bastards..."

Rahim instructed his two cohorts to collect Ashish and they obediently heaved the inert body of the bearer up and dragged him outside the cell.

"*Yalla!*" Rahim shouted at Wills, pulling him up by his arm and pushing him after Ashish.

Outside the cell, Wills saw a large crate on a hand trolley and watched in horror as his young servant was thrust into it. Rahim laughed at Wills' reaction to this irreverent act then shoved Wills toward the crate.

When I heard Wills' voice, I stopped dead in my tracks. He was alive! I listened intently and, when I heard the sound of scuffling, I followed it, silently moving from stack to stack until I came upon the heart-stopping sight of Wills being manhandled into a large crate.

"You won't get away with this!" Wills protested. "You tell that bastard Wellbridge that I'm coming for him!" Wills' threats were met with a vicious attack by Rahim, punching him several times until Wills fell semiconscious into the crate. The two coolies were rattled

by this violence and jumped when Rahim snapped at them to cover the crate with a lid and nail it down. Another barked order from Rahim and the coolies pulled the trolley toward the dock.

It was then that it all became clear. They weren't taking Wills to the railway station; they were taking him out to sea and there...

My heart pounded. There was not a moment to lose.

I had a gun but there were seven of them at least, possibly more. I couldn't be certain how the coolies would react: would they stand by or would they attack me? And, unlike my stand-off with Johnson and his gang, I had to make each shot count; there wouldn't be a second chance. The only alternative was to pick them off one at a time. And silently.

The two coolies pulled the trolley onto the dock where Rahim ordered the four to load the crate onto the fishing boat. The second Thug—for they were true Thugs: murderers—grabbed the distressed tea-bearer and pushed him onto the fishing boat, throwing him to the deck, behind the crate.

In the workshop I fumbled around in the dark and found what I needed and watched the dock from behind the door, waiting for the moment to make my move.

Suddenly, I felt something. My lower abdomen felt a little flutter, a twitch, a gentle tap, the likes of which I had never felt before. The baby—my baby. I was bewildered by the realisation that I really did have a life growing inside me.

A shout from the dock brought me back to the reality that Wills' life was in jeopardy if I did not act.

Rahim had boarded the fishing boat and commanded the craft to be untethered and the captain to pull away, leaving the four coolies on the dock. Rahim's last words to them were clearly a warning, drawing his thumb across his neck as he spoke.

The boat slowly chugged away from the wharf as both Thugs joined the captain at the helm in the small cabin on the foredeck.

I saw the opportunity and sprinted from the warehouse, across the dock and leapt across the growing expanse of water, landing feet first on the deck, behind the crate and next to the tea-bearer. The thud of my landing was absorbed by the sound of the engine's pistons.

I looked back to see that the four coolies watched on in silent astonishment, grateful that they did not raise the alarm.

"Mrs Williams," the tea-bearer whispered equally shocked, "you—"

"Shh..." I warned and quickly severed his bindings with the packing knife I had collected from the workshop. "We must work quickly. Are you up for it?"

He nodded. It was then that I saw the damage they had inflicted on this young man; he was hurt but courageous. I handed him the knife and threw my satchel onto the deck, removing another item I had picked up: a small crowbar.

From the cabin, I could hear Rahim instructing the captain to head out to sea. The skies were dark and cloudless, the half-moon casting a dull glow on us, just enough to conceal us but also just enough to expose us. I had to work quickly.

Reaching up to the lid, I inserted the straight end of the claw between the lid and the case and levered it. It gave a little. I pushed the claw further along and levered again; it gave a little more but I had to work my way around the lid to lift it off effectively. There was no sound or movement from inside the crate and fear for Wills' life drove me on.

I moved from behind the crate to one side just as Rahim turned.

“Ai!” he shouted.

I was discovered!

Both Thugs rushed toward me. I panicked and dropped the crowbar, desperate to get to the gun in my satchel behind the crate. Why didn't I shoot them when I had the chance!

Rahim caught me and, in the tight space on deck, I was unable to manoeuvre. I struggled to free myself. He was far stronger and caught me in the debilitating crush of his arms.

I heard the engine slow.

Rahim picked me up and threw me overboard. I tumbled and sank down through the dark water, holding onto the little breath that he hadn't squeezed out of me. My clothing was pulling me down; I righted myself and looked up. Through the murky water, I could just make out the silhouette of the boat and the Afghan peering over the starboard side searching for me. I swam beneath the hull to the other side, my lungs screaming for air and praying that I would not be seen. I broke the surface and sputtered out seawater and gulped in lungfuls of air, hoping no one would hear me. Gasping, I found the boat's rub rail and clung to it as the craft bobbed slowly along.

Rahim, satisfied I had drowned, shouted to his accomplice to help him push the crate overboard.

No!

There was nothing I could do. When I heard the splash the large wooden case made hitting the water, it was like a death knell.

I could not—would not give up on Wills.

I dived under the boat again and came up next to the bobbing crate and thanked God that it was floating and had not sunk. Somehow, the crate was upright and I could see where I had managed to lever off part of the lid.

On board, the Thugs turned their attention to the tea-bearer, advancing upon him with their original deadly intent for him. He sprang to his feet brandishing the knife, ready to defend himself and determined not to succumb without a fight.

Rahim sneered and in an instant he and his accomplice overpowered the young bearer, disarming him and knocking him to the deck.

He landed on my satchel, dislodging the contents: keys and gun.

In an instant, the Afghans were upon him and grabbed him as he fumbled for the weapon. In the melee, he fired blindly, the first shot missed its mark, the second shot pierced the throat of Rahim's accomplice and felled him, clutching the gaping wound to his neck, gasping for life; the third hit Rahim in his shoulder, the fourth, fifth and sixth despatched the brutal Thug in a spray of blood and guts.

Stunned by his own violence, the tea-bearer staggered to his feet and searched for me. I was treading water beside the crate in the wake of the slow-moving boat. The crate was slowly taking in water and sinking. I did all I could to prize the lid away but, without the crowbar, it was useless.

The bearer ran to the captain and, with my empty gun pointed at the captain's head, ordered him to turn the craft about.

The crate was three-quarters submerged when the fishing boat pulled alongside.

“Crowbar!” I shouted and was handed it immediately.

It took many desperate attempts to shift the lid off that blasted crate. I prayed that Wills was conscious and that he had his head above water.

The bearer could do little to help other than to keep the boat alongside and the captain compliant, threatening him with my now-empty gun.

“Wills!” I cried coughing out the seawater that flooded into my mouth and nose.

“Wills! Can you hear me? Push! Push up on the lid!”

The crate was now almost fully submerged. One final desperate jimmying of the crowbar had the lid off and Wills burst out of his coffin, gasping for life-giving air. He coughed and spluttered as the crate sank beneath the waves.

Both the bearer and the captain reached down and grabbed Wills and pulled him onboard.

To my horror, Wills was holding onto Ashish by his wrist. The young bearer was lifeless.

On board, Wills' young and faithful bearer was lain down beside Wills.

"I couldn't leave him to the sharks," Wills hacked, his lungs spasming to clear themselves.

#

The atmosphere in the Sind Club was most jovial. The well-to-do English business men were enjoying each other's company without disruption by their wives and deceiving themselves they were back in the Mother Country. The illusion would have been carried had it not been for the stifling heat.

But this was the land of opportunity and any enterprising gentleman could make a fortune here—so long as he wasn't caught.

That was the tenet of the Wellbridge dynasty: don't get caught.

The family of Anthony Wellbridge had been ennobled when his father was elevated to the rank of baron and, upon his father's death, Anthony inherited the title *The Right Honourable The Lord Houghton*.

It was an honour for Mr Henry Erskine, the newly re-elected president of the Sind Club and the current Commissioner in Sindh to be in such illustrious company...or so thought Anthony Wellbridge. The two gentlemen had enjoyed an excellent meal at this exclusive establishment and were discussing business over a large brandy and cheroot when a commotion disrupted their conversation.

"Sir! Madam! You can't come in here!" was the cry of the concierge as he scurried behind me and Wills through the dining room and to Wellbridge's table, startling both him and Erskine and drawing the bewildered attention of the waiters and guests.

"What the devil!" cried Erskine, standing to face us intruders. He took in our sodden, battered and bruised appearance, composed himself, then demanded, "What is the meaning of this outrage?"

Wills ignored the Commissioner. "You! Wellbridge!"

Wellbridge sat emotionless in his place with an unreadable smirk and remarked, "Been for a swim?"

"You bastard!" With a fury I had not seen in any man, Wills grabbed Wellbridge by his jacket lapels and dragged him out of his chair, sending bottles and glasses flying. "You killed my man!" Wills spat out and punched the nobleman's face time and again until he was senseless. Immediately, the waiters were upon him. Wellbridge's knees buckled but, even

hindered by the waiters, Wills' merciless barrage of blows didn't stop, following him down to the floor until, finally, Erskine and several other waiters dragged Wills off the bloodied, damaged nobleman.

"Steady on!" Erskine cried pushing Wills away restrained and surrounded by the waiters. "He's been here with me all night. Explain yourself." Erskine demanded.

"Major Belgrave will explain," Wills thundered, "He'll be here shortly." Wills' fury abated and he turned to Wellbridge, prone on the floor simpering, his face blood-soaked nursing a broken nose and lacerated brow. "He's coming from the railway station. But you knew he'd be there, didn't you?" Wills forcefully broke away the men holding him back, "Let go of me!" He turned his attention back to Wellbridge. "You're lucky they pulled me off you, you murdering bastard, because I came here with the intention of killing you."

Wills pushed his way through the barricade of waiters, "Get out of my way!" and stormed out as quickly as he stormed in.

I looked at Wellbridge as he was being assisted by a waiter. "Perhaps you don't know yet but your wife is in custody. And Rahim and one of his 'cousins' are dead. And a third cousin probably will never have children. For you, Lord Houghton, the Great Game is up."

I caught up to Wills outside the Sind Club. He had calmed down and was nursing his swollen fist.

"You know," I said censuring him, "between you and me, you shouldn't have called him a bastard. That would put him in the same league as me. A bastard...and a murderer...Oh! Come to think of it—"

Several days later, Wills and I were summoned by Major Belgrave to his office. Wills was recovering well from his beating and near-drowning at the hands of the Afghans. His vision was less blurry and his headaches abating. He had completed his report and had it delivered to the major the previous day.

"Miss Davies, Lieutenant Williams," Major Belgrave said meeting us at his door and ushering us to our chairs. "Please, sit. I trust you are both well?" he said then immediately winced at his thoughtless automatic greeting. "Of course, you're not," he scoffed as he took his place behind his desk. "I, um, I just wanted to let you know that Commissioner in Sindh has made generous provision for your ayah, Bibiana, and for the family of your bearer, Ashish, in gratitude of their contribution in bringing this sordid affair to its conclusion. With regard to Wellbridge and his wife, they are now both in custody and will face prosecution on charges of high treason...and we know what the ultimate penalty for that will be—"

“If convicted,” I added.

“Oh, they will be. The general manager, Somerby, has turned his coat and will give testimony against them both. That, and with evidence provided by the captain of the fishing boat and some of the coolies, will leave no doubt as to their culpability.”

“Have you found any evidence leading to the fate of your two previous infiltrators?” Wills asked.

“I’m afraid they met the fate that yours was to have been,” the major gravely replied. “I have arranged for a team of deep-sea divers to accompany a most compliant fishing boat captain to the spot where they were pushed overboard. We will find them however long it takes.”

“The tea-bearer,” I asked, “what’s become of him?”

“Ah, yes, the tea-bearer,” the major replied making his way to a different door and opening it. “Subadar-Major Mangal, if you please.”

From the adjoining office, came a young native man in a soldier’s uniform sporting sergeant-major insignia, his bruised face barely able to contain a beaming smile.

“Miss Davies, Lieutenant Williams, this is Subadar-Major Ravindra Mangal. I believe you’ve met before.”

“The tea-bearer,” I gasped.

“The subadar-major was our under-cover man. When Wellbridge discovered this, Mangal was given misleading information, which he was duped into passing on to us. They were going to kill him, too.”

“Miss Davies memsahib, you saved my life—”

“No. You saved mine. And Wills’...Lieutenant Williams’. It is I who should thank you. If you hadn’t despatched those two Afghans, none of us would be here today.”

“Lastly, gentlemen, and lady,” Belgrave continued, “My report is on its way to London and I have recommended you each for a citation for acts of bravery in the service of queen and country.”

We spent the next few months, together with a small army from the Directorate of Military Intelligence, scouring documents found in Wellbridge’s office. We made many discoveries that led us to the identity and location of other spies working for the Czar in Sindh. Many had fled but we captured many others and they told all—by one means or another. Convicting Lord and Lady Houghton was now only a matter of judicial process. The Young Lion, *l’venok*, however, eluded us.

#

By February 1886, the ‘Young Lion Operation’ as it became known, was all but over. I had returned and to my room at Booth’s Lodgings for Ladies in Bombay and to Mrs Booth’s condemnation of my physical state—I was very much with child and without a wedding ring. Wills, ever the gentleman, requested and received extended furlough and accompanied me to help me pack and remove to Secunderabad. There, he arranged the lease of a small cottage for us in Trimulgherry close to the Station Hospital.

He remained with me throughout my confinement and was as overjoyed as any father would have been at the birth of my child—a boy. He was a bonny and healthy baby and I secretly prayed that his future would be untainted by my past deeds.

There was no question that I would raise him. For his own sake I would give him up to a loving and nurturing family. He was never to know of his beginnings or of me.

“What have you named him?” Wills asked as he cradled the newborn in his arms.

“William Patrick,” I replied, still exhausted and lying in the hospital bed. “William after you and Patrick after my...a boy I was very fond of in Sydney Town.”

“You realise my Christian name is Reginald?”

“Yes, but I thought William more appropriate. William the Conqueror.”

“And his family name?”

“None. I’m leaving it blank. As I have the name of the father.”

“We have to put something.”

“Blank. The family who adopts him can fill it in.” I looked at the child and there was no doubt who his father was. Wispy strands of hair were the colour of copper. “Wills, I don’t want him to ever know who his father was or how he came to be. Or about me. What happened...the things I’ve done. Never.”

Wills looked at me with disappointment laced with understanding.

“I’ve written to Stokes and he’s arranged everything with the Catholic church. They will act as intermediary. Stokes knows of a very worthy family to take the boy. I’ve heard of this fellow and believe him to be a good man. He’s a major with the Second Battalion of the East Yorkshire Regiment stationed in Bombay. Ernest Pinnock. They are childless and desperate for a son and heir. I have arranged to meet him and his wife in Bombay on the twenty-sixth. But I’m sure they will pass muster.”

“Wills, my name is to be deleted from his birth certificate. Can you arrange that?”

“I’ll make sure it happens, one way or the other. And I’ll not speak of you. I’ll ensure that Old Man Stokes promises not to as well.”

By May of that year, Baby William Patrick was in the care of Major Ernest Pinnock and his wife Cicely who promised Wills that my son would never know of me or that he had been adopted. They were never told of the boy's father or how he had been conceived.

My last deed before I severed all ties with my baby forever was to make provision for his education and care by setting up a trust fund for him through one of the army advocates.

#

It had been a very difficult time for me after I gave up my baby. I knew he had gone to a good home; the scant reports from Stokes to Wills were positive and assured that William Patrick was being loved and cared for...far better that I ever could have.

By August, I finally was beginning to sleep again and my appetite restored. I don't know how Wills put up with me and my sullen irritability during that time but his unselfish, unrelenting support brought me back to myself. To this day, I don't know why he stuck by me when it would have been so easy for him to leave me to stew in my unexpected melancholy and unfathomable self-pity. But stick by me he did.

Word came through Lieutenant-Colonel Stokes that Will's temporary assignment with the Directorate of Military Intelligence was permanent—a posting Wills was excited to fill but he insisted on one condition to this new commission: that I be attached to this position.

There was initial fuss and bother over the fact that I was a woman but, after Stoke's strong recommendation and their review of the reports of "The Young Lion Operation", permission finally was granted and *Captain* Reginald Williams and his Assisting Clerk, Miss Rebecca Davies, were assigned to Cape Colony and the possible resurgence of the unrest there.

#

PART VII

1905

Thursday, 21st December – 4.30 p.m.

Steadman Hotel, Lambeth, London, England

It had been a long and fruitless day for Charlie Pinnock. And one of disconcerting events. Young Charlie Pinnock slumped in the old Chesterfield chair in his mother's hotel room and replayed the events of the day, awaiting his mother's and aunt's return. He had now pursued his quest down every obscure avenue and found each blocked by an impenetrable stone wall. What he had presumed to be the final act of discovering who his real parents were only left him more disconsolate than before.

Major Williams, the only man who could help him, virtually threw him out on his ear and cautioned him never to make contact again. A woman—a Miss Davies—warned him that he was in danger. But from what? From whom? And who was she? Why would she care?

“There you are!” chirped a spritely Mrs Pinnock as she and her younger sister struggled through the door laden with an amazing assortment of parcels and packages. “I imagined we wouldn't see you until late this evening.”

Charlie straightened his defeated shoulders and hastened out of his chair to help his mother and aunt with their purchases.

“Mother! Aunty. Let me help you. You seem to have bought out all the London shops.”

“Yes. I'm afraid I may have spent far more than I should have—” Mrs Pinnock replied with guilt-free impishness only to be interrupted by her sister, Beatrice.

“Now, Cicely, own that you enjoyed every minute of it, you spendthrift. You've bought something for every single member of the family plus their in-laws and cousins. And servants!”

“And something especially nice for you, Charlie.”

“I'll say. We spent half the morning looking for exactly the right thing.”

“For me, Mother? You really shouldn’t have—”

“For you, my darling boy, anything,” she said gently cradling her son’s face in her gloved hands. “Why are you back so soon? I thought you’d be out celebrating with your friends from Sandhurst, Sub-altern Pinnock.” Mrs Pinnock was particularly pleased to address her son by his new commission. He was to join his father’s old regiment after the Christmas holiday, beginning at the same level her husband had all those years ago. She was sure their son would attain the same, if not higher, rank her dear husband had: Lieutenant Colonel.

“The, er, the chaps had a previous engagement,” lied Charlie for he had not told his mother what his true quest had been that day: to find Lieutenant Reginald Williams of the Metropolitan Police and question him about his real parents.

“Well, in that case, what say you join your Aunty Beatrice and me for a sumptuous French meal? In celebration.” Mrs Pinnock proposed. “There’s a French restaurant not far from here.”

“Mother, the expense—” Charlie objected.

“Charlie, how many times does one graduate from the Royal Military Academy with honours? Now, off to your own room while your aunt and I freshen up.”

“And stow all these gifts!” Beatrice added, scanning the piles with an overwhelmed sigh.

Charlie made his way to the door and turned to see the brilliant smile his mother gave him. He realised—and not for the first time—that he loved her with all his being. Words that Major Williams said echoed through his thoughts: what good would it do to awaken sleeping dogs. The major was right. He couldn’t love this woman more. And the woman who gave birth to him? She obviously didn’t want him, perhaps she was dead but now it mattered none to him. He decided that he would no longer pursue those ghosts or awaken those dogs. His life had been a happy one, marred only by the sudden death of his beloved father. He had everything he needed and more. He had his mother’s undeniable love.

#

1905

Thursday, 21st December – 4.30 p.m.

Lilyfield Manor, England

“Peter, has there been any word from Miss Davies?”

“No, my lady, none.”

“You will let me know as soon as you hear anything?”

“Immediately, my lady. Will that be all, my lady?”

With a grateful nod, the countess dismissed her butler from the study and poured herself a cup of tea, chiding herself for feeling so apprehensive. After all, Rebecca hadn't been too concerned about the burglary of her Newington flat so why should she? Perhaps it was longing she was feeling, not apprehension. And perhaps this feeling of longing should be curtailed lest it transmogrify into jealousy. But why had she not telephoned? The lack of communication brought back painful memories of only a few months prior when Rebecca disappeared from the face of the earth and feared dead. She immediately pushed those memories aside; this situation was entirely different; her life was not in danger.

“I beg your pardon, my lady...” The soft voice with the Gaelic lilt belonged to Mrs McPherson who stood at the study's doorway, shadowed by Mrs Morton, the cook.

“Mrs McPherson, do come in.” Lady Katherine's reply was formal; she only addressed her housekeeper by her Christian name when they were together and alone. “And Mrs Morton.”

The cook bobbed a quick curtsy, “Your ladyship.”

“Mrs Morton has some concerns about the Christmas menu, my lady,” began the housekeeper, “all to do with—”

“Turkey!” interrupted Cook, “why turkey, my lady?”

“Mrs Morton—” the housekeeper's warning went unheeded.

“What's wrong with goose? ‘Christmas turkey’ just don't sound right—”

Mrs Morton—”

“It’s always been goose at Christmas—”

Mrs Morton!”

“Goose...” Mrs Morton’s agitation subsided to a mere whisper.

Lady Katherine did her best to refrain from smiling at the two older women’s quibbling for she knew Cook to be a passionate traditionalist who rarely tried anything that hadn’t been tried and tested many times over.

“Mrs Morton,” began the noblewoman as conciliatorily as her constrained mirth would allow, “what is your objection? Other than tradition?”

“Turkey for the Christmas table? Newfangled idea! It should be goose. Goose with plum pudding, goose with roasted nuts, minced pies, roast pork, apple stuffing. And they are so expensive, my lady, turkeys. Mr Lowe quoted me one shilling and seven pence a pound and we’ll need at least a twenty-pound bird just for upstairs. That’s one pound, eleven and eight, just for the bird. That’s highway robbery, my lady! He tells me they’re coming from Russia. With all their troubles with strikes and massacres, I’m sure sending us a turkey is not a priority. And geese are far cheaper. English geese—”

“I understand—”

“And I don’t have a recipe for turkey, my lady, pardon the interruption. Goose. Goose I have a recipe for.”

“Nothing in Mrs Beeton’s cook book?”

“Nothing in *my* cook book, my lady.”

“You know it’s quite à la mode, Mrs Morton. Even the king himself is having turkey for Christmas dinner. Perhaps not a Russian bird but we shouldn’t be left behind, should we?”

“Well...” the cook hesitated. “And my budget?”

“I’m sure we can accommodate the extra expense, Mrs Morton. Can we not, Mrs McPherson?” The countess turned to her housekeeper.

“Aye, my lady, I’m sure we can accommodate *two* turkeys if needs be. English or Russian. And if Mrs Morton would refer to Mrs Beeton’s recipe and apply her own special touch, I’m sure we’d be able to satisfy King Edward himself...if needs be.”

“Mrs Morton?”

The cook hesitated then concurred, “If you say so, my lady.”

“It’s settled then. I know you will do a splendid job on the Russian...or English...bird and even cast a shadow over Mrs Beeton’s original recipe.”

“I’ll do me best.”

Mrs McPherson brought the interview to a close. “Thank you, my lady. Mrs Morton...?”

“Thank you, my lady,” the cook offered with another bob. “Pity, I had a real plump goose sorted...”

Lady Katherine smiled as both women retreated the way they came, Mrs McPherson glancing back. It was then she noticed a melancholia to her mistress’ smile.

“Is something amiss, my lady?” she asked softly as Mrs Morton made her way back to the kitchen, mumbling to herself as she went.

“No, Fiona. I’m just missing Rebecca. Rather, not knowing how she’s faring. The burglary. I had hoped to hear from her by now.”

“I’m sure all’s well but you could telephone to Mr Quinn. He would know of the incident, I’m sure.”

“Yes...yes, perhaps I will.”

#

1905

Thursday, 21st December – 4.30 p.m.

Metropolitan Police, London, England

Mr Alexander Quinn was scathing in his censure of my impulsive action to threaten Sir Giles Hawthorne. It wasn't so much that I had threatened to kill the offensive little prig for divulging our whereabouts but that I had tipped our hand that we knew the offensive little prig had done so. And Wills did nothing to shore up my very inadequate defence.

The arguments back and forth were respectful but forceful and each of us tipped in his tuppence-worth—except for Yabsley. He had become quite pale and was looking far worse now than he had been in the morning. Any attempt he made to stand was abandoned and had earlier vomited up his breakfast. He seemed to have difficulty in following the conversation. The knock he took was having a severe detrimental effect on him but he refused all suggestions that he be removed to hospital.

Once we had all calmed down, we got on with planning our next move.

What was obvious was that Wills and I were the object of these offenses. The motivation to commit these offenses was most likely the recovery of the booty of which I had relieved the former Amir's bodyguard. That those three burly Mussulman intruders were being led by someone else was also obvious. But by whom? My intuition told me the most likely instigator was the second son of the former Amir, one Naathim Nasir Talpur, but was it he who had contacted Sir Giles Hawthorne for my address? And, if so, was Hawthorne made aware of what the dead Amir's son was after?

Quinn insisted that Hawthorne not be involved. In fact, Quinn confirmed he had instructed Sir Giles to take his Christmas holiday early, something Sir Giles had railed against until Quinn said it was a reward for his faithful duty and would be on full pay during the extended break.

The search of university enrolments by almost the entire DSO team had only just begun and it would take days, weeks, even months and, as expected, one day in, nothing so far.

We bandied about various theories and hypotheses like a tennis ball in a Wimbledon match. The one thing I dared not mention was the unexpected appearance of that red-headed young man. Wills was complicit in my withholding knowledge of his existence.

“We won’t find who’s responsible by hiding away,” I said, becoming frustrated by all the talk and no action. “We need to draw them out into the open. Clearly, whoever is behind this is after what I have. Make it known that I am here and they will come for me—”

“No—” Quinn rejected out-of-hand.

I persisted. “We arrest them and beat a confession out of them. They know who is behind all this.”

“Too dangerous.” Quinn insisted.

“Too dangerous? Sir, I’ve been in far more perilous circumstances than this. I know how to look after myself.”

“And I’ll be with her all the way,” Wills confirmed. “I am involved so my appearance won’t be of any surprise.”

“No. We sit tight until we have more information from the universities so we know just who we’re dealing with.”

“That could take months!”

“Has anyone put a time limit to this? Meanwhile, for your own safety’s sake, you, Davies and Williams, are to stay within these walls. I’ll have the desk sergeant find suitable accommodation for you here and bring you a change of clothing. And you, Yabsley, you will be taken to hospital for treatment and convalescence.”

“Sir, with respect, to do nothing is to waste time. These people are determined and it will be only a matter of time before they become desperate and more vicious in their attempts to find me. I think we should be anticipatory rather than inactive.”

“I have made my decision, Davies, and my orders are for you and Williams to stay here until further notice. Is that understood? Davies?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Williams?”

“Sir.”

“Good. Now help Yabsley get his things together. I will call the ambulance to take him to hospital.”

So we were ordered to sit on our hands and await the results of the university investigations. A poor decision, I thought but, at the very least, it would give time for Wills and Yabsley to recover from their injuries.

1905

Thursday, 21st December – 10.30 p.m.

Steadman Hotel, Lambeth, London, England

They climbed the stairs to their third-floor hotel rooms, mother, son and aunt, each filled with bonhomie and *bon repas* and, of course, several glasses of the fine champagne the French restaurant offered.

“Your father would have been so proud of you,” Mrs Pinnock said at the entrance to her room, tears of both joy and regret welling in her eyes. She pulled her son into a tight motherly embrace. “So proud.”

Charlie returned the loving embrace and immediately pushed any yearning to discover his real parents into the abyss of oblivion. Yes, his father would have been proud of him and he would do everything humanly possible to ensure his mother always felt the way she did for him tonight.

Beatrice unlocked the door to the sisters’ room and glanced toward the far end of the passageway where she saw three well-dressed men in quiet conversation. The corridor was lit by electric light that cast a soft but dim glow.

“Cicely, let the young man get some rest,” she chided her sister who disentangled herself from her son’s embrace.

“Rest, Charlie, we’ll see you tomorrow at breakfast.

“Good night mother, Aunty Beatrice. Tomorrow. I have some Christmas shopping to do as well.”

He waited until his mother and aunt were safely inside their room before turning toward his own, the next door up. Inserting his key into the lock, he became aware of someone standing close to him.

“Charles Pinnock?” the voice was deep and full-toned with a strange resonance to it which he couldn’t readily place. He turned to the voice.

“Yes?”

Before he could react, Charlie was pushed backward into the chest of another man who wrapped his massive arm around Charlie’s neck and squeezed tight, his chin caught in the crook of the strangler’s elbow. He was being pulled backward and upward, being lifted off the floor. Charlie grabbed at the constricting arm about his neck but couldn’t pull it away. He struggled and writhed but two other men held down his arms and legs. He could still breathe—just—but couldn’t call out.

The three large men huddled around Charlie; he was unable to move, unable to call out. He was being strangled and he couldn’t free himself!

He bucked, he jerked and thrashed but to no avail; the darkened corridor became darker...and darker...and darker until all went black.

All was quiet in Charlie’s world, his body limp and submissive.

The three attackers released their grip on the now incapacitated Charlie, easily holding the youth upright.

They looked around. Nobody witnessed what they had done.

Without a word exchanged between them, they gathered up the insensible young man—one at Charlie’s shoulders and another, his legs, while the third quietly slipped a folded sheet of paper under the door to Mrs Pinnock’s room.

Within three minutes, and without being observed, their mission was accomplished and they slipped down the servants’ stairs and into the dark, complicit night.

#

1905

Friday, 22nd December – 7.00 a.m.

Steadman Hotel, Lambeth, London, England

“Cicely, I’m off to the bathroom,” sang Aunt Beatrice, swathed in her dressing gown and carrying a towel and bag containing her toilet-set. “I’ll knock on Charlie’s door and make sure he’s awake.”

Cicely was in the little bedroom tidying it up in anticipation of the housemaid—it wouldn’t do to let the maid think that they were untidy or slothful—so she was happy for her younger sister to take her ablution before she did.

“Cicely! Cicely!” The panicked cry from Beatrice brought Mrs Pinnock to the little sitting room and to her sister who held a sheet of paper in her trembling hand.

Beatrice’s look of sheer alarm and terror made Cicely’s heart pound with fear. “What is it? What have you there?”

Cicely took the note and, scanning it once, flung open her door and ran to Charlie’s, followed closely by Beatrice.

Cicely knocked frantically on her son’s door. “Charlie! Charlie, open the door!”

Beatrice pulled her sister away and pointed to the door’s lock and the key in it. The enormity of the situation hit them immediately and simultaneously.

In a deft and desperate move, Cicely unlocked the door and flung it open. A few steps inside they stopped and looked around the room. Empty.

“Charlie?”

“Perhaps it’s a joke,” offered a disbelieving Beatrice.

Cicely opened out the scrunched note she gripped and re-read it. “This is no joke. Someone’s taken Charlie. They’ve given instructions.”

#

1905

Friday, 22nd December – 8.15 a.m.

Metropolitan Police, London, England

The rapping on Major Williams' office door was loud and insistent.

Wills swung the door open to face a very apologetic desk sergeant.

“What is it, Sergeant?” Wills' annoyance tempered itself when he saw two well-dressed but distraught women standing behind him, their agitation most evident.

“Beg pardon, Major, but Mr Quinn has not yet arrived and Sir Giles is on holiday and I know—”

“Out with it, man!”

“These two ladies are insisting to speak to Miss Davies.”

“Miss Davies?” Wills queried, looking from one to the other and back to the sergeant. “She's not here.”

“Please!” begged Mrs Pinnock pushing past the desk sergeant, “We've nowhere else to turn! They've taken my son!” She thrust the crumpled note at Wills.

The first thing Wills noticed was that the note was written in an elegant, most likely feminine, hand. The second thing was the first two words: “Charles Pinnock?”

“Yes. My son, Charlie. Please, you must find this Rebecca Davies. My son's life depends on it!”

Wills' mind raced through the strange events of the last few days and the stranger events surrounding yesterday's visitation by the same Charles Pinnock. He knew full well who Charles Pinnock was.

“Come in,” he said finally conceding the urgency of the interruption. “Thank you, Sergeant. Ask Mr Quinn to join us immediately he arrives.” He closed the door behind the two women and addressed them respectfully. “You are Mrs Pinnock?”

“Yes. This is my sister, Mrs Harding.”

“Apologies for the rude accommodation but please make yourselves comfortable—”

“Where can I find Rebecca Davies?” The angst was rising exponentially. “She must do as the letter demands or my son...”

“Miss Davies will be with us shortly. Tell me what happened.”

“You can’t be involved!” Mrs Pinnock cried, pacing the small room, “The police must not be involved. My son will die. It must be Rebecca Davies. Only she can save him.”

I had taken leave to freshen up in the lavatory and, as I approached Wills’ office, I could hear a woman’s voice coming from inside. The muffled sounds were distressed and, upon entering, I saw two women standing there, flustered and obviously troubled.

“Ah. Davies, this is Mrs Pinnock and her sister, Mrs Harding,” Wills introduced. “This is Rebecca Davies.”

My mind reeled and a million thoughts raced through it all at once. Mrs Pinnock. Charlie’s mother. My son’s mother; she seemed a woman of quality. What was she doing here? Why did she want to see me? Why was she so upset? Did she find out about me? Was she here to berate me for talking to her son? For abandoning him? How did she know?

“Davies,” Wills continued pulling me out of my wild abstractions, “something’s happened to the Pinnock boy, Charles. They need your help.”

“My help? Why? What has happened?” I was beginning to feel their anxiety enveloping me.

“They’ve abducted my son and they want you to—” Mrs Pinnock’s voice broke.

A flash of clarity sent a shiver through my spine. ‘They’ knew about me and Charlie. They took Charlie to get to me...and the booty.

“This,” interrupted Wills, handing me the notepaper, “is the ransom note they left for Mrs Pinnock.”

I took the note and could see that Wills knew exactly what I was thinking. He turned to Mrs Pinnock.

“We’ll find your son. He will be returned to you unharmed.”

Tears welled in the woman’s eyes, “Please, please. He’s all I have. I can’t lose him...I don’t understand...My darling boy...please...” As the tears streamed down her face, her knees gave way and she collapsed onto the old sofa. Immediately, her sister was beside her, wrapping her arms about her and comforting her.

Her grief was real and her fear of losing him palpable.

“Mrs Pinnock,” Wills quietly assured, “we will find your son.” Wills turned to me as his words rang through my mind: *your* son.

#

It was several hours since Mrs Pinnock and her sister left assured that we would find her son and return him unharmed—a promise we knew would be difficult to keep. Quinn was unusually delayed and waiting for him just made us more edgy and restless. We read and re-read the note the abductors had left:

Charles Pinnock will not be harmed if you carry out these instructions exactly.

Contact Rebecca Davies at the Metropolitan Police Station in Whitehall.

She is to proceed IMMEDIATELY to her flat in Newington.

She is to collect further directions from her letter box.

You are being watched.

She is to proceed ALONE or Charles Pinnock will die.

She is not to be followed or Charles Pinnock will die.

Charles Pinnock will be released unharmed only if Rebecca Davies does exactly as instructed.

Memories came flooding back of the ransom note that the duke had received for the return of his niece, the Countess of Chestermere, only a few months earlier. In that case, we knew that the abductors had no intention of releasing the countess to us alive. Would it be the same in this case? Would Charlie be released unharmed if I did what they wanted? Both Wills and I were sure that what they wanted was the return of the gems and gold I took from the old Amir's bodyguard. But who were 'they'?

"We can't wait for Quinn," I said rising to my feet and heading for the door. "The note says that I must go immediately."

"No. No, we wait for Quinn."

"Time is not on our side, you know that, Wills."

Wills knew that we had to react right away but contravening orders was something he didn't like to do. "All right," Wills conceded reluctantly, "if you go, I'm coming with you."

"You read the note."

Wills became flustered. He was caught between doing what he wanted to do and doing what Quinn told us to do: stay where we were.

"All right. I won't follow you. But when you get your instructions, whatever you do, leave the details somewhere. So I can find you."

"Brigadier Lambros. I'll leave them with the brigadier. He rarely goes anywhere."

An unexpected knock interrupted our planning. Opening the door to a very nervous Fawkner, Wills was curt in his greeting.

“Fawkner. What do you want?”

“Em...em...a...a telephone call, Miss. For you.”

“Me?” Who would call Sir Giles’ secretary wanting to speak to me, I wondered.

“The...the caller was put through to Sir Giles’ office...Mr Quinn is unavailable apparently...It’s a lady, Miss...Lady Chestermere.”

I was at Hawthorne’s desk without delay and addressing the countess, concern prickling my thoughts. “Katherine, is everything all right?”

“I should ask that of you. I am dreadfully concerned that I haven’t heard from you. Has anything been taken?”

I was stumped for an answer until I realised Lady Katherine was referring to the burglary of my flat.

“Complete ransacking. But nothing that can’t be rectified.”

“When are you coming home?”

Home. Yes, being with Katherine was like I belonged with her. “Um,” I hesitated not wanting to alarm her, “I have a few errands to take care of before I can return.”

“By Sunday?”

“Sunday?”

“Christmas eve.”

“I’ll do my best.”

It was only after I closed my telephone call with Lady Katherine that I noticed the desk blotter on Hawthorne’s desk. Fawkner had yet to replace it with a clean blotter sheet. This one had the last jottings and scribbles from the sub-conscious mind of its owner before he left for his Christmas break. Amid the fancy scrollwork, naïve caricatures and arabesques were words: *Drayer, Pinnock, Tim, Steadman.*

#

1905

Friday, 22nd December – 11.15 a.m.

Louisa Mansions, Newington, London, England

The hansom dawdled its way southward toward my flat in Newington, hemmed in on all sides by heavy traffic. Progress could be measured by yards per minute giving me time to cogitate about recent events. What intrigued me the most was the appearance of that man wearing the ushanka, not once, but three times: first boarding my train in Rusby, again getting off at Paddington and lastly—and most disconcertingly—at Wills' home in Dulwich Village. Was it he who slugged Yabsley in that cowardly manner? If so, why? That action allowed the three Mussulmen to escape. And why was I being followed? My concern immediately flew to Lady Katherine. Was someone watching her? Was she safe? I quickly reassured myself that, at Lilyfield Manor, she was surrounded by loyal staff who would, indeed, protect her. They had shown as much during her horrific ordeal at the hands of her abductors.

Reassured by these thoughts, my mind returned to the man in the fur cap. Those were the hats worn by eastern Europeans, Russians. If he were Russian, why was he following me?

Russia was in a state of political chaos and cultural upheaval. It was one of the most poverty-stricken countries in Europe with near-starving peasants making up the vast majority of its citizens. The emerging industrialism had a growing minority of poor workers who were railing against oppression and low wages. The czar was doing his best to reform political and social inequities between the working class and peasants on the one side, and the nobility and wealthy bourgeoisie on the other. It was very apparent that the former group was becoming more vocal and violent against the latter, and even within their own revolutionist groups. The Socialist Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks, the Constitutional Democrats all climbed over each other vying for control of the rebellious masses.

Widespread worker strikes, peasant unrest and military mutinies demanded constitutional change and a constitutional monarch as here in Great Britain. Only two months

earlier had seen Nicholas II reluctantly agree to articles in the so-called October Manifesto, promising a reformed political order and basic civil liberties for most citizens. It was the French Revolution all over again. I hoped that we had become more civilised in the intervening time and that King Edward's nephew, Nicholas, and his wife Alexandra, would not suffer the fate of Louis and Marie-Antoinette.

“Louisa Mansions, Miss.” The cabby announced pulling up to the front door of the Newington flats.

If I were being watched, as the ransom note had implied, it had not been obvious to me. London at Christmastime was like an ant's nest of activity, seeking, finding, retrieving their honeydew for those they loved or were indebted to. People from every part of the world were everywhere, swathed in layers of wool against the cold, hatted heads down, getting in each other's way and apologetically shouldering themselves through the near-impenetrable swarm.

As expected, the letter from the kidnapper was there in my mail box and marked simply, *Rebecca Davies*—no *Miss*, impolite and discourteous—and sealed. I wondered if anyone had seen who had slipped it in there. No doubt, some street urchin after being paid a penny to do so.

I glanced back through the front door of the building and saw no one loitering about, only people scurrying back and forth.

The door to my flat on the third floor had, indeed, been freshly painted and there was no sign of a police presence now that it had been secured. Inside, the charwoman had done an excellent job of cleaning and putting right what little was left undamaged or spoiled.

Quickly tearing open the seal, I read the instructions therein, written by the same delicate hand as the original ransom note and in the same succinct vein:

Proceed to King William Street Underground Station.

Be there by 12 midday today.

Bring the goods you stole.

COME ALONE.

You are being watched.

The life of Charles Pinnock depends on your following these instructions.

Charles Pinnock will die if you do not.

My heart clenched at that last sentence. The being I had given life to could have it taken away because of me.

I came to myself and reread the instructions. King William Street Underground Station? That railway station had been closed for five years at least. It wasn't far from Newington but the vehicular traffic was so dense that it was almost at a standstill. I could walk there in half an hour and, even though I knew where the entrance to the station had been, I was sure it was now boarded up.

And *the goods*? There was no doubt the kidnapper was referring to the booty. And there was no doubt now who the kidnapper was. The goods were in Lilyfield Manor, a day's journey there and a day's journey back, given that the line was served only once a day.

I quickly copied the relevant details and sealed the note in an envelope, marking it 'RW'—Reginald Williams, the name by which I had introduced Wills to the Brigadier.

Emerging from my flat and into the corridor, I scanned its length and down the staircase. There was no one about—in fact, there was nowhere to hide.

My tapping on the brigadier's door took longer to answer than I had expected and I was about to turn away when I heard the key turn in the lock.

"Yes?" queried a sleepy Brigadier Lambros, Retired. "Oh, Miss Davies," he said opening the door a little wider and adjusting the sash around his dressing gown. "I was...resting my eyes. Do come in."

"Thank you, Brigadier, but I am running late for an appointment." Handing him the envelope, I asked, "I wonder if you would hold this for my friend, Reggie? Reginald Williams? You remember him? Detective Sergeant Yabsley? Wednesday afternoon last?"

"Hmm? Williams? Reginald Williams? Yes! Yes, of course. Why didn't you say so? A letter, you say?" he said examining the envelope in his hand.

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind. I have an appointment to keep and he will pop by later this afternoon and collect it from you. Very important."

"I see, I see. Who is this 'RW' on the...Oh! Quite! Quite, yes. Reginald Williams. RW. Quite."

"Thank you, Brigadier. I must go."

As I left the elderly gentleman and retired soldier at his doorway, I hoped Wills was not being followed and would find his way to the old station quickly. It would be just the two of us against at three Mussulmen and their leader at least, and an unknown number at most: a challenge, I thought, but knowing what was at stake, one we must take up.

Leaving Louisa Mansions, I joined the Yuletide throng and bustled along Borough High Street, past Borough Station and Southward Cathedral, and onto London Bridge. It was only a short walk from there to the barricaded entrance of the underground railway station of King William Street, the former terminus of the Central and South London Railway. Its ingress was on the conjunction of King William Street, Monument Street and Arthur Street.

Arriving at the blocked archway, I couldn't readily see a way into the abandoned station but there must be one, assuming Charles Pinnock was being held down there.

Nothing I did shifted any of the hoarding that had been securely fastened to the framework covering the disused entrance to the station. The barricade held fast. Curious passersby looked askance at me.

"It's closed up, luv," one helpful chap offered, stating the obvious, as he passed by.

Frustrated but determined, I looked for something to lever the boarding away. Then I saw him: a well-dressed swarthy man with a vigorous beard, standing in a shop's doorway to the right, watching me. I recognised him as one of the three men who were at Wills' house and the one who pushed Wills against the wall and backhanded me.

He captured my gaze for a long moment before he turned and took a few steps into the shop, stopping to look over his shoulder at me—a tacit invitation to follow.

The shop, a tobacconist, was lively with customers. He edged his way through the crowd to the back office, occasionally glancing back to make sure I was following. He led me out a doorway into the deserted concourse of the Underground station.

Veering off into one of the halls, we passed the decommissioned lift to the station's platform and through another archway that led to a spiral wrought-iron staircase. It would have been pitch black except for the electric lights that illuminated our way. I presumed that even though the station had been disused for five years, the electricity had been left connected for the expediency of railway workers as and when required.

Down we went, like flotsam in water swirling down a cistern, down and around and into the depths of London, deeper than the bed of the Thames itself for this railway line passed beneath the river.

The once-gleaming glaze on the beige, brown and speckled tiles that lined the tunnel were grimy but still elegant in their simplicity of design. Such a waste, I thought, only ten years' use.

Who would I meet at the end of this staircase? Was Charlie here? I didn't have with me what they wanted: the gems. Those were safely stored elsewhere. Could I buy the time

required to bring them here? Would they sell me the time? I also wondered if Wills had retrieved the letter I left with the brigadier. Was he on his way? Would he find his way in?

A metallic clink from above us drew my immediate attention to it. Wills! Thankfully, my brawny chaperon hadn't heard it.

We continued deeper and the deeper we went, the stuffier the air became. There were no vents or extractor fans working and the air was heavy with humidity.

We finally reached the station, an aneurism in the tubular vein that had carried the electric trains; a bulge that accommodated the platform and service rooms in the huge pipe that was the Underground. It was alike all the other stations of London's Underground with an elevated hardwood floor and completely tiled all around the inner circumference. But this one was eerily deserted and deathly quiet save for the faint rumbling of a train, its sound being transmitted along the idle tracks. Posters covered the far wall, peeling away and drooping like withering flowers unable to withstand the clamminess. Advertisements proclaiming the benefits of Nestlé's Milk, Fry's Cocoa and offering office spaces to rent or buy.

"Yalla."

I hadn't realised I had stopped to absorb the forsaken surroundings. The bearded man was several yards ahead of me and promptly signalled for me to follow into what once must have been the station master's office.

The still, stifling air outside was, in here, being pushed around the room by several large electric fans and breathing became more tolerable. The windows to the platform were covered in years of grime making them translucent rather than transparent. Two doorways led off to what must have been private offices. My bearded pilot knocked on one of those doors and stood back, capturing me once again in his steely gaze.

The lock clicked and the door squealed open, objecting to being awoken from the dead. From the anteroom emerged a young man, of average height and build and elegantly attired. He, unlike his burly guard, was clean-shaven but, like him, was dusky-skinned, dark-eyed and with black, macassared hair. He addressed my guard quietly in Arabic and was reassured by him that we had not been followed.

He looked at his wristwatch. "Right on time. Rebecca Davies, I presume." His cultured voice was as unctuous as his hair dressing.

"Where's Charles Pinnock?" I demanded in an equally controlled tone.

“Safe. Well. Well enough, that is. You haven’t changed a bit. Except for the white hair,” he smiled. Had it not been for these particular circumstances, I may well have been charmed by his cordiality.

“I can’t say the same for you. Naathim Nasir Talpur.” He wasn’t surprised that I knew who he was. “How did you find me?”

“Long, long story. Long, long search but most fruitful at its conclusion. Let me render it down for you: Mother.”

“Your mother, Uzma? Your father’s second wife?”

“Hm-hm. She told all before—well, we won’t go into that.”

“Before what?” I was alarmed by the inference.

“Oh, I don’t want to upset you, Rebecca—I may call you Rebecca, mayn’t I? I feel I know you so well. I know what you meant to Mother. Let me simply say that she was as loyal to you as humanly possible. After that, I was able to trace you through your saviour and mentor, Reginald Williams of the Queen’s Own Corps of Guides, and with considerable assistance from the vice-chancellor of Cambridge and his connections within the Russian Embassy. And, of course, one covetous chappy within your own organisation. Surprisingly, you and Reginald Williams are quite well thought of there, you know, the Russian Embassy. Or so the vice-chancellor says. Your recent efforts cleared them of very serious crimes against your aristocracy.”

“What did you do to your mother?”

“Not I, Rebecca, no, no. It was Father. The Amir. Yours was not the only... shall we say...friendly encounter she enjoyed. Unfortunately, she enjoyed one too many. I was given the task of eliciting the truth.”

“From your own mother?” I was appalled.

“Hm-hm. I did what had to be done. Tariq didn’t have the stomach for it. In fact, Tariq doesn’t have the stomach for anything much. He prefers to *play* the part of Amir, rather than *being* the Amir. He dances to someone else’s tune, you understand. But that’s another story.”

“What happened to Uzma?” I already knew the answer but I needed him to confirm it if only to give me more reason to detest him.

“What happens to any woman who is unfaithful to her husband?”

I could not utter the word that was a sentence. He could.

“Stoned.” He let me drown in the horrific image that it conjured, then continued unaffected by my suppressed anguish. “Did you bring the goods with you? You know what

the deal is. You haven't spent it all, have you?" He clicked his tongue in feigned admonition, "That was a king's ransom. Quite literally, you know. If you have, I don't know how we can proceed. That young man's life depends on your returning my gems to me, or their commensurate value. Today."

I needed more answers before I would give any satisfaction to that cocky little bastard.

"Why did you take Charles Pinnock?"

"Why did you come for him?"

He knew. He was playing games with me. I was not in the mood. "Where is he? I want to see him."

"I told you. He is safe."

"I want to see him." I insisted.

"The gems first."

"I don't have them with me."

"That is bad news. For Charles Pinnock."

"They are locked away in a vault. In the country. I will need two days to get them. You haven't given me the time."

"Hm, that's about two days too many. And I suppose you'll want me to trust you while you go and get them?"

"You have the boy."

"True. I have the boy. It's of some intrigue to me, Rebecca, why the boy is so precious to you. Surely, he's not your paramour. Forgive me but not only is he half your age, I didn't think your interest lay with the opposite gender. Then there's the red hair." He paused to savour the reaction he was expecting. "Just who is this Charles Pinnock to you?"

"Nothing."

Naathim smiled again, taking his time to taunt me further. He took a few steps to circle me. "That's not what I was told."

"Who told you? Your covetous chappy within the organisation?"

"One doesn't reveal one's sources, does one? You, as a spy, would appreciate that."

"I know exactly who told you. And he is wrong."

"We'll see."

"Unless I see the boy, this conversation ends and I leave."

We had reached an impasse.

Naathim pursed his lips and smiled again.

“All right, then. I’ll take you to him. But first…” He turned to the sentry and beckoned him with a toss of his head. Turning to me, Naathim apologised, “Forgive the imposition, Rebecca, but I need to know if you’re armed.”

I stopped the advance of the monolith by removing the Webley from under my coat and jacket and handing it to the guard who passed it to Naathim.

“Thank you. Now we can proceed.” He nodded to the guard to remain on guard then ushered me back through the door he had come and into a smaller, windowless room lit by one incandescent globe dangling from the ceiling. One wall was lined with barren shelves and several steel lockers. Opposite was a small table abutting the wall next to a plumbed-in wash tub and narrow cupboards. This had been the amenities room.

Here, too, the dank air was being churned by an electric fan.

In the farthest corner, standing shoulder to shoulder, was the remaining pair of bearded Mussulman triplets who had ransacked Wills’ home.

I couldn’t see Charlie. Damping down my rising anger, I turned to Naathim.

“Where is he?”

Naathim waved the two men aside and revealed Charlie, his dinner suit dishevelled, gagged and bound, slouched and unconscious in a chair in the dark corner. I hastened toward him but my path was quickly obstructed by the two guards.

“You said he was unharmed.”

“He’s napping.”

“My arse! Let me see to him.”

“So this is the elusive Rebecca Davies.” The feminine voice came from behind and was smooth but threatening. I turned to see a slender young woman at the doorway and was immediately struck by the similarity: Uzma’s daughter.

“Jameela.”

She stalked into the small room, graceful, elegant, deadly. Behind her, one of the guards closed the door and turned the key, locking away any hope of quick escape.

“Ah, you remember me. I am honoured.” She addressed her brother: “Did she bring them?”

I took the words from his mouth, “No. What have you done to the boy? If you have harmed him—”

“Just a little barbital. No harm done. He’ll awaken soon.”

Jameela approached me like a lioness stalking her injured prey, savouring each moment of the imminent kill. She reached out her hand, the multitude gold bangles along her arm jangled as she traced the scar along my face.

“Does it hurt?” she whispered with an intimacy that confused me. “She was very fond of you, you know. More so after you restored Junal’s choodi to her. Mother knew what that dog Rashid did to Junal. And to so many other poor servant girls. She knew he took their jewellery as a prize. A souvenir of his victories. His depravities. Mother also knew what he did to you. He boasted that he intended to kill you. That the English soldier rescued you. What became of your knight in shining armour?” Jameela cast her eyes toward Charlie then back to me. Her demeanour changed to one of almost pitiful understanding. “Why did you go through with it?”

I could not answer her; every reason that came to me seemed trite. Slumped in that chair in the darkened corner was the result of one man’s hatred of women, of brutal domination and control of them. But the result was not guilt; the result was innocence.

“Did you give him up because you couldn’t love him?” she whispered.

“I gave him up because I loved him too much. I did not want to drag him into the hell that awaits me.” I was growing tired of this game and warned, “Jameela, you have no idea what I have done. What I’m capable of doing. Without remorse. Or regret. Rashid and his cohorts were not the first men I killed. Nor the last.”

Jameela stepped back from our intimate exchange, hardness returning to her exquisite features. Was it fear of me that she felt, or contempt?

“You shouldn’t have taken the gems,” she declared, her voice once again cold. “I want them back.”

“I told your brother I need time—”

The slap to my face stung as much as it surprised me. I had never raised my hand to another woman in my life and the only thought that stopped me now was Charlie’s safety.

“No excuses!” Jameela screamed causing her accomplices to glance at each other with concern.

“Milly—” Naathim coaxed.

“Shut up, Timmy! You’re as weak as Tariq. I will deal with this.”

The partnership was fracturing; this was a good sign.

“I can’t give you what I don’t have.” My tone was low and measured hoping to placate the wild-eyed rage in the young woman standing before me, glaring at me. She was

volatile to say the least of her and I didn't want to antagonise her further. "I will get the gems but you must give me time."

#

Wills had retrieved Davies' note from the brigadier and had arrived at the blocked entrance to the former railway station. He couldn't see any way to enter but there had to access somewhere, somehow. He went into the shop to the left, a stationer's on Monument Street, and asked the very busy shop girl if there was a way into the disused concourse.

"Pardon me, Miss—"

"I'll be with you in a moment, sir," was the harassed girl's curt reply.

"I only need to know if there's an entry into the old concourse—"

"Sir! I'm serving this lady. Please."

Deciding that the shop was busy enough for him not to be noticed, he edged his way through the customers and into the back storeroom. There, he found what he was hoping to find, a door to the disused concourse but it was blocked by stacks of cases and cartons. Obviously, Davies had not come this way but was satisfied that there certainly was a way through.

Carefully pushing his way back through to the front door and onto the street, he turned back and entered the shop to the right, a tobacconist.

There, too, he found a press of customers clamouring for attention and still three days to Christmas! He took advantage of the confusion and picked his way through them to the back room. His persistence was rewarded. The door to the old concourse was accessible and ajar. She must have come this way he surmised and, within moments, he was on the old concourse and his way to find Davies and, hopefully, Charles Pinnock. He could hear movement ahead of him, the clicking of hobnails on steel leading away from him. Davies wore rubber-soled boots as did he. He proceeded cautiously, readying the access to the Webley under his coat.

#

"And if I let you go, what assurances do I have that you won't bring the police back with you?" Jameela's question was a fair one although posed with a snarl.

"You have the boy. I would never put his life in jeopardy."

Jameela stared at me, her eyes wild and unreadable. We had reached a deadlock. I turned to Naathim who was submissively allowing his younger sister to orchestrate proceedings.

"Naathim, will you trust me?"

He seemed to be lost, subjugated by Jameela's dominance.

"He knows better than to contradict me."

I quickly took stock of the situation. One way in and out. Charlie was incapacitated and I unarmed save for the stiletto blade in my right boot and, as far as I could tell, this was the whole force: three strong-arm thugs—two here and one outside—and two disgruntled siblings, one of whom had my gun and the other unbalanced. Thankfully, the saner of the two held the weapon.

I was certain the sound I heard in the stairwell had been Wills following us down and just as certain that he was waiting somewhere on the platform for my signal. But it was too dangerous for him to storm in and open fire here in such close quarters. I had to draw them out of this room and away from Charlie.

Before I could devise a ruse, a volley of gunfire rang through the empty station! Glass shattered! A groan and a thud...and all was quiet.

Surely not Wills! The Mussulman outside had not been armed. Wills would never shoot a defenceless man.

Inside, Jameela and Naathim were alarmed. The two thugs guarding Charlie sprang toward me and grabbed me before I could retrieve my blade pulling my arms up behind my back. Struggling was useless; they would break my arms or dislocate my shoulders if I resisted. The pain was intense.

Naathim stood rooted to the spot, terror blazed in his eyes. Jameela grabbed the gun from her brother and pointed it at my head, her rage barely controlled.

"You lied!"

"No. I came alone!" I gasped through the jolts of pain that shot through my shoulders. She was as likely to shoot me as not.

A heavy thud pounded the door. And again. And again. Wills was trying to break the door down! It made no sense.

"Tell them to stop or I'll shoot! Tell them! I'll kill your son!" She ran to Charlie and pointed the gun to his head and screamed, "Tell them!"

"Stop! Wills, stop! They have Charlie! They will kill him if you don't stop! Please! STOP!"

The battering ceased. All was quiet. Unnervingly quiet. All I could hear were the laboured breaths of our captors looking to the young woman for guidance, leadership.

Jameela ordered one of her henchmen to unbind Charlie and drag him to the door. He did as commanded and, grabbing Charlie about the waist, flung an arm over his shoulder and hauled the paralysed youth toward me.

She pointed the gun at me again.

“You. You tell your man to get away from the door or I will kill you and the boy. Now! Tell him now!”

“You won’t get out of this alive if you kill him. Me. Jameela, none of you. You don’t want to die, do you?” The Mussulman wrenched my arm up behind my back again. All I could do was expel a gasp in pain.

“Do you?” Jameela taunted, “I *will* kill him if you don’t do as I say. *Yalla*,” Jameela ordered and the thug pushed me toward the only way of escape. “Call him off! Tell him to back away! Now!”

I faced the only way out—the door—and the inevitable consequence of Jameela’s insane directive. The knife was in my right boot and left arm was free but benumbed. All I could do was comply and trust Wills.

“Wills. Wills, stand down. Don’t shoot. We’re coming out. They will kill Charlie if you don’t let them pass. Please, hold fire.”

Jameela gave the order and the key in the lock slowly turned. Immediately the door was swung open, I was thrust into the breach, the hulking escort that held me captive cowering down behind me and filling the doorway. The lifeless form of the Mussulman left to guard the door lay oozing blood, his pesh-kabz knife clenched in his fist, useless against gunfire.

I looked up. No one behind me could see what I saw: six men, guns pointed at me, silently beckoning me forward. Where was Wills? Who were these men? I didn’t recognise any of them from Scotland Yard. But I did recognise one man’s headwear: a ushanka.

“Don’t shoot,” I begged, not knowing their intent or purpose. “There is a hostage. An innocent boy. He must not be harmed. Please—”

I was pushed forward. The second Mussulman emerged hauling Charlie and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his partner forming a defensive human wall. Jameela followed and shielded herself behind me. Naathim timorously emerged from the small room and cowered behind Charlie.

Jameela’s arrogance did not abate demanding to direct this lethal pantomime.

“Let us pass and you can have these worthless dogs.”

An older man, about my age, replied with a derisive laugh.

“Let the hostages go and put all your weapons on the floor.” His English words were thick with Slavic intonation. “Do it now and no one will be harmed.”

These men were Russian! Why were they here?

“How can I trust you?” Jameela replied, her voice defiant.

“You can’t. But what choice do you have?”

The whirr of the electric fans filled the expanse of silence that the last question brought on. I was incapacitated and unable to move without excruciating pain. I looked to Charlie, propped upright and unconscious.

“*Gotov*,” the man instructed calmly. Each of the five men raised his pistol and took aim at his target. “I won’t tell you again, my friends, put down your weapons and release the hostages.”

“Who are you!” demanded Jameela, “We have no quarrel with you!”

It was then I noticed Charlie’s eyes open and, without moving, glanced at me from the corner of his eye. Was that a smile that flickered across his mouth?

“*Tsel*” was his only response and each armed man cocked the hammer of his pistol.

“Jameela,” I implored, “do as he says. They are ready to fire! They will shoot.”

“Yes, we will shoot.”

I could see the resolve of the two Mussulmen waning; they glanced at each other, wanting to obey their mistress but not wanting to die for her as their compatriot had done. My captor’s grip was loosening and he looked to his brother-in-arms. In unison and without a word, both Charlie and I were released and impelled forward. We fell to the floor. I immediately scrambled to Charlie and threw myself over him to protect him from what I feared would follow.

The Mussulmen raised their arms in surrender and stepped aside to expose the offending brother and sister.

“Bastard dogs!” Jameela screamed and opened fire!

“No!” Naathim cried.

“*Ogon*” was the only verbal response and all six men fired upon the four standing.

It was over in a matter of seconds.

Smoke and acrid smell of gunpowder filled the station master’s office and, agitated by the ceaseless spinning of the electric fans, propelled the polluted air through the shattered windows.

Blood drained from the wasted lives littered about us. I felt Charlie move beneath me. We were not out of danger. “Don’t move,” I whispered.

The Russian approached me, his raised gun menacing me.

“Get up!” he ordered.

“Let the boy go. He has nothing to do with them or me.”

“Get up,” he iterated more gently.

I did as I was ordered, helping Charlie to his feet. He was unsteady and dishevelled but otherwise unharmed. We faced the Russian.

“I do not intend to harm you. Or him,” he said as he lowered his weapon.

I looked the man square in the eyes. “Who are you? Why—”

“Do you have the gems?”

My heart sank. Those cursed gems. How could I explain it to this intruder and how did he know about them? “No.” was my simple and truthful reply.

“Good.”

A movement from the stairwell’s tunnel caught our attention. Wills! His gun in hand, pointed at the leader and ready to fire. The Russians turned; their guns aimed at the trespasser.

“No!” I cried, “Don’t shoot! He’s with me!”

“*Derzhat’ ogon’!*” the Russian repeated, telling his men to hold fire.

Wills looked at me warily, taking in the carnage around us.

“Are you all right?” he asked as he cautiously made his way toward me, training his Webley at the Russian standing close to me.

“Yes. Put up your weapon, Wills. He doesn’t mean to harm us.” I replied.

“Who are you?” Wills asked of the Russian, repeating my question and holstering his gun. He looked at the fallen and recognised the three Mussulmen who attacked us. “Are they—?”

I nodded. Wills crouched over the fallen brother and sighed, “Naathim?”

I nodded again. “And that’s his sister, Jameela.”

Wills never gloated over a victory that caused the adversary’s death but mourned the waste of human life instead.

“Go,” the Russian interrupted unemotionally, “I will take care of this,” and signalled his men who quickly busied themselves rummaging through the bodies of the dead, taking what they found. One manhandled the dead Jameela. I saw this and was appalled.

“Don’t. Please don’t desecrate her body.” I don’t know why I felt I should honour her in this way. She chose her path. She chose to die. The Russian ordered the man away.

“You had me followed,” I said, indicating the man in the ushanka.

“Ah, Pyotr of the cold ears,” the Russian obviously disapproved of Pyotr’s wearing such a distinctive head covering.

“Why?” I insisted.

“We had to find these two,” the Russian began indifferently. “We were aware of the two brothers’ struggle to gain control when their father died. Tariq confirmed his loyalty to the czar. Naathim not so.”

“Tariq is your puppet,” I clarified.

“Put whatever name on it you wish. Naathim wanted independence. From us. From the British. He intended to overthrow Tariq. We need control in the area. You British are too avid in your quest for lands. There are bad things happening in Russia now. If the czar is deposed, the country will be in turmoil. It will be worse for everyone, not better. I support the czar. These men and many others support the czar. Those in the embassy support the czar. When our diplomats became aware of who was making enquiries after you and Major Williams, we understood why. The insurgents needed funding to overthrow Tariq and, by extension, the czar. And the British.”

“You didn’t do this for the British.”

A sheepish smile crossed the Russian’s face. “We both benefited, nyet?”

“What made you think I was involved?”

“The woman, Jameela, was told what you had taken—a small fortune—enough to buy weapons and mercenaries. Their quest was to find you and relieve you of your...how do you call it in English? Booty. My assignment was to find them and stop them. But the only connection we had was you, Rebecca Davies. And we knew where you were. By following you, we would find them,” he said, glancing at the corpses, “and neutralise them. My assignment is complete.” The Russian holstered his gun and turned his back to me. He hesitated, and turned back. “You haven’t changed at all, Rebecca Davies. Except your hair is now white.”

I was puzzled. I didn’t know this man.

“Allow me,” he said, understanding my confusion, “Fyodor Lebedev. I knew of you and Lieutenant Williams in Kurrachee. You knew of me as *L’venok*.”

“Young Lion,” I whispered.

“Only not so young now.” His chuckle was mirthless. Once again, he turned to leave but an afterthought stopped him: “You realise, I never ordered Wellbridge to kill you. Or any of your agents. That was his own doing. He paid for that with his life. I admired you and Williams. You kept my wits sharp.”

PART VIII

1905

Friday, 22nd December – 7.30 p.m.

Metropolitan Police, London, England

“Everything appears to be in order, young man, but should you experience bouts of dizziness or nausea, consult with your doctor immediately.”

I could hear the police surgeon finalising his examination of Charles Pinnock as I sat in the waiting room outside the small infirmary in Scotland Yard.

I had told Wills about the blotter on Hawthorne’s desk and the scribblings upon it. Names that only someone who had been in contact with the kidnappers would know. Evidence that Hawthorne was complicit in this matter and would see him stripped of his rank and office and discharged from service, if not incarcerated. Wills was to return with that crucial sheet of absorbent paper.

Mr Alexander Quinn had been contacted and would be with us shortly. I was not looking forward to the dressing down I was due for once again contravening his orders.

The desk sergeant had arranged for a carriage to collect Mrs Pinnock and her sister from their hotel where they had been directed to await any word of Charlie.

The door to the infirmary opened and the doctor emerged.

“You can see him now,” the doctor announced. “He has some bruising to his neck and arms but the barbitol has worn off. He’ll be fine. Allow him to rest.” As an afterthought, he added, “You have a fine son there,” leaving me dumbstruck and disappearing before I could repudiate his last statement.

Charlie stood when I entered the little room. His dinner suit was grimy and crumpled and his white shirt soiled. He held his collar in his hand and smiled apologetically explaining, “Lost the studs.”

So many thoughts raced through my mind but none escaped to be heard. I didn't know what to say, where to start so I just looked at the fine young man that stood before me. He was hurt because of me, suffering I had resolved he would never have to endure if I gave him up. What could I say to the young man with his father's red hair and his grandmother's vibrant blue eyes? What could justify abandonment?

Charlie looked at me and I could see he was as unsure of what he was going to say to me as I was wanting to say to him.

"I was in and out of consciousness the whole time," he finally admitted in a voice so soft I could hardly hear it. "I heard—" He hesitated and took a step closer and peered at the disfigurement to my face. Just as Jameela had done, he gently traced the line of healed flesh. "Did that happen when I was conceived?" He gulped down his hesitancy and whispered, "You are my mother."

His brow furrowed and his eyes glistened. He waited for a reply—a confirmation or denial—I did not know which to give. My head fought my heart for the right to speak until I finally replied.

"Cicely Pinnock is your mother." I breathed those deceitful words and watched a tear trace down his cheek.

Footsteps clattered along the wooden floors toward us.

"Charlie!" Cicely Pinnock and her sister, Beatrice, swooped into the room and enveloped the young man in their arms. "Oh, Charlie, we were so worried!" Cicely sobbed, "You're safe! You're safe."

"Yes, Mother, I'm safe and well."

I left the threesome rocking back and forth, comforting and reassuring each other that all would, indeed, be well.

Wills found me making my way up the stairs to Hawthorne's office. He was empty-handed and very obviously disappointed.

"Fawkner changed the blotter before he left for the day," Wills informed, "and the rubbish has already been incinerated."

That put paid to proffering evidence to Quinn of Hawthorne's involvement in this very serious matter, unless, of course, Hawthorne himself admitted his guilt and that would be most unlikely.

We stood for long moments enveloped in our own thoughts, silently ruminating the events of the last few days and how all this had come about. Tracing my own decisions back, this all stemmed from my needing a drink twenty years ago in Bombay. If I had kept a supply

of spirits at Booth's Lodgings for Ladies, I wouldn't have gone to the wine merchant's and there I wouldn't have volunteered for the archaeological expedition and wouldn't have met and fallen for the charms of Uzma. If I hadn't slept in, I wouldn't have been caught by Rashid and Charlie would never have been born. Nor would I have met Wills. And I wouldn't be here, in England and sharing my life with a countess.

How different my life had I chosen the alternative path at any one of those forks in the road to my destiny...

"Where are you spending Christmas?" Wills' question caught me unaware.

"Pardon? Oh, at Lilyfield Manor, I expect. You?"

"Back to Cornwall with Cornelia and Reggie. And Mikey."

"How's your shoulder?"

"Better. The analgesics are a boon."

"Miss Davies?" The soft female voice came from behind us. We turned to Mrs Pinnock who requested, "May I have a word, please? Privately?"

Wills was quick on the uptake and excused himself. "I'll be in my office writing up my report. Mrs Pinnock, a very happy Christmas to you and yours."

"It will be now, thanks to you and Miss Davies. And a merry Christmas to you."

Cicely Pinnock was a handsome woman and of about my own age, fifty, a little shorter than me and with a fine well-proportioned form. I couldn't help notice how closely she was examining my features.

"How can I be of service, Mrs Pinnock?"

"I don't know how to thank you for saving my son's life." She hesitated then took a deep breath and continued, "Know that you will always be welcome in my home should you wish to call upon Charlie."

Did she know? "Thank you but I don't think—"

"Charlie told me." Her smile was honest and shy. "Only a blind person could not see it." Unexpectedly, her eyes filled with tears. "I am so sorry for what happened to you. But thank you for Charlie. He could not have been more loved and wanted." And before my threatening tears could escape, Mrs Pinnock turned on her heels and rushed back the way she came.