

Susanna Bonaretti
PO Box 347
Ramsgate NSW 2217
+61 4 1228 7219
+61 2 9529 3585
nonseq@iinet.net.au
susannabonaretti.com
33.000 words

Memoirs of a Bastard Colonist

MIDDLE EAST 1885

IV

by

Susanna Bonaretti

33,000 words



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?”

#

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.

#

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.

#

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 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 cockylorum 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.

#