

THE LYING REFLECTION THE LYING REFLECTION

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Christ was **tempted**
by Lucifer for forty days
and forty nights. Man on
the other hand, is

tempted for eternity

The Lying Reflection

By
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To my family, for believing in me even when I didn't.

*'Slay was thus the flesh and bones,
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
And so ended the carrion
Albeit there remained the spirit of the
cursed.'*

*Ryker Marcussen
In the Year of our Lord 1909.*

CHAPTER 1

Every tale, every life-altering incident, every catastrophic occurrence, has a beginning. A point in the continuum of time when fate reaches out and changes the track on which life like a train was travelling till then, and suddenly, in complete oblivion, we find ourselves on a path that's alien and disquieting in ways we would have never perceived. Unknowingly starts the odyssey that slowly but surely leads towards the abyss of horror and by the time we are aware of the imminent danger, we are left helpless in the hands of providence.

A common observation is that most of the time, if not always, this particular off-track journey begins with an endeavour or an effort on our part. A butterfly effect, if you may. An act seemingly ordinary at that time, an ignorant, unconscious action that eventually metamorphosed into a disaster, made the sky fall.

The day that marked the prelude to the horrific misadventure in Trisha's life also began like any other day – well, almost like any other day.

Outside, the sky was just turning pale. The sun tried to wipe off the inky cloak of the night, while darkness refused to go away and, like a soldier, fought valiantly against the wishes of daylight. The fog that had engulfed the entire valley all through the night was thinning and faint wisps of mist floated up as the day got brighter. The tea plantation covered the surrounding hills in a velvety cloak, reflecting the various hues of green. Light green of a new leaf, where the sun shone directly, to emerald-green a bit farther, followed by bottle green – till it reached the corners of the valley where daylight had yet to penetrate, and the green changed into a charcoal black.

In the Browns' plantation house, Trisha woke up and sleepily reached out towards the table clock that stood on her bedside table. At almost the same time, the alarm rang to announce that it was 6.00 am already. It was such a synchronic, yet sudden, action that she couldn't help jump up and, in doing so, accidentally let the clock drop on the timber floor.

In an instant, there was a crash; the glass shattered into tiny bits and scattered to the various corners of the room. Trisha gaped at the clock in dismay – shocked that it could break so easily. She picked up the clock and noticed that it had stopped ticking – the exact thing she had been afraid of. She stared at the face of the clock that was completely bare without a single fragment of glass left stuck to the frame and almost willed it to become whole again. She felt the clock staring back at her silently, almost accusingly, for being so careless. Trisha was extremely sad. It was one of her prized possessions, not because of its monetary worth, but because it had belonged to her late mother. It was one of the few things of her mother that she had.

"Trisha. Is everything all right?" she heard Mrs. D' Costa knocking softly on her door.

"Um, yes, Mrs. D, everything is fine. I just knocked something over accidentally."

Trisha consciously avoided mentioning what the 'something' was. She felt shameful to have been so careless with an object that held such sentimental value.

"Good, in that case, get ready quickly and come down. Breakfast is almost ready and I don't want you to be late for school."

Trisha could hear Mrs. D' Costa's footsteps fading as she walked off from the door. Morosely, she placed the clock back on her bedside table and climbed out of the bed when an excruciating pain on the sole of her left foot reminded her of the broken glass that was scattered all over her bedroom floor. Trisha whimpered in pain and raised her left foot to inspect the exact damage. As the second misfortune of the day, she found a sharp shard of glass had pierced her sole. Crimson blood gleamed and travelled down her foot till it reached her heel, from where it dropped, making small, almost dark brown, globules on the floor. She sat back on the bed and carefully took out the piece of glass, biting her lips in order not to make any noise that would bring Mrs. D' Costa back to her room.

Mrs. D' Costa had been the housekeeper with the Browns for more than thirty years. In fact, Trisha's father, Mathew Brown, was in his late teens when she was first employed. From the day she came in, Mrs. D' Costa single-handedly managed the entire staff that worked in the plantation house where the Browns resided for the last three generations.

When Trisha was born, almost eighteen years ago, it was Mrs. D' Costa who carried her first – even before either of her parents did. It was at that singular moment that Mrs. D' Costa had fallen in love with the tiny bundle and had loved her fiercely – still did with the same intensity and protectiveness. Moreover, after the sudden and unfortunate demise of Trisha's mother when Trisha was just five, Mrs. D' Costa took the little girl under her wing and vowed never to let Trisha feel the absence of a mother. Unfortunately, along with the benefits of being loved so much, there were quite a few disadvantages of such overwhelming affections. The primary one being that even if there was a tiniest scratch on Trisha, or when Trisha was unwell, Mrs. D' Costa went completely overboard fussing over her. All this was not so bad when she was a child. But now, it sometimes made Trisha feel smothered, made her feel like a child – a perception that she was growing tired of.

Slowly and painfully, she hobbled to an antique chest of drawers that stood looming in the corner and rummaged through it for a hanky. Later, after she had washed and cleaned the wound, she tied the hanky around it. Then, with an old blouse, she quickly wiped the floor, and tried to bundle most of the glass pieces into the blouse. That was followed by a quick bath. By the time Trisha was ready, it was almost seven and she could hear Mrs. D' Costa's footsteps once again in the corridor coming towards her room.

Hurriedly, Trisha took out a pair of boots from the closet and slipped her feet into it, wincing as the wound throbbed, before Mrs. D' Costa could see the bandaged foot. Then, just as the housekeeper raised her right hand to knock on Trisha's door, she opened it, sweeping all the physical pain and mental distraught behind a bright smile.

Trisha sat alone at the twelve-seater dining table having her breakfast; her only companions were the expensive china and silver cutleries that were laid out in a flourish in front of her. Mrs. D' Costa had long since retreated into the kitchen to oversee the day's meals. Trisha couldn't understand what the fuss was all about, seeing how there were hardly any family members in the house at the moment. In fact, she was the only Brown residing at the Brown mansion currently.

Looking through the window onto the panoramic view of the green mountains melting into the blue sky, Trisha was suddenly hit by a wave of loneliness. It was not a very alien feeling for Trisha. Solitude had been her loyal friend through the years. She could hardly remember the house hustling and bustling with life – if she tried really hard, her

memories took her back to the time when she was around four, five years old; that was when she was truly happy living in that huge mansion. She remembered running around that very dining table squealing with laughter with her mother behind her, trying to catch her. She remembered hiding below the beautiful 17th century Florentine console that, till today, stood at its place on the side wall, unmoved, unchanged through the years. Even now, if she closed her eyes and tried very hard, she could conjure her mother's face.

To Trisha, her mother was undoubtedly the most gorgeous woman in the world. She regularly gazed in wonder at the beautiful oil painting of her mother that hung over the fireplace in the sitting room. Little did Trisha realise that she was an exact replica, albeit a younger version, of her late mother. The grey green eyes – almost too big in the oval face, skin as clear and delicate as porcelain, curly locks of hair, the colour of the midnight sky that ran down her slim back.

Anyone who had known her mother always paused for a moment when they saw the adult Trisha for the first time. As Trisha's grand auntie who came to visit a few years ago had whispered in awe, "It is almost as if Katya has been reincarnated."

Mathew Brown had met Katya, Trisha's mother, on a trip to Denmark. Although the Browns had been tea estate owners for generations, Mathew was the only one who decided to expand Brown and Co. into something more than just tea manufacturers. Previously, they solely depended on the business from traders. However, Mathew having a very keen sense of business, realised that the lion's share was going to the traders, although the hard work was mostly being done by plantation owners. That's when he envisioned Brown and Co. on a global platform and worked triply hard to make his dream come true. Brown and Co., being the producers of a premium quality of Darjeeling tea, was already well known around the world, and wherever he went with his proposition and business plan, he was welcomed gladly.

As his business took him around the different corners of the world, Mathew Brown started to develop a love for antiques, especially antique furniture, just like his father. On every trip, he brought back something. Queen Anne-style dining chairs on one trip; a Louis XV-type walnut bench on another. Slowly, the mansion that had been the home for generations of Browns started becoming more like an art museum housing rare and exquisite antiques.

While the business grew in leaps and bounds, the amount of time that Mathew could actually spend in Darjeeling, at home with his daughter, became less and less. After the death of his father, Mathew Brown Sr., Mathew started relying on his employees to take care of the plantation and Mrs. D' Costa to take care of his daughter.

Although the estate had no complaints being left at the hands of the staff, it was a completely different issue when it came to Trisha. Trisha missed having her father around. Especially after the death of her grandfather, she felt like the only Brown who was still living in that huge plantation house. To her, the fourteen-bedroom mansion had always been too big, although being born there she had never felt intimidated by its size.

The original colonial-style bungalow was built in 1912. Later on, as the previous generations of Browns became prosperous, their families became bigger and more wings were added. However, after India obtained independence in 1947, most of the Browns returned to England. Only Trisha's grandfather, with his wife and their only son, Mathew, stayed back.

Today, the bungalow stood sprawling over forty thousand square feet of land surrounded by almost a hundred and fifty acres of tea plantation. It stood at the end of a winding pathway that ran through the estate circling around the impeccably maintained garden before reaching the huge car porch. The bungalow stood facing east, its glass windows catching the rays of the morning sun. Shimmering like a mirage in the middle of the fine green of the tea plantation.

The building was done in archaic stone with Indian woodworks at prominent places, and tiled roofs that lent an air of cool tranquillity; from the main sitting room extended a long corridor towards the bedrooms. All the bedrooms had colonial-style fireplaces, strong timber flooring and were decorated with antique furniture that lent an aura of the forgotten times. On the left was a huge dining room. The kitchen, which was almost as big as a hall, was built behind the dining room. Although today all the appliances essential in a modern kitchen were available, the brick oven that was used in the olden days for baking, or the huge cauldron that used to be constantly bubbling with soups in the winter months, stood proudly at the corner – a strong remembrance of the yesteryears.

Trisha stood up, trying hard to shrug off the feeling of desolation, and started to dust the crumbs of toast from her school uniform. She heard Mrs. D' Costa's voice as she was just going to leave the dining room.

“Trisha, please come back home straight after school today. Your father called last night right after you went to bed. You can expect him this evening. His flight from Budapest arrived yesterday. But he has some work in Calcutta, so will be flying back later today.”

Trisha looked at Mrs. D' Costa, expressionless. As happy as she was that her father will be back that evening, she knew that her father treated their home as nothing more than a place to rest between business trips, and Trisha as probably an obligation. It would hardly be a couple of days before he has to leave for some foreign land, saying goodbye to the plantation and to her.

Mrs. D' Costa understood Trisha's anguish at being parentless most of the time. She knew that, as much as she tried to shelter her and love her, Trisha still needed the love and the presence of her father in her life.

“I know today is the last day of school and perhaps you would want to go out with your friends after that, but Mr. Brown specifically requested for you to be at home so that he can have dinner with you,” she added in a gentler voice.

Trisha nodded silently and headed out towards the car porch where a liveried chauffeur stood beside a white Mercedes waiting to take her to St. Mary's, a private school patronised by the affluent and their children in Darjeeling.

CHAPTER 2

St. Mary's school in Darjeeling was established in 1925. It was first started by a group of missionaries and had been the institution where the English who lived in Darjeeling during the colonial times sent their children. At one time, it was a residential school. But later on, due to some rumours about racial problems, the hostels were closed down in the mid-nineteen hundreds. However, till today, the stately building stands proudly on top of one of the highest hills in Darjeeling, with Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest peak, as its spectacular and exceptional backdrop. The school comprises four wings, which houses primary and secondary level class rooms as well the science labs, the staff rooms, the administration block and a chapel by a small natural lake.

That was Trisha's favourite part of the school. Whenever she was free between classes, she liked to carry a book and go sit under a tree near the lake and lose herself in the story – the fantasy world always more endearing than the real world.

"Trisha, Trisha. Hey, wait for me."

Even before Trisha could get out of her car, she heard Mia's excited voice behind her. Trisha turned around smilingly. Mia was Trisha's best friend in school. In fact, truth be told, Mia was probably Trisha's only friend – in school, or otherwise. They had been the best of friends from the time both were six years old and in primary school. The two girls were poles apart in their thoughts, their attitudes and their actions, but their mutual love and adoration for each other had kept them firm friends throughout the years.

As Trisha waited patiently for her friend to catch up, she couldn't help smiling – remembering the six-year-old chubby Mia with her pigtails that used to be tied up with blue ribbons. It was unbelievable how the cherubic cute child had grown up into this skinny model-type teenager – angular cheek bones, wavy hair that fringed her face in soft wisps of flyaway hair, chocolate-brown eyes peering through thick lashes. Almost every boy in the school had a crush on Mia. But she seemed to be completely oblivious to the effect she had on the male population. Even now while she walked towards Trisha, Mia was totally unaware of the not very subtle glances that followed her stride.

"Hey! So, since today is the last day of school, would you like to come home with me?" asked Mia breathlessly. "Gram's making bread pudding for tea."

Mia's parents lived in Calcutta, which was over two hundred kilometres from Darjeeling. Both her parents were working there in top management positions in major corporations. Having a career that involved late night conference calls and early morning meetings, they had understood that it was best that Mia lived with her grandma and went to school in Darjeeling. That way, the young girl and the old lady, who loved each other indubitably, would both be happy and Mia's education at the St. Mary's was an added bonus.

Trisha shook her head. "Not today," she said. "Papa is coming home today. I should be there."

"Oh! Okay, cool," said Mia, in a slightly disappointed voice. But then instantly cheering up, in a very Mia-like manner, she asked, "So what's the plan for your birthday? Is it going to be a major bash? Can't believe that you are turning eighteen a full two

months earlier than me. You can do all the things that I would not be able to do for a long time.”

“Really? Like what?” asked Trisha, amused.

“Well, I... I am not really sure,” stammered Mia doubtfully. “How about going to a night club or the Labong race course to see one of the horse races?”

Mia was obsessed when it came to horses. She loved them and could go on talking about her own pet pony for hours if someone didn’t interrupt her. Her desire had always been to be able to go to the Labong race course in Darjeeling, which was unique in its own way, being the world’s highest altitude race course, and see horses race.

“Mia!” exclaimed Trisha. “Do you really think that your grandma will actually let you go to any of the places that you are thinking of going?”

“I know,” answered Mia gloomily – her dreams shattered by the mention of her grandma. “Knowing Grams, I am sure she would let me date only when I am forty-five.”

“Oh come on,” said Trisha cheerfully. “That’s not too bad. I’ll pray that your wrinkles are not that visible when you are forty-five. Maybe the old man who’ll be your date would have cataracts and not be able to see your sagging face.”

Mia shrieked in mock horror, punching Trisha and laughing and enjoying the radiant happiness that best friends share when they are together; the two young girls headed for their next class chattering happily.

* * *

Mia’s grandmother, Katarzyna, was nine when she first arrived in India along with her older brother, Krzysztof, who was twelve at that time. They were among the very few lucky Polish children who escaped the wrath of the Nazis during the peak of the Nazi delinquency at the time of World War Two.

Katarzyna’s family, during the Second World War, had the extreme misfortune of being in Poland. After the German invasion of Poland on September 1st 1939, the Polish people were hunted down and killed like rabid dogs in their own country. The German army was sent to Poland as stated by Hitler in his Armenian quote, ‘with orders to kill without mercy and to reprove all men, women and children of the Polish race’. The appalling belief that all Slavic people were ‘*untermensch*’ or sub-humans led to the massacre of Jews, gypsies, Poles and other races that were not Aryans.

On September 5th 1939, Katarzyna, hidden under a pile of hay along with her brother, witnessed the horrific and brutal massacre where the German soldiers killed 97 Polish citizens. She watched her parents die while their heads were chopped off and their lifeless bodies bled into the grounds of Trzebinia – the small Polish town where she was born. Her brother, Krzysztof, had covered her mouth tightly with his hands to stop her from screaming hysterically, and, held by Krzysztof, she had watched in terror, the unleashed brutality of the German soldiers.

Katarzyna lived with her parents in a small run-down farmhouse on the outskirts of the Polish town of Trzebinia. That evening, they had sat down for supper at the wooden dining table in the kitchen. A steaming pot of vegetable broth made of turnips and carrots stood on the table while her mother ladled the soup into their bowls. All at once, there was a loud hammering on the front door. Her mother’s face turned pale. The wooden ladle dropped from her hand, upsetting a bowl of soup to the ground. It was as if the

sound announced the much dreaded arrival of the Grim Reaper. They had heard of rumours of the German soldiers killing and plundering in the other towns of Poland, but it was all hearsay. Communication in those days, being almost in its infancy, had not been able to warn the doomed family about the truth behind the rumours.

A look of panic passed between the parents. There was a fright so raw, a fear so naked in that look that even Katarzyna, as young as she was, realised that something terrible stood on the other side of their front door. While trying to make as little noise as possible, their mother hastily dragged them out of their chairs and pushed them through the backdoor into the backyard. She whispered to Krzysztof to hurry and hide, to take care of his sister – her voice breaking with fright and urgency. Katarzyna could hear her father as he tried to haul something in a futile attempt to block the main entrance, but, as her brother dragged her out to the backyard looking around for a place to hide, she could hear the front door crashing down. Footsteps, numerous footsteps that invaded the sanctity of her home, made her realise with horror that that was the last she would see of her father. Her leaden legs refused to move, although her brother wanted her to run.

“*Przynaglacz*,” urged Krzysztof, asking Katarzyna to hurry. Then, finding a haystack, he pushed her in and then squeezed himself into a small space beside her.

The haystack was right at the side of the house and, through the open windows, the children watched in horror as the German soldiers grabbed their father and kicked him, which sent him reeling backwards – their malicious grins spread across their faces like men possessed. Their mother rushed to the father’s aide and, like a rag doll, she was thrown against the wall. There was a solitary spasmodic movement and then her lifeless body lay on the ground while blood flowed with a cavalier lethargy drenching the rug in the hall. Their father’s agonising scream as he watched his beloved wife die was unbearable. Later, one of the soldiers came back with the meat cleaver from their own kitchen. Something so familiar, so banal, at that moment became the deadly weapon with which one of the men chopped off their father’s head in a single swipe.

The siblings, seeing their parents murdered inhumanely, whimpered in fear and rage. But a deep-rooted instinct of survival stopped them from coming out of their hiding place; through that single decision, they escaped death that night. Everywhere around them, they could hear the wails of the tortured people as the soldiers went on a spree of mass murder. The helpless cries of agony, the countless pleas for mercy and the numerous shrieks of terror filled the night air with a repugnant cacophony.

After the horrific slaughter of innocents that soaked the quiet and peaceful town of Trzebinia in blood, the soldiers torched every house – the fire lighted the night sky in an orange glow, and created a pseudo sunset. All through the hellish night, the children lay hidden under the haystack.

That night, when the entire village was burning in the infernal fire, by some divine miracle, the haystack under which Katarzyna and her brother were hiding was left untouched. For the first time that night, Katarzyna thought deeply about the existence of God. Her family had always been devout Catholics, going to church every Sunday, and being model Christians. Katarzyna had followed the teachings of the holy Bible without any questions just because that was what was taught to her at home.

However, her reason for hoping fervently that there was the supreme power, the Lord Almighty, was not because she escaped death. It was far deeper than that. She wanted to believe in the power of God, because even though she was too young to understand the

flame of outrage or the fire of vengeance that was filling her little heart, she wanted the evil to be punished. She wanted to believe in supreme justice, because she realised she was helpless – incapable in the hands of fate to take any form revenge for the horrific murders of her parents. Above all, she wanted her parents to be in Heaven, to be a part of the Lord's paradise. She wanted them to have eternal peace and happiness because even that was barely sufficient to make up for the inhuman torture that they had suffered on Earth.

By the next morning, the entire place had the look of the aftermath of a volcanic eruption. Sometime in the middle of the night, the satanic soldiers had left, although the two terrified children had still not dared to come out of their hiding place. Only with the sun's rays streaming into the countryside making everything more visible did the siblings dare to come out.

But the ordeal was far from being over. In shocked silence, they watched as the cinders lay around, while murky haze followed the still-burning countryside and hung around ominously. Their home lay half burnt with the pot of soup still on top of the table. Pieces of turnip and carrots swimming in the gravy in the midst of all the decimation seemed more morbid than anything else around. In the hall, they found the partially charred and headless body of their father, while their mother lay stiff and lifeless in one corner.

Childhood and innocence was wiped off without a trace in a single night in the life of Katarzyna and Krzysztof. Wordlessly, they started putting whatever clothes they could salvage into a bag. Some chunks of bread and a bottle of water were also added into it. The extreme shock prevented them from crying, which was a good thing, because it made them realise, even without the necessity to discuss it, that in order to survive, they had to flee.

Through the forests that lay north of their village, the two children started their journey. Where they were going, they had no idea. All they knew was that they had to get away from Trzebinia – as far away as they could. Krzysztof had been familiar with the forests since he had always brought the cows from their farm to graze there from the time he was seven. Slowly and clumsily, they treaded. Grief and exhaustion consumed the siblings and made it much harder for them to walk through the deep pine forests.

That night, the brother and the sister lay huddled together covered in a shawl that had been their mother's. It was one of her favourites. Her scent was still on it and Katarzyna comforted by the familiar smell felt safe and closer to her mother. While Krzysztof slept, the lassitude from the previous day's ordeal finally catching up with him, Katarzyna lay awake and looked up at the cloudless starry sky. The lull in the forest, the pine-scented breeze and the soft undergrowth on which they lay brought a sense of serenity that calmed her down – enveloped her in a feeling of peace. In that deep forest, in the silence when the whole forest seemed to be sleeping, Katarzyna felt the presence of God. Without any logical reasoning, she knew that, no matter what happens, God's justice will always prevail. As the North Star shone brightest among all the stars, she realised that God was speaking to her, asking her to follow the brightest star of all, and be saved.

The next day, once both of them were awake, Katarzyna told her brother that they should travel north – follow the brightest star in the sky. Krzysztof was surprised. He had been worrying where to go as well, but then he had not come up with any solution. On the other hand, Katarzyna spoke with such conviction that the decision was made just like that, and so started their journey northwards.

The food, they had brought from home, even after strict rationing ended by the next day. After that, all they survived on were wild berries and water from the brooks that ran through the forests. They dared not go into any village or town because, as young as they were, with the departure of their innocence, the first lesson that both Katarzyna and Krzysztof learnt was the inhumanity of humans. They understood that the people who slaughtered their parents were everywhere and they were aware that, if they were caught, they would also be killed mercilessly. Thus, they kept towards the middle of the forest while moving north. Their clothes were tattered, being caught in the brambles numerous times, their hair unkempt, faces scruffy from the lack of baths, and a look of lost frenzy in their eyes.

One day blended into another till Katarzyna felt that she was caught in the forest for eternity. From morning till dusk, they walked, resting only when the darkness engulfed the forest.

It must have been the third day, although by then both the children had lost any sense of time or date. They came across a sort of clearing in the forest. There were a few overturned pots. A fireplace lay burnt with ashes flying all around. A few shabby shelters made by hastily tied logs and leaves and, among them, like hideous, macabre mannequins, lay human bodies. Some headless; some armless; some covered with flies – the only thing common among them being the torturous manner in which they must have been murdered.

Blood had clotted and formed a rusty red mosaic on the corpses while maggots crawled in and out of the orifices. All lay in various early stages of decomposition, and the overwhelming stench that came from the bodies were unbearable. Without wanting to, Katarzyna started to gag. A sense of queasiness invaded her nostrils and made her want to throw up.

Suddenly, they heard voices and the sounds of boots approaching, coming in towards the clearing from the east.

“*Der Schuam,*” they heard a voice talking in German. “It’s sad that all are dead. I would have liked to kill them myself.”

Katarzyna and Krzysztof stood transfixed. They could make out the outlines of the soldiers coming towards them, but they were unable to move. Utmost fright had turned them into statues. Moreover, it was too late for them to run anywhere and hide – all that there was, were the dead bodies strewn around. Without another moment’s hesitation, Krzysztof smeared some blood from the nearest corpse on Katarzyna’s face and asked her to lie down and pretend to be dead. He shoved one of her legs under another corpse, which made her look as if one of her legs had been cut off. He himself hurriedly smeared blood over his face, his arms and his clothes, and lay upside down at a dangerous angle, which instantly made him look lifeless.

Katarzyna lay there, hardly daring to breathe, with the fear that, if she breathed normally, they would definitely be discovered. The obnoxious foul odour from the corpse beside filled her nostrils, making her feel nauseous beyond control. Her heart was beating so fast, so thunderously that she was sure the soldiers could hear her heartbeat. A kind of buzzing sound filled her ears and she could barely make out the men speak, although they trudged around kicking at the corpses around her.

Her blood turned cold once she realised that the men were checking to see whether any of the unfortunate people were alive. She braced herself, making herself strong, vowing

not to move. Even before she was completely prepared for it, she felt a heavy boot giving a single solid kick near her ribs. The pain was excruciating. Her entire body revolted against the agony. She wanted to scream out, wanted to howl as every joint, every muscle in her body burnt with pain. But she didn't let out a single whimper – not even a squeak, and bore the agonising pain in silence. She remained there, motionless, praying to God to help her tolerate the pain. Before long, the monstrous party left the clearing, satisfied with their fellow men's loathsome horrendous destruction of human lives.

Slowly, fatigue permeated through every vein, every muscle in the tender and frail bodies of the two children. As they trudged along the forests, bit by bit, it started to dawn on them, the absolute hopelessness of their situation. With their parents dead, their country at war, and they themselves wandering aimlessly in the forest, the siblings had lost their will to go on. The strong kick from the soldier had hurt Katarzyna's ribs, making the young chest bruised and blue. She was also running a very high temperature and was phasing in and out of consciousness. Krzysztof had to carry her fragile body on his back. However, even he was running out of strength – both physical and mental.

Gradually, the trees in the forest started to look different. The species changed and so did the land. The undergrowth was not so thick. The vegetation was sparse, and the land was marshy. It became increasingly difficult for Krzysztof to maintain his balance walking on the waterlogged land while carrying his sister. The sun's rays seemed to penetrate right through his eyes, making them hurt and blurring his vision. On his back, he felt Katarzyna's hot breath. He felt her body burning up with fever. But he could not move forward, although it was not because of his lack of trying. The whole forest around him seemed to be spinning; he blinked, trying to focus his eyes back on the path.

Suddenly, he could hear voices of men. At first, he thought he was hallucinating. It was all a part of a trick that his mind was playing on him; just like the spinning forest or the blurring vision. But, as the voices started coming closer, they grew louder. In a few more moments, he could distinctly make out the words and, with a sinking heart, Krzysztof realised that it was not a delusion. It was real – the men were not a figment of his imagination, and neither was the feeling of horror, the dismay, the realisation that all was in vain. They had run from evil, but they couldn't hide. He tried to run, tried to blend into the surrounding grasslands, but the marshy area, Katarzyna's weight, as well as his body's absolute refusal to move, immobilised Krzysztof. As the forest went in and out of focus, Krzysztof's knees buckled under the weight, and he blacked out – his head hitting the ground right when the first of the men sighted him.

CHAPTER 3

Colonel Timothy Carver, sitting on a wicker chair, watched silently as his friend, Captain Jack Hawkins, the commander of the ship, H.M.S Mockingbird, paced impatiently up and down in the engine room. Very few things had the ability to get the captain agitated and this Colonel Timothy Carver knew not through rumours or hearsay, but because of their unwavering friendship that had begun in the days when both were in the academy and had lasted through the years till the present day.

The tall, robust captain with the clearest blue eyes he had ever seen was one of the most respected men in the Royal Navy. At fifty-three, thirty-three years of which he had been serving in the Royal Navy, Captain Jack Hawkins had been earning medals for his demonstration of courage and leadership, as one collects sea shells at the sea shore. Thus, it went without saying that he had had his fair share of complicated and perilous situations before. However, in all those times, the captain had a strategic plan and a clear idea of what was expected of him and his men.

But this time it was different. It had only been a few days since the German Army had started its invasion into the soils of Poland. In fact, when they had first anchored H.M.S Mockingbird in the Baltic Sea on the shores of Gdansk, they were completely unaware of the battle that had started between Germany and Poland. They were on their way to Calcutta, the British capital of colonial India, but had to make a detour and anchor in Gdansk due to bad weather. However, from the time they had anchored, they had been asked to stay where they were, since a number of countries were still under discussion on what should be done, and how the escalation of Hitler's bloodthirstiness was to be handled.

Captain Hawkins, being a man more of action than words, found waiting in a war zone without actually doing something extremely frustrating. Apart from that, he was also worried about something that was of a more personal nature. His wife, Lady Fiona Hawkins, was also in the ship. His transfer orders to the British capital of India had come a month ago and he had been looking forward to visiting the subcontinent.

Suddenly, he stopped and looked at his friend, Colonel Timothy Carver, who also happened to be the doctor on duty on H.M.S Mockingbird.

"I am completely baffled," said Captain Hawkins in his signature husky voice that was the effect of too many cigars and too many glasses of port, when whiskey was not available. "How long are we supposed to wait? And what exactly are we supposed to do while we are waiting? My ship is not equipped for a battle right now. And I don't want to put my men in any form of danger. If orders don't come by tomorrow, we are still pulling out from here and will go and wait somewhere in international waters."

Before Colonel Carver could answer that, there was a soft knock on the door.

"Come in," snapped the captain, clearly not in a good mood.

The door to the engine room opened, and there stood two cadets, with a troubled look on their faces, and two unconscious, shabbily dressed children in their arms.

The two friends in the room were taken aback. They had fought in wars, and were accustomed to the atrocities that a war brought upon mankind. They were familiar with casualties that wars caused. But seeing those two children, unconscious and helpless,

stirred something in the hearts of the veteran soldiers. In an immaculate engine room, among impeccably dressed men in their white uniforms, the limp bodies of the two children in their bedraggled clothes and their neglected hygiene stood out glaringly, accusingly, almost, at the barbarity they had suffered.

For some time, nobody could utter a word. The only noise was a low humming that the machines in the room made. A shocked silence descended on the four men – the cadets afraid to explain why they were carrying the children, while the colonel and the captain were unable to ask anything. After several moments of silence, it was Colonel Carver who first regained his senses. He rushed towards the door, ordering the two children to be taken to his clinic on the lower deck.

While the cadets carried the children, he walked briskly alongside them, trying to find out the circumstances under which they were found. It didn't take the colonel long to get the details. According to the men, they had gone to the surrounding forests to look around for some game. They had heard from the locals that rabbits were in abundance in the woods and that's what had lured them into the woods even though they knew that the captain's orders were not to go far from the ship. One of the men, whose name was Phillip, said that the boy had been carrying the girl on his back, and passed out almost in front of him. At first, the men didn't know what to do, but they just couldn't leave the children there, and so they brought them back to the ship, fully aware of the fact that that would give away their unlawful escapade to the captain.

Colonel Carver remained silent. It was not his duty to mete out any kind of punishment to the men for disregarding orders – that was up to his friend, Captain Hawkins. But he made a mental note to plead with his friend that he pass a lighter punishment in light of the situation.

Both the children were unconscious, but the boy just seemed to be exhausted. The girl, on other hand, was running a high temperature, and, on removing her blouse, the colonel noticed her ribs were swollen and had a nasty bruise that was turning purple. In the fragile body of the little girl, the deep purple bruise stood out, a sample of the savageness humans were capable of.

While the colonel attached saline drips to the arms of the two children, trying to re-hydrate them, working silently and cursing under his breath at whoever was responsible for causing them such agony, he suddenly felt the presence of another person behind him. On turning around, he found Lady Fiona Hawkins standing at the doorstep of his small clinic. Her questioning eyes were filled with tears of empathy seeing the bruised and battered bodies of the two children.

It took two days and most of the third day for Katarzyna and Krzysztof to recover their strength, at least enough to regain their consciousness and talk – although it was almost a week before either of them could walk properly. In that time, Colonel Carver did everything that medicine had taught him over the years to treat them, and, in that time, not once did Lady Fiona Hawkins leave the sides of the children.

When Katarzyna whimpered in pain in her sleep, it was Lady Fiona who shushed her and wiped her frail tiny body every time it was bathed with sweat. When Krzysztof called out for his mother, groaning from some horrible nightmare, it was Lady Fiona who held him to her bosom, rocked him and reassured him that everything would be all right. There were shadows under her beautiful violet eyes from the lack of sleep, but no one could make her leave the clinic even for the shortest time.

Lady Fiona and Captain Jack Hawkins had been childhood sweethearts. She had married him when she was eighteen. He a big bear of a man and she, a small, petite porcelain doll, was perhaps physically the most unlikely match. But both of them were devoted to each other in a manner that put the classical lovers, Romeo and Juliet, to shame. Never had they lacked anything in their married life, except perhaps the most important thing. They were childless. Throughout the years of trying, they had both pretended that it was okay, that it didn't matter if they did not have children since neither of them wanted the other to feel inadequate or unhappy. However, deep inside their hearts, both felt empty without the joys of being a parent. Secretly, perhaps it made Jack Hawkins feel worse, because in all the years there had never been a time when he had not been able to fulfil each and every of Fiona's wishes. But this was perhaps God's will and, although he was not too happy with God on that, there was nothing that he could do.

As the years had gone by in their married life, Lady Fiona had started to give up the hope of being called a mother. Captain Hawkins had seen her look wistfully at the other mothers with a slight smile that turned the corners of her lips – when she thought he was not watching. Other times, she would be pale, listless, a shadow of the vibrant Fiona that he knew and loved. She was always the most dutiful and the loving wife. But she wanted to be more than that; she wanted to be a loving mother as well.

Tending to the two children had almost brought back a purpose in her life. Even staying awake to look after them, although physically exhausting, seemed to have returned a spark to her dull, listless eyes.

On the third day, it was Katarzyna who opened her eyes first. Looking around drowsily, she didn't realise where she was. Panic started setting in when she remembered the ordeal she had gone through. But, as she clambered up, trying to get down from the bed, a beautiful lady, with voice like a flute, wrapped her arms around her and held her down while murmuring softly, telling her that she was safe, telling her to relax. In those lavender-scented arms, Katarzyna felt protected and peaceful. Her baffled mind was almost certain that she was in Heaven, being held by an angel – perhaps the most beautiful and the most special of all God's angels.

On the evening of the third day, Krzysztof was well enough to sit up and narrate the horror that they had gone through. By then, H.M.S Mockingbird was already on her way to India – their orders had come the same night as the children were found. Krzysztof and Katarzyna was brought to the upper deck and made to lie down on the deck chairs, while Lady Fiona fussed over them, putting blankets over them and bringing them cool water to drink.

The sun was setting on the western horizon and lighted the ocean in tints of orange and gold. The cool salty breeze from the sea and the unending vastness of the ocean enveloped Krzysztof in a surreal atmosphere. Sitting there, he found it difficult to believe that the grief of the last few days had been real. It was as if it had happened to him in another world, in another lifetime. He was surrounded by a lot of people; although no one pushed him to say anything, he could see the questioning looks in their eyes. It was as though every pair of eyes attempted to infiltrate deep into his core with the desire to learn his woeful tale. He saw the beautiful lady sitting beside Katarzyna, holding her in her arms, while Katarzyna looked snug and content to be there.

Taking a deep breath, Krzysztof started narrating his nightmarish tale. His eyes were empty as he looked towards the setting sun, his voice listless, emotionless as he related

his tale. He was burnt out, his grief being too much for his brain to comprehend, so it felt as if he was relating an incident that had happened to someone else. In a flat monotone, he related how his father was beheaded. While everyone else squirmed in horror at the time when they had to hide among corpses, Krzysztof remained impassive and hardly noticed the outrage and the repulsion on the faces around him.

“And then I don’t remember anything,” said Krzysztof, finally referring to the time he had blacked out.

The entire deck was quiet. Although there were at least fifteen people present there, no one could say anything. Lady Fiona’s eyes were filled with fresh tears as she gently untangled herself from Katarzyna and went to hold Krzysztof. Looking around, Colonel Carver realised it was his turn now to explain to the two children how exactly they had ended up on the ship.

After Colonel Carver explained to the children how they were found, there was another bout of silence on the deck. While Katarzyna and Krzysztof were digesting the incident in their minds, the question that laid hanging in the air, even though unspoken, was what was to happen to them now.

Before anyone could say anything, or even before Krzysztof or Katarzyna could ask the question, Lady Fiona got up hurriedly.

“I think we should let them sleep now,” she said, avoiding her husband’s meaningful glance.

That night, when Captain Hawkins entered the bedroom of his quarters, he found Lady Fiona sitting pensively, staring out through the porthole. Not once did she glance at him as he entered, so lost was she in deep thoughts. Jack Hawkins let out a sigh. He knew the time had come for them to address the question that both of them had been avoiding for the last few days.

Sitting beside his wife on the loveseat, he too stared out of the window, looking at the silvery waters bathed in the moonlight while he tried to get his thoughts in order, trying to say the right thing, because it was something very crucial. But, however much he tried, Captain Jack Hawkins, a man of few words, and not very good at diplomacy or gentleness, did not know how to bring up the topic that was at the forefront in his mind. Neither did Fiona say a word. She sat like a statue, completely unaware of the internal turmoil that her husband was going through right then.

Captain Hawkins sighed and took Fiona’s hand in his hands, making her turn slowly towards him. As she looked up to meet his eyes, he realised that he wouldn’t have to say anything – whatever needed saying was already there reflected in her eyes.

“Are you sure that that is what you want?” asked Hawkins gently.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Both completely in sync telepathically, knowing the subject of their discussion, even without having to say it aloud – two minds, and two hearts working in perfect harmony to express through their eyes what had taken them so long to communicate through words. So that night was the beginning when Captain and Mrs. Jack Hawkins ceased to remain a couple and became a family instead.

CHAPTER 4

Mathew Brown was tired. Tired of being on the move constantly; roaming the globe not with the languorous inquisitiveness of tourists, but with the frenzied worry of a man on whose solitary shoulders rested the responsibility – the burden, rather, of a large business empire. He was tired of being duty bound to take care of his employees, their families and a thousand other associates who relied on his expertise and knowledge to earn their livelihood. He was tired of running a business that was vulnerable enough to be affected by everything ranging from bad weather to labour unions, and most of all he was tired of running away; running away every time from Darjeeling, from his home, because every part of the place reminded him of his beloved Katya. Even after almost thirteen years of her death, Katya lived in his heart, in memories more vibrant, in fantasies more indubitable than the real, living people he encountered every day.

“Mrs. D’Costa,” he hollered from where he stood, by the French window in his study, “Is Trisha back yet?”

Mrs. D’Costa, who was right outside the room coincidentally, peeped in. “No, she isn’t. But don’t worry, she promised to be back the moment school ends. Would you like me to make you a cup of tea in the meantime?”

Mathew shook his head. “Please not tea. I cannot take another cup. Just ask her to come right into the study the moment she arrives.”

Mrs. D’Costa nodded and stepped back from the doorway where she was standing.

Suddenly Mathew felt lonely in that big study. It was more of a library rather, with bookshelves running through the length and breadth of the room. Mathew’s eyes kept drawing back to the soft black leather couch that occupied the other side of the room opposite the fireplace. He remembered cold winter months when he sat by the fireplace reading, while Katya would lie on his lap, trying to read something. He remembered how she would lose concentration and look away staring into nothingness as she thought of things that Mathew knew he was not part of. In that pensive mood, while she dreamt of places or people unknown, Katya looked more than just beautiful. She seemed to have an ethereal beauty that radiated from her with a soft diffused glow. He would have loved to be able to read her mind right then. From the day he had fallen in love with her, he had made a secret promise to himself that never would he allow even a shadow of sadness to cross her path. But whenever she had that faraway look, Mathew felt that there existed a past in Katya that she preferred to keep completely separate from him. And that made him feel that he failed in keeping her happy.

Somehow, coming back home always brought back the anguish of losing her – like an old wound that had opened up and caused fresh bouts of pain. Especially today, being the anniversary of the first time that Mathew had laid his eyes on his late wife almost twenty years ago, try as he might, he couldn’t stop the memories of that day from flooding his mind.

He had been in Copenhagen. It was the weekend of *Sankt Hans Aften* or Saint John’s Eve, and everybody he knew there was either out of station or planned to spend the day with families and loved ones. There was no lack of invitations from his clients and

associates to join them in the celebrations, but somehow Mathew was not in the mood for socialising.

That Saturday, after a satisfying breakfast in his hotel, Mathew ventured out to explore the city with such aimlessness that can only be attained by a person with no prior engagements or appointments. His hotel was in the Christianshvan area, and within short walking distance was the sea. Mathew's aim was to take a walk across the seashore. However, while walking towards the beach, he came across a small alley laid out with cobbled stones. A casual glance towards the alley displayed a tiny board above a rundown shop advertising antique objects. That being an addiction, he changed his direction and walked towards the promise of more *objet d' arts*.

As he pushed open the door, a bunch of bells hanging above the glass door announced his arrival. Inside the shop, among a musty smell and gloomy lighting – a characteristic of all authentic antique shops, Mathew found a sea of curios and art pieces cluttered together haphazardly. A twenty thousand-dollar statue lying right next to a cheap hundred-dollar oil painting. But it definitely was a Mecca for any ardent antique fan. Everywhere he looked, there were treasures from the yesteryears – each piece waiting to whisper the secret behind its being. All that was needed were the eyes to see it and the knack to estimate its value.

Mathew looked around noticing that apart from him, the shop looked deserted. However, when he walked further in towards the core of the shop, his eyes scanning expertly the objects, he suddenly had a feeling that someone was watching him. He looked up to see a beautiful Belgian mirror that adorned one of the pillars. The mirror itself was breathtaking, with ornate prisms studded at the upper borders, shining like diamonds reflecting the various colours of the rainbow. The glass was so clear, so smooth that it was like looking out of a window. A grand, intricately carved gold-gilded frame added to its exquisite beauty. He had never come across a mirror that glorious. But what was more breathtaking, more unique, was the reflection of a woman standing right behind him. Her reflection stirred some deeply embedded strings in Mathew's heart. It was such an overwhelming feeling that he spun around and, in his haste, upset a brass candle stand to the floor. The loud, harsh, clanging sound of metal hitting the marble floor, to Mathew, seemed almost musical in its disposition – a fitting dramatic background score to the vision that stood in front of him.

In front of him stood a woman so beautiful, so alluring that, for a moment, Mathew almost stopped breathing, lest it be an apparition that vanishes with the slightest movement. With skin as clear as porcelain, a face that boasted of proud Scandinavian heritage – high cheek bones, strong jaws, eyes the colour of stormy seas and lips that reminded him of the petals of the crimson roses – she was definitely the most beautiful woman he had ever seen; most probably the most beautiful woman there ever was. Time seemed to stand still as Mathew stood there speechless, motionless.

“*Kan jeg hjælpe dig?*” she asked in a soft, low voice.

Her voice brought Mathew back to Earth. He shook his head.

“I am sorry. I don't speak Danish. Do you speak English?” he asked in a voice that sounded hoarse and croaky even to him.

Never preceding that situation had he ever been so strongly affected by anybody of the fairer sex. It was almost as if his heart was speaking something else while his mouth said something completely different. If Mathew was not such a practical man, he would

almost believe that to be love at first sight. *But then*, he thought, *there is nothing called love at first sight – or is there?* His brain was in turmoil, unable to decipher the reason behind such a strong emotional attachment towards her.

“May I help you?” she asked with a slight accent and a smile – aware of the effect she was having on the handsome foreign stranger.

Mathew blushed, realising that he was almost making a fool of himself in front of her.

“Ahem... I would just like to browse through, if you don’t mind,” he said, clearing his throat.

“Sure. Please go ahead.”

She turned back and headed towards a small desk in the corner that Mathew had overlooked before. There, she sat down and picked up a pen and started writing something in a huge ledger in front of her. Her retreat almost left the place cold and a void in Mathew’s heart. It was like a feeling of abandonment and a faint wisp of moroseness seemed to surround him. *How is that possible? It’s not as if I even remotely know her*, he thought.

Mathew tried to turn his interest back towards the antiques, but, after such a momentous meeting with someone who Mathew could only think of as an angel, he found it difficult to focus on the objects around him. Antiques had always been his passion, but right then, even the most exquisite object seemed dull and lifeless. Looking around, spending almost half an hour in the shop, while he thought of a clever line to impress her, Mathew came up with nothing – nothing that he wanted to buy and no line that was witty or intelligent enough that he could use on her. Finally, frustrated and appalled at his lack of social skills, Mathew walked up to her and thanked her for allowing him to look around. Then, without even waiting for her to answer, he turned around.

As he walked towards the door, he heard her voice behind him.

“Couldn’t you find anything in the shop worthy of your interest?”

He turned around and saw her smiling at him, her eyes twinkling with some hidden mischief. Mathew slowly walked back to her. He was not sure whether she was subtly teasing him, or whether she was asking him as a proud owner of an antique shop.

“Well.” He hesitated. “There are quite a few interesting pieces that you have in the shop, but the most interesting among them is...” Mathew stopped, looking at her face, her eyes, trying to find the right words to say next. He wanted to say that, with all the beautiful objects in place, nothing was as priceless as her. That everything in her shop was worthy and especially so because of her. That anyone would feel honoured to buy something from someone so beautiful.

“Yes?” she asked curiously, looking at his face and trying to know the most exquisite piece in her shop.

Mathew was still hesitant. He knew she was not one of those girls who someone could make a flippant flattering remark about. She was someone to be held with tremendous grace and respect, someone to be cherished and loved for eternity. He realised that saying the wrong thing would make him lose the chance of getting to know her at all.

Thinking thus that it would not be wise to make a personal remark, he chose to make a casual one instead.

“Well,” he said casually, “I find the Belgian mirror over there to be the most beautiful. How much is that? ”

It honestly was the best antique that the place had to offer. It was something unique, and, if Mathew was really in the mood of buying, he would have definitely bought the mirror. However, from the moment his eyes had fallen on her, he had lost his eye of an antique connoisseur. But seeing that she raised the question, he knew that one way to impress her would be to give her an accurate and honest appraisal of what he thought was good in her shop.

What happened next, Mathew even in his wildest dreams could not have imagined. It was shocking, the effect his words had on her. In an instant, her face turned white, as if every drop of blood had been drained out of her porcelain skin.

Her friendliness was gone in a flash and a look of caution settled on her face. It was almost as if every emotion of hers got locked up inside her with that single remark of his – almost as if he had said something to offend her.

“I am sorry,” she said briskly. “That mirror is not for sale.”

“But why not?” protested Mathew. “It would bring in a very good profit for your shop.”

“It’s not my shop. And it’s the owner’s decision on what should be sold and what not. And, as you can see clearly from the sign on it, it’s not for sale.” She said it so firmly, almost bordering on rudeness that he was taken aback.

However, Mathew Brown was a man who was used to getting his way. Being born into a rich family, things were generally not denied to him. Moreover, as he grew up and became a successful businessman, he rarely faced an obstacle where a particular object could not be bought. Thus, her refusal brought out the arrogant capitalist in him. It was almost like a game to him – a game he was determined to win.

“My dear Miss...” he started, looking at her with sardonic eyes and prompting her to furnish her name.

“Katya,” she said.

“My dear Miss Katya, I am absolutely sure that if there was such a sign that proclaiming that the mirror was not to be sold, I would have definitely seen it. I am a very observant man who sees into every detail whenever I walk into any room. And I can assure you that there was no such sign on that mirror. And seeing how, without a sign, it makes the mirror available, I intend to buy it,” said Mathew breathlessly, feeling very pleased with himself.

Annoyance or some other emotion that Mathew could not really define seemed to be etched on her face. Without another word to him, Katya marched towards the mirror, trying to show him the sign. However, with dismay, she realised that the sign was missing. She frantically looked around, thinking maybe it had fallen down. Seeing her dismay, Mathew, who had been ready for another argument with her, softened. He didn’t want to cause her distress. All he wanted was to get to know her better. He decided to let the matter drop. However, before he could utter another word, he found Katya pick up a piece of paper that had lodged itself between a wooden writing table and a huge Ming vase under the mirror.

“I am sorry, sir; it’s my fault. I didn’t realise the sign had dropped off. It must have fallen sometime ago and I didn’t notice. Please accept my apologies,” she said, at once humble, yet the desperation in her voice could not be completely buried.

Mathew glanced at the white piece of paper that she was carrying, and on it, in almost as many as ten languages or may be more, was written that the mirror was not for sale. Katya seemed to be very anxious to make amends and he knew that this was the perfect

opportunity for him to make it favourable for himself. Although he couldn't imagine why someone like her would actually want to be an ordinary salesgirl in an antique shop, he realised that she could get into a troublesome situation if he insisted on buying while she had to explain the situation to the owners – tell them that because of her overlooking the sign, they may be legally liable to sell him the mirror.

As any good businessman, he knew how to make the most of the situation.

“I'll tell you what,” he said, as if he had contemplated it for a while. “I will not buy the mirror only if you are willing to have dinner with me tonight.”

Katya seemed to hesitate, but only for a few seconds, before nodding in acquiescence.

Thinking in retrospect, everything about that evening had been magical. Starting from the quaint restaurant located right on the beach – in fact, the tables and chairs were actually arranged on the sand itself; the moonlit night, the silvery waters of the Baltic sea, the salty breeze, the dim candle light and, of course, the company of the stunning Katya – it was almost a dream. But then when has a dream ever been that perfect?

For Mathew, what had started off as an appreciation of physical beauty slowly turned into admiration as he was, in turn, mesmerised and surprised at Katya's wit, grace and intellect. At times, he really had difficulty believing that she was real. What was more unbelievable was that she seemed genuinely happy working in the obscurity of an unconventional antique shop, rather than being a super model conquering the ramps of Paris and Milan or ruling over some country as a queen; for she had both the beauty and the regal look that either of the professions demanded.

When the evening slowly turned into late night, he didn't realise, but then neither did Katya. She had never been the type to go out on dates with strangers. In fact, truth be told, she had never been on a date before that. Her interaction with the opposite sex had been strictly limited to meeting them in a professional capacity. But something in Mathew's eyes stirred a feeling of fondness deep within her soul, and she was glad that she had impulsively decided to go out with him. After dinner, walking on the beach and holding hands seemed only natural, and the conversation slowly turned towards more serious things.

It was a whirlwind romance that ended in an even faster wedding. Katya was an orphan, and didn't have anyone to call, and Mathew's father and Mrs. D' Costa flew down from India to attend the wedding, because Mathew wanted Katya to fly to India with him not as his fiancée, but his wife. A very simple wedding was held in a small church outside Copenhagen. There were just the three of them and the priest, and, after that, they spent a few days honeymooning around Europe before Mathew brought his bride back to Darjeeling.

Katya was more loving and dutiful as a wife than Mathew could ever have dreamt. There was never a complaint even in the deepest corner of his heart that he could admit having against her. But perhaps there was one – she was an enigma. Through her most merry laughter there seemed to be a shadow of melancholy that hovered very close to her eyes. Somehow, her smiles seemed to stop just short of reaching her eyes, while her lips quivered with slight uncertainty. It was as if she was haunted by some past memories. Mathew knew that he was loved, and never would Katya look at another man, but even though he was the only man in her life, he sometimes felt as if her heart did not completely belong to him. There was a secret part of her heart, her mind that seemed to

belong to another place, another time. Try as he might, Mathew was unable to bring her out of that melancholy or be a part of whatever was making her suffer so.

Throughout their marriage, Mathew tried to probe, albeit gently, what was it that made Katya endure that silent grief. He asked her questions about her parents, her growing up years, how she handled the deaths of her parents, who, according to her, had died in a car accident. However, such queries always left him with more questions than answers. Katya was curt and very vague when it came to talking about her family. She consistently told him that she preferred talking about things that did not involve her family. Mathew comforted himself by reasoning that perhaps being an orphan had given her a very tough childhood and she did not like to be reminded of those days. But somehow her bearing did not seem to be that of someone who had come up the hard way. It was more like that of noble blood. However, as the years went by, Mathew learnt to accept her the way she was – her mirth and her melancholy.

The only time she had shocked him was the night when Trisha was born. Where Mathew was filled with a great sense of pride and overwhelming love for the tiny miniature attestation of their love, Katya seemed to be extremely distressed, crying when she thought no one noticed. Mathew could not understand the reason behind those tears since, over time, he observed his wife love their daughter with a fierceness that was beyond the love of any mother for her child – at least, as far as he had seen.

Even after so many years, he still did not have any answers – their marriage, and Katya, remained an unsolved puzzle. The biggest mystery of all being the reason behind the letter that remained till today locked up in a secret compartment of his study table. Mathew reached out to open the drawer, but right then he heard Trisha's voice at the door.

“Papa.”

That one word filled Mathew's heart with the pride and joy of fatherhood. Looking up at her, Mathew smiled, his whole face expressing his gladness in seeing his daughter. He had missed her. When he was not around, he didn't seem to realise just how much, but when after a long interval he saw her, he felt as if he was seeing her for the first time. For a moment, he forgot the girl almost on the verge of womanhood, and instead saw the little baby that he used to carry around like the most precious treasure that this world was capable of producing.

Trisha was almost the reflection of Katya in every way – from the stormy grey-green eyes to the porcelain skin. But where Katya always seemed to be haunted by some unknown pain, Trisha's face portrayed the innocence and happiness of a modern day teenager.

“Hi Punkin,” said Mathew. He had called her that from the time she was a chubby baby with soft rounded hands and dimpled chin. “Come in.”

Trisha almost ran in and gave her darling daddy a hug, forgetting the complaints she carried in her heart that her father didn't have enough time for her. She realised every moment spent with him brought her joy, a sense of family, and she didn't want to dampen her spirit thinking about when her beloved papa had to leave her again. Mrs. D' Costa found them laughing and talking at the same time when she peeped in after sometime, wanting to call them for dinner. But, seeing the look of contentment and love reflected on the faces of both the father and daughter, she decided to leave them alone for a while more. *I can always postpone dinner by a few minutes*, thought Mrs. D' Costa as she

retreated out of the study, while the Browns remained completely unaware of her momentary presence.

“I have something for you,” said Mathew, suddenly jumping up from the couch where both were sitting.

Trisha looked up questioningly, her face filled with the excitement and anticipation of a present.

“Consider it an advance birthday present,” said Mathew, and led Trisha to a corner of the study.

There in the corner stood something hidden under a red cloth. As Mathew took the cloth off with a flourish, Trish gasped, seeing the beautiful antique mirror that stood there. It was studded with beautiful prisms that shone in the light, glittering like diamonds. A gold-gilded frame surrounded the mirror like a crown fit for a king. It was the most glorious mirror that Trisha had seen. *Is it just an illusion or do I look more beautiful in the reflection,* she thought.

“It’s a Belgian mirror from the fifteenth century; a very expensive and rare piece of antique,” she heard her father saying.

“It’s beautiful,” said Trisha, almost whispering with reverence towards an object that stunning.

“Not as beautiful as you, Punkin. Someone as beautiful as you should only see herself in something as precious as this. I will have it fixed in your room so that you can dress up in front of it every morning. Would you like that?”

Trisha nodded in acquiescence, unable to talk, so awestruck was she.

Mathew gave a sigh of satisfaction as he remembered how he had obtained the mirror. On the last trip when he had visited Copenhagen, he made it a point to go back to the antique shop where he had first met Katya. It had always been there in the back of his mind to acquire that mirror. That mirror had always had a special sentimental value to him, seeing how he had had the first glimpse of his beloved Katya in it. However, he had never before thought of buying it, knowing that it was not for sale. But this time, he just took a chance, and luck was on his side. There was a young salesman in the shop who was more than willing to sell it to him for a heavy price, unable to hide his pleasure thinking of the hefty commission he would make from the sale.

That night after dinner and after he bade Trisha goodnight, Mathew returned to his study and took out the letter. It was torn in a few places, shabby and crumpled over years of handling.

My darling Mathew,

Please forgive me for what I am about to do. It’s the nightmares that haunt me. I thought being away from that curse, I had a chance. But it seems I was wrong. My darling, never had I thought that I would meet someone who would love me the way you do. Being your wife has made me the happiest person in the world. But I am cursed and I cannot bear it any longer, to live in constant fear and uncertainty.

I am going to end my life. Please pray for my soul, so that God has pity on me. I do not want to go to the pits of Hell, though I know perhaps that is

what is written in my fate. But even the fear of Hell is nothing compared to the fear of the curse.

Forgive me, my darling, and always tell Trisha that her mother loved her very much. Please let her not forget her mother as she grows up.

I Love you and even my last moments in this world would be spent remembering you, my love.

*Yours forever
Katya*

CHAPTER 5

“Good Morning Janet.” Ian spoke into the phone sitting in his bedroom of the Trafalgar Suite in Ritz Carlton, London.

“Good Morning Ian.” Janet his PA replied.

“What are my appointments for today and can they be postponed?”

“Absolutely not.” Janet replied firmly. “Today you are supposed to meet Sir Rogers in Sussex regarding the *Spatha*. It took me a long time to confirm the meeting, and I know you badly want the *Spatha* in your collection.”

“I see.” Replied Ian morosely. It was true, he definitely could not postpone that appointment.

Ian Marcussen was not a superstitious man. Neither was he religious in nature.

That day, however, Ian had a nagging feeling of discomfort. It was as if an unforeseen catastrophe was about to strike, and he knew not from which corner to expect its arrival.

It had started that morning. While shaving he had nicked himself on the chin. Looking around for a tissue to stop the bleeding, he noticed that drops of blood that fell on the wash basin were peculiar in shape. As the drops made their way downwards to the circular opening of the drain, they seemed to look like upside down crosses.

Those crimson markings filled Ian up with a sense of unease. He quickly washed the blood off. Walking back to the bedroom, Ian thought he saw something move in the bathtub. He spun around instantly, but of course there wasn't anything.

After getting dressed for the day, he reached for his gold Rolex that had been on the bedside table. However, it wasn't there. That was both surprising and worrying. Surprising, because Ian was a man of habit, and he always kept the classic Rolex, a gift from his grandfather on his bedside table. After this many years, the watch was like his security blanket. It was worrying because he couldn't think of anywhere else he could have kept it.

After looking around the entire suite and turning it upside down in the process, Ian went back into the bathroom. The watch was right beside the wash basin, on the marble ledge.

“Strange. I could have sworn,” Ian muttered; not remembering whether the watch had been there when he was in the bathroom a while back.

As he walked into the private dining room, Ian nodded imperceptibly at the designated butler, barely acknowledging his presence; he was that baffled. When Ian was in London, the Ritz was his home, and the hotel, in turn, offered him the premium service that was only reserved for the extremely important handful of patrons, and royalty.

He sat down for a breakfast that consisted of fruits, yoghurts and several types of cheese. However, Ian's heart seemed to be beating off its course. A cauldron of unease seemed to have toppled and spilt inside his body. As the minutes passed by, it slowly started seeping into the blood vessels, making his body taut with tension, bracing against some unknown storm.

Suddenly his mobile rang. Ian picked it up and saw an unknown number. Not many people had this number, he thought frowningly.

“Hello?” Ian answered the phone briskly.

There was static on the other side of the phone.

“Hello?” Ian’s unease started to get more pronounced and became evident in his voice.

“Mr. Marcussen?” A youngish male voice enquired from the other side of the line.

“Yes.”

“Good Morning. This is Stephen. I am calling on behalf of Sir Rogers, to confirm your mutual appointment. And to extend an invitation for lunch with Sir Rogers afterwards.”

Ian smiled, even without going for the meeting, he knew that at least this was one thing that was going to go well for the day.

“I would love to. If it is not too much trouble.”

“Not at all Mr. Marcussen, Sir Rogers is looking forward for your visit.”

“Fine, I’ll be there by noon.” Said Ian and disconnected the line.

Shortly Ian left the hotel and got into a black Bentley that waited for him at the entrance. As the chauffeur blended into the traffic towards Sussex, Ian resolved to not over dissect that morning’s incidents.

He was in the midst of negotiating the price of a sword that he was going to buy from an English Lord living in Sussex. It was not just any sword. It was a *Spatha*, a German sword that dated back to almost 700AD. The years had not been very kind to the family and, thus, they were selling off a few of the family treasures. Ian loved deals like that. During a desperate sale, Ian had a knack of getting more than what he ventured out to buy. Although, till now, they had just spoken about the sale of only the sword, Ian was hopeful that he may be able to extract quite a few other jewels.

Ian dealt with antiques – antique weapons being his specialty. But comparing him to an antique dealer would be like comparing a shrub to a forest. He was definitely above and beyond the realms of an ordinary antique dealer. The biggest difference being that he was born with noble blood, born into aristocracy of such eminence where wealth, luxury and rare antiques were weaved into every part of their life; and he was born to rule. Today, although monarchy had come to an end, Ian’s family still ruled – if not through the virtue of nobility, it was through the strength of billions of dollars.

His passion for ancient weapons started from the time he was barely five. When, as a child, he had walked through the great halls of his ancestral castle in Engjahæð, Denmark, he used to stare in awe at the various battle armours that stood at the corners of the halls, the great swords that hung on the walls – his mind going back to the battles that were fought hundreds of years ago where perhaps his great-great-great-grandfather carried the swords and the shields. From that early age, Ian was proud of his ancestry; he was proud that in him he carried the fierce and passionate blood of the Vikings.

As he grew older, along with being the best in academics, graduating in business studies with the highest marks from Oxford University, Ian’s passion for learning about ancient weaponry grew. Today, at thirty-eight, he was an authority on ancient weapons, and was, in fact, requested by various museums and universities around the world to give talks, or to judge the authenticity of various ancient finds.

The feeling of disquietude was still there when Ian returned to his suite that evening. Rather, it seemed to have intensified as the hours passed. The cause on which Ian had blamed that particular nervousness had, in fact, gone quite well. His trip to Sussex had been more than successful. Not only did he manage to buy the *Spatha* at a price much lower than what he had anticipated, but he also acquired a *Fauchard* – a pole weapon

used in medieval Europe, which Ian was certain dated back to the fourteenth century. The *Fauchard* was a true gem of a find, bearing a curved blade that was almost seven-foot long and a cutting edge around the concave side of the blade. Even after centuries of its creation, the blade gleamed with a sharpness that all at once managed to look dazzling as well as sinister.

Ian picked up the phone and made a few calls, keeping abreast with the various hubs of his business and auction houses that spread throughout Europe and America. Some of the calls were not particularly necessary, but he wanted to be sure that everything was all right. He did have a tendency to micromanage his empire.

Although it was quite late in the evening – almost around 11.30 p.m. – he decided that a hot bath would be just the right therapy to relax him. The master bathroom was huge, done up in creamy beige Italian marble with golden borders running through. Even the taps and the shower heads were gold plated. Ian turned on the tap and, as steaming hot water started to fill up the sunken Jacuzzi and clouds of smoke spiralled up from the tub, he walked back to the bedroom and waited for the water to fill up. In the bedroom, he stripped out of his business clothes – a perfectly tailored Armani suit, and gold cuff links with his initials and his watch. He made it a point to remember that this time, he did keep the watch on the bedside table.

Ian was not handsome in the classic sense of the word. But he was definitely far more charismatic than being just handsome. He was tall enough to be towering over almost anyone he met, physically intimidating them even before the conversation had begun. His piercing ocean blue eyes, dazzled like blue diamonds that could, in turn, melt a heart or a cold stare from which could freeze a person mid-gait. His copper blond hair, a sharp contrast to his milky white pallor, a strong angular jaw that almost shouted un-bendable determination, made people look up curiously from whatever they were doing just to have a glimpse of that impressive being any time Ian walked into a room. Ian was the culmination of excellent education, amazing business sense with a supreme confidence bordering on arrogance that only people from the highest pedigree possess naturally.

In another part of the world, almost seven thousand kilometres away, Mrs. D' Costa was supervising the workers who had come to put up the Belgian mirror in Trisha's room, while Trisha sat on the bed carelessly working on a school project, and observed the workers. The mirror was really heavy and it took four men and almost two hours of intense manual labour to have it mounted on the wall facing Trisha's bed.

Once everyone had left the room, Trisha took out all her makeup and knick knacks and arranged them on a dressing table in front of the mirror bought along with it. She sat down, staring at the mirror; still not able to shrug off the sense of awe that beautiful piece of glass commanded. Her reflection seemed to be more alluring, more beautiful than Trisha had ever thought she was. Her face had an ethereal glow; her skin flawless, without a single spot. There were certain very subtle changes in her face. Her features more chiselled; her cheekbones higher – the beauty of a matured woman. She seemed to have lost the softness of the faint layer of baby fat that her cheeks always had. She remembered how she would stare into mirrors sucking in her lips, pouting, trying to look more sexy – and wishing for a million times that her features were sharper. But there it was, right in front her, the changes in her face she always wanted. The biggest change

seemed to be in her eyes; from a cloudy tourmaline green to a sharp emerald. There was a sharp glint in her eyes that she had not noticed before.

As she stared at her reflection, almost drowning in her own eyes, Trisha felt that she was being transported to a different plane – a plane where she was not just an ordinary girl; a plane that promised her powers unknown, wealth unseen and places unvisited. Almost in a trance, Trisha seemed to forget her surroundings, her bedroom, her loved ones, and even herself. For a while, it was just her and her reflection. She could not turn away from her own intense gaze that kept her vision captivated on the mirror. Suddenly, Trisha saw a tiny smile that seemed to upturn the corners of her lips in the reflection. Trisha stared in horror at that hint of a smile, trying to concentrate on it. But, as suddenly as she saw the smile, it disappeared, not leaving behind a slightest hint of anything out of place.

“Trisha.”

She jumped up, rudely awakened from her reverie. Trisha turned around and found Mrs. D’ Costa at the door.

“Your father is looking for you.”

Trisha got up and followed Mrs. D’ Costa, her mind still bewildered, wondering what it was she had seen in the mirror.

Ian walked back to the bathroom, sure that by then the tub would be filled. The whole bathroom was smoky. Droplets of water vapour had condensed on the mirrors as well as the marble walls. It was almost as if a mist was rippling around the bathroom. How hot was the water? Wondered Ian. Steam got into his eyes, causing his eyes to sting and reducing his visibility. Ian, with eyes half-closed eyes, groped towards the tub, wondering why he could not hear the water flowing from the tap. The smoke near the Jacuzzi was a lot denser. Ian could not see the water or the tap from which the water flowed. The whole place was swirling with mist like the ones created in the presence of dry ice. Slowly and carefully, Ian tried to put one leg inside the tub. He jumped out, almost tripping and falling in his haste to draw his leg out of the tub.

The water was frozen completely. In fact, there was no water. It was just a big slab of ice firmly stuck to all the corners of the Jacuzzi. Even the water that was pouring out of the tap had frozen solid and now looked like a white ice tube emerging from the tap.

Ian was shocked. He had absolutely no idea what had just happened. He couldn’t think of one plausible explanation through which he could understand how steaming hot water could turn into solid ice over the matter of a few minutes in a bathroom that was still humid and damp from hot water vapour. An unknown fear started to slither slowly through his body. The dread that he had been feeling the whole day seemed to aggravate.

Trying not to pay heed to the fear, Ian walked back to his bedroom and, with the intention of calling housekeeping, he picked up the phone. Suddenly, within the blink of an eye, the whole room was in darkness. Ian looked around, but it was pitch dark – so dark that whether he kept his eyes open or closed made no difference to the visibility. Putting the telephone receiver to his ears, he didn’t get the familiar dialling tone. There was an unnatural silence that engulfed the entire suite like a suffocating sheath. He couldn’t hear even the familiar London traffic that was always a hum in the background. In fact, there was no sound of any sort around him. It was as if he was inside a vacuum.

Ian's heart sank. He could not imagine what was happening. He fumbled around trying to get out of the bedroom and into the living room, while being careful that he didn't topple over anything.

Where is my cell phone, wondered Ian. But, try as he might, he couldn't find the hall table where he had kept his wallet and cell phone when he returned. Ian was sure that there had been some electrical fault and soon housekeeping would be knocking at his door. So that he would be able to open the door quickly, Ian started to walk towards what he thought was the entrance to the suite. He felt like he was walking in space – completely dark and devoid of light; in a nebulous catacomb that seemed to be never ending. In that crepuscular atmosphere, there came sudden gusts of wind – like a draught from the sea; salty air, bringing along with it the fishy and sea weedy smell of the great blue.

Ian suddenly realised that he couldn't see any of the windows that were strategically placed around the suite. He started to panic, and could feel his heart beat rise rapidly. Tiny beads of cold sweat trickled down his forehead, and, although quite a substantial time had passed, he couldn't hear anyone at the door; neither did the electricity come back. Then he heard it – the inhuman cackling that froze him in his steps. A laughter that seemed to ascend from a low rumble to a high shrill pitch, till the deafening sound started to hurt Ian's ears. He pressed his hands to his ears and tried to shut off the evil sound, but that was in vain. It was as if the laughter was coming from the core of his soul, and no physical attempt was able to block it off. Suddenly, the laughter changed to a cry – a howling, heart-wrenching wail that reverberated throughout the suite. The entire hall seemed to be shaking at the intensity of the wail. Ian was sure that he would very soon become deaf if that agonising sound didn't stop immediately.

“Noooooooooooooooooooo,” he screamed unable to take the pressure on his eardrums anymore.

That was when he remembered the verse that had been taught to every Marcussen over the generations; the verse that threatened to bring the curse. It was the one thing that over many generations the Marcussens had been warned of. But it had happened so many centuries ago, so many generations ago that, as the story was handed down from father to child, generation to generation, it had ceased to remain a fact, and had become a myth, a legend instead.

*When the banshee starts her wail,
And water freezes to ice,
Beware, for from the depths of hell,
The demonic strength will rise.*

Ian had learnt the poem on his grandfather's lap. It had always been just a rhyme – four short lines that didn't really carry any threat; a closet monster that started losing its impudence as he started growing up. But, when he was old enough to actually be told about the calamity that had been looming over the Marcussens for generations, Ian wished that there was a closet monster. It would have been lot easier to have dealt with the monster rather than what troubled the family.

Ian felt like he had been walking around the suite for almost an hour. At that point in time, he was not even sure whether he was in the hotel or on a planet far away from

Earth. As much as he groped around with his hands, he could not touch a single object, the familiarity of which would have helped him understand his exact location. Everywhere felt empty. Although he was walking, putting one foot in front of the other, he seemed to be walking in space, in zero gravity. He seemed to be in the midst of a most horrible nightmare. But he knew he was not asleep. He knew that whatever he was feeling was happening in real life.

As suddenly as the wailing had started, it stopped. Almost immediately, the room was flooded with light. He had been in darkness for so long that Ian was temporarily blinded. Opening his eyes just slightly so that it didn't hurt, he looked around curiously to know exactly where it was that he stood, where it was that he had completely lost his bearing and had felt so lost in the darkness. With shock, he realised that he was standing right next to the telephone that he had picked up what seemed to be almost an hour ago. The telephone was in its cradle. On picking up the receiver, Ian could hear the familiar dialling tone. He knew he had been walking; he knew he had been trying to touch objects in the dark. But what he couldn't explain was why he couldn't feel anything then, while in the light he saw that the bed, the side table and every other knick knack placed just within his reach. It was totally unexplainable. *The water*, he thought, running back to the bathroom, thinking by now it would be overflowing. But even there, to his amazement, the tub was just half filled. There was no ice, no smoke, nothing that could explain what he had just felt. But among everything he got the worst shock when he glanced at the wall clock in the master bedroom. It showed 11.40. Hardly a few minutes had passed from the time he had opened the tap, or from the time he had taken off his clothes.

Shaking with trepidation, Ian closed the tap and returned to the bedroom. As he picked up the phone, he knew exactly who he needed to call, and somehow, even before he made that call, he knew what he was going to hear. He knew that what generations of Marcussens had been afraid of was beginning to come true. The question was: would he be able to stop it? Was he strong enough to fight what his Viking ancestors could not?

CHAPTER 6

Katarzyna peeped into the garden through her kitchen window and found her granddaughter and Trisha lazing in the soft afterglow of the evening sun. Trisha had a faraway, distressed look while Mia had a look of perfect contentment, her eyes glazed over with the blissful lassitude and a hint of a smile turned the corners of her lips. Knowing Mia as well as she did, Katarzyna could almost hear her thoughts. Thoughts of long days to be spent enjoying all the different kinds of entertainment that Darjeeling had to offer. Thoughts of holidays, homework-less days that she could spend in any way she wished, maybe even thoughts of boys. Katarzyna frowned at that thought. She didn't want Mia to be thinking of boys so early in her life. But she knew that at that age of raging hormones, try as she might, she would not be able to restrict Mia and bring her up sheltered from everything the way she wanted to.

Katarzyna herself had met her late husband when she was seventeen, and never had she had a day's misery in her entire married life. Her David had been the sweetest man she had ever known. Her only repine was that he died early leaving behind his young pretty wife holding their only son – stopping, depriving himself and his beloved from the love and joy of a bigger household.

From the day Katarzyna had found shelter within the hearts of Lady Fiona and Captain Hawkins, she knew that it could only have been a hallowed miracle. The Hawkins had embraced the two unfortunate children as their own. In the entire three months that took H.M.S Mockingbird to reach the Khidderpore port of Calcutta, Lady Fiona personally coached Katarzyna and Krzysztof in English. She insisted that everyone on the ship call them Katherine and Christopher rather than by their Polish names. Only when Katarzyna was old enough to understand the ways of the world did she realise the extreme understanding that went behind that gesture. The Hawkins didn't want the world to discriminate against the siblings. They didn't want pity or disdain to be a part of Katarzyna or Krzysztof's life. Thus, from the moment the four had landed on Indian soil, they were a family, a unit to everyone they met. Slowly, as the children grew up, they started, if not to forget, at least to accept, the horrendous incident of their childhood. Katarzyna could never forget her beloved mother. Her kind eyes, the tiny crows' feet that crinkled when she smiled and her mild admonishments when she had been up to mischief, but the affection of Lady Fiona, her dedication to their needs, and the gruff yet kind Captain Hawkins filled up the void and made her heart less painful, and slowly she and Krzysztof learnt to love them with much fierceness – now that they knew the pain of losing parents.

The day Krzysztof reached eighteen, he announced his intention to join the British Royal Navy like the captain and fight against the German oppression. Katarzyna realised the sense of revenge that was deep seated within Krzysztof's spirit. A sense of retribution against the mindless killing of his parents had always been there inside her brother even in spite of the happy times that the Hawkins had provided them. As sad as she was knowing that she would miss her dear brother, she also knew that his mind was made and there was nothing that would make him change his mind. Captain Hawkins' chest swelled with pride at Krzysztof's declaration while Lady Fiona gasped in horror as she thought of

the little man, who was hardly bigger than a child, going into the ruthless world of battles.

Within a few short months after that, Krzysztof sailed for England and Katarzyna only met her beloved brother when he used to come back during his leave. Slowly, those visits started getting shorter and the intervals longer, and the last she had heard of Krzysztof was almost twenty years ago – before the birth of Mia when she had received a Christmas card with a short note scribbled saying that he had taken a wife and had settled down in Sussex.

She had not sent an answer to that, partly due to the hurt she felt at being completely shunned from his life and partly due to the sad realisation that they had started moving apart from the day Krzysztof sailed for England for the first time. Now the void was so wide that it was impossible to once again re-grow the love that they had once shared.

A squeal of laughter brought Katarzyna back to the present as she saw Mia in the midst of turning the garden hose onto Trisha while Trisha was trying to outrun the water pressure. However, even in the midst of that laughter, Trisha looked slightly depressed – as if she was trying hard to have some fun in that childish game while her mind was on something else; more serious, more troubling. Katarzyna made a mental note to make sure she found out what was troubling Trisha. She had had a soft spot for the sweet motherless girl from the first time she had seen her – five years old and chocolate-smearing mouth.

My goodness, when will the girl learn how to tidy her room, thought Mrs. D' Costa, entering Trisha's room. Her clothes were scattered almost on every available surface. As characteristic of almost all teenaged girls throughout the world, Trisha generally went through a series of outfits every morning before choosing something that, according to Mrs. D' Costa, didn't really look a whole lot different from the rest anyway.

Shaking her head in annoyance, she started folding a t-shirt. There was a biting chilliness inside the room, although outside was bright and sunny. Mrs. D' Costa shivered involuntarily, puzzled at the unnatural icy nip in the air. As she went around settling the room, she felt the cold aggravate. An uncomfortable feeling that she couldn't place her finger on seemed to hover over her. It was almost as if somebody was watching her cleaning the room. A practical woman who had never given in to any form of hysteria, Mrs. D' Costa walked towards the windows and opened them, telling herself that it was the cold that was making her nervous.

The bright sunlight flowed into the room and warmed it up considerably. The prisms on the Belgian mirror shone like diamonds reflecting the indigos and purples of white light. Mrs. D' Costa glanced at the mirror, appreciating its grandeur and the rainbow of colours that adorned it.

There was almost something magical in it. She felt that she looked radiant in the mirror. The tiny lines around her eyes and her mouth had mysteriously vanished. The face that stared back at her didn't seem to have aged at all. A beautifully sculpted nose; a pair of lips that looked like it has been drawn by an artist; skin that glowed with a soft light. Mrs. D' Costa was mesmerised at her own reflection. She had never realised that she was so beautiful. Always thinking that she looked quite plain, she had never really paid attention to her looks before and chose to be brisk and hard working rather than spend time in front

of the mirror. But today was different. Today, it was almost as if she possessed the beauty and the regal looks of a queen.

Mrs. D' Costa was lost as she stared at her reflection when she noticed her eyes. A rude scare jolted her out of her reverie. The eyes didn't seem to be hers. They were completely the wrong colour. They were a misty sea green, whereas her eyes had always been a soft black. What was stranger was the cruel glint in those eyes that seemed to intimidate any person who would dare to look into them. The cold granite-edged eyes spoke multitudes of the ruthlessness that lay in the heart of the owner.

A bizarre feeling of discomfort and chill seemed to invade Mrs. D' Costa. Some deep-rooted instinct almost commanded her to get out of that room, and she decided that the smartest thing to do would be to listen to that instinct.

* * *

Trisha sat alone outside in the garden as Mia had gone in to answer the phone. *It must be that boy, Avi*, thought Katarzyna. He went to the same tuition classes as Mia, and somehow Katarzyna was not so sure that homework and projects were the only thing that they discussed. She made a mental note to find out more from Mia, but right now she had an opportunity in hand to talk to Trisha alone.

Seeing Grams walking towards her, Trisha sat up smiled and made place for the old lady beside her on the garden swing. As she thanked Trisha and sat down, Katarzyna wondered how to bring up the topic, how to make Trisha comfortable enough to confide in her. Being an extremely straight forward person, and a complete stranger to diplomacy, Katarzyna decided to follow the direct way.

"Trisha, sweetheart, I have been noticing that you seem to be quite worried over something. Is everything okay?"

Trisha looked up. Her eyes clearly expressed the astonishment that Grams could actually observe the distress that hounded her deep inside her heart.

Katarzyna noticed the look of surprise. She also observed the look of fear that seemed to flutter for a second over Trisha's eyes. She could see the hidden toil between hesitation and a need to confide that was going on in Trisha's mind, but she didn't want to be forceful. After a few moments of internal battle, Trisha shook her head.

"No, Grams," she said. "I am fine. Guess I have not been feeling well for sometime. Plus the pressure of the exams had been quite taxing, and I have not been sleeping properly for the last few nights. So..." She trailed off.

Katarzyna nodded understandingly. Somehow she felt that the reasons Trisha gave were not the real ones. But she did not want to force the child and get her guard up. She realised that the day Trisha was ready to talk to her, she would, and chances were she would do it faster if there was no pressure on her. However, in the meantime, Katarzyna decided to keep an eye on Trisha. She gently patted Trisha on her back and stood up, excusing herself.

Trisha watched Grams going back into the house wistfully. She wished she could tell the old lady everything that was bothering her. But where could she start, and would anybody actually believe what she was facing? She didn't want to be labelled superstitious; neither did she want people to think she was crazy. She knew that whatever

she was enduring was neither a hallucination nor any sort of manifestation of mental stress. Neither was it a sign of a weak will.

It had all started from the day the Belgian mirror had been mounted on her wall. That night, she had difficulty sleeping and she lay awake staring at the mirror. It was mounted in such a way that in it she could see the reflection of herself and her bed very clearly. In the subdued light of the bedside lamp, the mirror held a hypnotic allure. The prisms were luminous with mellow hues of amber, and her reflection in it was as clear and sharp as seeing into the still waters of a clear lake on a bright and sunny morning.

Trisha stared dreamily at her reflection, remembering how her father had seen her mum the first time on the mirror. She had found the anecdote very romantic indeed and, in that silence of the night when the whole world seemed to have fallen asleep, she could almost visualise her mother's reflection in it.

As she gazed at her own reflection, Trisha seemed to be transported to almost a different plane, into a different time, a different place. But that ceased to remain just a feeling when, after a while – and she was not exactly sure how long it was – she noticed that whatever she could see in the mirror didn't seem to be the reflection of her bedroom.

Her bedroom seemed to have transformed into another room. Although she could see her own reflection in the mirror, the rest of the room was radically changed. Her grand antique four-poster bed was gone; gone was the chest of drawers. In the mirror, she could see herself lying on an ebony bed, the deep intricate carvings on it standing out haughtily against her small frame. With matching armoire and nightstands, the furniture of the entire room seemed to have undergone a radical change. Till a while ago, the night lamp that glowed on her bedside table was gone, and, instead of it, the whole room had the orange luminous glow that could only be produced by the light of burning candles.

By then, Trisha realised that she didn't seem to be in her room. Hypnotised by the reflection, Trisha climbed down from the bed and started walking towards the mirror. Such was the magnetic pull of the mirror that she could not draw her eyes away from the reflection to look around and confirm whether what she was seeing in the mirror was true. In a daze, she walked towards the mirror. On reaching it, she hesitantly touched the surface with her fingers, not believing what she was seeing, and neither being able to disbelieve what was in front of her eyes. Was she dreaming, she wondered. But how vivid could a dream be where she could make out every nook and corner of a room, its lighting, as well as the various furniture that were scattered around it. The cold surface of the mirror was another reason that Trisha was sure that it wasn't a dream. She wouldn't be able to feel the cold if she was sleeping, she thought.

As she looked into the mirror, into her perfect reflection and the reflection of an era that felt long gone, Trisha suddenly heard a low chuckle. It seemed to originate from the mirror, and, although she knew it was impossible for a mirror to produce such a noise, at that mystical moment, nothing seemed to be preposterous.

“Soon...” a single word was whispered.

There was no one around who could have spoken. The voice itself had been so low that Trisha was not sure whether she actually heard it, or whether she had imagined it. But that one whisper brought her out of the hypnotic hold of the mirror. She jumped up, as if from out of a trance, and looked around. Everything was normal. She was back in her own room in her familiar surroundings, and, turning back to see into the mirror, she found her room reflected ordinarily in its surface.

It took a long time for her to fall asleep that night. Even in her sleep, she was restless, tossing and turning and always with an uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching her while she slept.

The next night, Trisha had been exhausted. It had been a long day when she and Mia, along with a bunch of friends, had gone hiking to a wilder part of tiger hills. Needless to say, when her sleep-laden eyes finally closed and her head rested on the pillow, nightmares of the previous night was the last thing on Trisha's mind. Yet there was a repetition of the nightmare of the previous night, and it ended with the whispered word 'soon' – like a sigh of breeze rustling the leaves of the trees in the wood.

This started happening every night. Every night, the mirror seemed to transport her to some place not known to her previously. She had been brought up both by her father and Mrs. D' Costa to believe only in things that were explained through logic. Thus, she was afraid to talk to anybody of her strange nightly phenomenon.

Things started becoming unbearable when she started dreaming of a mysterious castle. In her dream, although she couldn't see the entire building, she knew that she was in room of a castle, possibly by the sea. She could hear the low roars of the waves crashing on a rock. She was in a room, the walls and floor of which were built of stone slabs. On every available surface burnt thick yellowing candles, giving the whole room a mystical aura. The smell of burning wax invaded her nostrils even in her dream. Also, she seemed to somehow know that the room had been prepared for some occult ritual, and she experienced fear – as if she was involved in that ritual, but more as a sacrifice than an actual participant. Every night, the dream would end with her looking down at her wrists and seeing them slashed brutally with deep crimson blood flowing out of them, and her shrieking at the sight.

She always woke up in sweats, shivering from the memory of the horrible dream that seemed to be etched into her mind.

Trisha somehow knew that her dreams and the feelings that she was being watched all came back to the mirror. She felt that if she could only stop looking at it just before she went to sleep, maybe the dreams would not come. But it was almost impossible to stay away from the arresting attraction of the mirror.

One night, right before going to bed, Trisha covered the mirror with one of her scarves. The dreams that night became more vivid, more brutal. She dreamt of being tied up against a plank. Thick ropes cut into her wrists and feet, and she seemed to be getting prepared as a sacrifice. The more she struggled to free herself, the more the ropes dug deep into her soft flesh, made her bleed and caused her extreme pain. There were shadowy figures around her covered in black robes from head to toe. They whispered chants in a language unknown to her. As one of the figures came closer, she tried to peep under the hood to see the person and, with shock, she realised that there was no person underneath the hood; it was just a grinning skull that stared at her with black, empty holes in place of eyes.

She shrieked and the noise woke her up. For a few minutes, Trisha was still in the tangled web of her dream. When she realised it was just a dream, she hastily turned around towards the mirror. Her red scarf was lying on top of the dresser in front of it. As Trisha went to pick it up, she noticed the long cuts in the scarf, something that seemed to have been done by fierce sharp slashes of long fingernails. With deepest fear and shaking

hands, Trisha picked up the scarf and hid it under her mattress. Somehow, she understood that, as outrageous as it might sound, somehow the mirror didn't want to stay covered.

That was three days ago and was the last night that Trisha had slept. She knew not who to confide in. Not wanting to be ridiculed or cause unnecessary worry to her father, she decided to try to fight her fears by herself, and at the same time try to find out something more about that cursed antique.

But, with her eighteenth birthday just around the corner and the big party that her father had decided to throw her, there were too many things to be done and too little time for her to actually work on the finding out something about the mirror.

CHAPTER 7

Nature herself had seemed to be in a pursuit to stop Ian from reaching his ancestral castle in Engjahæð. He had left London the same night of the incident, rushing frantically, barking instructions at his flight crew to prepare to get back Denmark within the hour. However, weather conditions being severely bad in Engjahæð, his private jet had to turn back and land at Skagen instead, which was the closest airport to Engjahæð, Ian, on getting down from the plane at the Stokmarknes Airport, Skagen, had felt the true force of nature's fury. Rain lashed at him from all sides like sharp arrows trying to pierce his body while the umbrella a member of his cabin crew held over his head seemed nothing but a joke – a lone swordsman fighting against an army with guns.

By the time he got inside the car waiting for him on the runway, Ian was drenched to his bones. He was cold, and shivered uncontrollably. However, deep in his heart, he doubted whether the shivers were due to the cold, or due to the underlying abhorrence of his ancestral curse. Much against the well meaning advice of everybody to stay the night and leave the next morning, Ian started for Engjahæð.

The scenery around Skagen always, to Ian, had seemed unnatural at best and mystical at worst. The wild state of enigmatic sand formation was brought about by vicious sandstorms kicked up by North Sea gales over centuries. Till today, the Råbjerg Mile, an enormous dune, fifty metres high, moves a few yards eastwards annually. Winding through the coastal roads of eerie desolation, mysterious sand formations and obscure trails over and around heather-capped dunes, Ian's mind seemed to be swirling in mysteries that almost reflected the surrounding landscape. The perilous journey through the meandering roads lasted longer than it should have, as the rain made driving almost impossible. Luckily, the driver had been a local, and knew almost every pothole on the road and smoothly manoeuvred the car through the narrowest bits.

Now in the familiarity of his ancestral home, Ian seemed to be able to breathe slightly better. However, the fantastic and completely surreal experience that had led him back to the castle almost fifteen years later took away the pleasure that Ian used to derive within these sandstone walls. The sense of solace, the sanctuary the mighty castle had once provided, seemed to have diminished – for hiding among these castle walls were secrets drenched in blood of the innocents, secrets that had made the once proud Marcussens bow their heads in shame.

Ian tried to recollect the tales heard on his grandfather's lap. But then he had been too young. The duress that his grandfather's tone revealed had been too subtle for a child engrossed in the fairytale-like character of the story to understand. At that time, it had sounded like the dramatisation of fables to young Ian. Later, at his father's death bed, the secret of the family curse had been once again revealed. His father, in his weak, cancer-ridden, raspy voice, had recited the four lines that had been passed on to the eldest Marcussen along with the warning that at all cost the curse must be kept at bay.

It was almost three in the morning by the time Ian had got out of his travelling clothes and, after a cup of scalding coffee made by the his cook, Ingrid, a local woman in her fifties who, along with her husband, were the sole caretakers of the castle, Ian felt he was

in a better position to tackle the problem at hand. After instructing his staff not to disturb him under any circumstance, he made his way to the library.

Through the long broad hall that led away from the heart of the castle, Ian walked towards the library. Striking oil paintings of his ancestors adorned the walls of the hall. They stared back at him. In the amber glow of the flaming torches, their eyes seemed to follow Ian with concern – anxious to know the fate of the Marcussen bloodline.

The library was a formidable room with floor to ceiling huge shelves that covered three fourths of the walls, leaving aside the windows, while on the fourth wall there was a massive fireplace. There was a large mahogany desk on one side, while a conference table with sixteen chairs took up a sizeable space on the other. The conference table was a much newer addition to the antediluvian library, and was usually the place where Ian's father held official meetings when he became too old to travel.

The library housed numerous priceless books. First edition of the Latin, *Liber Chronicarum cum figuris et ymaginibus ab inicio mundi* by Schedel Hartmannbooks written in 1493, and rare manuscripts, including the *Tabulae de Motibus Planetarum* by Bianchini Giovanni, written in the fifteenth century, were among others. It was a library that would have made any ardent book collector ecstatic. According to Ian's instructions, his housekeeper had already started a fire there, and the room felt warm and inviting.

Above the fireplace, behind the portrait of Ian's great-great-grandfather, was a hidden safe. Ian had first come to know about it from his father. It could only be opened with a thick brass key that the eldest Marcussen was in charge of. Ian had received it from his father on his death bed with instructions to open it and understand its contents. It had been several years since his father had died and somehow Ian neither had the time, nor did he give any antecedence to the matter.

But here at last he was, following on the footsteps of his ancestors, discovering the contents of the safe. A tiny hidden lever cleverly camouflaged at the edge of the fireplace swung open the portrait like a door noiselessly – revealing the safe embedded in the stone walls. It was not a modern piece of equipment and, in fact, was old enough to be an antiquity itself. With apprehensive hands, Ian fitted the key and turned it.

The shadowy insides of the safe were bare, apart from a book. Ian took out the book – curiosity overriding apprehension. As he took it out, he discovered that it was more of a diary than a book. The cover was bound with rough leather that had thinned over the years, and in some places was almost bare. He carried it and settled down on the chair by the desk. Then, with fingers that trembled slightly with anxiety at what he was about to discover, Ian opened the leather string that held the many loose pages inside.

The rain lashed out more fiercely against the panes as Ian opened the journal. The skies tore apart with lightning as Ian began to read – as if nature herself was struck by thunder as was the lone Marcussen.

CHAPTER 8

The original text was written in Danish. But, sometime in the early 1900s, someone had taken the time to translate it into English. Silently, Ian thanked his ancestor who had taken that pain, probably aware that, as years went by, his descendents wouldn't converse much in the language of the yesteryears. Then Ian turned the page.

* * *

*“Slay was thus the flesh and bones,
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
And so ended the carrion
Albeit there remained the spirit of the cursed. ”*
Ryker Marcussen
In the Year of our Lord 1909.

She was born Æsa Marcussen in the year 1501 A.D. Her father, Niels Marcussen, Duke of Engjahæð, was a general in the army of His Majesty, Christian I, King of Denmark. With the death of Christoffer III in 1448, the direct lines of the ancient Danish dynasty became extinct. Duke Christian of Oldenburg was elected as his successor and became King of Denmark the same year under the name of Christian I. He belonged to one of the collateral branches of the original dynasty and founded the royal House of Oldenburg, which reigned until 1863, when the last man on the throne from that family, Frederik VII, died without issue.

Niels Marcussen spent most of his time away from his ancestral castle, helping his king fortify Denmark under his rule. It was perhaps the most paramount blessing that providence had bestowed upon him. For, living away from Æsa, his life was spared.

From the moment of her birth, she seemed to spread the shadow of death around her. Her mother died at childbirth and she went through three wet nurses during her breast-fed years. All the wet nurses' tenure ended abruptly as each died a mysterious death. There was no sickness, no accident. They just withered and died – as if, along with breast milk, Æsa had sucked out their life force.

She was strikingly beautiful. With sharp Scandinavian features, she exuded a resplendent beauty that made anyone who met her enchanted in moments. However, there were incessant whispers in the servants' quarters and among the kitchen hands about Æsa. Rumours that she was the incarnation of the Devil himself were not uncommon. The shadow of death seemed to follow her in such subtle yet unmistakable manner that it could not be overlooked. Potted plants kept in her chamber drooped and died within days of being placed there in spite of being watered and taken care of. There were instances where birds were found in perfect form, but completely lifeless lying on the window sills. Chambermaids, when summoned by her, felt an unnamed fear arise inside them. There had been no precedence of any occurrence that could cause such behaviour among the hired help, except perhaps that being around her gave them a sense of nondescript uneasiness.

By the time she was sixteen, word of her beauty spread throughout the country and suitors from far and near paid visits asking for her hand in marriage. Finding the Earl of Holstein a suitable match for his daughter, Niels Marcussen gave her hand away in marriage to the earl. However, the marriage did not last long, for the young earl was soon taken over by a mysterious illness that made him bedridden within a few months of their marriage. The unfortunate man breathed his last just before the year turned and they could celebrate their first anniversary.

After the untimely demise of her husband, Æsa was not seen or heard from in Engjahæð for several years. There was hearsay that she was coping with the tragedy of being a widow at seventeen by travelling all over Europe. When, after five years, Æsa appeared at the Engjahæð castle, she was very changed. Gone was the sweet innocence of her youth. In place of that, there was a woman emanating a beauty that was alluring, yet with the warmth of a marble statue.

Æsa settled back into her old quarters in the castle with the ease of someone who had not been gone at all. Her father welcomed her back warmly. He instructed his new wife, Duchess Erica, who seemed to be not much older than Æsa, to see to her every comfort. No more attention was paid to Æsa, or to anybody else, for that matter, for he was satisfied that he had performed his domestic duties well and soon he left the castle to join his army as usual.

If, before, the chamber maids had been fearful of being summoned to Æsa's quarters, now there were involuntary shivers that passed through the wretched. Her eyes seemed to hold the glint of steel and could make even a grown man flounder in unease. Her features had hardened such that, without conscious thinking, one felt the need to take a step back in her presence.

But then, they hardly needed to enter Æsa's abode anymore. For, along with Æsa, there arrived her companion, Jannike. She was a stout, tall woman who seemed ageless. However, if a guess had to be made, she could have been anywhere between forty or sixty. The most intimidating feature on Jannike's face was a deep scar that ran from just below her left eye, taking a curve and ending right above her jaw bone. As perhaps a result of the same accident that caused the scar, her left eye was also blood red. Although in the hearts of the benevolent, there would have arose sympathy at the unfortunate marring of her facial features, her nature, along with her looks, kept all kinds of sympathy at bay.

All the inhabitants of the castle were uncomfortable in her presence. She treaded more silently than a cat, as if she did not walk on foot, but on fleshy paws. Her face had the drawn haggard looks of a woman who had gone through hard times; her skin was rough and leathery. However, her eyes held a sharpness that almost could see through one's soul. When, in the evenings after serving dinner, all the servants gathered around the huge fireplace in the kitchen sipping home-made *glögg* to keep the cold away, Jannike was never there.

It was not that she was missed; there had been sighs of relief when, at the beginning, the domestic help had been expecting her in the kitchen with dread mixed with curiosity. But, as time went by, Jannike never bothered them, or rather, didn't bother with them.

The only time she was seen in the kitchen was when her mistress needed something. Jannike single-handedly took care of all Æsa's needs. For days, Æsa was not seen outside her chambers – only Jannike fulfilling her mistress' devoir.

However, at nights, several people had seen the duo wandering around the castle grounds. Some of the stable hands had also seen them riding out of the castle gates towards the beach at Engjahæð. Sam, a stable boy of about sixteen, had once, out of curiosity, followed them till the end of the beach... the long strip where the Baltic Sea met the North Sea. There, between the quiet waves of the Baltic Sea and the furious thrashing of the North Sea, Sam observed Æsa and Jannike perform something that had the look of a Pagan ritual of some sort. They had lighted a fire at the northernmost tip of the beach and were seen chanting verses in a strange tongue. At one moment, Æsa seemed to look up and glance towards the heather shrubs behind which the stable boy was hiding. Seeing her look towards him, Sam was filled with a fear so intense that, involuntarily, his heart seemed to beat ten times faster, while he could hear the roar of blood in his ears. Fortunately, he had been too far to be detected, and when later he related the incident to everyone back at the stable, he swore that never again would he attempt what he did that night.

After that emprise, rumour spread around like wildfire that Æsa was dabbling in the black arts and that she, rather than worshipping the Holy Father, was worshipping someone more sinister and more potent. However, right around that time, young girls in and around Engjahæð started to go missing and, as with the nature of human beings, they forgot a strange ritual at midnight and the stories among the peasants in the alehouses pondered more on the missing girls than Lady Æsa's queer fancies.

When, after several weeks, the mutilated body of Mariah Brandt, the teenage daughter of farmer, Brandt, was found on the shores of the twin seas, the sand-drenched brown in her blood, the fear spread throughout Engjahæð like an epidemic. Mariah had last been seen few nights before in the castle grounds when she had secretly sneaked to go and meet her lover who worked as a stable hand in the stables of the castle.

When Mariah's body was first found, the primary suspect seemed to be the unfortunate lover. However, the brutality with which her body was slashed, or the cruel marks of branding with hot iron rod that her body exhibited, did not seem to be the work of someone ordinary. Nevertheless, the poor man was taken to the dungeons where he awaited the return of Duke Niels Marcussen for his trial.

The death of Mariah stirred up the sleepy Engjahæð countryside like never before. The missing girls had caused their share of worries among the people. However, sometimes the fear of the unknown and unseen can be overshadowed by the fear of the known and the seen. The chalk-white grotesque body of the dead girl with purple blotches where the blood had clotted stirred panic among the villagers. Soon, after sundown, the village square became deserted. The alehouse became a popular haunt of people with theories interpreting the incident. The murder was blamed on every cause ranging from animal attacks to serial killers, and every time one put forth his theories, there were ten others who would find cause to dispute it. Thus went on the mystery of the murdered girl.

* * *

Duchess Erica was in distress. With the departure of her husband, Duke Niels Marcussen, she was supposed to be in charge of the castle and its inhabitants. However, she was unable to fulfil the duties bestowed upon her completely. The fault did not lie with her, but with Lady Æsa. For long, the duchess had been hearing whispers among the servants

that Æsa's behaviour had become stranger and stranger over months. She was aware that, for days, Æsa did not leave her chambers. She was conscious of Æsa's nightly wanderings and, at several instances, had wanted to meet her to discuss these issues. However, whenever she had sent an invite through her chambermaid requesting Æsa's presence at dinner or maybe for a cup of *glögg* after dinner, Jannike silently appeared before the chambermaid and always made some form of excuse on behalf of Æsa. It was almost as if Æsa did not live there, thought the duchess grimly. She decided that she would not accept anymore excuses and would personally visit Æsa that night.

A substantial time had passed after sundown and dinner when the duchess could finally make her way to pay Lady Æsa a visit. She had tried very hard to make it to Æsa's chambers as soon as possible. But, with several prior engagements as a duchess, as well as being a devoted mother of two young children who had to be put to bed, she got there later than she had wanted to. However, when she eventually reached Æsa's chambers, there was no sign of Jannike there. Erica let out a sigh of relief. She found Jannike quite direful and was, in fact, dreading to meet the strange woman. The door to Æsa's bedroom was shut, but it didn't seem to be locked. Duchess Erica knocked softly, but there was no answer. She waited for a few moments and then slowly and hesitantly pushed open the door. The room seemed to be empty. The four-poster bed that dominated the colossal room was perfectly made and there laid everything undisturbed by human presence.

It was quite by accident that Erica found the secret passageway. While scouring around the room, she noticed the exquisite Belgian looking glass on one wall. The prisms adorning the glass dazzled in the colours of the rainbow. Before Æsa returned to the castle, Erica had been into these chambers. But never before had she seen it. Enchanted by its beauty, Erica walked to the mirror and touched its smooth surface. She admired the exclusive handwork of the gold-gilded frame around it and wondered where she could possibly get such a beautiful one for herself. It was then that she noticed a small iron ring that was cleverly hidden beside the mirror.

She pressed it with curious fingers, wondering what it was used for, and accidentally gave it a slight tug. All of a sudden, the mirror silently slid aside, revealing a secret passageway.

Erica's heartbeat picked up in moments. There was something ominous in the passageway that seemed to beckon her towards its deep dark belly. Haltingly, hesitantly, she tiptoed into the passageway. There were narrow stone steps that led down towards the lower grounds. She could see a dim orange glow that emanated from the belly of the pit. Although every cell in her body screamed to her to get away from there, curiosity got better of her and she proceeded towards the pit.

The walls of the tunnel were solid sandstone, rough to the touch. There was a damp musty smell that hung to the air like an invisible cloak. The passage was so narrow that Erica scraped herself on quite a few parts of her arms. Tiny dots of blood and curling skin stamped in her elbows and her forearms – like punishment being meted out to her for probing into affairs that didn't concern her. However, she was oblivious to the pain that it caused. The narrow steps took a turn right before it ended in a rough cave-like room and Erica, for the first time, could see what was going on in the alcove.

At that moment, Erica wished she had followed her instinct and gone back to the safety of her chambers. She wished she had not been curious, because curiosity had surely brought her to the pits of Hell. Her legs felt leaden and her heart pounded like a caged

animal, while her eyes unblinkingly stared at the atrocities that were being committed right in front of her.

Thick black candles burnt on every available surface in the alcove. The air was pregnant with the smell of burning wax mixed with another smell of something metallic, something like gunpowder. The whole room glowed with an eerie golden hue in the candle light. On the stone wall facing the steps where she stood was a roughly carved pentagram. Right in the middle of the pentagram stood the statue of the beast, the horns curled up from its triangular face while it stood upright on its hind legs. The eyes seemed to be blazing fire while fumes seemed radiate from its nostrils. The statue felt alive. For never could something devoid of life hold a look of such profound malevolence, of such baneful attitude.

Blood dripped on the statue and on Æsa, who stood completely naked in front of the idol, head bent in worship and reverence. She and the statue were both bathed in blood. The scarlet liquid shining in the candle light was illuminated like liquid ruby as it dripped languidly down Æsa's naked form. Erica's eyes followed the course of blood and looked up towards the ceiling. Another horror awaited her up there. For right at the low ceiling hung a young girl tied with heavy iron chains with her neck slit just enough for her to slowly bleed to death. While the blood bathed Æsa and her evil lord, the innocent lass struggled feebly against a mountain of odds to break her restraints.

Involuntarily, Erica gave a shriek that she tried to muffle by pressing her palm against her mouth. But it was too late. For Æsa turned around and saw her. Jannike, who Erica had not noticed till then, appeared from one corner silently. She wore a black cloak with a hood that hid half her face. All that was visible was her mouth that appeared to be smeared red with blood. Erica stood there transfixed, with no power to move a muscle. Æsa's gaze seemed to hold her in place and, although her brain screamed orders for her to turn around and take flight, her body refused to oblige. Slowly, with the confident gait of a predator, Æsa came forward. Her face broke into a smile so menacing that it seemed to pour acid into Erica's bloodstream.

"*Mother,*" she hissed through gritted teeth. "How *kind* of you to drop by and pay me a visit. I am sorry that I had not invited you earlier. That was rude of me. But how rude of *you* to not have brought me a present.... Maybe it's still not too late." Æsa seemed to ponder as Erica just stood there like a stone statue devoid of any form of movement. "Maybe you can still give me something – something priceless, something unique," continued Æsa. "Maybe, you can give me your soul," she whispered vehemently. Her blood-drenched face was like that of a cannibal while her strikingly white teeth, like fangs, mashed against each other.

Erica stood there horrified by the frightening image of the bloody and menacing nude woman that stood in front of her. She had lost all sense of movement or speech. Her will seemed to belong to Æsa and not to herself. There seemed to be an order that Æsa's icy blue eyes commanded Erica, something that she couldn't comprehend.

All of a sudden, Erica seemed to regain control over her body, although her mind was completely blank. In a trance-like manner, Erica turned around and walked out of the cave and went back to her chambers.

Her chambermaid, a young girl named Anne, noticed the duchess coming in. Her gown was torn in places, her hair dishevelled, and her eyes glazed as if, although she was there in the chambers, her eyes were seeing a different vision. Erica did not seem to notice

Anne. She walked straight to the writing desk and picked up the letter opener that lay among several letters, ink bottles and quills, and held it close to her face as she studied it intently.

Anne looked at her mistress in wonder, for never before had her mistress showed such strange behaviour. Then suddenly, without any warning, Erica stabbed herself in the heart with the letter opener with such force that Anne could hear the crunching of the bone that protected the heart.

Blood spurted out like a fountain as the duchess whispered, "*Jeg gave dig min sjæl kære Æsa.*" *I gift you my soul, dear Æsa.* Then the lifeless body of young Erica fell to the floor.

Anne stood dumbfounded for a few moments, and then she started to scream uncontrollably as she gazed, horrified, at the sight of the blood-soaked duchess.

CHAPTER 9

Nature seemed to have declared war upon the world as fierce thunder and lightning brought the sky to life. But nothing was more frightening than what Ian was reading in the ancestors' journal. Staggered at the esoteric knowledge that the journal held, Ian read on, wanting to know just how deep the trouble that he was in was.

* * *

Almost a mile away from the castle on a hill stood the Engjahæð Catholic Church. It had stood on the same grounds for almost two centuries before Niels Marcussen became the Duke of Engjahæð. Thus, although by then Gothic art was becoming more widespread, the Church of Engjahæð still stood, mighty and proud, its head held high, an image of the twelfth century Romanesque period. The magnificent curved dome held beautiful frescoes showing Jesus surrounded by the angels. The murals of the flowers or cherubic angels caught in unknown games lent an air of comfort and joy to the church interior. However, nothing could put Father Birger's restless mind at peace.

It had been a few weeks since Erica, the Duchess of Engjahæð, had died in what was the most horrific and brutal death. She had been denied a Christian burial because she had taken her own life. But how on God's Earth was it possible for someone to take her own life in a manner so brutal, so gruesome, worried Father Birger. In his entire life of five and sixty years, he had never heard of a suicide so appalling.

The chambermaid's narrative had sounded unbelievable. That the duchess had actually declared her soul to be a gift to Lady Æsa right before she died had become a matter of speculation. Everybody was talking. Common people had become scared of traipsing the castle shadows. That Æsa may have somehow, in some way, instigated Erica's death seemed to leave no doubt in anyone's mind. Moreover, it convinced people that she had powers beyond a mortal's reach. Rumours that Æsa may perhaps be a witch could also be heard in many circles.

Æsa had never entered the church, and Father Birger realised that it was time to pay her a visit. He didn't want hysterics to spread among the people. He was a man of God, mild mannered, righteous and a caring leader to his flock of parishioners. However, he was not a believer of black arts and neither did he want a person as important as Lady Æsa to be affected by such rumours. He had requested a meeting with her and she had invited him over that evening. But he really didn't know how he was going to bring up such a sensitive subject.

The sun was setting in the western skies by the time Father Birger reached the castle. The castle stood facing east, and, thus, the setting sun lent a dark, mysterious aura to it. There was an unknown fear that seemed to descend upon Father Birger. He forcefully shrugged off the foreboding feeling and called upon Lady Æsa.

She had been waiting for him in the hall. The hall was so big that it was difficult in the twilight to see where the walls ended. A huge fire burnt in the fireplace, and since it was not really that cold, the air inside felt warm – almost stifling.

Æsa looked up, but remained seated as Father Birger was brought in by one of the maids.

“Father,” she said, her voice chilly, like the northern winds. “It is so nice of you to drop by. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I wanted to offer you my condolences,” said Father Birger, taken aback at the directness of Æsa’s inquest. “Losing the duchess must have been difficult for you. I am sorry for your loss. Erica was a very kind and dutiful woman.”

Æsa stared at the father with unmasked disdain. “Tell me, Father,” she said at last, “is denying a proper funeral the way your God honours kindness and dutifulness?”

“I don’t understand,” stammered Father Birger.

Æsa stared at him unblinkingly. “What is so difficult to understand?” Her voice turned from chilly to almost frozen. “You said that she was kind and dutiful, yet you denied her a place in the churchyard.”

“But she committed suicide and taking one’s life, a life that God has given, is blasphemy,” protested Father Birger feebly. Somehow, hearing Æsa talk, he didn’t seem to feel very convinced about his own faith.

Æsa lifted up her hand, motioning him to stop, then, in a voice soft yet lethal, she said, “Either your God sees her as a sinner, or you were lying to me when you claimed that my stepmother was a dutiful and a kind woman. That would make you a liar; you, the head of the Catholic Church here. So either way, it does not show you or your beliefs in a very good light, don’t you think so?” Her smile was almost a sneer.

Father Birger was completely stunned. He did not know how to answer such banal disregard of Christian faith.

“Anyway,” she continued. “I am sure that was not the reason why you came to see me and I am curious to know the real reason. Why did you come to see me, Father?” Her voice was casual, yet it held a warning that reminded Father Birger of the silent slithering of a viper. Potent with venom, yet portraying harmlessness at the moment.

Her sapphire-blue eyes seemed to pierce through Father Birger’s body and see right into his soul. There was a slight mocking smile on her face – as if she could smell his fear and see through his wavering thoughts on faith. He had no idea how to start on the subject that he had come to speak to her about. The unnatural heat inside the hall was suffocating him, and his collar seemed to be stifling. Putting a finger inside the collar, he tried to loosen it a bit. Then, being stuck with no other option of subtlety, he spoke.

“There have been some very outlandish, but troubling, rumours that are being circulated in the parish regarding you. And I felt it was my duty to let you know that you can put an end to all this only if you would join us in church sometimes.” Father Birger cleared his throat – it was suddenly dry and he felt terribly thirsty.

Æsa, throughout his speech, had not moved her gaze from him in the slightest, and now, with an amused smile, she asked him, “What sort of rumours are being spread, Father?”

“That...you’re... That you are a witch and that perhaps... That maybe your allegiance is not to Our Father, but to someone else,” Father Birger stammered uncomfortably, completely out of his depth.

Æsa raised her eyebrows. Suddenly, the entire room seemed to turn chilly, in a matter of moments.

“Why, Father.” She spoke mockingly. “They are not rumours. They are true. My allegiance is to my Father, just like yours is to yours.”

“But... But,” stammered Father Birger. “It can’t be. We are all the children of our Lord, the merciful one. He loves every one of us and leads us to deliverance.” Father Birger seemed desperate to believe in what he said, although, in the deepest corners of his heart, he was suddenly not so sure. Not so sure about what he had preached in Sunday masses for more than half his life.

“Merciful?” Æsa’s voice sounded like a whiplash. “What mercy are you talking about? Tell me which merciful God would take a mother away from a newborn baby? Which merciful God would kill thousands of people with plagues; wash away entire villages with floods? You talk about love from Him? The one who didn’t love His son enough to save him from being crucified? Your God is just an egocentric, self-absorbed being,” she said, while pacing up and down the hall, her fury almost palpable. “He doesn’t believe in the power of love. He just believes in the love of power. He asks you to believe in deliverance of your soul. Do you even know whether you *have* a soul, Father Birger?” she whispered, staring coldly at him.

“You spend your entire life praying, being righteous, and depriving yourself of every bit of beguilement at the promise of receiving something after you have died. Aren’t you the naïve ones? No wonder you are His *lamb*; because He slaughters you at His whim. My Father, on the other hand,” she continued, taking a deep breath, “believes only in giving you what your body and your spirit craves. What you call temptation is what *he* calls our right. He represents indulgence instead of abstinence; vital existence instead of spiritual pipe dreams; undefiled wisdom instead of hypocritical self-deceit. He represents kindness to those who deserve it instead of love wasted on ingrates.” She seemed to spit out the last bit, her contempt and complete disdain for the Christian faith unrestrained.

Father Birger was silent. So was Æsa. There was nothing more to say. However, her eyes seemed to penetrate deep into his soul, and, without a further word, Father Birger turned around and left the castle.

On the journey back, all he remembered was that he needed to do her bidding – needed to please her, and her lord. He made his horse gallop faster, pulling cruelly at the reins till the poor animal started to froth in the mouth trying to please his master.

The church was empty; the candles glowed softly, creating a serene atmosphere. On the opposite side of the entrance, lined on both sides by wooden pews, creating a long passage, stood a golden cross, and on it was Jesus, His head hung in pain and compliance. Walking like a man in a trance, Father Birger slowly took out a barrel of lard that had been kept inside the cupboard used for lighting torches. He poured it over all the church pews, the pillars, the walls and finally himself. Then he struck a match to it all. The greedy tongues of the flame started to devour every part of the church, while Father Birger stood in the middle, a glorious smile lighting his face. *I have done her bidding. I have pleased the lord*, he thought as the hungry flames engulfed him and his beloved church.

CHAPTER 10

It was several months before Niels Marcussen could return to Engjahæð. They had been in the midst of war and, thus, he had even been unable to attend his wife's funeral. By the time of his return, Engjahæð had transformed into something out of a nightmarish fairytale. A fairytale with a twist; where the innocent stepmother died while the evil stepdaughter reigned.

One of the chambermaids in the castle had heard Æsa's conversation with Father Birger. She had been on the verge of bringing in some refreshments for the holy man when, hearing the conversations that was going on inside, she decided it would be foolish to let Æsa know of her presence. However, curiosity had been so overpowering that neither could she move away completely from the conversation that almost played marbles with her belief of God. Thus, crouched at the shadowy entrance to the hall, she had listened to Æsa belittled God and glorify the one whose name is seldom taken. Finally, she had seen Father Birger walk out of there in a daze, leaving the castle without a backward glance. The father's self-immolation had created a wave of deep-seated panic among the people.

Moreover, Æsa too did not seem to have the need to hide her allegiance to the Dark Lord anymore. Her powers had been growing considerably over the months. Virgin sacrifices were now done brazenly. The peasants and the farmers around were powerless to stop the murders. To stop Æsa from harming them or their families, some of the villagers joined her in the worship of Satan. The Dark Lord's shrine now stood bold and blatant in the middle of the village square. The statue of the ferocious beast standing on two hooved legs terrorised the simple village folks beyond description.

This happened after Luke, a farmhand, was hypnotised by just a glance from Æsa. That night, he tied up his fifteen-year-old daughter and brought her to Æsa to be sacrificed. The ones who resisted him claimed that he had more strength than ten horses. In vain, they tried to stop Luke from abducting his own daughter and sacrificing her at the whim of Lady Æsa.

The more devout ones met secretly in the cellar of Ingrid, widow of the farmer, Bern. Ingrid had always been a very pious Catholic and a regular church goer. Now, when the entire village seemed to be under the blanket of the Dark Lord himself, she was the one who offered solace to the other parishioners. They met up in her cellar, praying to God, asking Him for directions to end the reign of terror.

The duke was not a man who believed much in the power of the supernatural. He believed that everything could be handled through words, and, where words failed, the sword always worked. However, when he saw the look of fear on his closest friend, Daniel Olsen's, face, Niels Marcussen realised that the problem ran far deeper than he thought.

Daniel Olsen was a nobleman whose mansion lay a few miles west of the castle. The tall, stout Daniel was a brave soldier with a reputation for being the one who was feared by all his enemies and he, in turn, feared no one. He and the duke had been childhood friends and had fought many a war side by side. However, when Daniel was injured in one such war, he retired to a more domestic way of life.

Thus, although Niels Marcussen had decided to shrug off the matter of the speculations surrounding his daughter, Daniel's account made him rethink.

Throughout the narration, the duke sat still as his oldest friend described to him the surreal murders and the supernatural occurrences that shook Engjahæð. He vacantly stared out of the window, sitting in a stupor. Once Daniel's narration was over, he looked up. His face was pale. The Marcussens knew how to rule, but they knew not how to fight powers beyond the mortal reach.

"What should I do?" whispered Niels in a voice laden with fatigue and defeat. "How do I end this? She is my daughter; my first born. I cannot harm her. But I cannot under any circumstance let anyone cause harm to my people. I... I... don't know..." His voice faltered as he bowed his head in shame and misery.

Feeling his friend's hand on his shoulder, he looked up.

"All may not be lost," said Daniel gently. "There still maybe a way, but unless it is tried out, we would not know its outcome. There seems to be one man who can give us salvation from our terrible fate."

The duke looked at his friend's face questioningly.

"I will let him introduce himself." Daniel beckoned his manservant and whispered something in his ear.

Presently, a man wearing a black habit entered the room, followed by the servant. The coarse woollen habit touched his toes, while the hood kept his face hidden partially, lending a touch of mystery. It did not take Niels Marcussen more than a few moments to understand that he was looking at a monk. But how the monk had any solution to the impending doom, Marcussen was not sure.

Nodding imperceptibly – almost as if a greater movement would be a luxury that he is abstained from – the monk sat down. Hurriedly, Daniel introduced the duke and asked the monk to explain his intention.

"My name is Father Mario," said the monk. "What I am going to tell you today may sound blasphemous, or at the least, unimaginable. But all I ask is that you hear what I have to say, and then decide if you want to accept the path I have to offer to achieve salvation."

Getting a slight nod from the duke as encouragement, the monk started his tale.

According to Father Mario, their sect originated from the Clunaic Benedictines, which was founded sometime in early 910 AD. Over the generations, however, their faction, along with honouring abstinence and poverty, moved on to something more distinctive; a cause that seemed to become worthy enough to be pursued by a number of monasteries around the world. It was the pursuit of an objective that was not mentioned in general circumstances. Father Mario said that, in order to explain what was happening in Engjahæð, he would have to give them a brief background of their origin.

From the time of the birth of Christ, every few decades, Satan sends from Hell his own dark angels whose sole purpose on Earth is to stop people's belief in God, and spread the tyranny of the Dark Lord and encourage his worship as the only form of deliverance. The dark angels are empowered by Satan in black arts and also had the power to bend people's mind to do their bidding. Æsa was one such dark angel.

Father Mario belonged to a monastery run by the '*Patronus Fides*' or the 'Guardians of Faith'. Throughout the centuries, the '*Patronus Fides*' had been the soldiers of God to

stop these dark angels. Extreme faith in God was the only way to send these incubuses back straight to Hell.

Niels Marcussen shook his head in disbelief. It was impossible that his daughter, the beautiful Æsa, could be anything apart from a gift from the heavens. But the strange happenings of the past few months defied all logic.

Noticing the turmoil the duke's face revealed, Father Mario said, "I know it is difficult to comprehend what you and your people are facing. You may even have some doubt as to whether Æsa is such a being, but there are ways to confirm it. A dark angel is always born to a family of extraordinary affluence and power. The mother always passes away at childbirth. They seem to spread death like water spilt, to whoever comes in close contact with them. But above all, each of them is branded by the Devil. In their body, they bear a birthmark that is unique."

Niels Marcussen's face turned the colour of chalk as he remembered the night of Æsa's birth. As the midwife had brought the baby out wrapped in silk, Niels had eagerly taken his firstborn and held her with the paternal pride of a first-time father. As his wife struggled inside fighting death while the internal haemorrhage started to worsen, Æsa had stared at the father with baby blue eyes and gripped Niels' finger with strength that was impossible for a newborn to possess. At that moment, the duke's chest had swelled with pride. Then he noticed the red flower-like birthmark at the back of the hand with which baby Æsa held his finger. Gently easing his finger out of the baby's grip, Niels had rubbed his fingers over the mark, feeling the cottony soft wrinkly baby skin under his thumb.

The duke's face conveyed his feelings to his friend and Father Mario. For, without a word, from the first time since Father Mario had started to speak, the duke's belief in his words was expressed through his eyes. Morosely, he accepted finally that perhaps his beloved daughter did bear the mark of the Devil.

He drew on a piece of paper, the birthmark that Æsa bore on the back of her left hand. Then, gravely, Niels spoke in a voice that shook with contradicting emotions. "Is this the kind of birthmark you are talking about, Father?"

Father Mario looked at the piece of paper in front of him. On it was drawn a tiny flower like form with a circle in the centre, from which extended three curved lines. It was a very simple drawing, yet it spoke volumes, for, when the three lines were separated and each was drawn with the central circle attached to it, it became 666, the number of the beast.

The room was silent. Perhaps each of the men, brave in their own way, was still not brave enough to understand or act on a mission of such enormous proportions without fear trembling inside their hearts.

It was finally Father Mario who broke the silence. "If you are convinced beyond a doubt that we are dealing with a dark angel, I will proceed by explaining what we need to do," he said quietly.

It had taken the whole of one day and a greater part of the next on horseback to reach their destination. Now, as Niels Marcussen, along with Father Mario, stood at the gates of the monastery of the '*Patronus Fides*', he was filled with awe at the formidable structure

that loomed in front of him. Built following the Gothic architecture, every brick seemed to reconfirm abstinence from luxury and worldly pleasures.

Father Mario had stressed the urgency of the matter and had pleaded with the duke to follow him without hesitation. “Every moment spent hesitating is a moment that lends more power to Æsa,” were his exact words.

Moreover, seeing the silent affirmation in his childhood friend’s demeanour, Niels Marcussen had decided to follow the monk’s request, however irrational it sounded. Nobody in the Marcussen castle was aware of the duke’s decision, and neither did the duke feel that he needed to inform anyone. Perhaps, in a very tiny corner of his heart, there lurked a hint of fear. He was afraid that if, after talking to Father Mario, he went back to the castle and encountered his daughter, there was a chance that she would penetrate deep into his heart and see what he was up to.

As they rode up to the main monastery, leaving the wrought iron gates behind, Niels Marcussen was surprised to see how well maintained the grounds were, while simultaneously being completely devoid of human life. Not a soul was in sight. When Father Mario pulled the rope that stood dangling on one side of a colossal oak door, the sound of a bell was heard clanging far away, almost in the heart of the monastery. Within a few moments, the door opened soundlessly and the duke, with slight apprehension, followed Father Mario inside.

Inside was lighted by candles that glowed from bronze stands mounted on the walls. After coming in from the bright afternoon sun, it took a while for the duke to adjust his vision to the dimly lighted interiors. The hall stood bare, devoid of a single piece of furniture or decorative item. On the opposite wall was a low arch that seemed to lead to the heart of the monastery. Above the low arch was a single wooden cross, the only extra accessory to the grim brick refectory.

The monk who opened the door was a young lad as far as the number of years he has spent on Earth was concerned. However, his face, the only part that was not covered by his habit, spoke volumes of disquietude.

The only communication between Father Mario and him was a silent nod. Consequently, he turned around and led the way through the arch. They followed him through a long, narrow hallway lighted by rays of sunlight that came through the attenuated windows.

At the end of the hallway, the young monk knocked on a door. A low voice beckoned them inside. The duke followed Father Mario as he opened the door.

Used to indulgence and affluence in every step of his life, the duke had never seen a bedroom that bare. Calling it Spartan did not seem appropriate, because he couldn’t believe that the Spartans led a life that austere. There was a single bed attached to the wall. A small table with a rough chair stood beside it. A wooden cross hung on the wall above the bed. The window, if at all it could be called such, was just a narrow slit through which sunlight struggled to come in. A ceramic basin stood at one corner with a jug of water on it. That was it. There was nothing else in the room that could draw one’s attention for even a moment.

On the chair, there sat a monk who wore the same type of habit that the duke came to learn belonged to the ‘*Patronus Fides*’. He was writing something. When they entered, he turned around. Numerous wrinkles like spiders’ webs crisscrossed his face. However, his eyes were the colour of the sky on a cloudless day, deep blue, sharp and soul piercing.

Realising that Father Mario was accompanied by the duke himself, he tried to get up. But somehow his frail body seemed to resist his action.

Father Mario quickly rushed to his aid only to be stopped by the monk's raised hand forbidding any assistance.

Then he, with obvious difficulty, raised himself from the chair and walked slowly towards the duke with both his hands extended for an embrace of joy and relief. "I knew you would come, my son," he said. "We have been waiting for you to make this journey now for a long time. There is much to explain and time is really short."

It was a voice that sounded weak, but nevertheless had an unexplainable depth and sincerity to it. He introduced himself as Father Sigvarðr and requested the duke to sit on the sole chair in the room. He himself shuffled towards the bed while Father Mario stood erect beside the elderly monk, ever alert in case his assistance was needed.

Father Sigvarðr nodded to the young monk, giving him permission to leave. The monk bowed and closed the door; leaving behind him the duke with the two '*Patronus Fides*' and a secret that would change his world.

After almost an hour, Niels Marcussen followed Father Sigvarðr and Father Mario towards another part of the monastery. By then, his mind was completely on the mission he needed to undertake. Whatever turmoil, whatever uncertainty, which he might have possessed, even till he reached Father Sigvarðr's room, had now disappeared. Now, all he aspired was to finish the mission that he was to be entrusted with. That he may not be successful did not cross his mind. For, in almost all circumstances, the Marcussens had always been victorious.

But he couldn't stop wondering at all the things he learnt from the monks. It was as if there lay another world intertwined with his own that he was not aware of. A world built on beliefs and magic; a world where God or Devil were not just words heard in the Bible or in the church; a world of angels and demons; a world where accepting their existence and reacting accordingly was as natural as breathing.

The duke was now convinced that Æsa was a dark angel. If nothing else, the sincerity and the conviction with which Father Sigvarðr spoke to him was enough. The whole monastery has been praying to keep her powers at bay till she could be subjugated.

During the course of their conversation, the duke discovered that Father Sigvarðr's weakness and frailty was the consequence of a prolonged fasting. When Niels Marcussen, not very familiar with God or religion, had enquired how, through fasting, Father Sigvarðr could do anything that would hinder a dark angel, the monk had smiled and quoted the Bible.

He said, "In Matthew 4:4, it is written, Jesus says, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'."

As the duke sat mesmerised, hearing the conviction the monk had in his faith and in God, Father Sigvarðr continued, "Through fasting, our spirits become more sensitive to the Holy Spirit and more reliant on God's voice. And when we fast, demons fear us, for by abstaining from our bodily needs, we climb onto a higher plain where their harmful powers against mortals become fruitless."

Although the duke followed the monks silently to wherever he was being led, his mind seemed to still dwell on the revelations that had been made behind the closed doors of Father Sigvarðr's chambers. Soon, he, along with the others, reached an open courtyard. At one end of it was a lighted furnace. Three monks, perhaps the designated blacksmiths

of the monastery, stood near the fire. One of them held a piece of a red-hot object with a pair of long tongs on top of a rough stone ledge while the other two hammered away at the object, trying to flatten it.

“From here, my son, starts your mission,” said Father Sigvarðr, holding the duke’s shoulder with affection, although his eyes could not hide the anxiety within.

Niels Marcussen, a man born to rule through the power of his sword and ancestry, somehow felt humbled in the novel surrounding. Where he had always been looked up to in fear and awe, there in the monastery, to be called ‘my son’ instead of being called ‘My Lord’ seemed only natural.

“We need you to provide us with a drop of your blood to complete this talisman,” said Father Sigvarðr as Father Mario provided him with a golden dagger.

Questioningly, he looked up at Father Sigvarðr.

“What you see there,” said the elderly monk, pointing towards the red-hot object, “is the talisman that is devised to deem the dark angel powerless. It is a symbol of *chi-rho*.”

Father Sigvarðr explained to him that *chi-rho* was the oldest known monogram of Christ. In the second century just before an important battle, the Roman Emperor Constantine had seen the symbol in the sky and heard the message from God: ‘by this sign, conquer’. From then onwards, Emperor Constantine had adopted the sign of *chi-rho* as the symbol for his army.

Niels Marcussen walked towards the furnace and, with the tip of the dagger, slashed the crown of his finger. As a drop of crimson liquid dropped on top of the talisman, it almost sizzled and, in an instant, the talisman seemed to change colour. That was followed by one of the monks sealing the part with the drop of his blood with some molten amber, and then he plunged it into water.

When the cooled talisman was finally handed to the duke, he couldn’t help wondering how this would be able to subdue Æsa’s illimitable powers. Curiously, he turned it around. It was a small metallic circle, the size of a gold coin with the letter P standing tall, while an X was seen, crossing the stalk of the P.

Perhaps the disbelief in his eyes was quite visible, for he could hear Father Sigvarðr saying, “Do not doubt the power of the talisman, my child. It may look quite harmless, but have trust that it is not.”

According to Father Sigvarðr, the talisman was made by melting and fusing nine different elements from nine corners of the world. The blood of the duke actually represented the nine ancestral generations of the Marcussens. All these put together created something that would be feared by any dark angel.

“Together with the efficacy of this talisman and the power of our faith in God, nothing will stand in our way,” said Father Sigvarðr confidently. “X represents *ch* while P represents *r* in Roman letters; the first three letters of Christ. And in a mission where Christ himself follows you, how can you be anything but victorious?”

Niels Marcussen was directed to place the talisman on top of a looking glass through which Æsa might see herself every day. When she looked into the mirror, through sunlight, the source of all life on Earth that is reflected through the talisman, the dark angel would be caught in the mirror.

As Father Sigvarðr elucidated, the mirror reflects us perfectly. Yet it does every action of ours in an opposite manner. While we raise our left hand, the mirror image raises its right. Hence, although it is not seen, when a person’s soul is filled with evil, the image in

the mirror has a soul full of goodness. Thus, while the dark angel looks at the mirror, through the magic of the talisman, its evil soul will be trapped eternally in the mirror, while the goodness would come out of it, transforming Æsa into a person virtuous and honourable.

“However,” warned Father Sigvarðr, “never let the mirror be taken away from the Marcussen bloodline or never let it be destroyed. For that would release the evil dark angel’s soul on Earth and create incessant devastation.”

The next day, while the duke waited with Father Mario for the stable hand to bring his horse, Father Mario reached out and touched his arm. When the duke looked at him questioningly, he said hesitantly, “There’s something more you must remember. Once Satan has chosen a certain family to send his dark angel, even if one of them is destroyed, there would be more to come through generations. Never will the Marcussen bloodline be completely safe from Satan’s clasp. So every generation of the Marcussens should be aware of whatever happens now.”

Somehow, Niels Marcussen was not surprised. Instead, what he felt was a profound sense of sadness. At length, he asked, “Why, Father? Why us? Are we not religious enough? Is it because we don’t go to church as often as we should?”

Father Mario shook his head, and, with a smile that was more remorseful than anything else, replied, “It is not attending church or being religious that brings you closer to God.” He seemed to think something for a while, and then said as an afterthought, “Perhaps the way generations of Marcussens have accumulated their wealth and their power have appeased the Devil more than God himself.”

As the duke left the monastery gates behind him, clouds of dusts from his horse’s hooves obliterating its view, Father Mario’s last words kept reverberating through his mind ceaselessly. It was then that decision was made that, from that day forth, the Marcussens were going to change their way of life.

Chapter 11

The Marcussen castle had undergone a subtle yet definite transformation. It was nothing drastic, nothing apparent. Yet there was a subtle aura of despondency that permeated the castle walls. The sun rays seemed to be in constant battle against the gloomy interiors to just allow the tiniest amount daylight to shine inside the chambers. The shadows in the corners of the halls and the corridors seemed to flicker with malevolent life. As if they were in the midst of a conspiracy, plotting to eradicate light and life out of the Marcussens.

In the darkness of the night the Duke reached the castle alone; after two days' ride from the monastery of *Patronus Fides*.

The news of his arrival was a deliberately kept secret from most of the castle members, including of course his daughter. If the situation he faced right then had not been so grave, Niels Marcussen would have been amused at the fact that he needed to keep his return to his own domain a secret.

Where once the entire castle full of folks came out to greet the Duke back from his journeys, this time, there was only his trusted manservant waiting by the stable, holding a solitary oil lamp and standing beside the shadowy rose bushes.

After getting down from his horse, the Duke instructed his servant to let him know the moment lady Æsa leaves her chambers and then retreated to his own chambers.

It was possibly an hour or two before dawn when Niels Marcussen arose from a deep slumber hearing a low knock on his door. It took him a few moments to realize that somebody was actually knocking on his door. Groggily he sat up pulling his silken robe around his waist. Even before he opened the door, he knew that he would find his servant who would have brought him information about Æsa—perhaps she had already left her chambers in time for her strange unholy rituals.

What surprised him was the hour. He had not expected his daughter to leave her chambers in the middle of the night. Perhaps even after accepting the mission, there was still a part of him, the paternal part that couldn't believe that Æsa, his baby, could be anything apart from a princess or an angel from heaven. However as he opened the door and looked at his servant's face, the decision was made. Nothing else was needed to convince him that what he had been entrusted to do was in fact a necessary step. Grimly he braced himself for the battle that lay ahead of him. The responsibility that he has undertaken must be performed unhesitatingly, thought the Duke resolutely. For no Lady leaves her chambers at such ungodly hours, except to commit ungodly acts.

Shortly after that Niels Marcussen entered Æsa's chambers. He clutched the talisman in his hand so hard that the knuckles had turned white. Her room was empty. There burnt thick black candles, black on all available surfaces of her chambers—starting from the bedside tables to the huge dresser. Nubilous heavy curtains hung from the tall windows barring even the faintest strains of moonlight from entering the room. A stifling heat spread throughout the room and made it hard for Niels to breathe.

There was a suffocating smell of molten wax but along with it was mingled another smell. A sickly sweet metallic odour that the Duke with a shock realized was the smell of stale blood. Being a man who has encountered numerous brutalities in battles, the smell was nothing new. However, experiencing it inside his castle was a horror of a different kind. That the atrocities could invade his domain, corrupt the sanctity of his home made his furious and somewhat fearful heart beat like a hundred horses galloping inside his rib cage.

Scouring the room he noticed the beautiful looking glass mounted on one of the walls. Without wasting anymore time, he went to the mirror and wedged the talisman that had already been brushed with horse glue, among the prisms of the mirror. After the deed was done, he stepped back and anxiously tried to see whether there remained any suspicious trace of his act. However, the talisman remained unobtrusive among the dazzling prisms.

Not willing to spend any more time lest Æsa comes back, the Duke turned around. However, with extreme shock he realized that he couldn't find the entrance through which he came in. He looked around, baffled at how a door could vanish into thin air. But there remained absolutely no hint of any door anywhere. It was as if the entire room had been constructed perfectly, the only flaw lying in the absence of an entrance or an exit. Niels Marcussen was not sure whether he was asleep or awake. *Is it a dream?* He wondered.

He pinched himself hard, thinking that the long journey had exhausted him to such an extent that he was hallucinating. He was almost convinced that he would wake up and find himself lying on his bed. However the painful pinch although left a fierce red mark on his arm didn't seem to change the scene remotely. With terrible dismay he realized that whatever nightmare had gripped him had done so in reality and not in the refuge of slumber.

Unable to trust his own eyes, he started groping around the walls in an attempt to find his freedom. But there wasn't any. As time passed, his panic increased and like a madman searching for an unachievable object, he banged on each wall willing it to lead him out of the chambers of horror. As he pushed aside each curtain expecting to find windows behind them, all he faced was stone walls unrelenting to weak human strength.

In frenzy the Duke moved from one corner of the room to the other bathed in the jaundiced light of the candles. Unaware, uncaring that in his path lay strewn flower vases, upturned chairs, torn down curtains in a massacre. He did not notice that part of a heavily brocaded curtain lay on the path of a burning candle. The fire licked the edges of the brocade, hesitantly at first. Then, liking the taste of it, it moved further down the curtain, devouring it greedily. After it was done with the curtain it moved on to the next, and then to the furniture, to the bed and everything else in the room. It was as if the fire had been starving for a long time and now that its hunger was finally being fed, it did not want to stop. The whole room became the battleground of smoke and fire.

The Duke screamed for help, but even to him, his voice sounded frail and weak. Slowly oxygen became scarce and his breaths became short gasps, till there was no oxygen left in his lungs. The last thing he thought of before his eyes closed was that the fire and the smoke seemed to twirl around him in some ancient dance ritual.

There seemed to be some sort of harsh light right behind the eyelids that commanded cruelly to open the eyes. Consciousness was not there—at least not yet. All that there

was, was a sense of being in nether worlds. A transition between life and death. Between slumber and wakefulness.

However as consciousness started to creep slowly throughout his body and the harsh light poked his closed eyelids like arrows, the Duke opened his eyes. Not sure whether he had dreamed the entire ordeal of the previous night or whether he was dead and had gone to the otherworld, he opened his eyes, cautiously, hesitantly. Seeing unfamiliar bed chambers, he quickly sat up.

The first thing his glance fell on was Æsa. She was sitting on a chair right beside the bed. The look on her face reminded the Duke of a lioness that had already caught her prey but has decided to let it bleed to death for a longer time, rather than just put it out of its misery.

The bright morning sun shone into the room imparting it with pleasant warmth. His eyes followed the heavy curtains that he had seen was burnt to cinders right in front of him the night before. They had been drawn aside and tied back to let the morning sun come in. Right opposite the bed there stood the door that led out of the chamber, tangible, solid, innocent, without in anyway indicating that it had been missing the previous night. The mirror stood exactly in the same place as the night before.

He could not make out whether the talisman still remained as he had placed it. However, Niels did not dare scrutinize closer lest Æsa followed his gaze. Everything else looked in place. In fact the only thing out of place was he himself, lying on Æsa's bed.

Slowly, reluctantly his gaze returned towards Æsa. She sat there, beautiful as a marble statue, with a coldness that even the hardest stone could not portray. Her eyes held a glint of some unknown, unexplainable danger while the thin smile that spread across her luscious lips was anything but welcoming.

Niels Marcussen one of the bravest warriors that Denmark had, could feel fear like a tiny worm slithering in his guts. Never before did he feel so unnerved, not even when he had been captured by enemy camps which had happened quite a few times. Since lying down increased the amplitude of his vulnerability, the Duke sat up.

“Good morning father.” said Æsa; as the Duke with uncharacteristic clumsiness clambered out of the bed.

There was absolutely no hint of sarcasm in the voice. As the Duke wondered exactly how he would explain his presence in her chambers, she continued.

“I heard you came back from your journey yesterday. You must have been really tired and retired in the first chamber that you could reach.”

There was such innocent affection in her face, her eyes right at the moment, that the Duke could feel warmth of relief washing over him.

“Yes,” he agreed playing along with Æsa. “I was really too tired. It had been a long and tiring journey.”

As he spoke, Æsa stood up. “Was my bed comfortable? Did you have a good sleep?” she asked, a hint of smile playing at the corners of her lips.

“Yes, yes. Very.” answered the Duke quickly, perhaps a little too quickly, in his eagerness to agree with her. He was aware that if somehow she knew the real reason behind his presence there, then literally all hell will break loose.

I must not antagonize her. Thought the Duke.

“Hogwash!” Her voice lashed out, her eyes blazing fire. “Never have you ever let yourself in, into any other room in the castle. And suddenly due to your extreme exhaustion you had to choose the chamber of your daughter, which lies farthest from the entrance of the castle? It fills me with great remorse,” she continued after a brief pause, “that you would actually abuse my intellect in making an excuse so feeble.”

“You were prying, trying to quench your curiosity about the rumours,” She said getting up from the chair pointing a sharp finger at him. “Weren’t you My Lord? Do you take me for an imbecile?” she said her eyes narrowing into little more than mere slits on her face. “Think that you can just waltz right into *my* domain and leave unhurt? In here it is a spider’s web, my dear father. And you are the unfortunate fly. I always keep my doors open for anyone to come in at their will. But to leave, depends completely on my wish.” said Æsa, haughtily with the confidence of one who stands undefeated.

“Let me illustrate to you. Show you exactly what happens when my will is challenged.” She added as if she had just thought of it.

As she approached him, the Duke’s eyes became wide with shock. In her hand, Æsa held a small dagger. In other circumstances, it would have been a source of hilarity, a tiny petite woman bringing a dagger against a man of the Duke’s strength and stature.

However, the Duke just stood there transfixed with shock. As she came closer, the smile seemed to spread across her face, and her eyes shone with glee.

“Here,” she said. “Take it. Stab yourself with it. Stab it right through the heart. Right...here.” She whispered into Marcussen’s ear, tapping his chest where his heart would be.

Against every cell of his body’s screaming protest, the Duke took the dagger from her. His hand shook, though his legs felt leaden. Æsa stood opposite him, while the mirror was right behind him. The whole room was bathed in sunlight. It was so hard to comprehend that nightmares could occur in such broad daylight. Yet it was happening to him and he did not seem to be strong enough to stop it. What was most dismaying was that he was so close to his intent, his destination. Yet, he was unable to fulfil his mission, for the irony of the matter was that, he himself was blocking her reflection in the mirror.

Æsa stared at him, her glance unwavering, while Niels could feel the dagger that his hand clutched tightly against his will being slowly raised to his heart. He wanted to break eye contact with Æsa; he wanted to obey his mind that begged him to place the dagger on her heart instead. She was so close; it would have been so easy. But his will seemed to be unrelenting to his wishes, as it lay helpless in front of Æsa’s stare. Tiny beads of perspiration formed on his forehead, and slowly trickled down his eyes, his chin in small rivulets. He gritted his teeth, fighting against the force with which his hand came close to his chest. And Æsa for the entire time, stood in front of him; her eyes overflowing with the ruthless fire of revenge.

With a cry that shook the very foundations of the castle, with the will power that could only be the result of the proud, the brave Viking blood that ran in his veins, Niels Marcussen stabbed himself. With more vigour and strength than he had ever stabbed an enemy, he bent down and stabbed his knee. The pain was excruciating, he could hear his bone crunch as the blade pierced through his skin and flesh with vengeance. He buckled and fell down on the floor right in front of Æsa.

She stood there, frowning, not understanding how he had managed to stab his knee instead of his heart like she had demanded. Between her and the mirror now remained no

barrier. Right then, as if it was God's will, the sun shone brighter, lighting up every inch of the room. As Æsa looked up, her gaze fell on her reflection. At first there didn't seem to be any reaction.

The Duke awaited with bated breath. His heart started filling up with dismay, as she stood proud and erect in front of the mirror, with him lying at her feet helplessly. But then something seemed to affect her as her body started swaying slightly, as if in a trance. She seemed to have forgotten who she was. And before his eye, smoke the colour of tar started coming out from her chest, and enter the mirror. The black smoke was nothing like the Duke had seen before. It seemed to be alive. It seemed to fill the entire chamber with hatred and malevolence. The scream that came out of Æsa was inhuman. It was more of a screech of an animal in pain rather than a human. But all lasted for a few minutes and then she fell down.

Marcussen quickly crawled up to her, not caring about his own wound that was still bleeding dangerously. He wanted to get his daughter back. He wanted to bring back an Æsa, sweet and kind, filled with the goodness that would have come out of the mirror. But she didn't seem to be breathing.

"Æsa, *Mig barn*, wake up. Get up *kæresten*." But there was no response. And as Marcussen held the lifeless body of his beautiful daughter he realized she was lost from him forever.

He felt giddy, his head spun around as the room went in and out of focus, the result of a huge amount of blood loss. The deep gash in his knee didn't seem to be paining anymore. An overwhelming numbness spread throughout his body. And the feeling of profound sadness at the loss of his child filled his heart. He now understood that never could Æsa have turned good.

Never could the mirror have reflected her evil soul in an opposite manner, and given her good one in return. For as a Dark Angel, as Lucifer's pawn, Æsa had never possessed a soul—where there once reigned evil was just left as a corpse; a house from where the owner has walked out. Or as in this case the owner has just been imprisoned in the mirror. Although he wanted to scream for help, but his voice was too feeble. And soon Niels Marcussen lost consciousness, his huge frame falling down beside Æsa's petite one.

Chapter 12

The shrill ringing of her cell phone awakened Trisha with a jolt. It was hardly half an hour that she had finally managed to doze off and the sudden ringing made her heart beat faster. The faint blue light from the screen of her phone lit up her dark bedroom throwing deep shadows of all the furniture against the walls.

Sitting up groggily, Trisha answered her phone without even bothering to glance at the caller ID. She already knew who the caller was.

“Trishaaaa!” an excited voice exclaimed on the other side, “A very very happy eighteenth birthday. Hope I didn’t disturb you.” giggled Mia.

“Thank you.” replied Trisha half amused and half annoyed to be woken up. “And how can you disturb me? All I was doing, in the middle of the night was just sleeping.”

“Oh well, you can always go back to sleep after this. But at least I am the first one to wish you.” Replied Mia merrily.

“See you tomorrow for the party.” said Trisha. “And Mia, please come early, before all the guests arrive. I would really need you there. You know how unsocial I am. And Daddy has invited almost the whole of Darjeeling. Some of his business associates are even coming down from Calcutta. I don’t even know who they are. But looking at the arrangements, I am getting more worried than anything” she added anxiously.

“Don’t worry,” assured Mia. “I am very good at parties. And Grams and I will be there earlier to help you out. We are going to have an amazing time. See you tomorrow. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” replied Trisha before switching off the phone. She didn’t want anyone else to be wishing her happy birthday in the middle of the night.

Sleep had become a very precious commodity to her. For the past eight days, Trisha had hardly had a night’s undisturbed sleep. She had resorted to catching naps in the afternoons on the various sofas and couches scattered around the house. In her own bedroom however, she couldn’t sleep. When due to extreme exhaustion her body finally succumbed to sleep, the horrifying nightmares tortured her relentlessly. Always in the medieval times, always Trisha as a sacrifice, and always the effigy of the devil standing in front of her—a looming malevolent figure.

Although Trisha realized that all her dreams described devil worship, and maybe in some way it had something to do with the mirror, she didn’t know how or what she could do about it. Right then she had no one to talk to. At least no one who could make a difference. Her father had been using the occasion of her eighteenth birthday to throw a huge gala for all his clients, business associates and other illustrious guests. He had been busy with his work as well as being the co planner of the event along with Mrs. D’ Costa.

Trisha decided that once the party was over, she would request her father to remove the mirror from her room. She believed that although it would be difficult to convince Mathew Brown about its supernatural attribute, as a father, concerned about his child’s wellbeing, he would oblige her. Her only other worry was that it would hurt him that she did not like his gift, that she did not appreciate its sentimental value, as she knew for him, it was precious more for sentimental reasons; although even in its monetary value it was a fortune.

After Mia's phone call Trisha tried in vain to go back to sleep. However, sleep refused to come. Perhaps in some subconscious part of her mind, there lurked fear of the nightmares that would begin once she was trapped in slumber. After tossing and turning on her bed for the better part of an hour, always making a conscious effort to not stare at the mirror, Trisha flung the bed clothes aside and stood up. She switched on the bedside lamp and immediately the room glowed with a soft yellow tinge.

Not sure what she would do, now that she was up, Trisha decided to read a book. As she started to look for something interesting on her bookshelf, she suddenly heard a tapping noise on the window pane. It was quite a soft noise. Had it been any other time when it was not so silent, she might not have even heard it. But as it was, the faint noise seemed to beckon her towards the window. With slight apprehension as is normal in such circumstances, Trisha advanced towards the window that looked out towards the undulating hills covered with tea garden.

The entire hillside was bathed in moonlight although dark clouds on the horizon threatened to engulf the full moon in a time not very far. There was a storm brewing and the strong winds seemed to make all the tall trees bow their heads in acquiesce in face of its power. The staggering mountains far away seemed to alertly watch the countryside with suspicion. There was not a soul in sight, not that Trisha expected anyone to be out so late, and in such weather conditions.

She couldn't see the source of the tapping sound, although she could swear that she had heard it. Tap tap, like someone knocking softly against the glass pane. Unable to solve the mystery of the noise, Trisha turned around, but then she heard it again. She turned around swiftly to see, however, there was nothing suspicious on the other side of the window.

She walked back to the window, peeping through the glass, her nose and face flattened against it, trying once more to find the source. However, she didn't want to open the window. Although even to herself Trisha refused to admit that she was reluctant to open the window, not because of the freezing cold but because of some unknown fear.

As she intently pressed her face against the glass, suddenly there was a loud fluttering sound, and a raven, the biggest that Trisha had ever seen came and perched on the windowsill outside the glass. The huge black bird scared Trisha beyond anything; for she had never seen a Raven that close. She let out a scream, muffled by her palms pressing against her mouth. As Trisha looked at the raven, the raven seemed to look back at her with a blazing intensity. When it turned its head from one side to the other, Trisha noticed that one of its eyes was blood red, with a deep scar that ran from below the eye to almost the beak. It was a most hideous addition to an already menacing creature. The shock was too much. This time when she screamed, it was really loud. Loud enough to reverberate throughout the silent house, and bring Mrs. D'Costa running up to her room.

Trisha flung herself onto the motherly housekeeper's bosom as Mrs. D'Costa rushed into her room and sobbed. Telling her all about the monstrous crow.

Whatever, Mrs. D'Costa could make out between Trisha's sobs sounded quite unbelievable. That Trisha got scared because of a crow sitting on the window pane seemed to be outlandish. *Weren't all birds with the exception of owls blind at night?* Wondered Mrs. D'Costa.

Although she believed that Trisha must have dreamt the whole thing and got a fright, she didn't want to argue with the scared girl. Rather she volunteered to sleep on the couch in Trisha's room to keep her company. And the frightened Trisha gratefully agreed to the sleeping arrangements.

The next day dawned bright and sunny. The strong gale had blown all the clouds away leaving behind just a handful of white cottony ones to bring out the deep blue of a clear Darjeeling sky.

In the morning light, Trisha's nightly fear seemed baseless. As she woke up with the sun streaming into her room, Trisha decided not to let her previous night's fear ruin a perfect day—the day of her eighteenth birthday. Mrs. D' Costa must have left earlier to look over the arrangements. In place of that, standing on the carpet was a most delightful bouquet of red roses, scattered with baby breaths and orchids. Trisha smiled fondly knowing that the bouquet must be from her father. Only he knew how much Trisha loved roses, and never let any occasion go by, without buying her extravagant bouquets of roses.

The rest of the day passed amidst haste. There was much to do; mostly in the form of supervision, rather than actual manual labour. Huge creamy white canopies were put up in the front garden. Snow white lilies and scarlet roses were placed in bunches at every available surface. The stage was set up for the live band that would arrive in the evening. The caterer's trucks backed up in the driveway caused much inconvenience to every other person trying to come in or out of the house. The arrangements seemed to be more of a grand scale wedding rather than that of an eighteenth birthday.

Trisha who was generally a very quiet girl felt suffocated with such show of opulence even before the party had begun. However seeing the animated glitter in her father's eyes, as he ordered everyone around, made her accept such grandeur without a word of protest.

Between attending to phone calls of numerous people calling to wish her, and providing her opinion to her father and Mrs. D' Costa whenever needed, Trisha was exhausted. By the time she could climb upstairs to her room, after everything was finally ready, it was almost five thirty in the evening and guests were supposed to arrive from seven.

Perhaps for being out in the sun for so long, her room felt distinctly chilly, and Trisha felt an involuntary shudder run through her body. The room that had always been her sanctuary away from the hustle and bustle of the world, did not seem to have much comfort to offer her nowadays.

It was a feeling that was difficult to describe in words. Almost as if, the room alienated her, rather than welcomed her. As if, in her absence, conspiracies were carried out. Hushed whispers were spoken between the walls, the furniture, and the moment she walked in, every item stopped communicating mid-sentence, held their breaths and followed Trisha's every movement with invisible, silent, ominous eyes.

Although the sun had yet to set, twilight seemed to have settled in comfortably in her room. Causally, without paying much heed to her inner turmoil, Trisha switched on the lights. In fact she switched on every light in the huge bedroom, flooding it with the brightness of a ballroom. She couldn't help feeling relieved at having chased off the darkness. She mentally made a note, that the very next day she would ask her father to remove the Belgian Mirror from her room, as she knew that her entire discomfort and misery had their origin in that mirror.

Mrs. D' Costa had laid out the evening dress that Trisha was supposed to wear for the party. It was a beautiful satin dress the colour of champagne, with thin almost invisible

shoulder straps. The ankle length dress was designed to show off the curves of a woman through its sharp yet simple cut. This was another birthday gift that her father had bought from Paris on his last trip. Although she loved the dress, Trisha doubted whether the dress would be successful in accentuating her boyish and lean figure.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door.

“Come in”, said Trisha expecting Mrs. D Costa.

But as the door opened, she saw the excited face of Mia and her grandmother standing right behind her. For the first time in the day, Trisha was genuinely pleased. Pleased to see two of her most favourite people standing there.

“Hey, you did come early!” she exclaimed.

“Of course I did. Didn’t I tell you I will be there early?” said Mia with mock annoyance.

“And I guess, I don’t get any credit for hurrying you up, for the last two hours,” said Katarzyna smilingly.

“Oh Grams, I knew that you are the reason behind Mia’s punctuality.” said Trisha giving the old lady a bear hug.

“Happy birthday my sweetheart. May the Lord fill your life with love laughter and happiness,” said Katarzyna, planting a kiss on Trisha’s forehead.

“Thank you so much.” said Trisha as Grandma handed her a small wrapped box containing her birthday gift.

“Wow Trisha, this dress is super sexy!!” exclaimed Mia, lifting up the dress from bed.

“Mia,” frowned Katarzyna. “Please mind your language. That’s not the way a lady speaks.”

“Sorry Grams.” said Mia, instantly repentant. Not because she said it, but because she said it in front of her grandmother, who had very strong beliefs of how a lady should behave.

As the two teenagers became engrossed once again with the dress, and how Trisha should accessorize it, Katarzyna’s eyes fell on the Belgian mirror. It was truly the most spectacular looking glass that she had ever seen. She stood there, mesmerized by its beauty.

It took her a while to notice her own reflection in the mirror. There seemed to be something wrong with the reflection. Somehow she looked almost ten years younger, her face more radiant, and her age less visible. But that was not all; her eyes portrayed a coldness that startled her. The reflection that stared back at her seemed to be her in physical form. However, there was something more to it—something that she couldn’t put a finger on. It was as if the reflection was alive. And as she stared at it, it stared right back at her.

It was then that she noticed the simplest yet terrifying fact. From the time Katarzyna was seventeen, she wore a small gold cross on a short gold chain. The chain’s length was such that the cross always rested on her collar bone. It had been a gift from her beloved husband, while they were courting. From the day he had put it around her neck, Katarzyna had never taken it off. It had become a part of her. But as she looked at her reflection, she realized the gold cross was not visible in her reflection in the mirror. She could feel the cross when she touched it, but her neck in the mirror stood bare, devoid of the chain, or the cross.

She stared at the reflection, perplexed, her mind in distress. She could hear the two girls talking, and giggling in the background, but she stood there frozen; unable to take her

eyes off her reflection. And as she stood there horrified beyond words, her reflection suddenly broke into a smile. It was a smile so evil, so menacing, that Katarzyna shrieked involuntarily and took a step back.

The girls jumped up rushing to her side.

“Grams, what happened? Are you okay?” asked a worried Mia.

Trisha’s face too reflected the same concern. However, as Katarzyna looked at the both of them, especially Trisha, she realized that there was something more. Something that Trisha knew, but was not saying.

“I am fine.” said Katarzyna, trying her best to cover up her tremulous voice. “I think I just felt slightly dizzy.”

She now knew what had kept Trisha worried over the past few days. She knew that she had to talk to the girl about it. But all had to be done after the party. The time was not right.

“Mia, let’s go down and have some soft drink and allow Trisha to get ready. Guests are going to arrive shortly.”

As Mia held her hand and led her out of the room, Katarzyna turned back and looked at Trisha. With as much sympathy as her eyes could portray, she wordlessly let Trisha know that she understood the source of Trisha’s misery. Katarzyna noticed the huge drop of tear that rolled silently down the girl’s cheek. Perhaps, it was the burden of keeping such a dangerous secret, or perhaps it was the relief that someone besides her knew about the mirror that brought on the tears. Glancing hesitantly at the mirror once more, Katarzyna left the room with a worried Mia tagging along with her.

After Mia and Grams had left her room, Trisha felt lost. As she went about taking a shower, applying moisturizer, and getting ready, her mind was at the crossroads of emotions. On one hand, she was glad that now she had someone who had experienced something unnatural, something extraordinary in the mirror; glad that she can confide her fears to Grams. However, on the other hand, suddenly her uneasiness became far more real. Became tangible, for no more could she deny the dark magic of the mirror as tricks played by an active mind.

She was ready within an hour. Standing in front of the mirror, she couldn’t help marvelling at how flawlessly beautiful she looked. Her eyes fell on the dressing area in front of the mirror. She noticed an exquisite corsage made of orchids and pine leaves lying right there. Trisha frowned, trying to remember how it had come to be there. Not able to recollect its presence, she assumed that it must be another contribution from her father to accessorize her evening attire. Smiling to herself, Trisha picked up the scarlet orchid to pin it in the front of her dress.

She leaned very close to the mirror which of course at the moment was behaving extremely meekly, without the slightest trace of anything supernatural. With her brows furrowed into a frown of concentration, she tried to pin the corsage. Suddenly there was a loud fluttering noise, like that caused by the wings of a bird, almost as if a large bird was trying to break in through the glass pane of the window.

Trisha jumped up; her sudden careless action caused the pin of the corsage to deeply embed itself into the soft flesh of Trisha’s finger. She cried out in pain as blood oozed out of the cut dropping in circular globules on the dresser in front of the mirror. She turned around to see what bird had caused such a sudden and loud noise. But there was nothing

at the window. Trisha was certain that she heard the fluttering of wings. For a moment she was frightened that it may be the raven from the previous night.

However, as she could not see anything remotely representing the raven, or anything else that might have caused the noise outside the window, Trisha decided to solve the mystery of the noise later. She busied herself on taking care of her finger which was bleeding quite profusely. Holding up the bleeding finger, she started rummaging the drawer of the dresser with the other hand, looking for some cotton wool to wipe her finger.

In her haste, she didn't realize that her bleeding finger was touching the reflective surface of the mirror. She didn't realize that her hand was leaning on the mirror for support as with the other hand she searched for the cotton. She didn't notice that blood from her finger was running down the mirror in a single viscous line, following a slow lethargic path down the glass. She didn't notice the sudden appearance of an old hag with brownish yellow skin, eyes that flamed red, face that was more of a demon rather than human on the mirror.

Trisha was unaware of the obscene greed that the eyes of the vile creature displayed. Unaware how it opened its mouth, revealing a dark orifice out of which came out a tongue, forked like that of a viper and licked the blood off the mirror with extreme greed and relish.

It all happened in a matter of moments. And by the time Trisha took out the cotton wool, she realized her finger had stopped bleeding. In fact there wasn't even the slightest throb, to remind her of the cut. The only reminder that she had cut her finger, were the two bright red dots of blood on the background of the creamy white dresser.

She looked at her finger intently trying to find a trace of the cut. But truly there was none. A sudden buzzing noise like the roar of the angry sea seemed to invade her ears, while warmth like molten lava spread through her veins with the pace of lightening. For a moment she was afraid. Petrified at the way her body felt. But it was gone within a moment, and Trisha with utmost calm and confidence left her room to join the merriment below.

It was almost like how they show it in movies. Mathew realized, later on. One moment, there was a soft buzz, with everybody talking at the same time, mellow scattered conversations; and he the friendly host greeting everybody, moving in and out of small groups that had already formed among people better acquainted with each other.

The band was just warming up. They played soft jazzy numbers while waiting for the guests to loosen up slightly. Waiting for the effects of alcohol and familiarity to set in, before they start on the numbers that would bring them on the dance floor. The next moment, there was a sudden silence; and as if on clockwork, every head in the party turned towards the entrance of the canopy, where stood Trisha. Beautiful, head held high, with a confidence that would have shamed a queen even. There was a smile on her face that conveyed equal parts of amusement, and the perfectly measured synthetic smile of a hostess. A smile, which to everyone in general looked pleasant enough but somehow

didn't seem to be a joyous one; didn't seem to reach the depths of her eyes, Mathew observed.

What startled Mathew the most was the way Trisha stood there. Trisha who had always been something of a wall flower seemed to have undergone a huge transformation. It was almost as if there stood someone else someone who didn't resemble Trisha remotely, in spite of Trisha's face and body. Her stature, her poise, her gait, everything seemed to have transformed on the evening of her eighteenth birthday.

But that was just the tip of the iceberg. It became actually worrying when she started behaving in an immensely inappropriate manner with the guests. Her demeanour was appalling, blatantly flirtatious, and not in any way resembling the normal Trisha or her usual attitude.

She didn't act like a young girl who had just turned eighteen. She seemed to be a fully matured woman, a seductress, aware of her beauty and fully conversant of the weakness of men when it came to the fairer sex. Her seductive smiles, her sultry glances, her innuendos of words and actions, everything was scandalous.

Mathew Brown watched in horror as Trisha held court with almost all the men present while their spouses and partners fumed in corners. However, such was her spell that not one man who Trisha approached could help but be putty in her hands for as long as she wanted. And then within moments, she would suddenly be tired of his attention and turn around, walk away rudely—as if she had no time to endure such boring conversations. She would then find a new man to mesmerise.

Each time Mathew wanted to approach his daughter, she moved away. Not wanting to make a scene, or rather not knowing how exactly to handle the situation, Mathew tried damage control through ways he could. He urged the band to play music to which his guests could dance, kept insisting to everybody to have more drinks, more food, in the hope that that would keep them away from Trisha's atrocious behaviour.

Even Mia, her best friend was overlooked and avoided by Trisha, noticed Mathew. In fact standing lonely in a corner while her best friend dallied through almost all the men present, Mia looked completely baffled rather than hurt or miserable. Throughout the evening she tried to get Trisha into a conversation with her. But Trisha was absolutely uninterested. Each time Mia wanted a word with her, with impatience almost bordering on rudeness; Trisha excused herself and went away.

While Mathew or Mia seemed utterly baffled at Trisha's behaviour, the only one who seemed to be genuinely worried was Katarzyna. Her eyes followed Trisha everywhere although not once did she attempt to talk to the girl. Mathew was in fact surprised that Katarzyna did not attempt to even get anywhere close to Trisha.

When around ten, the party was just getting a tad more entertaining Katarzyna and Mia took leave, thanking Mathew for a wonderful time. As Mia turned around to leave, her grandmother stood for a moment longer—as if there was something she wanted to talk about. But after just the slightest hesitation, she looked up, smiled at Mathew and left along with her granddaughter.

In spite of Trisha's strange attitude, the affair lasted till much after midnight, when Mathew, slightly tipsy with all the champagne and hard liquor of the evening bade his last guest goodnight. Everyone seemed to have had a good time. *Maybe I was over reacting—paranoid at Trisha behaving in a womanly way*, thought Mathew. *Maybe it was just nervousness on her part at being in a gala with such a huge number of guests.*

Standing downstairs in the garden Mathew looked up towards Trisha's bedroom window. It was dark inside. She had retired long before the revelry had gotten slightly wilder—excusing herself gracefully and bidding everyone to have a good time.

Although Mathew knew that Trisha must be fast asleep by now, he couldn't help feeling as if there was a pair of eyes watching him from the darkened bedroom of his daughter. A slight shudder ran through him as he stepped back into the house while the hired helps were still outside clearing up after the party.

In Trisha's room, she stood, hidden by the lacy curtains on one side of the window. There played a slight smile in the corner of her lips as she watched Mathew pondering, looking towards her bedroom. And as he walked inside, disappearing from her view, Trisha opened the glass pane. Within moments, there was a noisy fluttering of wings, and a raven entered. It flew straight towards Trisha and perched on her shoulder. Slowly it turned its head around as if to take in the décor of the room. As it leisurely turned its head, a deep scar could be seen running from its left eye to the beak.

Although the darkness hid it, there was a smile on Trisha's face—a smile of happiness, at once again finding her long lost friend; a smile of achieving freedom at long last. A smile anticipating all that was going to happen from then onwards....

Chapter 13

Sleep seemed to have decided not to pay Mathew a visit that night. The entire day had been predictably exhausting, however the multitude of thoughts that ran through Mathew's mind kept slumber at bay. The party and the unnatural way that Trisha behaved was at the foremost amongst those thoughts. Strangely, Mathew couldn't help feeling uneasy about some remote unknown circumstance. Unsure of the reason behind such jittery nerves, he decided to cure it with the only remedy he knew.

The phone rang just as he was going to sit down with a glass of Laphroaig 18 years beside the fire in the library; the shrill sound cut through the peaceful night air like the cackle of a crow. Irritated at such disruption of peace, Mathew hurried towards the phone. Only when he reached his desk did he realize that it was the intercom that was ringing. That phone was connected to the security post at the edge of his estate, and they usually called only when somebody unannounced or unknown paid a visit.

Frowning at the unwelcome hindrance Mathew picked up the phone.

"Yes," barked Mathew—his voice expressing every ounce of the annoyance that he felt at that moment.

"Sir," he heard the Nepalese *Bahadur's* voice at the other end of the line. "There's a gentleman here who wants to meet you right now. He says it's a matter of utmost importance."

Before Mathew could ask him anything further, *Bahadur* continued. "I have never seen him before. He is definitely not from these parts and seems to be in quite a rush." Mathew contemplated the situation. Somehow that night he had had an overdose of visitors, and right then he didn't care how important or urgent a matter was, that brought a stranger at his door at that late hour, but he did not wish to be disturbed.

After a few moments, he answered. "Bahadur, please ask our visitor to come back tomorrow morning when I would be more willing to hear him."

There was a slight hesitation on the other end of the line and then spoke Bahadur. "Err Sir, I don't think that would be possible because our visitor has already broken the barricade and is currently on the way to the house." After a baffled pause he continued. "I am sending one of the guards behind him, in case things become ugly."

Furious at the audacity of the stranger, Mathew slammed the phone down and hurried towards the front porch of the Brown mansion. He had just about reached the porch when he saw the powerful headlights of a car travelling at lightning speed through the winding curves of his tea estate. Mathew gaped in wonder seeing the professional manoeuvring done by the driver at night in hilly unknown roads. Mesmerized, Brown forgot his former annoyance and watched as the car kept coming nearer and nearer, and within moments it was right in front of him. The tires screeched to a halt as the driver brought the car to a stop expertly.

Brown's jaws dropped as he stared at the black coupe in front of him. Its muscular exterior and elegant interior was unmistakably Bentley. With a shock he realized that it was the latest in a series of sports models from Bentley. He had only heard rumours of it being launched. However, seeing it for real and that too in Darjeeling was almost as unbelievable as seeing Santa Claus.

If the car was impressive, then the man who got down from it could only be described as majestic. The authority and ease with which he walked towards Brown was intimidating. It was almost as if breaking through a barricade in someone else's house was a very natural thing to do. There wasn't a slightest hesitation or apology in the man's body language. The tall towering stranger seemed to command a respect that was common only to people of a noble background.

Mathew stood there aghast. The stranger walked up to him at the top of the stairs, taking two stairs at a time easily, due to his formidable height.

"Hello, brother-in-law." He addressed Mathew as he reached the top of the stairs extending his hand towards Mathew for a handshake. Mathew couldn't move. He was too dumbfounded to react.

"Who are you?" he could barely get the words out of his mouth. Refusing to extend his hand towards the stranger.

With a lopsided smile the stranger answered. "I am Ian Marcussen."

Seeing no trace of recognition in Mathew Brown's eyes, he continued. "Perhaps you would better recognize me if I told you that I am Katya's cousin."

"Nonsense!" lashed out Mathew hearing the name of his cherished late wife on the lip of some stranger, who he was not sure right then that he liked much. "Katya did not have any family. She was an orphan."

"I did not say that she had parents. It is true that she is an orphan. But I am her father's brother's son. We grew up together. And anyway, wouldn't it be a lot easier if you just called her out and we could solve this mystery within moments?" said Ian with patience that he completely lacked right then.

The flight was exhausting enough. That coupled with the stress of the matter as well as the perilous drive from Calcutta to Darjeeling was all that was needed to make him extremely edgy.

"I wish I could do that." He heard Mathew speak bitterly. "But for that I would have to bring her back from the dead."

Mathew watched Ian's confident poise crumble right before him. There was raw pain in the eyes of the visitor. With all Ian was expecting, he did not expect this.

"When, how, did this happen?" Ian stammered, running out of words, as emotions and tears filled up his eyes, at having lost his childhood playmate forever.

"It's been almost thirteen years." Answered Mathew.

Somehow at that moment, seeing the naked pain in Ian's face, he didn't doubt the fact that Katya was related to this illustrious man. At that juncture his annoyance, his outrage at Ian's behaviour vanished. They were simply two men closely related by the bond of having loved and lost the same woman.

For a long time, Ian was at a loss. He remembered that night like yesterday although it had happened twenty years back. When she had stormed out of their ancestral castle and adamantly refused to be a part of the cursed Marcussen family, no one had stopped her. It was not because she was not loved; rather on the contrary, it was because she was loved more than anyone else. Her family had hoped fervently that staying away from them would perhaps rewrite her destiny.

Perhaps Fate would be tricked into believing that Katya was a different entity and thus would be spared the mysterious misfortune that had become the curse of every woman born with the Marcussen blood starting from the fifteenth century.

Thinking about the past had transported Ian back to that night in the castle when he had last seen Katya. At that time Katya had been eighteen. In fact that was the day she had turned eighteen. And like was the family tradition, every girl on the brink of womanhood was warned about the terrible fate that befalls on the women of the Marcussen clan. Katya had always been wilful and believed in writing her own destiny. That night she stoutly refused to believe that she had to live her whole life in fear; had to cower in front of the will of Fate. She had looked furious, yet felt completely helpless.

Ian who was just a year older than her had always loved her deeply from the moments that his young heart had understood the first stirrings of love. However he had never disclosed any of his feelings to her—always waiting for when the time was right. He had loved her from afar. Her sparkling eyes, her vibrant smile, her playful yet lady like nature had always been the elixir that quenched Ian's being. Almost every night the young man had gone to sleep with Katya's dreams as company. His longing to be with her had kept him awake, restless for many a night.

However the day she had walked out, Ian's father's strict instructions had been to let his niece live her life away from the shadow of the dreaded curse, if that was even possible. All the family members had been forbidden to interact with her. He, Ian's father had felt that it was necessary for Katya to forget her family in order for the family and especially its curse to forget her. However, a trust had been set up under her name, so she never lacked anything, and she was also given the job to overlook their antique business in Copenhagen.

That night Ian had to make a decision that broke his heart, transformed him from the joyful charming young man that he was with a future filled with love and possibilities into a grim brooding adult who viewed the world through the spectacle of cynicism and disdain. He realized that he needed to let Katya go. For declaring his love to her would only bind her back to the family. For days together his mind was in turmoil. His heart refused to let go of the woman without whom his life would be meaningless. But at last selfless love won. Ian understood that he would rather have Katya alive and happy with somebody else, than have a world where she didn't exist. And so once she left the family, he had never pursued her, never contacted her.

Many a night his resolve had weakened after a few glasses of liquor and he had picked up the phone to dial her number. A number he knew by heart although not once had he used it.

He had made his work his lover instead, giving in to her every demand, every whim gladly. Although the Marcussen wealth was enough to feed seven generations without anyone ever lifting a finger and doing an ounce of work, Ian had devoted his whole life in building up their family antique business. For staying busy was the only way he could keep the thoughts of Katya away.

Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Ian jolted back to the present and saw it was Mathew. "Why don't we go inside and then talk about everything. I will tell you all about Katya and you can tell me the purpose of your visit and also why my wife had not kept in touch with any of you." said Mathew.

As Ian turned around to follow him inside, Mathew nodded agreeably at the *Gurkha* security guard who had followed Ian's car on his bike and was at the moment standing quietly waiting for orders from Mathew.

Ian silently followed Mathew as he led him to the study. There, Mathew pointed towards the couch asking Ian to sit down as he walked towards the cocktail trolley to make a drink for him. While waiting Ian saw a picture of a girl on Mathew's desk. She was around seven-eight years old. She had a round cherubic face and mischievous green eyes. With one hand she was hugging a giant teddy bear and was grinning at the camera showing an adorable gap in her mouth with two missing front teeth.

"Your daughter?" enquired Ian.

Mathew nodded.

"She is adorable." said Ian.

"Yes she is." answered Mathew with paternal pride. "Today was her eighteenth birthday". He walked up to Ian passing him a glass of single malt and ice.

Both the men seemed to be lost in their personal worlds of memories and contemplations, which made them forget their immediate environment. Mathew sat on his arm chair and stared absentmindedly at the golden liquid reflecting amber splinters inside the crystal glass he was holding, while Ian watched the fire place with an intensity—as if searching for revelations in that volatile element.

Mathew guessed that Ian was still dealing with the sudden death of his cousin and decided to let Ian take his time to process the loss. He waited patiently for Ian to start the conversation without once showing any kind of urgency. However, his mind was bursting with curiosity, wanting to understand what he perceived to be a secret that would perhaps solve Katya's mysterious death.

Several minutes passed that way; the TICKTOK of the wall clock being the only sound apart from the frequent hisses and crackles that rose from the fireplace. When Mathew, in the warmth and comfort of his favourite room exhausted from the entire day's work, almost dozed off, he heard Ian's voice.

"What I am going to tell you may make you get up and dial the number to the closest mental asylum, or maybe the police. However, all I ask you is to give me a chance to finish." said Ian in a low voice.

Mathew nodded, intrigued, and apprehensive at the same time. It all sounded so mysterious.

It was as if Ian had prepared the speech in advance, so precise and complete was the tale that he narrated.

"The Marcussens have always been an illustrious name among the Danes from before the fifteenth century." began Ian. "My ancestor was the general in the army of His Majesty Christian the first, King of Denmark around the mid fourteenth century. And the curse began during his time."

Ian relayed every little detail that he had read in his ancestral journal to Mathew. Adding in the midst of it, how from a very young age every Marcussen had been warned of the curse. Throughout the narration Mathew's face was a canvas of emotions; disbelief, intrigue, worry, fascination—every emotion being painted over by the next as Ian recounted the tale.

Ian explained how from the time of the death of the Dark Angel, no woman with Marcussen blood had survived beyond the age of forty. There always came satanic temptations, voices whispered things to them till they went mad or as in most cases took their lives just to escape the evil enticement.

Mathew sat up hearing that. Till then he had heard the whole thing with slight disbelief. But suddenly it did not sound that fantastic any more. Suddenly a part of the puzzle seemed to fall in place. He quickly walked to his desk and from the secret chamber took out Katya's suicide note that beside him no one else was aware of. He handed it to Ian who was puzzled at the abrupt manner with which Mathew seemed to be hunting for something in the middle of their conversation.

"Here, perhaps once you read this, I wouldn't have to explain how she died," said Mathew as his voice shook slightly with the lump that seemed to have suddenly formed in his throat.

Ian reached out his hand and took the note. After almost twenty years, seeing Katya's familiar handwriting overwhelmed him till he felt the letters swimming. Unknowingly the tears had pushed through the cold ruthless surface of his heart. His thumb caressed every letter like he was caressing Katya's hand as it wrote. Each word was a reminder of his Katya. The swirls of the g's, the crossed t's the dotted i's. Even at the moment of utmost distress her handwriting had been perfect—just as she herself had always been. With extreme will power he fought back those tears and looked up towards Mathew.

"The nightmares that she spoke of, they are the hellish temptations that have plagued every Marcussen woman for centuries," said Ian gravely—his voice sounding broken and alien even to himself.

"But what I still don't understand," said Mathew, "is what brings you here after so many years?"

"You still don't realize do you?" said Ian smiling wistfully. "The mirror into which went the spirit of Æsa was the same mirror that had been kept in our antique store. It is the same mirror that you purchased and brought home. According to an ancient condition, we couldn't destroy the mirror for that would have unleashed the Dark Angel with all its vengeance into the world. We couldn't keep it at our homes, for then our homes used to be filled with shadows of negativity, and sicknesses. We couldn't sell it for then we were not sure whether others would take care it and prevent it from breaking. So as a solution my grandfather had shifted it to our antique store in Copenhagen. The clerk who had sold it to you was completely new and unaware that it was not for sale. And expecting a huge commission he allowed this sale. But the moment the mirror left our premises, exactly according to the ancient legend, I the eldest of the Marcussens felt a supernatural warning issued. I don't want to go into the details of that because I myself am still having a tough time believing it was real. However as feared, when I did call the store, they confirmed that the mirror had indeed been sold."

Ian was going to add something else when he saw Mathew's face turn parchment white with shock.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Mathew. Trisha, my daughter; does her--? Does that mean that she too will be tormented by devilish forces? Is she considered to have Marcussen blood in her as well?"

Ian was torn. He did not know what to reply. How could he tell a father that his daughter is doomed? How could he kill a man with his words? An honest and loving father who had just celebrated his daughter's eighteenth birthday that night. He decided to keep quiet and allow Mathew to answer his own doubts; for he had nothing to say.

Mathew stood unmoving; a statue, created through unimaginable information. He had never come out of mourning the loss of his late wife, and now, his mind refused to register the mortal danger that his daughter could be in.

“So what do we need to do now?” he asked after a long pause—his voice sounding weary and broken.

Ian took a deep breath and answered. “First of all, we should ship the mirror back to Copenhagen. I would be more than willing to return the amount you have paid for it.”

Mathew raised his hand in protest. “Please right now I am not thinking of that. All I want is my daughter to be safe.” He continued after a short pause. “You know what the irony is? I had bought the mirror as a remembrance to my wife. It was as a reflection on that mirror that I had first seen Katya. She had been standing behind me and I saw one of heaven’s angels in that reflection. The mirror had become special to me because of that one purpose. I bought it for Trisha because I felt that she would feel closer to her mother as I did through that piece of glass. And today that seems to bring bad luck.”

Mathew seemed to ponder over something more before he spoke again. “But can the mirror in anyway harm Trisha?” he enquired.

Ian nodded. “If somehow Trisha’s blood touches the mirror, the Dark Angel would be unleashed once again. For don’t forget Trisha too carries the Marcussen blood. We need to prevent any sort of circumstance that may cause such a calamity. So as I said, the safest would be to ship it back.”

Mathew agreed readily. “Yes, definitely. Let’s not waste any more time. Morning itself I will have it taken down from its mounting. Unfortunately it’s in Trisha’s room. But she is fast asleep. And at least for tonight we can sleep knowing nothing dangerous can happen right now.”

There were hardly a few hours of darkness left when the two men retired; Ian was shown to the guest room while Mathew went to his room.

Both were burdened under a nameless fear. Ian couldn’t understand it, yet he felt as if a heat seeking missile has already left for its destination and it was too late to stop it or change its course. While Mathew felt that there was a lot that Ian was not telling him. Both the men presently fell into a restless slumber waiting for the promise of a new dawn.

Chapter 14

It was a terrible nightmare. But how could it be? Wondered Trisha. It didn't remotely feel unreal, as dreams had a tendency to be. No matter how frightening, how surreal, how outlandish a nightmare is, at one corner of the sleeping psyche always remains the feeling that it is just a nightmare. Just a trick played by the subconscious and in order to escape from the clutches of that frightful ordeal, all that was needed to be done was to wake up. But that is exactly where lay Trisha's biggest challenge, her terrible fear. She was not asleep. Nor did she even feel remotely sleepy. She was wide awake; more alert than she had ever been in her entire life. And thus with chilling fear she concluded that what she was experiencing was real.

She was trapped; trapped inside an invisible force field within the familiar surroundings of her room. She could see the door leading to the balcony and the window beside it that overlooked the garden below. She could see the white lacy curtain that shook at the gentle breeze for the window was slightly open. She could see the glow of the colourful fairy lights with which the trees in the garden were draped, in honour of her eighteenth birthday. She could see her bathroom door left slightly ajar with a tiny triangular slice of the tiled floor visible through that crack. She could even see the door that led out from her room to the other parts of the house. But anytime she tried to use one of the exits, she couldn't. There seemed to be an unknown invisible wall that stopped her from moving away from her own room.

In vain, Trisha frantically rushed around trying with all her might to just get out of her room. She suddenly realized that she felt unnaturally light. Like a fragment of a burnt paper, unwanted and inconvenient, floating around in the wind. And she really was floating; observed Trisha with a shudder. Her feet did not reach the ground. In fact, looking down she discovered something that frightened her beyond all limits. She didn't have any feet. Agitatedly she looked for her hands, they were missing too. She tried to touch her stomach, her face, but none existed. All were just faint wisps of smoke—almost intangible, yet there undoubtedly, for she could feel herself suspended in air. The lightness made it extremely difficult for Trisha to dictate her own movements.

Am I dead? She thought horrified. But no, how could it be? Every thought, every memory, every emotion had remained unaltered. She could easily recall what she had for breakfast or what she and Mia had giggled about just a while back. Or was it a while? In that surreal surrounding there didn't seem to be any trace of time. It could have been a minute or an eternity that she had last met Mia. There was no sound at all. Not even the sound of her own breathing. *But then am I breathing?* She wondered. If she was, how could she? She didn't have a nose to inhale or exhale from, didn't have a body that needed the air. She wanted to scream, wanted to break out of the spell, the silence was deafening; but all her attempts were useless.

Going or rather floating closer towards her dresser, she tried to see herself in the mirror. But there stood the biggest shock in store for her. There was no mirror. There wasn't even the wall where hung the mirror. And as she suddenly looked up, she realized everything in the room seemed to be located in the opposite direction. The balcony door which stood on the right side of the window seemed to have interchanged places with it

and now stood on the left. The entrance to the bathroom had been on left wall, but now seemed to be on the right. Slowly, reluctantly there dawned an idea so fantastic, so appalling that Trisha didn't want to believe it—rather didn't want to think about it. Yet that seemed to be the undeniable truth.

She was trapped; trapped inside the mirror. And all she could see around her were just the reflections of the various parts of her room. She couldn't go out through any of the doors, since beyond the part which was not reflected, there was nothing. She was surrounded by an illusion; trapped within it with no place else to go.

She couldn't understand when and how that transformation, the disaster, had taken place. She remembered everything with crystal like clarity, the events prior to her current surreal existence. Getting dressed, talking to Mia and Grams when they came in to say hello. She remembered standing in front of the mirror and admiring her champagne coloured dress. She also remembered the corsage of the exquisite orchid, her finger getting pricked—she hastily looking around for a cotton to stop the bleeding. But everything beyond that time became unexplainable.

Lost, defeated, the poor girl could only but pray to God to relieve her of this misery. She wanted to cry, to scream, to bang at the glass that kept her prisoner, break it, release herself from the glass aquarium—but all were in vain, all remained unfulfilled yearnings.

Since time seemed to have stopped still in the mirror world Trisha did not realize how long it had been, but suddenly the door to her room opened and there, in walked—herself.

The idea itself would have been revolting in any circumstance. Yet here she was experiencing it. To exist outside her body, to see herself walk about, yet understand that it was not her, was a nightmare of colossal proportions. It was unbearable. However she was unable to stop herself from gaping in horror at the person, who seemed to be Trisha, yet was not her.

There was something intricately different about that person. In her gait, in her manners, lay very subtle yet definite differences. Trisha always had the habit of draping her dress or any clothing she wore in the evening over the chair in the corner so that it was aired out a bit. That was followed by her going to the bathroom, brushing her teeth before she retired for the night. However, the new Trisha seemed totally unbothered. The expensive dress lay strewn on the floor as she trampled it and went around looking for a night dress, treating every possession of Trisha's as her own.

Trisha trapped inside the mirror watched every movement of the girl outside horrified, at the same time fascinated by this out of the body experience.

Not once as she went about the room did the imposter glance towards the mirror. She seemed to be completely at home in Trisha's clothes, in Trisha's room and most of all in Trisha's body. The girl turned off all the main lights in the room and switched on the bedside nightlight. Instantly the brightness of the room reduced to a more mysterious golden glow. Trisha watched wordlessly as the girl stood concealed beside the window for a while looking down at something downstairs—perhaps in the garden.

Presently she opened the window completely for till then it had stood half open, and there entered the most hideous and frightening raven. Trisha was sure it was the same bird that she had seen the night before, the same one whose fluttering wings had caused her to jump and prick her finger in the process a while back. The raven had such a raw menacing look that even inside the mirror she sank back trying to increase the distance between her and the creature. On the other hand the girl hugged the creature with the

passion of uniting with a long lost friend. And the bird's human affection towards that touch was extremely eerie. It sat quietly accepting the embrace and almost hugged the girl back as well.

Mesmerized Trisha watched from behind her Bastille walls the reunion of the two; both seemed unaware of being watched, unaware of Trisha's presence so close to them. Yet just before turning the bed side light off, the girl looked at the mirror. She seemed to look straight into Trisha herself and smiled—as if she knew that there lay the real Trisha ensnared. That smile, that mockery of an action that is generally a portrayal of the happiness of the soul within, was the most inhuman, the most abhorrent and demoniac expression that a human face could express. Right then Trisha realized the difference between herself and the one that lay on her bed. She was nothing like Trisha; in fact there was nothing human in the entity that had possessed her body and her life.

It felt like an eternity, but suddenly Trisha felt as if she was in the middle of an earthquake. Her wafting body shook violently as the doors and the window in her mirror world started tremble as well. She clambered clumsily in her attempt to come close to the surface of the mirror and noticed that two men were in the midst of dismounting it from the wall.

Trisha could see it was bright outside and the morning sun streamed in through the window—the lace curtains drawn aside. Yet the silence existed still. Every action was soundless; she couldn't hear the men as they spoke with each other although she could see their lips moving. Presently, in walked her father. Seeing the man she loved the most standing right there unaware of the fate that she was in would have crunched her heart, if she indeed possessed one. With renewed vigour she tried to get his attention. But even now she failed. In that soundless, lifeless world lay enormous cruelty. The mirror world seemed to have been formed just to torment her. Behind her beloved father stood the phony Trisha with a subtle smile on her face; a smile that seemed to taunt the real Trisha, seemed to tell her that all hope was lost.

Presently the men brought sheets of newspaper and started to wrap the mirror up.

“No!” begged Trisha wordlessly as slowly, little by little every object obliterated from her view.

Gradually her father seemed to vanish behind veils of darkness. Dejectedly Trisha accepted that maybe never again she would see her father. She remembered how much she loved him. How much she cherished every moment with him. She remembered both of them consoling each other when they had lost her mother. Remembered her father reading her favourite stories every night when she went to bed; remembered him rushing in and engulfing her in his arms every time she woke up from a bad dream in the middle of the night. A wave of sadness encompassed her as the last bit of newspaper wrapped the mirror up. There was then just darkness—nothing else. She wanted to move away from the surface. But suddenly realized that she was totally stuck and was not capable of the slightest movement. For her mirror world had shrunken completely—in that darkness there was no reflection and hence no avenue or even the illusion of it where Trisha could manoeuvre. And as she could feel herself being lifted along with the mirror, completely frozen, Trisha wondered, *is this hell? Is this how I am going to spend eternity?*

Chapter 15

Whenever, over the next few weeks Ian had ever stopped to think when things had started moving out of his hands, he would always remember that morning. By the time Ian awoke the morning after he met Mathew, the sun was high up in the eastern skies. The night before, he had slept in Mathew's pyjamas for when he had flown to India, such regular habits as having an overnight case when travelling had been far from his mind.

Hastily he washed up and changed back into his own clothes—uncomfortable of being in someone else's. Ian then left the guest bedroom in search of Mathew. His intention was to take the mirror back to Copenhagen as soon as possible. He believed that the growing uneasiness that seemed to nag the corners of his heart would perhaps end once the mirror was back to where it had remained for several generations—the antique shop.

The smell of the alluring aromatic Darjeeling tea hit his nostrils the moment he left the guest room and following that heady redolence he ended up in the Browns' dining room. The place had been set for three people; but apart from Mathew who sat at the head of the table the other two places remained empty. Ian's expert eyes silently appreciated the fantastic mahogany table that would have been from the time of William IV somewhere during the early 1800s. The subtle yet luxurious display of antique furniture scattered around the dining room spoke volumes of Mathew's passion in antiques.

There was a liveried servant who bustled around as he lay the food on the table while another man, one who was more formally dressed as if he was on the way to office, stood beside Mathew. Pored over some papers with a pen in his hand and a frown on his face, Mathew seemed to be going through some business letters. He looked up as entered Ian, his frown turning into a pleasant smile.

"Good morning Ian." He said, waving his hand towards the chair on his left gesturing Ian to sit down. "Hope you had a pleasant night, considering,"

"I did. Thank you." lied Ian. He did not see any point in troubling Mathew with the torturous dreams and the disturbing thoughts that had taunted him throughout the night. Only with the sound of the first bird call towards the morning was Ian finally able to sleep.

"Would you like some tea? It's actually the one grown in our estates; or would you prefer coffee?" asked Mathew genially.

"Oh, I absolutely wouldn't dream of having anything else. The tea smells heavenly." replied Ian wisely, knowing that as an estate owner, Mathew took pride in his product, and would definitely be pleased with Ian's choice.

The servant boy obliged Ian's wishes immediately.

As Ian stirred a teaspoon of sugar into his tea he heard Mathew speak.

"Mr. Das, thank you for bringing the agreements over, but today I am slightly tied up. I would go through them tomorrow once I come into office." He said addressing the middle aged man who stood beside him.

"Yes, sure sir." said the man hurriedly gathering up the papers and leaving the room.

“What....”?

“I....”

Ian and Mathew spoke at the same time. Then they both stopped and smiled at each other.

“You go first.” said Mathew smiling towards Ian. He was developing a liking towards Ian, and started feeling a kinship with the handsome man who sat beside him. He did look like he had noble blood running through his veins; thought Mathew.

“Well,” said Ian, “I was wondering whether you can have someone take the mirror down. I want to take it back as soon as possible. Only when it is back in its place would I rest.”

“Don’t worry man.” said Mathew. “It has already been dismounted and packed, ready to be shipped. I had made sure that no time is wasted and just a while back the men had finished the job.”

“Thank you.” Ian nodded gratefully. “I plan to leave with it right after breakfast.”

“Please,” said Mathew raising his hand. “Allow me to suggest something to you. Till now I was....” He seemed to be struggling for the right words. “Not aware that my late wife had a family, nor was I fortunate enough to have a brother in law. If you would just accept my hospitality for a few days, then I would be truly honoured.”

Before Ian could protest, Mathew continued. “Don’t worry about the mirror. It would be shipped to exactly where you want it and I would send one of my trusted men along with it so that there’s no trouble. But now that you are here, I would love it if you spend some time with us and I am sure my daughter, your niece would also agree with me.”

Ian hesitated, but only for a moment. For such cordial invitation was impossible to decline. Moreover he too wanted to get to know Katya’s family better. After all he was the lone surviving Marcussen and all he had to call as his family now, was Mathew and his niece who he was yet to see.

“Fine”, Ian nodded agreeably. “Thank you for your hospitality. I would love to. I have a jet waiting at the Calcutta airport and if only you can arrange for someone to take the mirror there; I would arrange with my crew to take it back to Copenhagen immediately.”

“Of course.” Said Mathew, pleased that his guest had agreed to his proposal. “I will immediately make the arrangements.”

“Please call Mrs. D’ Costa and say I need to see her urgently.” He told the servant who stood behind him. The boy nodded and left the room.

Within moments, in walked a middle aged woman carrying a bowl of fruits, who Ian believed to be the one who ran the household.

“You wanted to see me Sir?” she asked Mathew at the same time giving Ian a curious look.

“Mrs. D’ Costa, this is Mr. Ian Marcussen. He is Katya’s cousin.” he added in a lower subdued voice.

Mrs. D’ Costa had heard about the late night visitor from the security guards. Nothing went on in the Brown estate without her knowledge. But this was the first time she was seeing him. She turned towards Ian—her eyes almost judgmental as she measured according to her set standards, to see whether the man who claimed to be family with her beloved late mistress was actually worthy of it; thought Ian amusedly. He had spent years understanding people when they remained silent.

Mrs. D' Costa seemed to like what she saw and nodded slightly wishing him good morning.

"And one more thing," added Mathew. "In the hall there's the mirror that I had brought back in my last trip. It has been packed and kept. Please see to it that it reaches Calcutta airport by today itself. The details of where it should be delivered will be given by Mr. Marcussen shortly. You just need to arrange for the men who would take it to Calcutta."

"Very well Sir," said Mrs. D' Costa. Ian noticed that she was bursting with curiosity to find out the reason behind such hasty departure of the antique, but manners and protocol kept her tongue in place, especially in front of a stranger.

"Where is Trisha? Why isn't she down yet for breakfast?" asked Mathew half annoyed. Before Mrs. D' Costa could answer, in walked a girl who literally stopped Ian's breaths for a few moments. His chest tightened with a feeling that he had stopped experiencing a long time back. His heart seemed to stop beating for a few moments and then accelerated with twice the vigour making up for the lost beats.

In front of him stood Katya! *No! It can't be*; thought Ian. *Katya is dead*. But how could he not recognize the face that had brought the cognizance of love into his life. How could he ever forget those eyes of melted emerald; the faint blush of the cheeks that put the rising sun of the dawn to shame; the gait of a queen, where unknowingly one bows in reverence in her presence?

It was the face, the body, the soul that had been etched in his mind for years. Although his logical mind knew that Katya was dead, his subconscious defied his belief, protested against all rationality in front of that apparition.

He was confused. *Am I the only one who could see Katya in the room?* He wondered. *Why isn't anyone else reacting like me?*

"What took you so long?" Mathew asked the apparition.

"I am sorry father." She replied. "I was caught up with something."

"Next time please be on time for breakfast, at least when I am home." Said Mathew displeased more at the memory of her appalling behaviour the night before, rather than her unpunctuality.

Ian was jolted out of his trance. Dumbfounded he realized that it was not Katya the love of his life, but it was Trisha; his niece. Unfortunately, despite the effort on the part of his rationality that urged him to behave in a way more suitable for when one meets his niece, the old emotion that had suddenly burst through the dam and drowned him refused to be subdued.

"Meet Ian." Said Mathew as Trisha sat down right opposite Ian. "Ian is your mother's cousin.....your uncle." He added after a brief pause.

Trisha looked towards Ian. Her jade eyes seemed to penetrate right into Ian's heart; her expression unreadable. She seemed to be taking in every inch of Ian.

After moments that to Ian felt like several lifetimes Trisha smiled. Every inch of that smile had the stamp of Katya. The way the smile was crooked to the left, the hint of her teeth could be seen through that smile, everything was familiar to Ian. And what was worse perhaps, was that when the last he saw Katya, she was of the exact same age. Having not seen her as a grown woman, the image he carried in his heart had never aged. Hence he couldn't believe that the person in front was not Katya.

"Hello Ian." She said. "Or should I call you *Uncle*?"

“Please,” replied Ian, not believing that the hoarse voice was coming out of him. “Just call me Ian.”

A slight tinge of mockery seemed to lace her words. Yet Ian was not sure what that was. However, suddenly he started to feel deeply uncomfortable as her stare seemed to almost border on inappropriateness. He regretted the decision to stay back for a few more days. But now it was too late to change his mind.

“I want to thank you for taking the mirror away papa.” said Trisha turning towards Mathew. “I wanted to tell you to do so myself, but was waiting for the right moment.”

“Why?” asked Mathew distraught. “Was something wrong?” He had not intended his daughter to have had any untoward experience due to the cursed object.

“Nothing really,” Trisha shook her head. “It just made me very uncomfortable. As if there was more to it than met the eye. You know the type of feeling that I am talking about?” asked Trisha looking towards Ian. Her gaze held something unknown. Yet it was a look that seemed to impart some hidden message towards Ian.

Without understanding what exactly he was agreeing to, Ian nodded his head. His eyes kept being drawn to Trisha against all resistance. He seemed unable to function normally from the moment Trisha had entered the room. There seemed to be a spark, an undercurrent that radiated between him and Trisha and try as he might Ian couldn’t deny that. But was he truly trying or was he just letting the deep embedded passion hold the reins of his being? Contemplated Ian.

Unaware of the tension inside the room Mathew spoke. “Ian has come to take back the mirror. It seems that it is a family heirloom and had been sold by mistake.”

“If it’s a family heirloom then why is it being taken back? Am I not family?” Trisha’s question held unknown mischief and challenge that right at that moment was too heavy for Mathew to handle.

In a firm voice that expressed his displeasure, he answered. “Trisha, it’s not up for any kind of debate. Wouldn’t it be better that we get to know our family rather than fight over a material object? Moreover I thought you just told me that you wanted me to get rid of that thing?”

Such sharp words from Mathew seemed to subdue Trisha and following that, breakfast was a quiet affair.

Throughout that day Ian was torn into shreds by emotions that taunted him, dared him to think the unthinkable. Surreal situations seemed to engulf his entire being, and for a man who was always in control of himself and of situations around him, it caused in him a strange state of subordination, a rare attitude of meekness.

It was decided at breakfast that Trisha would show Ian around Darjeeling. Mathew’s secret wish behind that was twofold. First he wanted Trisha to get to know the only family she had apart from himself, but the second reason was the more complicated one. Mathew had not really forgotten about Trisha’s strange and embarrassing behaviour the night before at the birthday party. Moreover after he learned about the strange curse that had followed the Marcussens through generations, Mathew was not sure whether in some way Trisha’s behaviour was the effect of the curse. He wanted Ian to observe if there was anything that he felt was different. However Mathew was not willing to let Ian know anything about it before hand because he didn’t want Ian’s mind to be clouded with a preformed notion.

The sun was almost overhead by the time Ian and Trisha left. As they walked down the front porch Ian had automatically walked towards his rented Bentley.

“Do you really think that this car would be able to travel the Darjeeling roads?” he heard Trisha’s unimpressed voice behind him as he deactivated the car alarm. Ian stopped in his steps. He had always been in charge of everything; inclusive of where and in what to travel. Hearing the doubt in the voice of a teenager who at every moment reminded him of Katya, he was not so sure about himself anymore. Wordlessly he turned around and followed Trisha as she led them to an SUV that stood at one side of the house.

As she hopped into the driver seat and opened the passenger side asking Ian to get in, he couldn’t help being surprised.

“You will be driving?” he asked.

“Of course.” she replied scornfully. “I have been driving since I was nine. And don’t worry,” she added with a sly grin, “I am not going to get you killed—not just yet.”

Ian heard her as he was getting inside the SUV; he stared at her, his face hardly able to hide his shock. But she looked back at him so innocently that he couldn’t understand whether he had actually heard the last part or whether his overactive imagination was playing tricks on him.

Mountains and valleys, tea estates and farms, market places and jungles all seemed to blur and blend into each other as Trisha took Ian around Darjeeling. All Ian was aware of was Trisha right beside him. Ian had met a lot of eighteen year old girls. His clients or associates had daughters of that age. But none behaved in the way Trisha did. She was very different. Everything about her seemed surreal. Everything reminded him of Katya. The way she tucked a loose tuft of hair behind her ears, the way she bit her lips in concentration, Ian knew at times that he was staring at her, but he honestly could not look away.

At times he felt that Trisha was behaving exactly like Katya just to taunt him. Why he was the victim of such a notion he did not know. But with every subtle gesture it became more and more confirmed.

Around mid-afternoon Trisha took him to a secluded area beside a waterfall.

“We will have lunch here.” Announced Trisha; parking the car under the shade of a pine tree. And took a wicker picnic basket out of the back seat.

Wordlessly Ian got down as well. He had always been a man of few words and being around Trisha he seemed to become a man of even fewer. As they sat down on the heather beside the waterfall he realized that the place was really lonely. They seemed to be the only ones there. He looked around and Trisha watched him doing so.

“This is my favourite part of Darjeeling.” She said. “Not many people come here. I come here when I am disturbed. This place soothes me down. Calms me.” She added staring intently at Ian.

“It’s a nice place.” he said trying to act as casual as he could. He sensed the intense scrutiny that Trisha was giving him. Being around her seemed to heighten his senses. He was aware of the perfume that she was wearing. It smelt fresh and floral at the same time. He could almost hear her heart beat as she sat next to him. Close enough that if he just moved an inch, their hands would be touching.

Ian wanted to break out of this spell. He knew what he was feeling was not natural, but he was hopelessly tangled in her web. They sat quietly for a long time. Ian was not hungry, and neither did Trisha offer to open the picnic basket.

It could have been minutes or time may have stopped still, when he heard her speak again.

“You loved her a lot didn’t you?”

Ian heard her speak, but didn’t realize that she was speaking to him; so lost was he in his own thoughts.

“Then why did you let her go?” she pursued.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” said Ian dismissively.

“Oh please!” she scoffed. “Please do not insult my intelligence. It is written all over your face.”

She turned around and sat facing Ian. “It bothers you a lot that I look like her, doesn’t it? You don’t really feel the way an *Uncle* should feel about his *Niece*, do you?” she asked.

Ian was not sure how to answer her. He was taken aback at such frankness. He stared back at her, confused, helpless; trying to discover why exactly she was taunting him like that. He noticed that her eyes seemed to lack the warmth that was there in Katya’s eyes. There was a cold glint in them that made him extremely uneasy. Yet he could not move, such was the strong spell that those eyes held.

“Did you guys....you know.... make love?” she continued.

Ian remained silent.

“I don’t think so.” She said herself after a brief pause, looking at him through narrowed eyes. “Did you at least kiss her?”

“Trisha, I don’t know what you are talking about and I don’t think my love life is any of your business.” said Ian briskly with firmness that he didn’t feel right then. “Let’s go back.” He said getting up.

But suddenly Trisha caught his hand and pulled him right back to where she was sitting. The force of which made him tumble right on top of her. More than anything else Ian was shocked at her strength. He was an expert in Krav Maga---the Israeli art of combat that encompassed Judo and Jujitsu. And no one before that, had ever been able to pull him down with such force. No one had ever been able to catch him unaware in a fraction of a second like that.

As he lay unbalanced on top of Trisha who was right then pinned to the ground, he was aware that he was getting aroused more and more with every passing moment. Her lips lay barely inches from his own, and every part of his body screamed at him to succumb to his temptation.

“Kiss me.” She said; seduction written over every syllable. “I know you want to. I know you have wondered from the moment you saw me, how it would be to kiss me. You have wondered for half your life, how it would have been to kiss Katya. Now I give you a chance to fulfil your dreams.”

Katya’s name on her lips brought Ian back to his senses. He pushed her aside and stood up. With supreme self-control he brought his laboured breathing to normal and then answered vehemently. “You are not Katya, and you would never be. Don’t ever compare yourself to her.”

A much acquiescent Trisha followed Ian back to the car and the drive back home was eventless. As Trisha parked the car, Ian spoke, while he stared out of the windscreen, not yet trusting himself to even look towards her.

“I will not speak of anything that has transpired between us. I am sure it had been a moment of weakness on your part as well. I am not really familiar with what goes on in

the heads of girls of your age. But please understand that you should not be this forward with men. It will get you into trouble. You are young, beautiful, and not many others you meet would be able to control themselves the way I did.”

Saying that, he got down from the car and walked towards the house leaving her sitting in the driver’s seat. Trisha’s eyes followed him as he crossed the car porch and ran up the stairs without a backward glance and slowly a triumphant smile spread across her face.

Back in the Brown mansion Mathew had left a note saying he had gone to his office to handle some urgent matters and would be back in time for dinner. Ian didn’t know what he should do with so much of time, being almost alone with Trisha in the house. He decided to shut himself up in the guest quarters in the pretext of working, when in reality he just didn’t want to be anywhere around Trisha. He called his crew in Calcutta and they informed that they would be on the way to Copenhagen within the hour. Relieved that at least there had been no unforeseen calamity on that part of his plan Ian decided to go back to Denmark next day itself. He knew that he would have to fly commercial. But his sense of dread had been increasing and somehow Trisha’s behaviour had instigated his unease further.

That night after dinner following much deliberation, Ian expressed his intention of returning to Denmark the next day to Mathew. He thanked him profusely for the hospitality and said that due to the mirror incident, he had left all his work half done, and a lot of things needed his attention. He promised that he would be back soon; perhaps get together for Christmas or some other festival. But right then he needed to go. He was much relieved when Mathew agreed, and went to sleep feeling slightly better.

Ian was not sure what exactly woke him up—he heard some kind of a scraping noise. He sat up on the bed and groped around for his phone. He wanted to know what time it was. Switching on the bedside light he looked around. But his phone was not there. He remembered that the last time he had it with him, was in Mathew’s study where after dinner he had shared a few drinks with Mathew. He quickly got out of bed and headed towards the study, barefooted and bare-chested wearing only his pyjama bottoms.

The entire house seemed to be sleeping. There was a stillness that engulfed the mansion. The lights had been switched off everywhere and only dimly lit lamps at far away distances kept the house faintly illuminated. Silently, not wanting to wake anybody up, Ian made his way towards the study. As he pushed open the huge oak door the warm glow of the fire inside the expansive room greeted him.

The room really was spacious. The ceiling high shelves were almost all around it, broken at only one area apart from the French windows, where the fireplace was. The fire had gone down and there glowed the mellow red embers lending a soft diffused light that was restricted only around the rug that lay in front of the fire place. The rest of the place was luminous with silvery moonlight that came in through the windows.

Even in that shadowy darkness there was no difficulty in recognizing the one that lay on the rug. Her young nubile body was the colour of warm honey; her soft chocolate coloured locks framed the exquisite face. There wasn’t a thread of clothing on her as she lay there wanton and inviting. Her lips slightly parted while her blossoming body writhed with the slow movement of the eternal dance of seduction.

Ian couldn’t take his eyes off her. Her eyes, her gaze towards him created a hunger so raw, so urgent that even before he thought about it, he knew that there was no turning

back. His eyes roved over her lips, her erect rosy nipples till it travelled down towards the tuft of brown hair that lay between her legs hiding the elixir of life. Sweat glistened like dew in the morning sun all over her smooth body, between her breasts and in the concave of her stomach. As she breathed, her chest heaved and fell, the movement beckoning him and he moved towards it like a moth towards fire—knowing that it just might be the end of him.

Just like a man parched and thirsty for days in a desert, Ian saw his oasis right in front of him. Every other thought, every other feeling had ceased to exist in him anymore. Closing the distance between him and her, he lowered himself beside her on the rug. Up close he drowned in the deep emerald pools that were her eyes, her sweet fragrant smell was intoxicating, her trembling lips like electric shocks that made every nerve in his body alert to the one beside him.

With his head resting on one hand, he lay down beside her. A single finger traced through her cheekbones, the shape of her lips and he willingly accepted defeat and embraced her invitation. Within moments his lips were on hers tasting them, devouring them with the hunger of years. She responded to his kisses with her back arched pushing herself into him wanting their union to be complete. But Ian was not ready yet. Not ready to give up on the sweet exciting adventure that every part of her body promised. His hands, his tongue were eager to discover every bit of her flesh, every curve in her body. Each moment he drew himself back felt like an eternity and he was once again drawn back to her. His kisses left tiny damp pleasures all over her and she moaned and writhed in serpentine motions on the rug with bliss.

Her fingers, her hands explored through his hard chest with feverish ardency till they reached the string of his pyjamas. There was absolutely no struggle as she touched it and his only piece of clothing fell off him without offering any resistance. Now with nothing left to create a boundary between them, Ian knew he couldn't hold back any longer. She seemed to reflect the same desire and in a moment he plunged into her. Deeper and deeper, till there was no way to say where one began and the other ended.

In their feverish frenzy to make their union as entwined as possible, their hands their mouths did not seem to be enough to satiate their hunger. As Ian increased the age old rhythm of love making, his thrill increased tenfold seeing the pleasure on her face. Her head thrown back, while her delicate throat lay exposed, her cheeks flushed her eyes half closed in ecstasy were visions so alluring so enticing that time seemed to stop still.

Suddenly she stopped her movements and maneuvered herself such that now she lay on top of Ian. A shiver of thrill ran through him as she pinned him to the floor and started moving her hips heightening his ebullience. She rocked back and forth taking him to great heights ecstasy. Her slim body paired with her pert breasts moving rhythmically, her golden skin glowing in the amber light of the burning fire, ignited raw animal passion in Ian and bathed him in a fountain of euphoria. He knew he couldn't hold on much longer as the familiar tightening around his groin announced the advent of his orgasm. She too didn't hold back and as they both exploded in delirious pleasure, she dug her nails deep into Ian, running them through the entire length of the hard muscles of his chest. The sharp pain was completely drowned inside the onset of pleasure. Ian watched fascinated as she indulged in her own personal rapture, her head thrown back, her thick locks flying around her head with the life of a thousand twines.

And then slowly she lowered her head. Looking straight into Ian's, eyes she smiled. A smile that could freeze a heart spread across her lips. Never before had Ian seen a human emotion portray such malice. As he stared in shock at the one he thought was Trisha, he saw the face change into something that couldn't have been human. Its old wrinkled skin, browned like parchment paper that had caught fire in places formed a face that seemed to have lived for centuries, and every moment of those centuries had left a mark on it. The eyes that stared at him were loathsome, glowing like burning coal and as the mouth opened, a tongue the colour of a bruise, blue and black slid out of her mouth. Like a serpent's it was forked, and as it quivered and licked her lips, Ian let out a scream, fear overriding every other emotion in his body.

The scream made him jump violently and he opened his eyes. He was in his room—the guest room of the Brown mansion. It was morning outside and the sun was peeping through the gaps in the curtain. He realized that he had dreamt the whole thing. His body was bathed with sweat and his heart was beating at the pace of an express train. Every part of his body still seemed to tingle from her touch. He also noticed a certain stickiness between his legs and a tell-tale stain on his pyjamas.

It was the most vivid nightmare he ever had and perhaps the erotic nature of it had caused such an effect on him, he decided. It took him a long time to get back to normal, to breathe regularly, and have a stable heart beat as his mind urged his body to forget the dream and accept the reality.

After he felt slightly better, he got out of the bed and went to the bathroom to take a shower. As he stood under the hot shower intending to wash off the traces of everything including his fear, he felt a stinging pain on his chest that shook his body like it had been struck by electricity. Looking down, he found deep gashes on his chest that seemed to have been caused by sharp claws.

Ian bid Mathew farewell and left the Brown mansion as fast as he could, refusing even to stay for breakfast or say goodbye to Trisha as Mathew requested. He knew that something was terribly wrong and now he regretted letting the mirror out of his sight at all. He knew he needed to get to the mirror as soon as possible for that was the only doorway through which he could stop the Dark Angel. He had not thought out the entire plan yet, but he knew the first step was to get the mirror. As he rushed out of the house, he hesitated for a second. Should he warn Mathew? But he couldn't imagine how exactly could he explain what troubled him. He knew he would have to be back to Darjeeling soon, and till then he thought it was better not to say anything to Mathew for he feared that somehow Trisha would know what he suspected. As he turned around the car and saw the Brown mansion in his rear-view mirror growing smaller and smaller, he noticed Trisha standing beside her bedroom window with a sneer that seemed to declare his cowardice.

All through the journey between Darjeeling and Calcutta, Ian tried to overlook the way he had behaved with Mathew. He couldn't help feeling that perhaps he had left the place too drastically. Perhaps by doing so he had already alerted the Dark Angel that he was keeping track of her. All these were only now playing in his mind. However, in the morning when he woke up, the vivid nightmare had created a panic, an impulse to escape,

to hold the mirror in his possession so acute, so urgent that he did not have time to act civil. Now as he remembered Mathew's puzzled and perhaps slightly hurt expression at his rush to leave Darjeeling, Ian couldn't help feel a bit uncomfortable at his own conduct. He decided to call Mathew as soon as he had the mirror with him. Till then his nerves were too jittery to carry out a conversation with anybody. Moreover his dream had been so erotic, so sinful for it involved his own blood, that he had also been ashamed to even look at Mathew. He did believe that perhaps in the deepest part of his subconscious he had felt something immoral towards Trisha; some unfulfilled desire, or else such a dream would not have happened. Trying to avoid these thoughts, Ian accelerated even further, driving at break neck speed through the winding roads of the mountains.

He had almost reached the outskirts of Calcutta when his mobile rang. It was an unknown yet local number and frowning at being disturbed at such a time he took the call. Perhaps somewhere hidden among the deepest corner of his heart, he had already feared this. Thus he was not as much shocked as he should have been at the news. His jet had crashed into the Bay of Bengal within minutes from the time it took off. There was still no traces of the aircraft or its crew. The authorities were conducting an investigation into how it all happened. They promised to keep him informed and expressed their condolences for his loss in their mechanical analogue drone.

Needless to say Ian was already aware that the investigation would be inconclusive. For no investigative body would be taking into account the supernatural element that Ian was sure had led to the disaster. He almost turned his car around and headed back for Darjeeling. But he realized now was not the time.

It has begun; he thought grimly. But right then he was not afraid. He felt a strange adrenaline rush. The centuries of Viking blood encouraged him to take up the challenge; the same blood that had defied stormy seas long long time ago in the quest of newer possibilities; in the quest of daring battles. But through evolution man had become smarter and Ian knew that this was a battle that cannot be fought with only physical strength or crude weapons. Like a game of chess, it was a battle of wits and a battle that under every circumstance he needed to win. For losing would mean the end of the world. He resolved he wasn't going to the battle without being prepared. And so he went forward losing himself within the labyrinthine streets of Calcutta.

Chapter 16

Like an enormous block of concrete, bad luck seemed to have stopped Mathew in his path, in all his endeavours within hardly a week. Every phone call he received, every sort of communication with the outside world were just bad news. Clients who had remained faithful patrons of Brown and Co. suddenly called and cancelled their orders for no apparent reasons. Further phone calls in order to understand what seemed to be the problem were also not entertained leaving Mathew bewildered at this sudden change in the business world. He knew that meant heavy losses in his business, but he had a more pressing issue at hand right then.

Suddenly a mysterious disease had infected his tea garden. Healthy plants seemed to wither and die within a few days in spite of the extra care that the workers had started taking when they first discovered the disease. But the arcane blight was almost supernatural in nature for none of the symptoms coincided with any known plant ailment. They died of dehydration like a rainforest species being exposed to desert habitat, even though every effort was being made to keep the plantation alive. Within a week a few acres had been affected, and Mathew knew that if he didn't find a remedy fast, very soon there wouldn't remain a Brown Tea plantation anymore.

What was more aggrieving was that the infection seemed to spread to the people who came in contact with the plants. Their skin erupted into tiny blisters that spread rapidly to all parts of the body. The rash was painful and extremely itchy and was accompanied by high fever. In some cases as had happened to quite a few of his workers, the blisters burst, secreting a kind of maggoty white pus that caused burning throughout the area. His plantation doctor who had been monitoring the workers had been baffled at the symptoms. The blood work had been sent to Calcutta for a better analysis, as Darjeeling was not equipped to handle such intricate ailments.

The doctor had also warned Mathew that there may be some kind of epidemic that was starting in the Brown plantation. Mathew had been unable to respond—his mind being super saturated with a series of worries.

The last phone call had perhaps been the worst. It was just 8.30 in the morning and Mathew was shaken to his bones. One of the labourers had died the previous night from the infection. Panic had flooded through the nearby *Gurkha* village like a river overflowing its banks in monsoon. That was where most of his labourers came from. Rumours were that the Brown Empire had been invaded by a plague; a calamity so potent that it affects anybody who dares to acquaint with them in anyway. The fear of this alien curse was such that men refused to return to the Brown estate to work. Some of the families who worked and lived there for generations, in the cottages provided by the plantation bundled up whatever little worldly possessions they had and left the estate hastily without even a backward glance—instinct to survive dominating over the instincts of loyalty or salary.

Mathew felt crushed under the weight of this mountainous catastrophe. Several times over the last few days, he had a gnawing feeling that maybe, just maybe it had something to do with the curse—something to do with Trisha. For as much as he wanted to, Mathew couldn't help but apprehend that Trisha was a transformed person. Even though it was the

holidays, very rarely did she leave her room or attempt at any kind of conversation with her father, or any other members of the Brown household. In rare cases when she did leave the vicinity of her room, she was seen walking alone towards the woods at the edge of the tea estate. Mathew had wanted to accompany her on numerous occasions but somehow at the last moment he did not. He couldn't understand why. *Why there was such reluctance on his part to be with his daughter?* Mathew pondered.

Moreover, Trisha too didn't seem to entertain the idea of any sort of encroachment into her space. She seemed to avoid meeting anyone else and at all costs seemed to decline human company.

That day, after refusing to have breakfast for most of the week, Trisha was finally seen sitting in her place at the dining table. However there was no conversation between father and daughter. Silence reigned as each seemed to be lost in their own thoughts. Mathew worried about the future of his company and the effect of that in their overall lifestyle, while Trisha sat there cold and unyielding like a marble statue, not encouraging even the slightest bit of conversation. As both of them sat engrossed or at least pretended to be, with their breakfast plates, Mrs. D' Costa entered.

She looked very displeased with something. "Trisha," she said. "There seems to be a crow that keeps coming into your room. The servant girl has seen it. I too have seen it coming and going from the window. This morning when the girl went in to clean your room, she complained that your whole room was in a mess. I hope you are not encouraging that disgusting scavenger into your room. I will not have it!" she exclaimed.

Trisha looked up. Mrs. D' Costa's displeasure or her flustered demeanour did not seem to have perturbed her in any way. With a coldness that could freeze a hot spring she spoke, "Yes. That's Jannike. My pet. She has every right to bring in whatever she pleases into my room. And behave however she pleases. We do have servants to clean up after her."

She paused, putting a bit of a sausage into her mouth and chewing it really slowly with relish, enjoying every moment of it—as Mrs. D' Costa stared at her in shock. "And in future please remember your place. I do not like to take orders from the hired help." Saying this, she pushed her chair backwards, stood up and walked out of the room with her head held high.

Mathew was shocked. His fork fell with a clatter on the floor. His face that had grown haggard over the last few days due to extreme stress was drained out of blood in a trice. Never before had he heard Trisha speak like that. Mrs. D' Costa stood transfixed unable to move, still not able to believe that she was spoken to such harshly by the baby girl who she had brought up all these years. Tears slowly filled up her eyes as Mathew watched her speechlessly—more embarrassed than her. He wanted to go after Trisha and demand an apology, wanted to tell her that he will not have this behaviour in his house. But he just couldn't.

Suddenly he understood his reluctance to follow her into the woods. His qualm in spending time with his daughter or questioning her about her transformation. With a sinking heart an idea, a horrifying notion dawned on him that he was actually scared of her. Frightened of his own daughter for reasons that he couldn't comprehend. Terrified that maybe Trisha has ceased to be his daughter anymore. He realized it was time to call Ian.

Around midday with grim determination Mrs. D' Costa entered Trisha's room. Trisha had as usual gone off for a walk by herself without feeling the need to inform anybody at home of her departure. It had taken a while for her to shake off the feeling of depression that Trisha's harsh words had caused her. However being a woman of practicality she had put it down to teenage hormones. She realized that this too was part of being a parent. And she knew that she had filled in as a mother in Trisha's life gradually over the years. It was perhaps time for the mother daughter tiffs that was common in every other household. However, she was determined not to let such behaviour pass. What did surprise her though was that Mathew remained silent throughout and didn't utter a single word of reproach towards Trisha. However he did have a lot of worries on his plate right then, she reasoned and as always she needed to put the household in order.

Mrs. D' Costa had also felt the very drastic change in Trisha's manner from the night of her eighteenth birthday. It was almost as if there was someone else was filling in as Trisha. She was quite puzzled and didn't really know how to react. Moreover, the sudden visit of Katya's cousin for the first time, the hushed conversations in the study that night, nothing had gone unnoticed. She knew there was something going on and as was a second nature to her, she resolved to get to the bottom of everything. However, the time was not right. For Mathew was truly going through a gruelling time and right then he needed support of his family rather than interrogations, and since his daughter refused to be the supportive one, Mrs. D' Costa realized that the responsibility to keep a calm atmosphere at home now as always fell on her.

Trisha's room was a disaster. Never had she seen Trisha being so messy—although as is common with teenagers all over the world, her room was not one of the tidiest. But it was absolutely uncharacteristic of her to have left dresses, even her favourite ones strewn all around the floor and the furniture. Dirty dishes with half eaten food lay scattered among them. Shoes, muddy and sometimes not even in a pair, lay upturned on the floor. The bed was unmade and looked it had been such for a while now. And worst of all there were bits of hair and animal fur around.

Trisha for the last few days had been very particular that no one should enter her room. She declared that she would take care of her room as far as cleaning was concerned. Mrs. D' Costa had not protested against it, for she thought it would teach the girl some responsibility as well. Moreover she respected whatever the reason for such privacy was, while the servants were just glad that they had one lesser place to clean in the huge plantation house.

That particular morning however, the *Gurkha* girl who had come in to clean for the first time had not been aware of Trisha's new rule. On entering Trisha's room, she had been shocked at the complete disarray in an otherwise neat house and had informed Mrs. D' Costa. Slowly even the rest of the household staff had told her things that sounded quite peculiar, especially the frequent visits of a crow.

Mrs. D' Costa remembered that she too had seen a crow, no, a raven sitting on the branches around the kitchen almost as if it was watching her. She had seen the bird on few different occasions, and every time she had felt the hair rise on her back. There was something terribly human about that hideous creature. Somehow it gave the feeling that its intelligence was on a much higher level than how nature had designed it. She had

always wondered why the creature was always around the Brown mansion. And now she knew.

When she first heard it, she couldn't believe that Trisha, who was of the most timid sort, would have a pet that ghastly. She also vaguely remembered that few nights back, though not sure when exactly, Trisha had awakened from a nightmare screaming that she had seen a crow at her bedroom window. She remembered how terrified Trisha was that night and couldn't believe that the same girl would speak so harshly to her over the disgusting creature, and call it her pet even. She was also fearful that the wild bird may scratch Trisha and cause her harm. Heaven only knows what sort of infections that may cause, she thought as she went around the room and started picking up the dirty plates that were scattered around. She was determined to get rid of it before Trisha returned.

As she bent down to get some of the empty snack wrappers from under the bed, she noticed a piece of red cloth peeping out from under the mattress. Curious, she pulled it out and realized it was one of Trisha's favourite silk scarves. Her eyes widened in shock when she saw the jagged tears that looked like sharp talons had slashed through the soft material. Mrs. D' Costa couldn't come up with a single logical reasoning behind what could have caused such brutal destruction to something that beautiful. She was sure that Trisha would never do such a thing. Nor did it look possible for any other instrument, even scissors to have caused such damage. The only picture that ran through her mind was as if some medieval witch with her long claws had slashed through the scarf with malicious glee.

Suddenly for no reason at all, she felt slightly afraid. It was as if a sixth sense, was trying to warn her about something, something her conscious mind was blocking. She spun around feeling the watchful eyes of someone behind her, and as she did, her foot landed on something that made a soft squeaky sound. She looked down and noticed with disgust that she had actually stepped on a dead rat. Its belly was wide open with rat intestines hanging out in a puddle of some disgusting fluid. The dreadful creature had been buried under a pair of jeans on the floor.

Mrs. D' Costa's sandal was drenched in blood. The purplish viscous greasy blood of an animal that had been dead for more than a day at the least. The stench was revolting. She almost gagged. But a stronger more powerful feeling engulfed her—the feeling of fear. She could still feel someone watching her. As she looked around, she saw the raven perched on a branch of the pine tree right across Trisha's window watching her. The look was one of judgment. As if it had caught Mrs. D' Costa snooping around in places where she had no business to be.

Mrs. D' Costa suddenly felt powerless to move, such was the strength of the raven's glare. Suddenly, it flew right in through the open window and perched on the head board of Trisha's bed. Up close it looked more hideous than before. The deep scar that ran from the eye to the beak marred its already ugly features farther. Giving it a look of a creature straight from hell.

She didn't know what to do; she had come in with a notion of getting rid of the bird if she came across it in the room. However, now that it was right in front of her, she didn't have a plan. Didn't have any idea, how to get rid of it. At such close quarters, it was even more frightening than Mrs. D' Costa had anticipated. Never did she ever think that she would be afraid of a raven. But sitting right in front of her, the creature seemed to challenge her. Seemed to defy Mrs. D' Costa's intention boldly. Without moving from

her place Mrs. D' Costa scanned the room slowly for something that she could use as weapon against that hideous monster. She saw a heavy hard covered book a few feet away from her lying on the floor. Very cautiously, she took a first step towards the book. The raven sat and watched her, without moving an inch. The next step also seemed not to cause any reaction, by the third step, the raven seemed to notice her movements, and it shifted slightly shaking its wings and turning its sooty head around as if like her, it too was looking for a weapon.

Mrs. D' Costa took the fourth and the fifth steps very fast and grabbed the book, then without pausing to think, for the fear of losing her resolve she hurled the heavy book with all her might at the raven. Her aim had always been spectacular. As a child, she could pluck mangoes from the neighbours' trees by aiming stones through catapults. She didn't ever have to aim at the same fruit twice, such was her skill. But right then what happened could only be called numinous. She seemed to see it in slow motion. For as the book flew towards it, the raven sat there, unflinching, glaring at the heavy missile that flew towards it. But just inches before it reached its head, the book seemed to halt for a few moments, in air right in front of the bird while the bird glowered at it with eyes that had turned the colour of burning coal. The book seemed to lose all momentum and fall right on the bed, at the feet of the bird.

Mrs. D' Costa stood there, motionless, horrified at what she had just experienced. She wanted to run, but fear kept her chained at the same spot. And even before the raven flew towards her with lightning speed she knew that she had declared enmity against something much more, a thousand times more powerful than she was.

The whole morning Mathew had spent in persuading supervisors, union leaders to bring back the labourers who worked in the estate. For without manpower, it was impossible to keep his estate alive. But all his meetings seemed to have been in vain, as the greed of money was unable to overpower the fear of losing one's life. The union leaders were helpless since the superstitious village folk refused to enter the Brown estate at any cost. In fact even the meetings had to be held outside the premises of the tea plantation.

As the driver drove him back towards the plantation house, with a heavy heart Mathew watched his empty tea plantation. Where the *Gurkha* girls were meant to be plucking the young tea leaves and putting them into the huge wicker baskets that they tied with headbands and carried on their backs, all that remained were dried brown shrubs. The whole area had the charred look of something that had been exposed to extreme heat. The dry desolate estate stirred emotions so strong that he told his chauffeur to just drop him there, saying he would take a walk back to the big house, and asked him to go for lunch.

He needed to walk through his beloved tea estate alone, needed to feel the pain of every tea plant. He wanted to know what happened. And like a doctor, he wanted to heal their misery. But he felt helpless. He had already invited some experts to come down, but they were booked for a few weeks, and Mathew was afraid that by the time they come down to the Brown estate, it would be too late. Even in Darjeeling, the midday heat could be quite strong. And the uphill walk towards his house was making Mathew perspire. He had decided to call Ian right after lunch. For ever since breakfast, he couldn't stop thinking about the stranger that Trisha had become. Although he had never been a superstitious person, he knew when things were just paranoia, or when things needed to be delved into.

As he almost reached the house, he noticed a figure walking towards him. In the glare of the afternoon sun, it was a bit difficult to recognize the figure as it shimmered like an illusion. Like a drunk, the person walked, tripping at every step, several times it fell and then clambered up as if in a hurry to leave the house behind. Mathew hastened his footsteps, and within a few yards, he caught up with the figure.

No words were powerful enough to explain the shock he suffered. The woman who came running towards him although she did not seem to be able to run, was the most horrifying image he had ever seen. Her hair unkempt and flying all around her face; while her clothes were torn almost everywhere. There were deep gashes all through her arms and her legs, with blood flowing through the gashes profusely. The worst was probably her face, which had undergone the most brutal of all the tortures.

The entire face seemed to be scratched, crisscrossed like a wire mesh with blood oozing out of every part of it. The right eye had been clawed out, while the eyelid of the left eye seemed to have been torn away. Thus one eye ball protruded out like a ghastly marble in the horrific distorted face. Mathew shrank back in fear and repugnance at that unfamiliar face. But in a shock he realized that it was Mrs. D' Costa—the lady who had been like a mother to both him and his daughter. She couldn't take the last step to close the distance between her and Mathew and she stumbled right in front of him on the ground. Mathew screamed for help as his hoarse voice reverberated around the plantation and soon servants from the house came running.

It was late evening by the time Mathew could return home. An ambulance had immediately been called once Mathew found her, and he had followed the ambulance to the nearest hospital. He had waited outside till the doctor could come out and update him on her progress. All the doctor could say was that she seemed to have been attacked by some kind of a bird. He feared it was an eagle for the gashes were so deep, that no other bird could have caused it. In fact even for an eagle such strength was unlikely. Moreover, Mrs. D' Costa had been completely incoherent. She did not make sense as she spoke of the minions of hell that had tormented her.

The doctor advised Mathew to go back saying that it was still too soon to say how bad the attack was. Her whole face and parts of her arms and legs had to be stitched, and they feared infections, though she was already on powerful antibiotics. Moreover, the trauma had also caused a severe shock to her brain and chances were that she would need treatment in an institution before she could go back to normal life. Every sentence seemed to bring more and more bad news Mathew's way, till he lost his resolve to fight. He decided to do the only thing that would perhaps bring him some solace. He picked up the phone and dialled Ian's number.

Chapter 17

Thrice, Mathew dialled the number given to him by Ian and thrice the call was diverted to voicemail. The mechanical voice at the other end urged him to leave a message as the person was unavailable. Mathew hesitated, not sure how to summarize the disastrous past week into a few sentences. Finally he had left a short message asking Ian to call him back. He was in no doubt that the urgency in his voice would be an indication enough for Ian to catch on to the events.

He had come back to an almost Cimmerian desolate house. Never before had he understood exactly how much Mrs. D' Costa meant to the Brown household. But now he did. Now he realized that it was the sixty something lady, who had transformed the huge semi vacant frosty mansion into a home for everybody. Mrs. D' Costa had been an orphan, and had never married. Whenever she was asked the reason behind her spinsterhood, she had always joked that marriage came with its own set of troubles and the Browns were already giving her enough. Before today Mathew had not for a moment thought of exactly how fond of her he was. He prayed earnestly for her to get better and for things to come back to normal once again.

The house was almost empty except for the new servant girl who seemed to be completely clueless, and worried as she faced the huge responsibility of running the household in Mrs. D' Costa's absence. On his return, she asked Mathew whether he would like something for dinner. However food was the last thing on his mind. He shook his head and refused dinner. He then thanked her for waiting up for him and asked her to go to bed. As she nodded and turned around, hesitatingly he had called her back.

"Has Trisha eaten?" he asked uncertainly. Deep inside what he actually needed to know was where exactly she was. The paternal concern for his daughter had ebbed over the days, and what remained was a sour mix of fear and resentment.

The maid shook her head and replied, "Miss, has told me, not to come into her room or disturb her," before hesitatingly adding, "I am afraid to ask her whether she wants to eat, after that."

Those few words spoke volumes about the level of discomfort everyone was feeling about Trisha, Mathew realized. But unfortunately, right then, he was clueless about what exactly was going on.

"I see." Mathew replied. "You can go now. Come early tomorrow."

In that empty mansion, Mathew felt lost. Most of the staff had already left their jobs—fearing some wrath of an unknown curse.

He went to his study and poured himself a drink and stood near the French windows; looking with overwhelming sadness towards the near decrepit tea garden with a glass of whiskey in his hand. His mind was in turmoil. The fiery strong liquid burnt his throat as it went in, yet he welcomed that feeling. For in a world where everything seemed to be surreal, every action a chimera, the only piece of reality seemed to be that burning sensation. His thoughts were like a collage.

Every incident of the past few days pasted beside the other. Not in some order, not in some series, but just random worries that bombarded him with more questions than he could find answers to. *What happens now? Is the curse truly behind all that is*

happening? Is Trisha possessed by the Dark Angel? What happened to his own sweet child? Is she in there somewhere inside, sharing space with the Dark Angel like they show in movies, or is she dead?

The last thought almost wrenched his heart out of his ribcage. Because Mathew couldn't imagine a world without Trisha. Yet he knew the one who paraded around as her was someone or something else. Like a hermit crab inside the shell of a nautilus. The question was whether the nautilus was dead, or does it still live alongside the crab.

Mathew did not have an answer to any of his questions. Perhaps before Mrs. D' Costa was attacked, he could convince himself that Trisha's unnatural behaviour was all a part of the process where a girl metamorphoses into a woman.

He could forcefully have reasoned that the motherless child was just going through a phase in life; forced himself to feel sorry for her perhaps traumatic transformation. But, the assault on Mrs. D' Costa broke through every barrier and his fear of the abstruse bane like a liquid flowed through his veins. His sweet child could never have caused even the tiniest scratch to anyone around. His child would never be able to calmly spit venom as did Trisha that morning talking to Mrs. D' Costa.

The knowledge that the Dark Angel dominated Trisha's body filled him up with hatred, a revulsion that made him gag. Being at the end of his rope all he wanted was probably to have a heart attack and die. Put himself out of every earthly misery, for it was not his fight. However, that would have only been possible if he was not a father. Unfortunately, being one made him realize that if somehow, somewhere inside the demonic darkness, there was the slightest chance that there existed the real Trisha, he needed to fight for her. Find a way to bring her back. For no force in the universe, natural or supernatural was going to stop him from rescuing his child.

With the intention of trying Ian's number one more time, he turned his back towards the window and searched for his mobile phone on his desk.

He had dimmed the lights of his study, for the brightly glaring lights hurt his tired eyes and gave him a headache. The effect was that the soft yellow lights kept the spacious room barely illuminated and the corners of the room blurred and bled into the surrounding edges.

As his eyes fell on the dark mahogany desk looking for his phone in the dim light, from the corner of his eyes he felt the presence of someone else in the room.

He spun around, and caught a figure half sitting, half lying down on the couch by the fireplace. She was wearing a black silky caftan and against the black leather of the couch, she seemed to blend in, only her face, the colour of creamy milk was visible.

A smile both seductive and inviting played at the corners of her lips. A soft enticement lingered in her peridotite eyes. As she moved a lock of hair behind her ears, her long slender fingers seemed to make a movement that was simple and unadorned into something sensuous, something erotic.

Katya! That was the first response his mind produced. An erratic, irrational thought; yet the posture, the choice of furniture, the choice of attire; every aspect was as defining as fingerprints.

But those moments of wishful delusion passed, and with a chill that almost froze his spine Mathew realized he was looking at Trisha. Her direct gaze held him at one place. He seemed not to be able to take his eyes off her. He hadn't realized that his little girl had grown into a woman; desirable, alluring. An epitome of feminine charm. Time seemed to

stop still as Mathew gazed at her with a feeling that was completely non-paternal. It was as if he was looking at her for the first time, seeing a woman who was arousing deep animal feelings that had lain dormant for years, within him. Thoughts more sinful than hell invaded his mind.

Trisha's smile seemed to become broader and more inviting as she saw Mathew standing there struggling against his own inner demons—struggling against the corrupt temptations of the fallen. His eyes roved over her body while he shook with desire that couldn't be ignored. His mind screamed at him to stop—urging him to see her as she was. The Dark Angel. The one who had invaded his daughter's body and now was inciting him to think the unthinkable.

With supreme effort Mathew averted her gaze. He looked away. Thankfully, he felt his own will power returning. He became his own man, out of the hypnotic clutches of her gaze.

Mathew realized he needed to tread carefully around her; needed to convince the Dark Angel about his ignorance of her unholy intentions.

"Trisha sweetheart," said Mathew as lightly as his shaky voice would allow, "I didn't hear you come in. It's quite late at night. Shouldn't you be asleep?"

She stretched languorously, still at her game of appearing sensuous, reminding Mathew of a black panther as she looked at him with narrowed feline eyes.

"I am not sleepy. I just wanted to know how Mrs. D' Costa was doing."

"She is recovering." said Mathew briskly as an unfamiliar streak of anger flashed through him. He realized that she was just using that as an excuse to be around him, catch him at a disadvantage. That not once did she call to enquire about her throughout the day knowing that he spent most of the day in the hospital.

"She is going to be completely fine in a few days." He added as he desperately clung on to that belief.

She nodded her head. "I am sure she will. And hopefully she would have learnt her lesson."

"What do you mean?" Mathew's voice sounded sharper than he intended it to be.

"Well, after all," she shrugged her shoulder and stood up, her posture that of a young lioness getting ready to sprint towards an unfortunate zebra. "She is just paying for her insolence, don't you think?"

There was a glint in Trisha's eyes that was undecipherable. But whatever it was, it made Mathew extremely nervous.

Taking advantage of Mathew's silence she continued, "Isn't disobedience one of the reasons a child is punished? Then how is it different when an adult disobeys?" she paused. "She was supposed to stay away from my room, yet she not only went in, in my absence, she tried to harm Jannike. She's a wild bird after all, and all she was doing was defending herself."

Mathew was astounded at her behaviour. At her non caring attitude, at her casual reasoning of something that had led to someone who was like a mother to her, to the emergency room.

Every step of the way Mathew seemed to err in his thoughts. It truly was difficult to think that all these words were not Trisha's—especially since they came out of Trisha's mouth, spoken in Trisha's voice. It took Mathew a lot of will power to remember that it

was someone else and not his daughter. Still he tried again, to find even the slightest trace of Trisha in the heartless monster that stood in front of him.

“What happened to you?” he said, his voice soft, wistful. “You used to be so caring, so loving. Where did that Trisha disappear?”

“She grew up....by a few centuries.” she answered with a sardonic smile—a steely glint in her eyes.

An icy cold fear permeated through every cell in his body. He realized that this was the first time the Dark Angel had ever given an indication of its existence. Mathew was not sure how to react, should he pursue the conversation? Should he behave as if he did not understand the underlying significance of her words? He decided to follow the latter path. For he was not equipped to react to the actuality of the situation.

While he groped around trying to find something unassuming to speak to her, she was ready with her next question.

“What is happening with the plantation? Have you found a way out of the blight?” she said as she slowly walked towards him.

It was the confident steady gait of a predator moving in towards the prey that was already hurt and has no place to escape. He was completely cornered and waited with bated breath as she slowly closed the gap of a few yards between them. He felt that he was the poor zebra whose neck was already bitten into by a lioness. Perhaps, all he needed to do was bleed to death, for her to feast on him. And for that she waited patiently by the side.

With absolute concentration, he tried to keep his attitude as nonchalant as he could. He shook his head and answered as he would if his own daughter had actually asked him that question.

“I am afraid, there doesn’t seem to be anything we can do. It’s a mystery as to what exactly is affecting the plants. I am still waiting for the experts to come down and give me their professional opinion.”

She shook her head with false empathy; as if appreciating all the trouble that Mathew had been facing for the past week.

“Poor papa.” she said her voice completely different from what it was even a while back. “You have really been through a lot in these last few days.”

Her sympathetic tone, as well as her endearing way of calling him papa, momentarily lowered Mathew’s guard. In the past few days, when his shoulders had been taut with unsolvable problems, all he wanted was to be able to talk to somebody. Somebody who would lend him a single word of kindness, for the strain was becoming unbearable. And right then without realizing, he gave in to the softness of her tone and confided in the one he prayed, was still his daughter.

“Yes, the last few days have been madness. If only I can find a way to save my plantation. If not, all my efforts would be in vain. You know what the plantation means to me. I would give anything, do everything to save it.” He sighed worriedly.

A sagacious smile transformed her lips into an upturned crescent.

“Anything? Everything? Papa!” she exclaimed with mild rebuke. “Such words should not be spoken of casually. Remember, whenever you make a deal, it’s never with Him,” she said pointing skywards and then with utmost contempt she continued, “He does not *make* deals. And neither does he honour them.”

Mathew stood shocked beside his desk, not believing his ears, not fathoming the path the conversation seemed to follow. Trisha cleared a part of the desk pushing the documents to the floor and with a lithe jump sat on top of it, not taking her eyes off him. She seemed to contemplate something before she spoke.

“Let’s say, *hypothetically*,” she stressed on every syllable of the word. “I could salvage the plantation. Bring back Brown and Co. to all its former glory, in just a night. You could go to sleep reassured and tomorrow things would just be back to normal—like before. Would that make you happy?”

Mathew’s heart felt like a blacksmith was hammering away at it; breathing became difficult. He wanted was her to stop talking of such eerie, such strange hypothesis. But he had no clue on how to stop her without enlightening her completely of his deep fear. He knew that he needed to maintain his act of ignorance. And so he asked, in a voice that shook with fear and the dim knowledge of the unknown.

“How will you do that?”

Trisha smiled, ‘Oh with a magic wand,’ she said sweeping her hand across as if she was holding one. “And in a day you would have rid yourself of all your worries.”

“And do I need to do anything in return?” Involuntarily the words spilt out of Mathew’s mouth before he could stop himself.

Her smile was almost benevolent as she looked at Mathew. “Remember all that you give for charity? All the various dinners of lobsters and caviars with fountains of champagne that you and every other socialite, every other Samaritan attends, all because that would help a wretched man get new kidneys, a family with their food or another servile for a heart bypass. Funny isn’t it? That in the name of charity there’s more food wasted at such dinners than a poor family can eat in a year? There’s enough wine there to *cause* kidney or heart problems. Yet you act that such ordeals of luxury has to be borne for the cause of charity. Why? Because the next day Mathew Brown in all his rugged handsomeness, in all his generosity, his glory, would be spread across the front page of every newspaper. And that would be beneficial to Brown and Co. and you in particular. And *that* my dear papa is the reason behind such benevolence isn’t it? So if charity itself is non charitable, then how can *I* offer you a free lunch?” she said leaning closer towards Mathew.

“But here, I am giving you an opportunity. To get back what you want. Just like you use the opportunity to be known through your charities. Don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing like using an opportunity to your benefit. I support such thoughts. I love the naked vanity that shines through every magnanimous gesture of humans. It arouses me, makes me greedy for more such human qualities. But the man upstairs, He seems to have problems with such inherent human qualities punishing them for what they want, what they *are*. But don’t worry; I am truly doing it from the goodness of my heart. Thanking you for all that you have done for me. I will get rid of all your problems, like a *real* charity and not want anything back from you—at least not in your life time.” She whispered, her eyes expressing the importance of every syllable in the word ‘lifetime’.

Mathew struggled to come out of this surreal conversation. He was almost fascinated at the fantastic quality of the conversation.

“And what are you thanking me for?” He asked her breathlessly

“For freeing me. I am just paying you the price of my freedom.” She smiled, leaning back on his desk while he gazed at her speechlessly.

What nightmare have I gotten myself into? Was this conversation even real or am I simply hallucinating? Wondered Mathew.

Trisha silently looked at him for a while. Her dilated pupils in the shadowy room seemed to grow darker and bigger till they covered her entire eyes wiping off every tiny trace of the sclera.

Her face, perhaps as a result of some trick played by the light and shadows in the room, seemed to turn pale taking on the hue of the bluish white of a monitor lizard egg; her almost transparent skin revealed the blue veins that crisscrossed beneath it.

Her smile, crueller than anything he had ever seen before revealed a brief glimpse of her teeth that in the semi darkness gleamed like fangs of pearl. Mathew drowning under a hypnotic ocean, couldn't look away as he watched Trisha in horror. The dim light in the room seemed to get dimmer.

Through the French windows he could see the full moon that had till then poured a sliver of its silvery light at the foot of his desk, slowly being engulfed by black thunderous clouds. A clap of lightning lit up the sky momentarily while Mathew stood rigid with fear.

Suddenly without any preamble, she jumped down from the desk, breaking Mathew out of his trance.

"Think about it. Let me know if you want what I have to offer." She said walking towards the door.

At the door she stopped and turned around as if she just remembered something. A daunting smile played at her lips as she looked at Mathew, with an unwavering gaze.

"And please call me Æsa. There's no point pretending. It just makes the whole game boring and rather hypocritical. Don't you think? Perhaps, by calling me by another name, the thoughts in your mind would be just erotic without travelling towards the boundaries of sin."

Without another word she turned around and left the study—leaving behind a completely broken Mathew. His entire body shook violently like a man affected by Parkinson's. He could barely sit down on the chair. And right then the phone rang. It would have required much effort on his part to even hold the phone, let alone answer it; such was the physical condition Mathew was in right then. His over strained mind didn't even wonder who it could be, calling him so late. And so he let the phone ring, the blue light blinking as if in Morse code while the chirpy tune sounded unbearable.

Ian patiently held on as he heard the phone ring on the other side. Mathew's urgent voice as he had left a voice mail, as well as his several missed calls indicated that something was brewing in Darjeeling as well. But Ian's patience went unrewarded, for there was no reply even after the tenth ring when the answering machine picked up. He hung up without leaving any message as an unknown fear rippled down his spine. *Has the Dark Angel already claimed another victim?* Wondered Ian.

Chapter 18

It had not been easy. In fact it was an unattainable feat, had it not been for true divine intervention, Ian believed. Though even now, he didn't know exactly how he would put everything in place, in spite of the distant ray of light that he could see.

When at first he had arrived at Calcutta, he had absolutely no idea what he needed to do. The mirror was gone, now that the aircraft carrying it had crashed. He had been terrified thinking that every chance of liberation from the demon ended with the mirror—the only pathway through which it had arrived into the earthly plane.

With its subversion, Ian needed to find a new path of deliverance. *But what was it?* He had wondered. Ian had gone through every line of the journal looking for a way out, frustrated at the nebulous Rubik's cube. The only other way was to contact the '*Patronus Fides*'. But even at the onset of that search, Ian was certain that it would be fruitless. Nevertheless he tried. Tried through the most obvious of the modern methods. He typed it in the Google search box. There were thousands of sites that had those key words. But even after spending almost an entire day going through each website, none were the one that he was looking for.

He was not surprised, for he was sure that no fifteenth century sect of monks would be advertising their monastery in the World Wide Web. As the next step he contacted a few of his most trusted friends and associates. However, as only then he realized, he didn't seem to know that many people who would be of any assistance in such a mythical yet ruinous predicament. If it was any other time Ian would have perhaps been slightly bothered by exactly how few people he actually trusted or considered his friends in almost forty years of his life. But right then such thoughts were far from his mind.

When the most obvious options ran out, he decided to follow more conventional ways of search. From the hotel concierge he obtained a list of libraries in the city. There were quite a few that dated back to the colonial era.

The first one he visited was the Asiatic Society. The grand building on Park Street was one of the oldest libraries in India. Established in 1784 under the patronage of Warren Hastings the first Governor General of Bengal during the colonial rule, it seemed to be the best place to begin a search for something ancient.

He searched through the dusty shelves of yellowed books and scripts for over two days—arriving at the library promptly the moment it opened each morning and being the last reader to leave the old building each evening.

He learnt a lot about occult, witchcraft and various similar topics ranging from the ancient lore to modern urban myths. Some sounded preposterous, while others were marked with the pen of reality. At any other time Ian, would have treated such writings with contempt and labelled them as the superstitious stories of the uneducated. But now he treated the same topics with respect as they took him for a journey into the mystical realms of magic, both black and white. However all that knowledge did very little to enlighten him on his disastrous situation, his battle against the incubus from hell.

He searched through every other library in the city, The British Council, The Commercial Library, The American Library. But all were in vain. There was nothing remotely similar to what he needed. For almost a week he hadn't shaved and had changed his clothes rarely.

He had checked in, at the Oberoi Grand one of the most prestigious and luxurious five star hotels in the city. The place was a status symbol among the locals and even a cup of coffee at the hotel coffee house had inspired many to dress impeccably.

In such surroundings, his longish tousled hair, his crumpled, slept-in clothes, the mad scientist look, made the hotel front desk slightly wary. However either they were well trained and too polite to question a hotel guest, or his Titanium credit card did all the talking on his behalf putting their worries to rest with the scope of a hefty profit.

For days he hardly had his meals—sometimes surviving on one meal a day. Since anything he ate tasted like cardboard, he wasn't particularly hungry. His nights were another story. When after much struggle to stay awake and ponder over his problems, his exhaustion rebelled against his wishes and sleep engulfed him, there were horrific nightmares.

Nightmares which terrorized his sleep laden eyes, yet on waking up he completely forgot their premise. All there was as a proof to the dreams was the pounding heart, the cold sweat that trickled down his forehead and a deep rancorous chuckle, a demonic laughter that rang in his ears when he could eventually get out of the web of the hideous phantasm.

Groggily Ian would sit up with panic and look around the presidential suite hoping to catch the one behind the laughter. Yet there had never even been a shadow of a suspicious nature. He knew that being of the Marcussen blood such torment would not leave him till the Dark Angel was destroyed. For as long as the demon was trapped in the mirror, only the Marcussen women had faced the nightmares. The male members of the clan had been oblivious to its evil, first-hand. Every night when he woke up from his nightmare, he would miss Katya even more, for then he would understand the devilish nightmares which had eventually led her to end her own life. *How many Marcussen women over the centuries had ended their life over this curse?* He wondered. It frustrated him beyond words that he was yet unable to rid the world of this vile creature.

This had continued for a week. In that one week, Ian had refused to communicate with anybody. His staff, his business associates from all over the world had tried calling him, but every call had been forwarded to the voicemail. Emails went unanswered, decisions were kept hanging, but Ian just let them be. He strongly believed that till he actually found a way to banish the evil he wouldn't be in a frame of mind to operate in corporate business. Perhaps a strong sense of uneasiness that he may not survive to run his business unless he could find a way to salvage himself was not far from his mind.

The only call he had resolved to answer was Mathew's, but in that one week there had been no call from Darjeeling. There were instances where Ian himself felt the need to call Mathew, just to find out exactly how he was; whether everything was fine. He regretted deeply that he had not warned Mathew about what he feared. But he argued that at that time he had just a hunch about the Dark Angel. In fact his hunch only became true once he heard that the mirror was destroyed. And once he realized that the evil against which his battle was, was very real, he wanted to stay away from Darjeeling. He was sharp enough to understand that he needed to understand his enemy from a distance and not compromise his position by being where the Dark Angel could strike upon him.

By the end of the week, Ian had lost all hopes. He had never been a religious man in the past, but now he found himself praying to God fervently, found himself begging for Him to show the way. However he was not sure whether God would actually hear him. He

doubted that the divine one would fulfil the wishes of one whose bloodline was chosen by Satan.

That evening he had returned from the library exhausted and discouraged at yet another day's failure at finding what he was looking for. He was too tired for even a shower. With a cup of coffee he stood by the window watching the busy streets of Calcutta below. People went about rushing from one place to another, perhaps late already, being caught in traffic and showed their impatience by honking at the cars in front. He envied each of them; envied their oblivion of the situation that could perhaps bring apocalypse.

He looked out of the window at the *Maidan*. The huge urban park with the Victoria Memorial on one side while the Fort William could be seen peeping through the old Banyan trees. On other times he would have loved to discover the many layers of this colourful city, for its rich history and heritage. However right then the colonial charm of the city was lost to him—till he saw the high tower of the St. Paul's Cathedral, semi concealed behind the trees and other buildings. From far it seemed to beckon him, as if calling him to pay a visit to the Almighty. In a strange land with unknown people, the white tower felt like home. And right then he could hear the faint sounds of the church bells tolling. That fell like a sign.

Without thinking further he left the hotel for the church. The church grounds itself had an air of serenity. In a city that never slept, where noise seemed to be an intricate part of its everyday life, it was surprising to find a place that peaceful. Even from the outside, the cathedral was beautiful. The tall white structure was constructed following the indo-gothic architecture. He remembered reading somewhere that it was built in the late eighteenth century.

He suddenly felt an urgency to get inside---as if the church itself held the answer that he was seeking. The huge cathedral hall was empty. But there was a tranquillity that Ian had not felt in a long, long time. He walked towards the altar and knelt down in one of the richly carved wooden pews. And perhaps for the first time in his life, he prayed. Prayed for salvation, prayed for strength and also for victory of good over evil. He did not realize when his eyes had filled with tears as he gazed at the Holy Cross. He was in a state of despair induced trance that ended when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He spun around and looked up to see an old priest standing beside him.

The compassionate look on the clergyman's face was so comforting that Ian like a child, helpless, unable to communicate his inner turmoil, just looked back at him with pleading eyes. The priest was around seventy-seventy five years old. His frail hands and body was visible through the robe. There was a kindness on his face that made a person want to pour out his worries like water. His kind face, his persona, possessed an aura of peace that seemed to surround him like a halo.

"My son, is everything alright?" he asked in a concerned voice.

"I don't know Father. I don't know." replied Ian desperately.

"Would you like to talk about it?" the priest asked—his eyes filled with a gentle understanding.

Ian shook his head, hopelessly realizing the futility of explaining his ordeal.

The priest quietly observed Ian, who hung his head in the sign of defeat and despondency. He seemed to contemplate something. Eventually he spoke smiling benevolently.

“Don’t worry my son; God always hears your prayers. Remember, When all fails, God prevails.”

Ian had no answer, for he was doubtful whether God would be by his side. He kept his head lowered as the Father patted his shoulder before turning around and walking away. But the moment the he walked away, Ian had a very strange feeling. It was almost as if some sort of an elixir had been injected into him. Gone were the days’ exhaustion and despair. He suddenly felt that perhaps he had already found the answer to his questions. He spun around wanting to talk to the priest, but there was nobody. He stood up, frantically looking around, but in that huge cathedral there was not another soul apart from him. He looked around to see whether there was any exit through which the priest could have disappeared that fast. However there was none close by.

It was like a dream. Almost as if the old priest was a part of some self-inflicted hallucination. But how could he deny the feeling of vigour—the feeling of new born exhilaration that he experienced with his gentle touch?

He rushed back to the hotel, for the first time driving as Calcuttans do—honking impatiently at every car in front of him. Unexplainably, in his heart he knew that the journal held the answer to the Dark Angel’s destruction. He knew he had to read it all over again, find the answer.

On reaching his suite he took out the journal and poured over every page trying to find the essential clue. But there seemed to be none. By the third time, he felt he knew every word by heart, yet the journal did not show him anything new—anything that could be used as a weapon to destroy the Dark Angel. It was almost three at night, yet Ian’s sleepless frenzied eyes refused to give up.

“Fuuuuck!!!!” screamed Ian.

Frustrated at the utter uselessness of the journal, he threw it against the wall. The diary flew through the air, hit the wall and landed on the floor with a crash bringing along with it an expensive crystal vase and the white roses that were in it. The noise was deafening. But Ian seemed to be completely unaware of it. He sat there, seething with rage, without any urge to pick up the journal that had changed his life, turned him into a madman in the past few weeks. He stared at it as if it was the source of all evil in his life. He noticed that the impact had torn the leather cover revealing the cardboard binding within.

Reluctantly he got out of his chair and went to retrieve the journal, before the water from the broken vase reached it; he now regretted handling such an antiquity in that manner. As he tried to stuff the cardboard cover back into the leather one, he noticed there was another written page inside the cover that he had not seen before. Curiously with shaking hands he turned the cover to see the page better.

There was a rough drawing of a church there. A drawing by someone whose skills as an artist would have been questionable. Nevertheless, it was a very clear diagram of a church, and below it were few verses that Ian read out aloud.

*“When all else fails, God prevails,
No evil shall arise afore His eyes,
For God’s light, and God’s sight
Robs the Devil off all his might,
In God’s house, with God’s will
Slay all demons, end all evil.”*

A smile broke on Ian’s face—a radiance that would perhaps have shamed the rising sun. For he was the chosen one no doubt. He was the fortunate one, the one who was touched by God’s hand—literally. Ian was chosen by Him to bring an end to the Dark Angel. He looked heavenward and thanked the Almighty, from that moment a changed man bathed in the divine light of God.

Chapter 19

Turbulence was a new addition to Trisha's earlier wretched life of darkness and immobility. Her soul trapped inside the mirror had tolerated it all; the horror of the darkness, the suffocation of rigidity, the cruelty of her fate. She had been aware that she was being moved, being transported through roads and finally she was locked in perhaps the baggage carrier of an aircraft; although she still couldn't hear a single sound. It was just through feelings and a sense of deep rooted instinct that seemed to have become stronger, more potent, now that she existed away from her physical body.

She was terrified of her present situation knowing that perhaps this was how she was going to remain for eternity. Trapped, tortured and forgotten.

But within what she presumed would have been a few minutes from the time she thought the flight had finally taken off from the ground, she felt unusual series of jolts. In fact the last one had been so bad that the mirror inside which she was trapped almost seemed to slide from one end of the plane to the other. She previously did not think that anything could possibly be worse than the condition she was in. but when the turbulence hit, it terrified her further. For she was not sure what other sort of torture lay beyond.

Suddenly she sensed that she was falling, falling fast from a great height. It terrorized her, yet she was unable to move and remained entrapped inside her glass prison. Gradually as she fell, she could see tiny dots of light. At first, her terrified mind insisted that it just was an illusion. But then belief set in when she could actually see small bits of light which became brighter and brighter as she saw the paper which had kept the mirror wrapped burning bit by bit.

Slow hesitant tongues of fire made odd parts of the mirror visible almost like a map. Trisha watched, fascinated as the world slowly began to be revealed gradually while she remained unharmed behind the glass barrier.

The cornflower blue sky with soft scattered clouds was the first thing that Trisha saw. The great vastness gave her a sense of freedom, of exhilaration, that for long Trisha had not felt. However that rush was short lived. It turned into a larger panic as she felt herself plunging from a great height at a great speed. The sky whizzed past her, the clouds just blurry lines and within a few more minutes she was submerged underwater. She went down without slowing as the momentum pushed her below, into the abyss of the pelagic bed.

She watched horrified; caught still in the soundless jail as the sunlight became fainter and fainter while she went deeper and deeper till all that was visible was midnight blue water.

With extreme force the mirror hit a jagged end of a coral mountain, and with a crash, it broke into a million pieces. All at once, Trisha could hear a great roar—the roar of water that was furious and frightening. Within the next few moments, Trisha realized that for the first time, she could hear her surroundings. However, it did nothing to reassure her.

The rumble of the waters terrified her. She was free, out of the entrapment of the mirror. But this was a greater horror if that could be believed. The strong water current pushed

her around, teasing her, bullying her like a tiny fawn in the den of lions. She was drowning, drowning in spite of her struggles against the colossal waves. She was exhausted and all she wanted to do was to give up; to just stop existing.

Yet the torture didn't stop. She was thrown around like one on a roller coaster that malfunctions. Grotesquely evil looking giant fishes swam around her. Although they seemed to not be able to see her, they could feel her presence. Giant octopuses with their hideously formed suckers seemed to beckon her and wanted to engulf her with their strong tentacles. Great whites circled her, sensing a prey, yet puzzled at its invisibility. She was right in the middle of a terrible nightmare as she tried to escape from one creature to another. Their sharp teeth, their mean horrendous eyes searched for her—their animal instinct perhaps heightened at the presence of an invisible prey.

Suddenly she could feel a hand—an invisible hand that seemed to grab her strongly and start to pull her up. At first she resisted for she was not sure what greater horror that would be a part of. Yet, there was such comfort, such assurance in that touch that she stopped struggling, and gave herself up to that superior power.

With shock she realized that, that touch was the only thing she could feel. For previously, she had not felt anything, not the coldness of her glass prison, not the heat of the fire, nor the moisture of the ocean. Yet she could feel every bit of the hand—the softness, the warmth, as it clasped her caringly. She couldn't wait to see the one with such powers.

It took just moments and suddenly she was out of the horrific ocean depth. She felt herself hovering over the water. The sun shone brightly while the water hid its malevolent nature under the deceptive cover of calmness.

Trisha spun around, lighter than a cotton seed, and tried to look around for the one who had rescued her. But over that desolate ocean, there was no one else. The blue sky, at the horizon drowned into the blue waters. She was the only one in the vast canvas of blue. She was not sure what had happened. But knew that it was a miracle, the way she had been pulled out of the sea. Unfortunately, in the past few hours things had turned so surreal that Trisha had long before stopped asking any questions—even if they were to herself.

Every time she glanced at the water below she panicked, for then she remembered what lurked beneath the cerulean exterior. But in that great amplitude, there wasn't even a dot that could be a promise of land ahead. She wished fervently that she was on land.

And suddenly, Trisha found herself on a sandy beach with coconut trees creating spiderlike shadows on the sand as the leaves fluttered in the breeze.

It took her a while but she realized that she could fly, although she still had to master her sense of direction. She could fly upwards effortlessly. It was an exhilarating experience. She looked around in eagerness, again not questioning how she landed there—accepting where she was for exactly what it was. The place seemed to be completely devoid of any human life. That was disappointing.

She wanted to be in a place with lots of people. She visualized herself in a marketplace. Her own thought surprised her, yet at the next moment she found herself in a marketplace. Colourfully adorned Middle Eastern folks bustled around her buying and selling fresh vegetables, fruits, clothes and souvenirs.

Trisha for the first time since her ordeal enjoyed herself. She couldn't comprehend what was happening. Yet every time she wished for to be somewhere, she ended up there. She

realized that the people around her did not seem to notice her at all; or rather she was invisible to them. Yet she could hear them talking in a language that she couldn't understand. She could smell the dusty fruity smell mingled with the smell of people and other smells of a market.

She was in a strange land, among strange people, yet it was welcoming. For although she couldn't be human, couldn't touch or feel like they do, yet their close vicinity assured her.

She went around the marketplace for some time, discovering new alleys, and new places in its vicinity. She floated over the top of people's heads and looked down upon them as they bargained and argued—their eyes shining at the end of each argument when they felt they have gotten a good price. It was all very interesting to her and for some time, she forgot her predicament. However, the novelty of the situation wore off soon enough, and Trisha felt lonely once more. She didn't want to exist in that non existing state any more.

An idea started to form within. She wanted to be visible. She wished fervently for that, expecting that as previously, her wishes would be answered and she would be blessed with her previous body. However, with immense disappointment she realized that, that was something out of her reach. As she looked down, she could still see herself existing as faint wisps of smoke and nothing more. Morosely she looked around wondering whether the lucky spell when all her wishes came true was over.

Soon, she found herself around a cattle market. Cows, goats, oxen, were tethered to small poles. She hovered above a cow as it bent down to drink from a great wooden tub of water. She suddenly felt that she saw something in the dark murky water. She whirled around, trying to maintain her balance and peeped into the tub. She could see her reflection. It was there floating in the ripples, breaking into tinier parts as the cow drank from it oblivious to what was happening around it.

She spun around anxiously, trying to look for a mirror in the market place—wanting to reconfirm what she saw. At ends she came to a canopy that sold old worn out, second-hand furniture. There was a shabby wooden dressing table at one corner of the canopy and a blurry patchy mirror rested above it. Trisha rushed towards it. It was true. Her reflection could be seen on it.

The same oval eyes, the porcelain face, the flowing hair. She now existed, even if only partially. It was a huge excitement, a great relief. Trisha shrieked with delight although no sound came out of her mouth. She realized that even though she didn't exist physically, through her wishes she had created her own reflection.

Suddenly she saw the shopkeeper coming towards the mirror. He was an old man, whose rheumatic legs seemed to give him a lot of pain as he walked from the other end of the shop. His eyes opened wide with horror as he saw her in it, while beyond the mirror he couldn't see anybody. Fearfully he clutched a talisman around his neck that hung from a silver chain; muttering some prayers under his breath.

Trisha stood there shocked. She couldn't believe that somebody would be afraid of her, would need to utter prayers in the hope of warding her off.

It caused her deep despair. She slowly retreated from the shop, flying farther and farther away from the marketplace. Suddenly she wanted to be alone, wanted to rid herself of human company. After a while, she came to a huge tree; one whose species she was not aware of. Its branches seemed to beckon her to rest there. As she sat or rather hovered below it, a hopelessness engulfed her once again.

For days she hovered around the same spot. For time in her realm was not an actuality. Days and minutes seemed to have the same duration as sunrises and sunsets blended into each other and she remained hovering under the shade of the giant tree.

Try as she might, she couldn't forget the look of horror on the shopkeeper's face. She realized that everybody was going to be afraid of her; think of her as a spirit. She understood that that was the bitter truth. However it was difficult to accept it. Since she did not die, there was no closure.

There had been no great light that had invited her into God's Eden as she had waited in the same spot. As days went by, she finally understood something. Understood that it had been the hand of God Himself that had pulled her out of the deep abyss and given her a chance to prove her existence. With that revelation, she was filled with a new energy—a strong sense of purpose. She resolved to get her identity back and resolved to never to give up without a fight.

She understood that the one who dwelt in her body was something evil—something that had been trapped inside the mirror like she had been trapped. She realized that from the moment her blood had touched the mirror surface there had been a transformation. And now the imposter lived as her. *Did her family realize that it was not her?* She wondered. She was immensely hurt assuming that perhaps she had not been missed at all. However, what could she do? She realized the only way her presence could be manifested was through a reflection. Yet she couldn't talk, couldn't declare the reason behind her ghostly existence. She knew that would frighten everyone. She couldn't imagine in the history of mankind, someone being in a situation which was this hopeless. Yet somehow, she suddenly experienced a grim determination; of finding a way out of this nightmare.

She knew that the only person who she could convince of her existence was her best friend Mia. No one else would comprehend the surreal situation. She thankfully remembered Mia's fascination with the supernatural and all the ghost stories her friend liked to read alone, in the middle of the night. She remembered fondly how almost always after reading particularly scary ones, Mia would stay awake at nights and call Trisha. Those hours when Trisha would keep Mia company over the phone, talking to her till Mia felt really sleepy. Trisha had always admonished her best friend for scaring herself through such tales. But now the same habit in Mia was the most attractive.

Moreover, Trisha was also frightened of the one that resided in her body and didn't want to venture into her home. The moment she thought about seeing Mia, she wished she was in Darjeeling and visualized Mia's bedroom where they had spent many hours together gossiping, listening to music or admiring boys.

Within moments, she found herself there—inside Mia's room among scattered books, cosmetics and CDs. The familiar smell, the familiar surroundings bathed Trisha with overwhelming emotions.

Mia was not in her room. Trisha decided to wait there. She didn't want to take the risk of scaring Mia and Grams, especially. She didn't want to cause the old lady a heart attack. As the sun set behind the mountains, turning the sky red, she waited for Mia to return to her room anxiously.

Mia had been out shopping with a few of her girlfriends from school. It had not been a trip she had enjoyed much, yet she had gone on Grams' insistence. The old lady was worried the way Mia moped around the house for days. She realized that Mia was

stunned at Trisha's hurtful transformation. For from the night of her birthday, not once did Trisha try to contact Mia. Every time Mia called Trisha's cell, the calls had gone unanswered and unreturned. A few times she had called the house as well. However, whether it was Mathew or Mrs. D' Costa who picked up the phone, they always seemed to be preoccupied over something else.

In fact Mia was secretly hurt that their tone of voice felt very different from their usual friendly ones. She did not know what was happening. But she missed her best friend. She couldn't imagine what she had done wrong to experience such indifference from the Brown household. The poor girl had lost the vibrant smile that had always been a part of her face. She hardly spoke, and had even lost her appetite worrying Grams even further. However after her outing with the girls today, she had resolved not to call Trisha again. She was not sure what exactly was wrong, but sorrowfully she decided that if her friendship had become a burden, then she would stay away.

Mia had a strange feeling the moment she entered her room. She couldn't put a finger on it, but something seemed to be different in there. It was almost as if a pair of invisible eyes were watching her every movement expectantly. Mia had never been a superstitious person although she admitted that she did like to read ghost stories, yet right then, she felt slightly apprehensive about entering her room. She shrugged her shoulders boldly and admonished herself for her jittery nerves and walked inside the room closing the door behind her.

However, the feeling of another presence in the room did not disappear. In fact it seemed to become stronger.

Nervously Mia walked around her room picking up a change of clothes. However, she felt uncomfortable getting out of her clothes, as if someone was watching her. The feeling of the presence in the room was so strong that Mia took her clothes and slammed the bathroom door behind her and locked it. She splashed her face with cool water wanting to get rid of that unknown apprehension. And somehow for a while, inside the bathroom she seemed to be successful. However, the moment she stepped out into her room, the familiar feeling engulfed her. It was frightening, the sense of an unseen presence. She walked towards the cupboard still trying to fight that feeling. But suddenly from the corner of her eye, she could see the reflection of someone in the mirror.

She jumped up. It had been so sudden. Thinking that she must have seen something completely rational like a fluttering curtain, Mia forced herself to look at the mirror. But right at that moment she realized she was not wrong. She *had* felt the presence in reality, for in the mirror stood Trisha. Drawn and haggard, her eyes almost swallowed up half her face. Mia spun around thinking that perhaps Trisha had come in and had waited to give Mia a surprise on her return. But there was nobody else in the room. Yet the moment she turned around and looked at the mirror, she could see Trisha. A sad wistful smile was at the corner of Trisha's lips.

It was the most terrifying thing that Mia had ever come across. Although the reflection seemed to want to tell her something, the fright was too much for her as she shrieked and passed out.

When she came back to consciousness, she found herself on the floor with Grams looking over her concernedly holding a cup of water. From the dampness on her face, Mia realized that Grams had been sprinkling water over her as she tried to bring her back

to consciousness. It took Mia a few moments to understand what had happened. The moment she remembered the reflection she hastily sat up and fearfully looked at the mirror.

However, there was no reflection of anyone else there. She looked at Grams concerned face, thinking how to explain to the old lady what exactly had happened when suddenly she saw Trisha's reflection again on the glass window pane, against the darkening evening sky.

The reflection looked concernedly towards Mia. Terrified beyond words, Mia's face drained of colour as she speechlessly pointed towards the window pane.

Puzzled Katarzyna looked towards the direction of Mia's was pointed finger. Instantly, she could feel a chill spread across her spine as she saw the ghostly Trisha staring at her from the window. Her presence felt as real as when Trisha had physically come to their home numerous times. Yet Katarzyna realized that this visit was something else altogether. With a sense of dread she remembered Trisha's unnatural behaviour on her birthday night as well as the strange apparition that she had experienced in Trisha's room that night in the Belgian mirror. Katarzyna had no idea what exactly was taking place. Somehow the spirit didn't exude any aura of malevolence. Yet its bizarre presence itself was unnerving. Calmly she took Mia's hand and asked her to follow her downstairs.

She looked grimly towards Trisha's reflection as if telling it that she was not afraid of whatever supernatural power it held. And then she closed Mia's room door behind her.

Downstairs she called the Brown residence. The phone rang for a long time and when she had almost given up hope and wanted to return the receiver to its cradle, Mathew picked up the call. His voice seeped with moroseness; as if something beyond repair worried him. Katarzyna hesitated; she didn't know exactly what to tell him, how to explain the phenomenon. Yet she knew that she just had to.

"Mathew? It's me Katarzyna. Mia's grandmother. It's been long that we have not heard from Trisha and we were just wondering how you are." Clearing her voice against a sudden dryness that seemed to parch her throat Katarzyna spoke.

"We are okay I guess." said Mathew, his voice sounding suddenly cautious over the phone.

However, Katarzyna noticed that he did not ask her back anything, although he seemed to wait for her to ask the next question.

"How is Trisha?" she asked, unable to form sentences that would delicately put forward exactly what she needed to say.

"I don't really know." said Mathew. "It's.....it's quite complicated." A sense of hopelessness seemed to exude from him.

Katarzyna waited for him to say what he meant by that statement, yet even Mathew seemed to be fumbling with his words. She waited patiently for a moment. But she realized that he was not going to say anything further. So she spoke as the frightened Mia looked on.

"Mathew, I don't really know how to tell you this, but something really strange happened right now. I...we...sort of saw Trisha's reflection in Mia's room. If it was me alone, or Mia alone, I would have strongly believed that it was some sort of hallucination." She added hurriedly for she feared that Mathew may want to make light of their experience. "However, we both saw it together, and in fact Mia passed out the first time she saw it."

She had felt embarrassed at what she had to tell, afraid that she may be ridiculed, but never in her dreams had she expected the way Mathew reacted.

“Where is Mia? Where is she?” he almost seemed to bellow at the other end of the phone. Katarzyna was shocked at the urgency that he emanated.

“She is here with me downstairs.” said Katarzyna. “But why.....?”

“Get her bags packed immediately. Send her to Calcutta to her parents! Do it now for both your sakes.” Cut in Mathew even before Katarzyna could finish her question.

“I am sending a car and a driver right away. And please don’t argue....just trust me I can’t explain right now. I will do it the moment I get a chance. But please, all I want is for you to believe me. If you have really seen Trisha, just do as I say, for Mia’s life may be in danger.” The desperation in Mathew’s voice was palpable.

Katarzyna hesitated. There were millions of questions in her mind. Yet she understood that right then she needed to listen to Mathew. There was a lot of time for her questions once Mia was sent off to Calcutta. She agreed to do exactly as he said and hung up.

Mathew stood shaking with an unknown fear after he kept the receiver. Only that morning the front page of their local newspaper printed the story of the abduction of two girls. Both thirteen year old, twins in fact, had been abducted from the *Gurkha* village. No one knew their whereabouts. But the parents were too poor for it to be a kidnapping for ransom case.

The police suspected there was some prostitution racket involved, for *Gurkha* girls were very pretty. However, Mathew feared something else completely. The moment Katarzyna had called him about their experience he realized that even Mia’s life could be in danger.

He lost no time and sent his driver off immediately with orders to take Mia to Calcutta without stopping anywhere else in the middle of the long journey. He personally wanted to go to Mia’s residence immediately. However, right then he had an important appointment—one that he was extremely nervous about. He decided to visit Katarzyna as soon as that unpleasant meeting was over.

As Katarzyna waved a worried Mia goodbye, she knew that she would need to communicate with the presence. She was not afraid, for she had absolute faith in the Almighty. It would take a lot more than a mere reflection to shake her. But she did want to know the reason that brought Trisha’s apparition to her home. Never before had she heard of the ghost of a living person. And as far as she knew, Trisha was alive.

Chapter 20

Katarzyna unperturbed walked to the open kitchen and put on the kettle. She needed a cup of tea, not so much because she was thirsty, as it was to be busy. The movement around the kitchen in fact gave her some time to think, to prepare for what lay ahead. Throughout this time, she could feel the presence behind her. It wasn't anything dramatic, anything frightening. It was a rather subtle sense of being the person under close scrutiny.

Katarzyna resisted the urge to turn back and confirm any presence of a physical being. She realized she needed to appear calm, even if her heart was thundering like horses' hooves on a race course. She patiently waited for the water to boil and once it did, she unhurriedly poured hot water from the kettle into a cup, put a tea bag into the cup and then brought it and sat down at the kitchen table. Although those actions had not really given her any opening for the strange conversation that she was about to have, it had at least reduced her nervousness for what lay ahead.

She looked around the kitchen as she tried to think of other things while she could summon enough courage to talk. Everything was kept perfectly in place. The old walnut shelves that displayed their wedding china, the spotless red brick kitchen floor, the pots and pans that hung overhead the hob. The only mess was on the kitchen counter. She had been in the middle of baking a cake when Mia's frantic screams had taken her upstairs. Flour, sugar, butter all lay open, the ladle inside the mixing bowl, firmly stuck out of the batter.

Katarzyna realized there was no more time to stall. Taking a deep breath she spoke. "Is there someone here? Someone that I can't see?"

It felt strange, eerie rather to address to no one in an empty house. Her voice sounded unfamiliar, hoarse and dry. She paused, expecting some answer. Although she was not really sure what exactly she expected. However, there was no answer. No sign that could establish the supernatural presence.

Katarzyna tried again. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

This time she could feel a sudden change in the environment. There was a complete silence around her. Even the low humming of the fridge seemed to have halted, as if in expectation of something. It was like the calm before a storm. Katarzyna could feel the hair on her nape rise in response to the stagnant air of the room. However, there was nothing more.

She took a deep breath. She had a sudden doubt that maybe she had imagined the whole thing. Maybe there had been no reflection to begin with. It had just been a hallucination. However, her mind refused to bury its questions. *How did both Mia and I see the reflection if indeed it had been a hallucination? Why am I still feeling as if an unseen entity is still in the room? And why did Mathew behave in that strange manner if everything had been alright to begin with?* Her mind could not answer any of those questions. So she tried again.

"Trisha, is that you? Do you need to tell me something?"

That question became the prologue for all hell to break loose. It started as a deep rumbling that seemed to radiate from the foundations of the house. The walls started to vibrate. The shelves shook, slowly first and then more violently. The china clattered in a coarse cacophony—the sound hurting Katarzyna’s ears, till she had to shut her ears with her palms. In sudden a blast of air the windows burst open, and a great gale started to slam those windows; forcing them open, and closing them the next moment. That was followed by the plates that started to fly out of the shelves into the air, crashing noisily on the floor—breaking into tiny pieces. The kitchen seemed to be caught in the eye of a hurricane. Katarzyna screamed because she had no idea how to stop the tempest, the fury of the unseen; but her voice drowned in that symphony of destruction. Amidst the flying objects, she quickly clambered and got under the table to avoid getting hurt.

Trisha was extremely distressed about the tornado that she seemed to create. Yet she knew not how to control it. All she had wanted was to communicate with Grams. However, she had no voice, no known way to let Grams know about her ghostly presence.

When Katarzyna had started asking the questions, Trisha looked around for ways to communicate. As Katarzyna’s questions grew, so grew Trisha’s frustrations till it reached the height. By the time Katarzyna took Trisha’s name, her frustration had built itself up to the pinnacle. And suddenly she had felt a burst of energy. A power that seemed to have manifested itself through her frustrations, through her need. A potentiality that was beyond Trisha’s control. She watched horrified as she spun through the air, creating havoc. She watched as pots, and pans, cups and plates flew all around—every inanimate object expressing the non-fulfilment of the soul.

Trisha had not wanted that, yet she did not know to stop it.

Suddenly in the midst of all that chaos, the open tin containing flour spilled on the ground. Both Katarzyna and Trisha noticed it almost at the same time. However, while Katarzyna did not see the significance of it amidst all the bedlam, it seemed to open a new possibility to Trisha’s soul.

Through experience she knew that the only thing she was capable of in the bodiless state, was to fly. An idea slowly started to form in her mind and she decided to give it all she had, for that was the only chance for her to communicate. She calmed down; she needed to focus. Thankfully with her calm, the gale inside the room stopped immediately. In the absence of her frustration, the energy seemed to wither off—unable to cause havoc.

As she started very gently to hover over the spilled flour on the floor, creating patterns, words were formed right in front of Katarzyna’s unbelieving eyes.

“HELP ME. IT’S TRISHA.”

Katarzyna could not fathom what lay in front of her. The words had just appeared out of nowhere. And the most terrifying idea was that the presence seemed to claim that it was Trisha.

“But...but...” she stammered. “How can you be Trisha? If you are Trisha, then who is the one back at your home?”

Some invisible hand seemed to obliterate the previous writings on the flour and fresh words were written again.

“SHE IS EVIL. TAKEN MY BODY. TRAPPED ME IN MIRROR. IT BROKE. AND RELEASED ME.”

Katarzyna felt like she was caught in a dream. What was happening right then was something beyond rationality. Yet every instinct urged her to believe in it. Again the words were obliterated, and fresh words appeared.

“GRAMS, ITS ME. PLEASE HELP ME. I’M SCARED.”

The last statement brought a lump to the old lady’s throat, and she broke down and started to sob uncontrollably. The cry of help from Trisha, a child who she loved as much as her own grandchild was too much for Katarzyna to endure.

‘Trisha, my child,’ she sobbed. ‘Don’t worry, don’t worry love, we will find a way out. Your father is on the way here. I will tell him everything.’

Then she controlled herself, wiped the tears and asked again.

“Will I be able to see you in a mirror?”

“YES” The words appeared.

Without wasting even another moment, Katarzyna ran towards the foyer—the closest part of the house with a mirror. She didn’t have to explain to Trisha where she was going, for the moment she saw into the mirror, beside her reflection she could see Trisha’s; a wistful smile on a long ashen face. Katarzyna shook with emotions that she couldn’t name.

Tenderly she ran her fingers on the mirror wanting to touch Trisha, love her, and extract her from the atrocities of the unknown realm.

Mathew drove recklessly through the meandering hilly roads of Darjeeling. There was not a soul on the street. It was not unlikely, after all it was almost eleven at night and people in the small mountainous town retired quite early. He had to drive carefully, for the fog had reduced visibility to the bare minimum. He had not planned on venturing out this late. However he had no choice. The appointment had run longer than he had anticipated. At the same time, the issue that needed to be discussed with Katarzyna could not be postponed either.

As his thoughts ran over that evening’s interview, he experienced the same tension he had felt then. For the first time in his life, and probably never in the life times of the previous Browns, the police came to his house for questioning. That itself had been completely unnerving, but what had followed had been worse.

The police had landed on his doorstep while they were investigating the sudden disappearance of the *Gurkha* girls. Somebody from the village had seen the girls last talking to Trisha Brown. The detective who had come was in his mid-thirties, pleasant, courteous yet with eyes like the eagle. Nothing seemed to escape his eyes and Mathew had found the interview very taxing.

Although the detective had assured him at the beginning of the interview that it was just routine checking, Mathew had been very nervous. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the detective and everything to do with the fact that he felt he knew what had happened to the girls.

That morning, when Mathew came into the living room, He had seen Æsa (that was what he called her now. For referring to her as Trisha sent a wave of repugnance down

his stomach). She was sitting on a sofa, with two identical dolls—both extremely life like miniature figures of little girls. Their clothes too had been very detailed. And such minute details went even down to their shoes. Mathew couldn't help wondering where she would have got them from. Moreover, dolls he always felt were meant to look cute and cuddly, not so eerily human.

Æsa had seemed not to notice as he walked in and neither did Mathew acknowledge her. Things had in fact been very strained between them. She did not address him directly, and nor did he. They led separated lives although Mathew feared for his regularly. Fortunately she did not seem to have any plans on harming him. She hummed an unknown tune. It had a very disturbing melody, although Mathew couldn't exactly understand what disturbed him so.

The moment he picked up the newspaper that had been kept on the coffee table, his blood ran cold at the front page news. The photos of the two missing girls with headlines screaming their disappearance was the first thing he saw. What terrified him the most was the dolls that Æsa was playing with were dressed in exactly the same attire as was shown in the photograph.

Mathew's hand shook as he lowered the paper and looked at her. Her head was bent down and she seemed to concentrate on braiding one of the doll's hair—as if unaware of the look that Mathew gave her.

All of a sudden she looked up and smiled. It was the spookiest expression that Mathew had encountered and he was shocked beyond words. The fear of the unimaginable was there—a fear so strong that Mathew believed that only by not talking about it, could he perhaps keep his sanity. He desperately waited for Ian to come to Darjeeling. However, even though he tried to avoid the topic of the girls, fate had different designs.

By mid-afternoon the police had contacted him and requested to meet him over it. Although they had been extremely polite about it, Mathew knew it was more of a command than a request.

He had heartily agreed to help them however he could. Though he was worried that perhaps his heartiness had sounded a bit too forced and had thus made the probing intuition of the detective who came to his house more alert. The detective had come around in the evening and Mathew had invited him into his study. He felt like a man with unwillingly trusted with a secret that he needed to hide at any cost. Being a straight forward man, a man with nothing to hide, he found the strain of the secret unbearable. Yet Mathew had tried to act as casual as he could, given the circumstances. After the initial routine questions, the detective had requested the presence of his daughter and Mathew had obliged.

She came into the room poised and calm—a strong contrast against his own nervous demeanour. The detective had been patient and politely asked her questions about the girl. She did not deny having met them and also in a very confident manner explained to the detective how the girls' parents had been workers in plantation and she knew them from the time they were kids. They had been on the way to school when she had bumped into them. Mathew couldn't help but admire the very unflustered manner with which she handled the questions.

As the detective seemed to reluctant to leave in the first place, his trained nose sniffing underneath every sentence, Mathew in order to appear more casual had asked him to stay back for dinner, which the detective accepted readily. They had been talking about

everything, and yet all topics came back to the disappearance of the girls. Each time that happened, Mathew became uncomfortable and felt himself being observed by the detective very closely. He had also tried to act casual, with Æsa, in a manner that befits a father, yet even that had been a constant strain

After bidding them a good night and thanking them for dinner, when the detective turned around to go to the car, Æsa called him back.

“Detective,” she said.

And as he turned back with questioning eyes, she asked.

“Do you believe in God?”

Puzzled the detective answered, “Of course I do. Who doesn’t?”

Æsa had smiled enigmatically and replied. “That’s good....perhaps your God will help you find the girls.”

A shiver had run through Mathew’s spine as he stood beside her speechless. The detective nodded his head, thinking that it was perhaps her way of wishing him luck. With teenagers, you never know what they mean, he thought wryly as he sped off in his police car and watched father and daughter getting smaller in his rearview mirror as they stood on the front porch.

Katarzyna opened the door the moment she heard Mathew’s car arriving and waited patiently till he reached her.

“How are you? Is Mia okay? When did she leave?” the questions seemed to pour out of Mathew without any preamble.

“I am fine. Mia is okay, she left a while back.” She replied and asked Mathew to come in.

“Oh my God! What happened?” exclaimed Mathew the moment he came in, for from the living room the open kitchen was completely visible and the place looked like it had been wrecked by a bulldozer.

“I will tell you everything,” said Katarzyna. “But first I need to know what’s going on.”

With a very heavy sigh Mathew sat down. On his way to her place, he had wondered how to tell her, explain to her something that even he was having difficulty believing. However, looking at the state of the place, it was evident that even she would have experienced something supernatural. And so, he began from the very beginning. He told her everything. About Katya, about Ian, about the mirror, Trisha’s birthday about Trisha herself. His voice shook as he told her about Trisha. Not once did Katarzyna interrupt him. Not once did she exhibit incredulity as Mathew narrated. After he finished telling her everything, there was a silence in the room. Mathew looked up and saw tears streaming down Katarzyna’s face.

“Poor child; how she must have suffered.” She said.

“I don’t know what has happened to Trisha.” said Mathew. “Is she possessed? Or is she....is she dead?” his voice broke as he uttered the last word, for it was too much for him to say it.

“Come with me,” said Katarzyna. “I want to show you something.”

Mathew followed her puzzled, as Katarzyna led the way to the mirror in the foyer. And in that full length mirror, Mathew saw his daughter. He screamed at first, panicking, not comprehending what lay before his eyes. Yet her sorrowful eyes, her sad little smile spoke volumes about her ordeal; about her existence. There was no doubt that it was her, he realized. For no one was more beautiful, more loving than his Trisha, his daughter.

“Trisha,” he whispered, the painful feeling choked his throat till he couldn’t speak anymore. Tears streamed down his cheeks which he was unaware of. He touched the mirror surface gently, trying to feel her, understand the barrier that separated them.

“Come, it’s my turn to tell you everything now.” said Katarzyna as she led Mathew away from the mirror. He followed reluctantly for he didn’t want to lose sight of his daughter even for a moment, although he understood that he needs to know what exactly had happened.

Just as they were going to sit down, the doorbell rang.

“It’s Ian I think,” said Mathew looking at Katarzyna’s puzzled expression at the unannounced guest. “I hope you don’t mind that I asked him to come here.” He said walking towards the door.

He was right. There stood Ian at the door, with a hopeful smile and eyes that gleamed with a secret.

“Hello Grams,” greeted Ian tentatively over Mathew’s shoulder to a shocked Katarzyna.

Chapter 21

That night in Katarzyna's place the planning that went on till the wee hours of the morning was nothing short of what generals for centuries have done before a battle. All the three had settled down around the kitchen table. The kitchen itself looked like a battle ground. In spite of that, the place was silently chosen by all—perhaps because that seemed to be the only proof of the unimaginable problem that lay in front of them. Both Ian and Mathew had looked questioningly at Katarzyna; waiting for her to explain what tornado had struck her life, her home and Katarzyna obliged readily. When she eventually explained Trisha's dramatic arrival to her house and her ethereal presence, Ian who had yet not seen Trisha's reflection grew uncomfortable and looked over his shoulder every now and then.

Strangely, he had experienced an odd feeling from the moment he had entered the house; as if some unseen eyes were watching him closely. Thankfully through Katarzyna's narration the presence was finally explained. It made Ian realize that he, the one who had always scoffed at 'feelings of the psychic sort' as he had always liked to call them, really did exist. The most ironical part was that, the sensitivity that he had ridiculed for so long had actually lain dormant within him. He noticed that as time passed, he was becoming more and more a believer, an acceptor of things beyond the cognitive world. Sometimes Ian felt that he was a stranger to himself. For the change in him was that remarkable; it was almost as if he had metamorphosed into another personality.

Each of them took turns to narrate their side of the story. As the conversation progressed, Trisha started to get more and more agitated—especially when Ian started to explain about the only solution that the journal had revealed. It was a solution that was as good as not being there. For the risks involved far outweighed a favourable outcome. As each of them around the table contemplated a plan, Trisha hovered around, an invisible force that blew like a cold breeze around them and sent shivers down their spine. It was a very unnerving feeling. Although they knew it was Trisha, they didn't know how to handle her—a spirit with an intensely strong presence that caught them off guard almost at every moment.

Finally Katarzyna suddenly stopped midsentence and said, "Trisha, I think you better go and watch some TV in Mia's room. You shouldn't be listening to this anyway."

For a few minutes the breeze seemed to stop, as all the three waited expectantly.

However, just as Mathew was going to open his mouth to say something, Katarzyna motioned with her hand and asked him to stop.

"Trisha," she said, her voice sounding extremely stern. "I mean it. Go upstairs right now. Don't think you can fool me just because you are invisible."

Both Mathew and Ian looked at each other, slightly intimidated by the old lady's sternness. For a while there was no other sound and a few moments later, the sound from a television somewhere upstairs in the house drifted down and they realized that this time Trisha really had gone off. Affectionately Mathew thought that Trisha even in her

bodiless form had not disposed of her manners or her respect for her elders. Following Trisha's actual withdrawal from the kitchen, the three once again resumed their planning.

The journal had shown Ian a way to end the Dark Angel, yet it was a way that had more perils than was humanly possible to handle. As he read aloud the verse he had accidentally discovered in the journal, Katarzyna and Mathew both agreed that they needed to get Æsa to a church. It was clear that only in hallowed grounds would her powers be rendered useless and she can finally be destroyed; banished to hell.

But then came the impossible part that Ian gravely revealed. Every Dark Angel was aware that the Church was its Achilles' heel. Therefore it was not just an impossibility of drawing one there; it would, put in simple terms, be equivalent to reducing one's lifespan in the quickest possible way. After all, the moment a Dark Angel had even the slightest feeling that its power was being challenged or conspired to be brought to an end it would kill any and everybody cruelly, without compassion. Saying that, wordlessly Ian pointed towards a part of the journal where a note had been written on it—underlined several times to prove its importance.

A sheath of gloom fell over Mathew and Katarzyna with the latest revelation. However, Ian seemed not much worried. Although the other two had lost all their hope he kept insisting that they would find a way out. He knew that his optimism would be viewed with apprehension, with doubt. But he couldn't let them know why exactly he felt that way; couldn't make them experience the divine miracle that he had personally felt. However, because of that divine touch, Ian had become mentally much stronger—now that he knew God was on his side.

Unfortunately, till almost dawn they couldn't come up with any solution. Couldn't discover a way through which Æsa could be taken to church. It was almost four in the morning when all realized that they needed to get some sleep. Mathew returned back to the Brown mansion while, it was decided that Ian would stay in Katarzyna's house till a solution was sourced out. It was better that the Marcussen does not come in direct contact with the Dark Angel—not unless it becomes absolutely unavoidable. No one knew what tricks Æsa had up her sleeves.

Ian let out a sigh of relief at that decision. He didn't want to be around Æsa as well. He had not forgotten the erotic nightmare that had haunted him. The unexplainable scratches on his chest had pestered him relentlessly, for he had no answer to that—at least not a logical one that could explain the physical manifestations of a nightmare. He had been embarrassed profusely by the marks and thus could not reveal to Mathew any of his doubts. How do you tell a father, the erotic dreams that a man has had with his daughter—even if the daughter *was* a minion from hell?

That night, Katarzyna couldn't fall asleep as much as she tried. She couldn't forget what Mathew had initially told her—his fear that the two missing girls may be in the clutches of Æsa. She couldn't imagine what atrocious terror they would be facing if they were alive. And as far as them being dead, she prayed to God fervently that it would not be so. She asked Him to keep them safe. Begged Him to show mercy, to protect them. With the first light of dawn, as she still lay awake Katarzyna made up her mind to pay Æsa a visit. She was not afraid of her; for she didn't fear death. She knew that after this life, she would have an eternal life in God's Eden. However, she would definitely not let

innocents be abducted, be sacrificed as long as she was alive. And for that she was willing to risk her life, and reason with Æsa.

Although the decision was made, it took Katarzyna most of the morning to invoke the kind of courage that would make her face Æsa fearlessly. She went about her kitchen trying to settle it as much as she could, while she got herself prepared for the meeting mentally. She could feel Trisha hovering about, and she spoke to her cheerfully, told her that everything would be fine; taking particular care to not reveal any of her plans to the poor soul or expose the anxiety that she carried within her heart. After she instructed Trisha, to not leave the house no matter what happened and left a note for Ian who seemed still to be asleep, Katarzyna left for the Brown's Plantation.

It was almost late afternoon. The air was quite chilly when Katarzyna decided to walk there. It had been a gloomy day to begin with and now she could see thick nimbus clouds curling up in the horizon. She now regretted her decision to walk till the Brown mansion. The distance was not much and she had thought that the brisk uphill walk would keep her physically challenged enough to keep her mind away from the parlay that lay ahead of her. She knew her decision to meet the Dark Angel could be dangerous at the least and fatal at the most.

However, she could not see any other way, another option to rescue the two girls. Deep inside her heart, she also thought that perhaps she would also find a way to bring Trisha back. To experience her soul floating around was an unbearable agony.

Slowly the breeze picked up and Katarzyna pulled her shawl closer, hugging it as the playful breeze seemed to tug at it forcefully. She had almost reached the edge of the Brown's tea plantation when she caught a glimpse of a faraway figure that seemed to go into the deep woods that lay around the tea estate. Instinctively she knew that it was Æsa, and without contemplating on the sensibility of her decision, Katarzyna followed her into the woods.

As she had been far when she had seen the figure entering the woods, by the time she herself entered the cluster of giant pines and firs, there was no sign of Æsa.

Katarzyna looked around trying to find a clue, a trail that would lead her to Æsa. But there was none. The shadowy, damp wood with the thick undergrowth seemed to be a sinister haven of ogres and goblins; of wizards and warlocks of the middle earth. The tall dark trees stood close together, sentries of all secrets that the woods harboured. They seemed to whisper amongst each other in some long forgotten language and Katarzyna felt unseen watchful eyes monitoring her movements as she entered deeper into the forest.

Strangely, the woods felt devoid of life—like a wall paper of a forest, rather than being an actual one. No birds whistled around on the trees, no squirrels scampered on branches. Everywhere there was stillness—a kind of stillness that usually precedes a great storm. Katarzyna could feel an unknown fear that slowly like a tiny spider crept up her spine. She would perhaps have turned around and left the way she came in, had it not been the worry of the two girls. But now with knowledge of the extreme danger the girls might be in, and the feeling that perhaps in some way she could save them, no amount of fear could make her turn back. A deep rooted instinct told her that she was on the right path. That the girls were indeed in these woods, and if she could just find them, she could save them.

Among the brambles and the fern-covered undergrowth, there ran a faint trace of a trail that seemed to lead deep into the heart of the forest. With a heart that seemed to beat faster and louder than a boulder rolling down a rocky mountain slope, Katarzyna decided to follow the trail.

After she had almost covered a hundred yards, the feeling that she was being watched seemed to intensify. Nervously she looked all around—her eyes scanning the various greens and browns around her. However, there was nothing or no one that could justify her feelings. Suddenly her eyes fell on a raven. It was the first living creature that Katarzyna had seen from the time she had entered the woods. It was a sooty hideous creature that sat on one of the lower branches of a pine tree and stared at her, cocking its bird head on one side.

There was something exceedingly disturbing about it. The way it perched and glared at her cawing shrilly, as if disapproving her unwanted interest in business that did not concern her. Without any warning it suddenly swooped down and almost touched her head as if in an attempt to scare her off. Katarzyna could feel the rush of air as its wings beat close to her head, could smell the dirty obnoxious smell rising from its feathered body—like a stale fish wrapped in a wet towel. Its sudden action gave Katarzyna quite a scare.

For a moment her resolve wavered and she seriously contemplated turning back. She hesitated as she stood and stared back at the bird remembering how Mrs. D' Costa had been brutally attacked by one. Katarzyna was certain that this raven was the same creature responsible for the cruel injuries on the poor woman. But suddenly there was a piercing scream, a scream of a child that reverberated through the forest—its agony palpable. Lost was all her fear, all hesitation, all thoughts of turning back. She ran through the trees, forgetting her age, forgetting that she was all alone and not prepared to fight what may lie ahead of her. The sharp thorny undergrowth marked deep scratches, her shawl tore in places, but she did not seem to even realize that. However, momentarily she had to halt to an instant stop. She almost tripped over herself, as she fought the inertia that had built up with her run. In front of her lay a scene more horrific than perhaps man's worst torture. A scene that no subconscious would be able to create in even a nightmare. The two abducted girls were tied together in the centre of a clearing surrounded by tall trees on all sides. They shivered and cowered in fear in front of a statue that was frightening, repulsive and in a strange sort of way more lifelike than a statue should ever be.

Its cuneate ram face with horns that spiralled out had a look of evil, of malevolence that would freeze even the hearts of the mighty. Powerful sinews formed its bold and repulsive body while its feet ended in the hooves of a ram. Its flared nostrils seemed to breathe fumes of fury. Its deeply carved rough stone eyes glared as if waiting to devour the fresh blood of the innocent children.

Yet that was still a statue and could in no way measure up to the nefarious one that stood in front the statue. It would be hard to describe it as any form of life visible in nature. For it was an abomination, a direct defiance against the way Mother Nature had ever intended earthly creatures to be.

A towering height of almost eight feet, a body with reptilian scales, and a thorny ridged brown tail that ended in a bunch of sharp gleaming spines stood naked its head bowed in reverence in front of the statue. Its muddy brown hands ended in sharp talons that looked

capable of clawing one's heart out straight off the ribcage without the need of any other weapon. In its hands it carried a bunch of parchment from which it read aloud. Verses in a language unknown to Katarzyna, yet every word carried a vibe more baneful, more ominous than any language on earth was ever meant to be.

There was a pungent suffocating smell of Sulphur that made breathing difficult and stung her eyes as well. The source of the smell was unknown. Without an ounce of doubt Katarzyna realized that she had entered where she shouldn't have. Entered perhaps in a realm from where return was impossible.

Involuntarily escaped a scream from her lips. The repulsion, the horror, became too much for her to tolerate in silence. Her trembling body almost buckled under her weak legs, but some unknown strength still left her standing. Her scream alerted the being and it turned around to look at Katarzyna with baleful eyes. The stygian black pupils shaped like ice picks in the greenish yellow background of reptilian eyes held such venom, such malice that in fear Katarzyna started to retreat, one step at a time.

As it opened its mouth in a corpse's smile, its thin almost non-existent lips pulled back, and through the yellowed fangs Katarzyna could see a forked tongue that slithered in and out of a purplish black orifice.

Even the blink of an eye would have taken longer than what it took for the demon to close its distance, to come and stand—a looming malignant figure upon Katarzyna. It flew, faster than lightning through the trees, while the dry leaves were left in a whirlwind in its path; the bunch of parchments that it had thrown away angrily, drifted around languorously in the breeze.

It narrowed its eyes and for a moment it seemed to try to remember Katarzyna from a different place. And then, in a voice that was coarser than nails being scratched through a tin plate it spoke.

“Katarzyna! Zinih, at last we meet.”

Katarzyna's eyes opened wide in shock. No one apart from her mother had ever called her Zinih. She had almost forgotten that Zinih had ever been her name. And now hearing the affectionate pet name in the voice of the demon filled her up with great revulsion, and surprisingly with greater anger, which gave her the strength she needed to face that atrocious being. For she was not willing to let anybody, especially not an incubus from hell, blemish the memory that the name carried. She was not bothered how the being had knowledge of such things; all she wanted was to save the two innocent children.

She trembled with fear as the demon stood close to her, yet she ordered it.

“Leave the children, let them go.”

The demon seemed to be taken aback at her directness. “Let them go? My dear Zinih, you are more naïve than I would ever have imagined.”

“Yes,” panted Katarzyna as she gasped for breath. “Perhaps I am. Perhaps *you* can tell me what exactly the sacrifice of innocents would bring to you.”

The coarse cackle of the demon filled the late afternoon sky. The forest vibrated with that unholy sound as the trees themselves shivered in fear as well. The thunder rumbled as if warning Katarzyna of the terrible storm that was about to enter her life and dark clouds rushed in obliterating the last bit of the weak sunlight. The demonic laughter hurt her ears and Katarzyna had to close them by pressing the palms of her hand firmly against her ears.

It stopped laughing after several agonizing moments, as if the mirth of what lay in Katarzyna's question had been too much to control its laughter—as if it had never heard anything that humorous.

It stared at her with cold impassive snake eyes and replied, “Sacrifice of innocents will bring exactly what it had brought years back in Trzebinia. It would bring power to me, and chaos to the world. I would imagine that I don't have to explain what exactly I would do with my power do I?”

If ever sarcasm was possible to be portrayed on an animal face that was how it would have looked. Katarzyna looked at it, defiant although deep within her heart she knew that she would not be going back. Perhaps that made her more brazen, made her ask more questions.

“What have you done with Trisha?” asked Katarzyna with as much boldness as she could muster.

“Don't worry, I have kept her safe. She is too precious for me.” It said with a sneer as it pointed towards the right.

Following its gaze Katarzyna found the body of Trisha, laid out on a white sheet on the grass. She seemed to be in a state of deep sleep.

“That is not Trisha!” exclaimed Katarzyna. “That is just her body.”

“Oops, did you mean her soul?” it asked mockingly. “Oh my, I don't think I have any idea. Her soul is not important to me. All I needed was a woman with the Marcussen blood. And in her I found it, after centuries of imprisonment, of patience. Now isn't that a great example of how fortune favours the smart?” It said twisting the last part of the proverb. Its smile made its hideous face more unbearable if that was even a possibility.

“Please,” said Katarzyna desperately. “Who are you? Why are you doing this to these innocent lives? Don't you fear God's wrath?”

“Where I come from, there is no God. Only him.” It said pointing at the statue. “And he is an exacting master. I don't have much time; I need to finish what I had started.”

“No!” Katarzyna held its scaly cold hand. She shook with revulsion at the touch of the rough leathery skin. But she was not going to give up. Not as long as she breathed would she ever let an innocent child come to harm in front of her eyes.

“Please,” she begged. “Kill me instead. Take my life, let these children go.”

The Dark Angel seemed to pause for a moment surprised perhaps at such a selfless act, for where it came from, treachery and vengeance ruled the days, not random acts of kindness.

It stared at her deeply, as if contemplating her offer. While comprehension of what exactly she was on the verge of doing, eluded her, Katarzyna stared back as dauntlessly as she could. However, the horrendous monster was not something that could be looked at for long and eventually she lowered her eyes.

“I am sorry,” it said with false politeness. “Does my true face bother you? It's the only form I can take when I pray to my Lord you know. For the body I was born in has been destroyed centuries back.” It paused and for the first time looked perhaps slightly remorseful.

But soon it continued. “Don't worry; I can look like anybody you want, although I cannot be that for long....Would this perhaps make you more comfortable?”

As Katarzyna looked up, she saw the smiling affectionate face of her mother—a face that had blurred through the years, yet that dear smile had been etched in her heart forever.

“No!” she sobbed. “Please no.”

“Tch tch, you humans, there’s no pleasing you”. It said annoyed and changed back to its original form. “Anyway now, I have wasted enough time with you. And no, I don’t need you. You are an old woman; I need the blood of young virgin girls.” It declared and turned around leaving Katarzyna standing there speechlessly.

Katarzyna noticed that, from the surrounding trees there started to crawl beings that were definitely from another world—as if the Dark Angel had called out an invitation. Their huge heads, their stunted bodies, their scrawny hands were the same rusty colour as dried blood. Their snarling mouths revealed bluish white razor sharp teeth, their deep red mouth from which their brown shrivelled tongue hung out sent deep shivers up Katarzyna’s spine. Yet she remained immobile. Unable to make the slightest movement. The bulging goldfish eyes of the creatures gazed greedily at the two innocent girls with the hunger of eternity.

The Dark Angel smiled invitingly, as if it had been waiting long for their arrival. Katarzyna looked in horror at the phantasm that stood in front of her, at the catastrophe that seemed to be acted out in her honour.

“Wait.” She sobbed. “Please, leave them; just take me. I beg you. I am sure that taking me, my soul would please your Lord a lot more. I am willing to break my allegiance to God and accept whatever the Dark Lord has in store for me. Please, just let them go.”

The demon smiled—if Katarzyna had not been so frazzled, she would have seen in it reflected its joy of victory. But she was too tensed, too worn out to notice anything anymore. It looked towards the creatures that had crawled down from the trees; its sudden glare stopping them mid gait. They stood there, snarling, wanting to tear the little girls to pieces, yet not daring in the presence of the powerful Dark Angel.

“Now, I am willing to listen to that.” It said conversationally. “Your soul...now that would definitely be worthy of something. In fact, your soul would be worth a hundred others. You know what?” It said as it started to walk back towards Katarzyna, “Not only would I let these girls go, but on my honour,” it said touching where its cold un-beating heart would probably reside, “I promise to not to harm anyone else...for let’s just say...sometime.”

Katarzyna’s heart stopped for a moment, and then started beating thunderously to make up for that moment. Her whole body shook with spasms as fear and realization of what she had done invaded every cell in her body. Finally her legs couldn’t hold her strong any longer, and with eyes shut, she kneeled before the Dark Angel defeated.

However, it seemed to be amused at Katarzyna’s acquiescence.

“Hush my dear Zinih. You are special, and only at a special moment can I sacrifice your soul, don’t you know that? Rise little one. Go home now. For in exactly one month, from this moment in time, I will come to claim what you have pledged to my Lord. Yet in good faith I will let these children go, just to show you how I always keep my word....in case you doubt that.”

The smile on that horrendous face was deadly. A reminder that the pact was already made and there was no turning back. That as promised, it would without the slightest doubt, definitely come for Katarzyna in a month.

Katarzyna opened her eyes and stood up. Her legs wobbly and her body weak with exhaustion. She watched as the Dark Angel turned around and banished the waiting minions of hell with a single clap of its hands. They turned around and disappeared. Growling with displeasure at the unwelcome hindrance to their feast.

Katarzyna did not have the energy to stay there any longer, and once the girls were freed, she turned around and left with them.

As the Dark Angel stood watching the trio retreat, a joyous smile of victory spread across its face. It had always wanted Katarzyna. For hers was a powerful soul. A God fearing saintly soul. If she transformed her loyalties to the Dark Lord, her allegiance to him and to Æsa herself would create a sovereign rule of Satan on earth. The children had but been a ploy to lure her into making the bargain. There wouldn't have ever been a sacrifice of the girls, for even the Dark Lord loathed the sacrifice of children. But Æsa knew the ever compassionate. Righteous, God fearing Katarzyna would give up her soul to save others. And it was important that Katarzyna did that willingly. For even in the infernal depths of hell, free will was always the most important clause.

Chapter 22

It was another long sleepless night; another night of anxious restlessness. But tonight it was worse. For Katarzyna understood that there was no escape from what she had bequeathed to the Dark Lord in the woods that afternoon. Thousands of questions tormented her ceaselessly. *Did she truly give up her soul? And what exactly does giving up of her soul amount to? Does she spend eternity tortured in hell? Does she herself become a Dark Angel or as Aesa had said, she makes the Dark Angel more powerful? Did she just agree to something that would bring apocalypse to the world?* Katarzyna shivered with horror at the faint voice deep within her heart. The voice that answered all her doubts, and told her that is exactly what she might have done. She might have just brought apocalypse much, much sooner than God had wanted, had willed.

She remembered how once they had been out of the woods the girls seemed to come out of a spell that had engulfed them till then. As she had taken them back to the *Gurkha* village, to their humble thatch roofed cottage, the entire village had followed them, walking along, whispering amongst themselves as they saw an old lady escorting the missing girls.

However, when the girls were questioned, by their parents or even for that matter by the detective who had come rushing down when he heard the news of their return, they could not answer anything—at least nothing that made any sense; for they insisted that they didn't remember what had happened to them in the woods. All they could recall was that they had entered the woods on the way back from school because they had heard someone calling out to them by their names. They had wandered around looking for the person who had called them, and yet had not seen anybody. Finally they had met Katarzyna and she had asked them to follow her back home which they had done unhesitatingly. They had no idea that they were missing for a few days although the exhaustion of the days in the woods was clearly visible in their young tired faces.

Katarzyna in a way was glad that the demon was forgotten by the children. She was certain that the horror would leave a severe trauma in the children's mind for the rest of their lives—had they remembered. Moreover she had been apprehensive of exactly how the simple village folk would handle the real disaster that the children had been the victims of. On their way to the village she had wondered whether the villagers would think of her as some sort of a witch or something similar. Yet, she couldn't just leave the children on the edge of the village. She needed to see that they were safe and sound and with their parents. And while everyone fussed around the two girls with joy and relief written all over their faces, Katarzyna quietly retreated out of their cottage and made her way home.

It had not been very difficult to avoid any sort of arduous conversation with Ian regarding her afternoon plight. For neither was Ian of the inquisitive sort, nor was he able to read the distress that was written all over Katarzyna's face; after all he did not know the old lady very well. Moreover, Ian's mind too was oversaturated with disquietude. He did

understand that time was running out and they needed to find a way to destroy the Dark Angel soon, before things became any worse than they already were. Thus, without much conversation Katarzyna could manage to see to Ian's evening meal and retire to her room at the soonest possible moment without appearing to be rude or a bad host. Ian was left sitting alone at the kitchen table and pondering over the antique journal—looking for clues of deliverance.

It would not have been unlikely for her to assume that maybe she herself had just dreamt the whole incidence. Not unlikely to deny the memory of the beastly demon from roosting inside her mind against her wishes, just like the two young girls had forgotten their ordeal. In fact in the familiar surroundings of her own room it would have been a lot easier to label that horrific afternoon as the work of an overly stressed over active imagination—had it not been the very tangible, the very flagrant proof that she had accidentally carried back along with her.

When she had taken the shawl off her weary shoulders that evening, she had found a sheet stuck to the woollen fibres of her shawl. Curiously she had detached it to have a look at it, but the moment she touched it, her whole body seemed to shake with revulsion. What should have been insentient seemed to quiver with life, with warmth of something living.

The malefic vibe that seemed to exude from it was unbearable, unreasonably frightening. The sensation was so absolute that Katarzyna just dropped it from her clutches instantly, and stared at it as it lay on the floor. She wondered what it was, and how it had come to stick to her shawl. She then remembered that when she had first intruded upon the forest clearing where the Dark Angel had been in the midst of praying to her Lord, she had been reading verses from few loose parchments. And when she had become aware of Katarzyna's intrusion, she had in anger flung the sheets aside and flown towards Katarzyna. The sheets had been drifting around in the strong breeze. Katarzyna was certain that what came back with her was one of those sheets.

After a few moments of unknown fear, of a strong reluctance to touch it once again, slowly she knelt down and with shaking fingers lifted the sheet. It was yellowed, shrivelled and curled up at the edges and certain parts eaten through by some unknown bugs perhaps. Without a doubt it was very ancient. The words were written in an incomprehensible language which Katarzyna thought perhaps was Latin since some of the letters were similar to English alphabets. The texture felt like some sort of parchment. *Perhaps it was papyrus*, wondered Katarzyna, having never been exposed to anything written on papyrus.

The sheet was bigger than any modern day page would be. Gradually curiosity got better of her and she brought out a measuring tape from the drawer to measure it. It was almost ninety centimetres in height and forty centimetres in width. There were ornate calligraphies done around the border. Colourful illustrations of wicked looking tiny demons were intertwined with the calligraphy. Although she couldn't understand what was written on it, the evil that seemed to emanate from that particular page was almost tangible. As if at any moment an invisible grasp may just clutch her throat and squeeze the life out of her without mercy.

Unnerved, Katarzyna quickly put it away inside a drawer and then climbed onto her bed. The ordeal of that afternoon played over and over in her mind like a scene from a horror film that had been looped into her brain against her will. She lay awake the whole night

and towards morning she realized that she needed to talk to Mathew and Ian about her pact with the Dark Angel. She knew that they would be upset by what she had done; however, she did not regret it, for saving the girls was worth giving up what she considered her useless existence any day. But the demon needed to be stopped, its powers needed to be abolished and there was just a month left to do that—just a month after which hell would rule the earth.

About fifty miles beyond the Gyatsola pass, in Tibet is a place called *Luhr*. Being located at almost eight thousand meters above the sea level, it is a place mostly unknown to man. The intense winds, the heavy blizzards, the negative sixty temperature makes this place perhaps the most intolerant, the most uninhabitable place on earth. Reaching that mountainous region would be a feat even beyond climbing Mt. Everest. For on its path lies deep gorges, powerful mountain rivers with water that is several degrees below freezing. Even if one could overcome those, the giant glaciers that surrounded the region would be still impassable to the masses. Perhaps there were just a handful of people who would be brave enough to even think of making that journey. And in that extreme environment stands a lone monastery hidden behind the great snow-capped peaks of the mighty Himalayas. For most part of the year the heavy snowfalls keeps it hidden away from the curious eyes of any man who would be adventurous enough to come to that region. In other times of weak summer sun, the great stone walls gleam like a magical Eden in the midst of the stormy land.

The great oaken door that led into the monastery complex of seventeen acres surrounded by high twenty feet walls had remained closed for more than five years now. Everything required for the scanty existence of the monks inside was available within its gates. They reared their own yaks, farmed their own vegetables in temperature controlled glass houses and healed their ailments through herbs grown within the monastery gates. And between performing their duties that was required for their mortal sustenance, they prayed. But their prayers were special, were more goal oriented. Because if their prayers stopped, the world would face a catastrophe, bigger than a global tsunami and more brutal than a world war.

Their existence for centuries has been kept a closely guarded secret and only the chosen ones once they reach a certain age gets to make the journey. And then, without the knowledge of their parents, without comprehending why they are acting as such, they leave home, and complete the journey to the hidden monastery.

In every generation fated young boys from around the world hears a calling—a voice that beckons them to traverse the perilous road that leads to the monastery. And unquestioningly they follow the voice; for its pull is such that it can't be denied. Once they leave their home, their family, and their mortified parents launch reports with the police about the missing children yet never over the years have they ever been successful

in bringing them back. And soon their names join those of the ones that remain missing forever.

Every boy on reaching the monastery realizes that that is where he belongs, and that is the reason for his existence, that is his duty on earth. Thus the sincerity with which every monk young or old prays inside that monastery is never for a moment questionable. And that is important, for the belief surrounding which the rules of the monastery has been laid requires complete allegiance, total faith.

That night had been one of the stormiest that even the elders of the monastery had ever seen. The gale blew with a vengeance threatening to shake even the mighty stone walls. The tempest whistled and moaned like banshees in pain. The blizzard covered every available part of the surrounding mountains in a blanket of snow. The open yards of the monastery were covered in foot high soft powdery snow resembling the vanilla icing of a cake. The thick candles inside the great hall flickered as chilly winds snuck in through tiny invisible cracks. But the monks remained unmoved; praying with their heads bowed, their palms joined and eyes closed whispering verses as ancient as time itself—protecting the world through the power of their prayers. Perhaps for the first time the monks could not immerse themselves completely in their prayers, could not concentrate on the verses as totally as they usually could, for never before had they faced a storm that ferocious.

Suddenly there was a sound of knocking against the great oaken door of the monastery. There was no chance of it being the work of the storm, for very clearly it sounded like someone was raising the heavy iron knocker and crashing it against the strong wood of the gate. The loud sound reverberated through the huge hall of the monastery its echo finally losing itself within the corridors that led to the sleeping chambers and the inner halls. All the monks raised their heads, their concentration distracted. Wordlessly they looked at each other for that sound had not been heard in the monastery for the past fifteen years.

Fifteen years back a lone Tibetan nomad had lost his way and had taken refuge inside the gates of the monastery. But that had been the last visitor and never after that had anyone raised the iron rings of the monastery gates.

That tonight of all nights someone would even be able to reach the gates was unbelievable. For several moments none of them knew what to do. The gale was too strong to venture out in the open courtyard crossing which they would reach the main gate of the monastery. However, as men of God they couldn't overlook the possibility that someone on the other side of the gates may be hurt and needed their assistance. Finally one bolder than the rest pulled his robe together and braving the storm went to open the mighty monastery gate. Seeing one of their brothers venturing out, a few of the other monks rushed to help as well and together they after much struggle fighting against the terrible winds, they managed to open the gates of the monastery.

The blizzard like a thick white curtain kept everything nearly invisible from their sight. However, had there been anybody on the other side of the gates, surely they would have seen him. But there was none. No one stood waiting on the other side. Neither did anyone kneel below—perhaps hurt and exhausted on that terrible night. It was completely empty. Yet right in the middle of the hurricane, there lay a single red rose, fresh and glittering, a newly bloomed one like a drop of ruby with an emerald green stalk in the virgin snow.

A young monk picked it up. Silently all turned around and retreated back into the great hall. They understood that it was a sign beyond their comprehension and it needed to be taken to Father Louis.

There was a soft knock on his door where Father Louis sat deep in prayers—his head bowed, the rosary clutched in his right hand. He looked up at the sound of the door being opened slowly. One of the younger monks walked in. In his hands he carried a tray and on the tray there lay a single rose. Without offering any explanation the monk realized that Father Lois knew the message behind the rose. For who else apart from the oldest surviving member of the *Patronus Fides* would be able to decipher the powerful messages from the heavenly Father.

Theirs was one of the very few remaining monasteries of the *Patronus Fides*. Perhaps centuries back the great monks had foreseen that Tibet would always remain a land of monasteries, a land of spiritual revelations. Thus hidden from the rest, would unobtrusively exist the monastery of the *Patronus Fides* for centuries to come. Whither civilization and urbanization like a contagion had infected most parts of the world, nestled among the pure untarnished mountains of the Himalayas their monastery had remained untouched by modernization, by the cynical closed minds of the scientific world; away from the scrutiny of the modern media and for centuries just like their forefathers, their brotherhood had prayed for strength to fight against the rise of any Dark Angel through all the ages.

Father Louis extended his hand and picked up the solitary rose from the tray. In a voice that shook with age and something perhaps akin to reverence he said, “*Quasi plantatio rosae in Jericho... Wisdom grew up as a rosebush in Jericho.*” He said quoting the Ecclesiasticus verse 24.18. “The time has come. Please ask the elders to convene in the *Aula of Lux lucis* within the hour.” He added, as he rose from his seat and with the slow gait that accompanies old age, he shuffled towards a simple wooden cabinet that stood at the corner of the room.

The young monk who had brought the message in the form of the rose felt a quiver of anticipation—a mild jolt of electricity that rushed through his veins. He had been in the monastery for over twelve years and never before had the elders held a meeting there. In fact most of his fellow brothers including himself had never even seen the interiors of *Aula of Lux lucis* or the Hall of Light.

Rumours were that the last time the elders of the monastery had ever gathered there was on the 27th of April 1945, three days prior to the death of the Fuehrer. Exactly three days after that on the 30th of April 1945, Hitler’s body was found with a bullet shot through his head and cyanide in his blood. The time of his death was given between three and four in the afternoon. 3.00 pm being the time that for centuries has been considered the Godly hour of the day as opposed to 3.00 am, which is considered the hour of Satan.

As the young monk retreated, and carried Father Louis’s message back to the elders, he realized that grave days lay ahead for the brotherhood of the *Patronus Fides*.

Chapter 23

Mathew Brown had a plan; a plan that none was aware of. A plan that he was determined to see through and prayed fervently for its success. He knew if he failed, he may not survive to see the next sunrise, yet he was not willing to back down. *After all what do I have to lose?* He argued with himself. He had lost everything that he ever held precious. Everything that had made his life worth living.

While Ian was still in the quest to demolish his family curse, Ian had not suffered as much as I have, thought Mathew grudgingly. The Marcussen curse had in fact wiped off every bit of happiness from his life. He had lost his beloved Katya to the curse, lost the motherly affections of Mrs. D' Costa who was still recuperating in the psychiatric ward of a private hospital in Calcutta. His ancestral tea plantation was dying off—destroying his business completely. But these were nothing, nothing compared to the fact that his daughter, the one solitary person for whom he would willingly cut his heart out, was suffering beyond the comprehension of any mortal.

It was still impossible for him to grasp the fact that she existed, yet not in a physical form. *What can I call it? Is my daughter a ghost? But then, she had not died.* There were millions of unanswered questions, but he knew that seeking answers to those questions would consume an entire life time. He was not bothered with the answers; all he knew was that he had to act. He couldn't for a moment forget the pain, the gripping agony that squeezed his chest that night in Katarzyna's house when he first saw Trisha's reflection in the hall mirror. When he realized that his daughter was being tormented every moment and he could do nothing about it. For a man who had always held his destiny by its horns, Mathew was disgusted with his helplessness when it came to rescuing his daughter.

He loathed every moment that brought him face to face with Æsa who now resided within the body of Trisha, with the comfort and casualness of belonging there. He wished he could drive a *Kukri*, the knife that the *Gurkhas* carried around, right through her heart. Yet he couldn't show his repugnance for that would be an unnecessary risk taken. Perhaps possibility that it would be fatal to him was also there. Not that Mathew was bothered about that. But he knew if something happened to him, Trisha would for eternity roam the earth in her astral form, and he couldn't bear to torment her any further.

Surprisingly, although Æsa was within the familiar physical form of Trisha, not once did Mathew feel any affection towards her. The entire characters of the two were so different that after even a glance, it was blatant that the one who was in the Brown Mansion was not Trisha. The cruel glint, the curled lips, the mocking smile, the ruthless sneer, Trisha would have been incapable of any of those. After a while Mathew reacted the same way as when a stranger wears the same clothing of someone familiar. For a moment they are mistaken to be your own, yet the differences are such that the clothing doesn't make the contrast any less obvious—perhaps in fact the dissimilarities become more glaring.

But now Mathew was tired of waiting around for Ian to find a way. His impatience was boiling over and he wanted to act. He had planned it for almost two days. It was quite a difficult plan, one with several loopholes, yet he knew that he needed to try it, for the sake of his sanity and the sake of his daughter. The plan did involve him talking to Æsa,

and perhaps they could do it over dinner. For after all a Dark Angel too needed to eat. Sustenance in the form of food and water was always required as long as one existed in the physical form and Mathew had observed that Æsa's appetite was as healthy as a giant's.

He decided that it was a situation that needed diplomacy and sometimes for the greater good, even enemies sit down and share a meal.

The whole day Æsa had been out of the house, while Mathew had been in. From late afternoon he locked himself up in the kitchen, cooking up a gourmet meal. He used to do that sometimes for Katya, when Trisha was a little girl and realized that he had still not forgotten those skills.

Darjeeling being a hilly area didn't have much seafood to offer and he had specially ordered some from Calcutta. Some of those had been difficult to get even in Calcutta, but as there was a common local saying, if one had the money, and knew where to look, one could even get some tigress's milk in the streets of Calcutta.

Now he stood in the middle of the kitchen and slowly took out the lobsters, the giant shrimps and the specially wrapped fish that was considered to be a delicacy in certain parts of the world. He sautéed and stirred and chopped and grated in frenzy trying to put together a meal that no one can deny. The delicious smell that wafted through the entire mansion made his own mouth water.

By the time he had laid dining table, the sun had set—leaving the sky bleeding dark red. Every dish, complete with silver cutleries and expensive china lay arranged on the table awaiting Æsa's arrival. Mathew lit the first candle among the five that stood upright in the gleaming silver candle stand, when he heard soft footsteps behind him. Without turning around he realized that it was Æsa, and that the time has come for him to begin his plan. His heart beat seemed to pick up its pace within moments and he realized that if he is not careful, he wouldn't be able to keep a cool demeanour or a steady voice. Taking a deep breath he turned around.

"Hi," he said.

Æsa stopped mid gait in surprise. For from the night when both had spoken in Mathew's study, not a single word has been exchanged between them. And that tonight Mathew waited with a table set for a romantic candle light dinner for two was not what she would have expected in a million years. Although to her Mathew's life was completely dispensable, yet she had kept him alive because she wanted to take him only when necessary, she didn't believe in wasting.

"I...I need to talk to you." said Mathew momentarily faltering in his speech as he looked towards the unblinking cold eyes of Æsa.

She did not answer; yet wordlessly walked towards him and towards the table.

"Please," he tried again, "I need to know certain things. I will not cause any sort of obstacles in your path, but I need to know where my daughter is. I need to know how do I get her back, and also what do I have to do in return."

Mathew's complete helplessness put a smile on Æsa's face. Her icy eyes seemed to light up with cruel amusement. She pulled a chair and sat down beside the table.

"I must say it has been a pleasant surprise to see that you are willing to accept that in order to *get* something, you need to *give* something." She said patronizingly. "Somehow that seems to be a concept that humans don't get quite right. And I like your way, I like that you would go through all this trouble," she waved her hand over the food laden

dining table, “to appease me. For that, I am obligated to answer your questions. But first things first. Please don’t ever be under the illusion that there is anything, anything at all that you can do, that would even remotely create an obstacle in my path. In fact my very friendly advice to you would be that you don’t ever try it, for that would definitely be very detrimental to your life. The second thing is that I have no idea where your daughter is. In fact for your peace of mind why don’t you just consider her dead?” she added shrugging her shoulders in a very dispassionate attitude.

“Actually I have an idea,” she said sitting up, as if she just had some sort of an epiphany. “Why don’t you have a wake, a memorial, a funeral ceremony even, in her name, for maybe then you would get some sort of a closure and you could get on with your life, or what is left of it.” She said with a cruel smile as she took a fork and jabbed it into a piece of golden fried prawn.

Blood roared in Mathew’s ears for the anger he felt surpassed every emotion he had ever felt in his life put together. He wanted to wring her neck with his bare hands had it been possible. However, he knew he had worked too hard at the plan to now spoil it with his temper.

He sat down slowly at the table and started to push the plates of food closer to her. He served her the herb rice, the mixed vegetables and laid the steamed fish fillets and the grilled lobster within her reach. That seemed to please her and she looked at the food with gleaming eyes.

And then she said, “You know, forget about Trisha, she was a weakling.....I can give you things that would take you beyond the dreams of any human. I like you...In fact I find you, what’s the word that they use nowadays?” she pondered for a moment and said, “Sexy. I find you sexy. And if you could just see beyond the fact that this is your daughter’s body,” she said pointing towards herself, “we could have some additional perks added to the entire package I have to offer you.”

Her greedy eyes roved all over Mathew perhaps stripping him from his clothing in her mind. “In fact,” she added, “the taboo, the forbidden pleasure should add more thrill to the.....relationship, don’t you think so?” she asked after a pause.

It was such a revolting thought, that Mathew could feel the bile rise in his mouth; he wanted to throw up, for he had not anticipated that any woman, even if she was a minion from hell, would speak in such repulsive manner. But he knew he needed to play along, for there was just a few more minutes left before his plan worked.

“I...I just need some time for it.” He said. For that was all he could manage to speak, so dry was his throat.

“Of course, I understand that.” She smiled, although her eyes clearly expressed that she couldn’t understand what the hesitation was. “After all I *am* a woman, and I don’t want to be the one that pursues.” She added coyly.

Mathew was not aware of her last sentence because all he could see was that slowly she had almost finished through the entire plate of lobsters and was going for the fish next. His heart beat picked up another notch as Aesa reached for the plate of steamed fish.

Mathew had taken the most amount of time to cook that dish. For the first time he had attempted to steam a dish, especially since he never liked the raw smell that steamed fish seemed to have. But this was a dish that to retain its flavour and its toxicity, needed to be cooked to the bare minimum. In fact he had taken the fish out of the steamer, several

minutes before it should have been taken out and cleverly disguised the uncooked smell with a lot of sesame oil, ginger and freshly chopped coriander.

Whereas Mathew's nervousness was palpable, Aesa's nonchalant enjoyment of the dish was a blatant contrast. She slowly mixed the fish up with the rice and chewed with her eyes closed enjoying every morsel of it. Mathew could feel his throat dry up while his blood pressure rose to an extent where his ears and cheeks became hotter than a clay oven.

He had gone through a terrible amount of trouble to obtain the puffer fish. Although it was a delicacy in Japan it was not that easily available in Darjeeling or Calcutta for that matter. In fact he had had to hire a fishing schooner just for that purpose. It was an illegal job and for that, it had been extremely expensive. However he didn't care. He needed it at all cost.

He had planned the dinner with the sole intention of poisoning Aesa. He had first considered poisonous mushrooms, but after exhaustive research realized that they didn't work as fast as his second option, the puffer fish. The puffer fish seemed to be the best option. It contained a substance called tetrodotoxin that was lethal to humans. It was considered up to 1,200 times deadlier than cyanide. Research showed that there were enough toxins in a single puffer fish to kill up to thirty adults and there is absolutely no known antidote to it.

The first time he had heard of it was when he had visited Japan on one of his business trips. There it was known as *Fugu* and people enjoyed it as a delicacy and were willing to pay exorbitant amount of money for it. However, the preparation required an extremely specialized skillset and only chefs who were licensed and trained were allowed to prepare the dish. For a wrong cut could spread the poison and anyone who ate it could be killed instantly.

Mathew had expected that Aesa would choke on the first morsel of the steamed fish, for he had not removed the poisonous gland from the fish. Rather he had mashed it spreading it around every part of the fish before steaming it. In order to avoid accidental contamination he had thrown away every piece of utensils that he had used to cook it. But now, he was shocked to see that Aesa finished every last bit of the fish. She seemed to be able to read the horror that was reflected in Mathew's eyes. And after finishing the entire plate she stood up and wiped her mouth on the linen napkin.

Her eyes held his in an unwavering gaze, and just before she turned around she smiled mockingly. "*Fugu* has always been my favourite, and I had found the way they cut off the toxin gland reduced the taste of the fish. Thank you for making it the way I like it." Leaving a horrified Mathew standing beside the dining table that still contained the remnants of a meal, she walked away.

Right before she left the dining room she turned towards Mathew once again. Her eyes glared with a cold fire. "I hope next time you don't forget what I told you about the obstacles, that you *think* that you may create in my path. Remember, it can only harm *you* and never me. Hopefully after today you would stop trying these terribly childish games. If games are what you are interested in, then perhaps you could come into my bedroom sometime....we could play some adult ones then."

Without waiting for any further answer from the mortified Mathew, Aesa turned around and left the room, leaving behind a terrified Mathew—one who was defeated both physically and mentally.

CHAPTER 24

“.....Like a tunnel that you follow,
To a tunnel of its own,
Down a hollow to a cavern
Where the sun has never shone
Like a door that keeps revolving,
In a half forgotten dream...
...like the circles that you find,
In the windmills of your mind.”

The soft sound of one of Ian's favourite songs wafted through the hidden speakers in Café Barista, where he had been sitting for the last three hours, trying to search for a way. The melodious serenading voice of Sting seemed to reflect Ian's frame of mind directly through the song.

Amusedly Ian thought that although he had always loved the song this was the first time he could actually grasp its meaning, for his mind true to the last word, as a windmill was spinning and churning theories and counter theories to end the devastation that the Dark Angel was bringing to everyone around him. He understood that very soon, it would spread to the other people in Darjeeling and then possibly the world. He reflected that the ones who were there in the café right then, discussing business strategies or meeting friends over a cup of coffee, had no idea, that their world could change, that their lives could be in danger; if he, Ian Marcussen couldn't come up with a solution.

For the last three hours he had had so many espressos, that his senses were heightened immensely and his hands almost twitched as he tried to write down some of the remote possibilities on the legal pad that was kept open beside the ancient journal and the laptop that had several searches on right then on keywords that included *Patronus Fides*, apocalypse, Satan, and ancient rituals.

Yet there was nothing that looked even remotely promising. Time was running out. It had been a week since he had come back to Darjeeling. A week since both Mathew and Katarzyna had confessed their own consternating encounters with the Dark Angel. A week since all had realized that soon Æsa would be coming for Katarzyna's soul, something which she herself had admitted would make her more powerful than now.

Ian dreaded to even think exactly what devastation that would cause. Yet, all ideas to get the Dark Angel to a church evaporated even before they were barely formed. At one time Ian had thought that perhaps if only somehow they could drug Æsa, it would perhaps be possible to move her into a church and then they could see what happens after that. However, since Mathew related how one of world's worst known poisons had not even the slightest effects on her, dismally Ian realized that where Tetrodotoxin had failed it was beyond impossible for any tranquilizers, no matter how strong they are, to work on her.

He was aware that if their plan failed, it would definitely bring Æsa's wrath on all of them. But right now, that was not what he was thinking. He was more adamant to banish the Dark Angel because he wanted more than anything to bring his niece, Trisha back. Over the days he had grown to adore her, to love her as his own daughter. And it had all started on an afternoon when he was completely frustrated at the world and everything and everyone in it.

Over the past few days, anytime Ian sat down to do some kind of research on Katarzyna's kitchen table, which seemed to have become the hub of all their meetings, he could feel Trisha's spectral presence hovering over him. He had always found it extremely unnerving unlike Mathew and Katarzyna, in spite of understanding that it was unavoidable.

Of course he empathized with her situation, yet he did not know her as well as the other two did, and would have preferred that she leave him alone. Especially since he was still having problems forgetting that night's explicit dream that had left its mark on him in the form of deep scratches that still ran across his chest.

However, somewhere deep inside he did have a heart of solid gold, although it was so deep that it was almost invisible. And because of that heart, he couldn't let Trisha know about his discomfort. Couldn't ask her, even politely to not be around him when he was working. After all he did understand that the worst was being faced by her.

One day when he was just too exhausted after brooding over the singular problem and at the complete lack of any inspiring ideas, his attention towards Trisha's spectral presence became particularly drawn. He decided that he needed at least to find a solution to that problem, before he moved on to the Dark Angel.

Without another word he left the house and returned with numerous mirrors and two workmen for till then not once had he attempted to see her or communicate with her; always pretending that she didn't exist. With Katarzyna's permission he had those mirrors mounted in every possible part of the house, uprooting paintings and family pictures where it got in the way. And now he could see Trisha clearly. Not just feel her ghostly company.

The moment he saw her, all his irritation, all his nervousness vanished. Unknowingly tears filled up his eyes, with guilt and shame. *How could I have ever been annoyed by her?* He had wondered remorsefully.

Trisha understood that Ian wanted to get to know her better. She too had felt his irritation on several occasions, but had never blamed him. After all it is not easy to live in a house where one of its members was invisible. As both their eyes met for the first time over the mirror, she gave him a hesitant smile. Her pale face, her large oval eyes, her melancholic smile, like a dagger pierced through Ian's unyielding heart, and in a moment he fell in love with her.

She was his own flesh and blood, his niece, his beloved Katya's daughter. *How could I have avoided her for so long? How could I have been such an asshole?* He admonished himself relentlessly.

With an awkward clumsy movement, he had waved at her, as if they were meeting for the first time in a park. She too waved back, a more cheerful smile now spread through her face.

"Hi Trisha," said Ian self-consciously knowing he should have done that several days back.

Trisha said something, but he couldn't understand, for although he could see her lips moving, there was no sound. Ian shook his head, indicating that he couldn't understand her. She seemed to ponder for a while and then falteringly she made signs with her hands. Trisha had learned the sign language in school.

Having studied in a convent, part of their social work curriculum included regular visits to the schools for the children with hearing impairment. Over the years in order to interact with them, she had picked up the sign language and was quite good at it. However, she was not sure whether Ian would know the language as well, but nevertheless thought it would do no harm to try it out.

Seeing the signs she made, Ian's face lighted up. He remembered those signs from his childhood. He remembered Katya making those to him in their ancestral castle. As a boy Ian had always been inquisitive and adventurous. Some of those adventures had led him straight back to his father with a long list of complaints from the entire household. And he had spent many a holiday grounded in his room which was on the second storey of the castle. He was smart enough to know that to crawl out of the window would be the prologue to a broken leg and a longer period of grounding. However he had been terribly bored. His only companion had been Katya who would patiently sit on the castle grounds and look up to him. The distance was too much to carry out a conversation, for the strain on the voice would be painful. Thus they had learnt the sign language and for many hours in a day the two children would communicate, and keep each other company. After decades, once again Ian needed to use those signals. And it was ironic that it was with the daughter of the one who had taught him the language in the first place. Hesitantly at first for he was not sure whether he remembered them, Ian made the sign for 'how are you'?

The way Trisha's eyes lit up was proof enough that she could understand him. From that moment forth, the two had become great friends. And Trisha had almost become a physical presence in the house for the numerous mirrors made sure that she didn't remain invisible for long. Mathew and Katarzyna both had been thrilled with Ian's efforts and that little thing had actually brought in an air of cheerfulness among them.

Ian found he was in awe of the young girl for her courage. He admired her immensely for her endurance, her bravery. Secretly he felt proud, for he knew that no ordinary girl would be able to tolerate the terrible hand that Fate had dealt to her. Only one with the brave Viking blood would be up for the challenge. Ian too was more encouraged once he got to interact with Trisha. He couldn't help remember Frank L. Gaines' famous quote "Only he who can see the invisible, can do the impossible". The first part of the quote was fulfilled, and all that remained was to complete the second part of the quote.

It was almost five in the evening and Ian had promised to be back in time for tea. He had an appointment with Trisha; they were supposed to play a game of chess. Trisha had boasted that she was the best chess player in the whole of Darjeeling and had won several trophies, and Ian could never let go of a challenge, even if it was in the midst of the dark times like now. Hurriedly he left the café and walked away from the mall towards the hilly road that led to Katarzyna's house. The mall was the name given to the centre of the

Darjeeling town and was more of a mall. Ian had not brought his car, thinking a brisk walk would do him some good. It had been ages since he had seen the interiors of a gym or had gone for a jog. Thus he did not want to lose the little chances of exercise he got. Almost at the end of the mall, where the shops had thinned substantially and a row of tall pines and firs lined the narrow road, Ian found a *Gurkha* sitting beside a wooden cart, selling various metal wares and among them quite a few remarkable kukris—the knives carried by the *Gurkhas* that had curved blades. Always an addict to weapons, Ian couldn't help but stop.

The man smiled at him almost knowingly as Ian closely scrutinized each of them. However although all were quite attractive to look at, the make was very common and nothing stood out. Nothing that caught Ian's eyes. After a few minutes during which the man seemed not to be able to take his eyes off Ian, Ian looked up and thanking the man he attempted to move off. As he took his first step the man called him back.

"I have one special." he said in broken English.

Ian was not impressed. It was the rule of all peddlers around the world to always claim to have something special whenever they wanted to attract a tourist. Something exorbitantly priced and completely unworthy. However, weaponry being his passion and specialty, he could not help himself but turn around once again facing the man. The *Gurkha* man looked ageless.

Ian had observed that this particular race within their considerably small size seemed to pack power like no other race. They were always fit, and in fact in all the time he had been in Darjeeling, not once had he seen an overweight *Gurkha*. Moreover their skin was always so clear and taut, free of wrinkles till they were almost in their sixties, that anyone who was younger than that was difficult to be placed in any age group.

Ian couldn't help noticing the sharp narrow eyes that held almost a hypnotic glance. As he stood there unmoving, the man bent down and produced something wrapped in sheepskin. Intrigued Ian extended his hand as the man put it in his palms.

Silently Ian took back every word he had thought before about exorbitantly priced unworthy objects. For in his hand he held a true work of art. It was clearly an ancient Kukri. It was around twelve inches long. The curved blade although smoothed over the years, had a sharp edge that still reflected a dangerous glint and declared its perilous nature. The handle was made of ivory; the workmanship exquisite. Ian couldn't believe his luck and that he would come across something that spectacular. Although he knew about these specialized *Gurkha* knives, he had not come across anything this magnificent. There were ancient words engraved in the blade. It looked like Sanskrit.

"What are these?" he asked pointing at the engravings.

"Those are ancient blessings. Those keep its owner safe Shaab" said the man, referring to Ian as what is considered 'sir' in their language.

"Look at the notch at here" he continued pointing to the base of the metal blade. "It looks like cow's feet, the mark of the great Pashupati Nath. It keeps you safe."

Ian knew all about Pashupati Nath. He was a form of Lord Shiva, the Hindu God that destroyed evil. The Nepalese and *Gurkha* prayed to him. His pilgrimage was also near Kathmandu the capital of Nepal, the Himalayan country.

Without any further discussion he asked, "How much is it?" prepared to hear a very high amount.

“It is one thousand rupees Shaab.” said the man surprising Ian completely.

He was ready to pay even ten thousand for it, such was its value. However, without saying anything, he took out two, thousand rupees bill and passed it to the man. “Here, keep it.”

The man took it gratefully and as he pocketed the money, he said, “Remember Shaab, this kukri never misses its mark. So be careful on who you use it.”

Ian was mystified with the man’s speech. Yet he decided not to make much of it. They did have a flare for the dramatics; he concluded.

The sky was already darkening as thunder clouds became visible on the periphery. Although the sun was still bright on the western horizon it did not look that it would be able to fight against the dark clouds once they spread through the sky. Ian looked up at the sky frowningly. He had spent too long in town and needed to get back soon. He didn’t want to get wet in a shower, for the last thing he needed now was to catch a cold. In vain he tried to look around for a cab. But getting a cab in Darjeeling was almost an impossible feat until and unless it was pre booked.

As he walked hurriedly, he saw the old Darjeeling English cemetery on his left. He remembered seeing one of its gates right before the road that led to Katarzyna house. Although he was not sure of the exact way, he wondered whether it wouldn’t be too difficult to go through it. Confident that he had spent many evenings strolling around the winding roads of Darjeeling and had a rough idea about its layout, impulsively Ian decided to take a shortcut through the cemetery. He argued that that if he was lucky, he would reach the house before the rain started.

Inside the cemetery the graves were all in ruins through years of non-maintenance, as well as through the brutal works of the thieves, vandals and grave diggers. The weather too had not been very kind to the ancient graves of the colonial times. However, whoever had chosen the site had a great taste, thought Ian admiringly. From the terraced grave sites, one could see beautiful undulating tea plantations covering the neighbouring hills as well as the Darjeeling town in the lower valley.

On one end was the majestic Kanchenjunga with its snow-capped peaks that were now golden with the setting sun’s rays. It was a breath-taking sight and added to the overall beauty of the whole place.

Ian walked briskly, and was almost reaching the heart of the cemetery when he felt that there was someone watching him. He spun around--the hair on his nape standing up in the anticipation of something unknown. But there wasn’t a sign of another being apart from him—not even a mongrel which the streets of Darjeeling had quite a few of. Slightly unnerved he turned around, increasing his pace.

Suddenly taking a shortcut through the cemetery didn’t seem to be a good idea. Even after walking a while longer, the feeling that he was being watched did not go off. After taking a few more steps he paused again, and looked around. This time his eyes caught a raven that sat on one of the high branches of a pine tree. It was so high up that Ian had to squint holding his forehead with his palm to cover his eyes against the glare of the sun.

He was not sure whether the raven stared at him as well, but suddenly a sixth sense alerted him, urged him to hurry. Somehow without a doubt he knew that it was Jannike. The reason was twofold. Firstly the sensation of being watched became stronger as he looked at the raven, and secondly the way Katarzyna had described her encounter with it in the woods was almost similar to what Ian felt right then.

Ian was at a loss. He had always thought that by staying away from the Brown Mansion, his presence in Darjeeling would remain a secret to Æsa. But he had never considered that deadly raven in that equation. Never realized that perhaps the Dark Angel's familiar may give away his cover. Right then there was nothing he could do. All he wanted was to hurry and get back to the house.

Suddenly the wind picked up, dead leaves spun around in small whirls while the giant pines and firs stooped and swerved fighting against the strong winds. Without meaning to, Ian almost started to jog, when he became aware that he seemed to have lost his way. The swishing sounds of the trees sounded eerily close to voices; as if they were talking—whispering to him.

Unbelievably, it almost sounded like they said, “she knows.....”

The trees seemed to become unnaturally agitated as the wind became stronger. Their whispering became louder and louder till Ian couldn't take it anymore, he closed his ears with his hands and almost started to run blindly. Yet the whispers didn't stop. The chilling sound echoed through the cemetery as every tree seemed to pick up the chant. “Shhhhhhh, knssssshhh ...sheeee...knooooowssss....shhhhhheee knows.”

Right in the middle of the vast cemetery, Ian realized that he had truly lost his way. He stopped and looked around having absolutely no idea where he was. He couldn't see a single gate that would lead him out of that burial ground. All he could see were ancient graves—most of them crumbling with age and decay. The winged angels and gargoyles on the bigger graves stared at him with their dead stone eyes, overflowing with malevolent glee. As if they knew something that he didn't.

As the stygian cumulonimbus clouds covered the early evening sky, the shadows of the stone statues seemed to grow bigger, falling right across Ian's path. For a second Ian was puzzled, for he had known only light to create shadows, and couldn't explain their presence when there was no sunlight.

But that thought fled faster through his mind than a passing bullet for he couldn't believe his eyes as he saw the shadows on the ground. They were alive. Their grotesque figures, snarling mouths, bony fingers that ended in claws crept slowly towards his legs almost as if they wanted to trap him in their skeletal shadowy grip. For a moment Ian couldn't move as he stared in horror at the ground while the shadows sneaked closer and closer.

He realized that he needed to run, something urged him not to let the shadows touch him for that would entrap him in the infernal depths of hell. He was not sure whether it was his subconscious or something else, but he was not willing to stand around and find the answer. As fast as his legs could carry him, he ran, not bothered whether he was running towards the gate or away from it, his only desire was to leave the shadowy demons behind.

Suddenly the first steel bolt of lightning tore through the sky followed by the deep rumbling of the thunder, and then started the rain. It was piercing, painful and chilled Ian to the bones. Visibility almost became zero and all Ian could see was a white sheet that covered the entire site. The menacing shadows seemed to have vanished although Ian knew that it was not over. Through the torment of the last few minutes Ian had lost sight of the demonic raven.

But as he walked as fast as he could for the rain and the strong gale had slowed him down considerably, he felt rather than saw, the raven swooping down towards him from

atop a tree. It was coming from behind him, and Ian knew that if he didn't act fast enough, he would not survive its attack.

He could hear the impious raven catching up on him, as the swooshing sound of its wings became louder and louder. Every nerve in his body, every muscle, became alert waiting for the right moment, years of martial arts, gruelling hours of practicing *Krav Maga* had heightened his five senses and right now even his sixth sense seemed to be alert and involved.

At the last possible moment Ian turned around when the satanic bird was just inches away from his head, and threw the *Kukri* that he had kept in his right pocket all the while clutching nervously afraid that he may not be able to take it out at the last moment. The knife went right across its heart with vehemence and the raven flew backwards with the momentum of the act. Its treacherous talons that had been spread with the intention of perhaps clawing a substantial part of Ian's skull curled in as it fell to the ground.

All at once without a preamble stopped the rain as the demonic bird lay on the ground.

Hesitantly Ian crept up to it and leaned down wanting to make sure that he really did get it. He couldn't believe that it would be so easy to kill something that had the power of a demon. But then he saw that it wasn't he that killed it. It was the *Kukri*. True to the last word of the *Gurkha* it indeed was a blessed one. And as Ian knelt beside the demonic raven, the Sanskrit words that were engraved in the blade of the knife started to catch fire and disappear one by one; their mission fulfilled their job complete. Within moments all the words had vanished leaving behind no traces of its existence on the shiny blade of the knife.

Ian bowed his head in gratefulness, overwhelmed with the many miracles that God showered in his path. As he stared at the marred features of the raven distastefully, he knew that *Æsa* has lost her queen and it wouldn't be long before he checkmated her. He pulled the *kukri* out of the unholy creature and he looked up.

A single ray of the setting sun broke through the thunder clouds and lighted the way, at the end of which stood a gate that exited from the cemetery. It beckoned him to it, almost affectionately, as if to say his job for the moment was done and between now and the next battle, the way will always be shown.

In the woods at the edge of the Brown tea plantation, *Æsa* suddenly looked up to the sky. Seeing the sun peeping through the storm clouds that she had summoned, she knew something was not right. Her unhallowed rituals seemed to have gone wrong somewhere, for by now Ian was supposed to be dead. She had always known that he was back from the moment he had landed in Darjeeling. She knew he was the strongest link and with his death, no one else could stop her. She herself had poisoned Jannike's talons with the venom of a king cobra. With one scratch, with the first draw of blood the neurotoxin venom would have entered Ian's blood stream and he would have died within minutes. However, *Æsa* felt something was not right. There was something joyous, something happier in the air. Not the sense of brood and desolation that she wanted the world to be surrounded with.

And for the first time an obscure fear like a small insect crept close to her heart. She stood up; she needed to find Jannike soon, needed to know what happened.

Ian hurried out of the cemetery and realized he was right; the gate did lead to the road right in front of Katarzyna's house. He walked briskly through the uphill road. He had never been as glad as he was right then, when the first glimpse of the homely bungalow caught his eyes. He almost ran through the path that led up to the main house, suddenly anxious to see that everything has remained unchanged inside the house and especially with its members. The front door was open, and as he rushed in from the hall, he saw Katarzyna sitting on the kitchen table, with two men on either sides of her. Their clothing was strange, but familiar.

It took moments for Ian to realize why; because they wore the exact habit that was described in his ancestral journal. His heart beat picked up as he with unbelieving eyes stared at the men who could not have been anything else but the ones that he had spent seeking for the last few weeks frenziedly. And there they were, right in front of his eyes. The biggest miracle yet that God had showered on him.

CHAPTER 25

For several long moments Ian stood between the hall and the open kitchen. Like a statue with his face carved in disbelief. He did not feel the wet clothes that chilled him to the bones—oblivious to the water that dripped from his soaked clothes, drenching the hall carpet; nor did he glance at Katarzyna, who hurriedly had left the conversation midway to look around for a towel for him. His eyes were only focused on the two monks who sat at the table, almost as if by averting his gaze even for a second, there was a risk that they may just vanish.

Born into affluence that was always taken for granted, Ian experienced very few instances in his entire life when he really had a need to seek something. Everything had always been available to him at his tiniest wish. Every whim had been fulfilled; every eccentricity indulged. But no wealth in the world had helped him to find the ones who were now in the same room as him. He was overwhelmed. That coupled with his recent ordeal left him speechless.

It was Father Jonathan who made the first move. From the moment he had joined the *Patronus Fides* monastery as a child, all he had heard about was the Marcussens. The tales were abundant and intimidating; of powerful Dark Angels and their slayers born within the same Viking clan with a history of over six hundred years.

Like watching a double edged knife, the monastery had kept a watch on the Marcussens. On one hand wary, for there lurked evil in their vicinity and on the other hand reverential, at the power they possessed to bring an end to Satan's pawns. And seeing Ian standing right in front of him, towering, formidable, even in the most compromising of all physical conditions, with hair wet and stuck to his skull, and clothes limp with water, to the monk it was almost like seeing a legend come to life.

Father Jonathan was born in the Yushu County of the Qinghai province in China. Born the youngest among eight children to a family of farm labourers, his childhood had seen both; scarcity of rice and abundance of abuse—both verbal and physical. From the time he was six years old, every morning at dawn he would follow two of his elder brothers to a farm nearby.

The farmer was not known for his kindness or his generosity. The only thing he was generous with, was the whip. And several times the innocent child had the misfortune to feel it on his tender body. He had been strictly told by his parents to accept whatever punishment was ever meted out to him for further antagonizing the despotic landlord may completely stop their otherwise meagre source of income.

At an age when children still live in a world of magic and fairy-tale, he understood the realities that comes with being poor; being at the mercy of others' whims and fancies; being exploited. Whenever he could, after gruelling hours of working in the farm, he

would go and sit beside the Tongtian River. The powerful serpentine river that ran through their small village always beckoned him to it.

He used to find solace in her rocky banks, beside the ever flowing waters that was indomitable, unstoppable and bold. From the time he could remember, he had always felt that he was not where he belonged. It was a strange discernment. One whose source was unknown. Yet it was always there right below his skin, right beyond his line of sight, right in his heart.

The whisperings that within the monks of *Patronus Fides* was known as *Dico* or ‘The Calling’, started around the time he was thirteen years old. Every trip to the banks of the Tongtian beckoned him to follow her, till he reached where he belongs. The voices when they first started had been barely noticeable. They could easily have been the swishing of the leaves or the gurgling of the waters. But as time went by they became more distinct, more urgent. Soon the whisperings were not just confined to the banks of the river; they followed him everywhere, urging him to find his destiny. Eventually, laden with curiosity and an unknown sense of purpose Jonathan traversed the miles that ended on the doorstep of the *Patronus Fides* monastery in *Luhr*.

And now, seeing Ian face to face, realizing that he was in the presence of a Marcussen, overwhelmed him as nothing had done before in the thirty years that he had spent in the monastery. He knew that finally he was living his purpose, his destiny. With a voice that shook with awe and elation, he spoke. “Ian Marcussen, it’s an honour to finally meet you.”

Ian was unable to speak. There were too many things he wanted to say, and too many things he needed to ask. No word could ever be sufficient to describe what he felt. No phrase would be a suitable greeting that Ian could convey through any language known to man. But his face lit up in a smile. Every known positive emotion—relief, triumph, joy and reverence like the various spices that makes a dish delectable was sprinkled in that smile.

As soon as Mathew arrived, the five of them sat around the kitchen table which over the last few days had taken on the importance of a conference table. They knew the path was difficult, fraught with danger, yet they found comfort in knowing that together they would banish the incubus undoubtedly to hell. Information was exchanged, the journal was taken out to be scrutinized further, the monks read aloud the verses that within its lines showed the path to salvation and understood what the other three had learnt some time back.

However, along with it, the impossibility of the deed was also understood. That the Dark Angel could not be taken to church that easily was realized by all.

“Can’t we create another talisman and trap the Dark Angel like before?” asked Ian despairingly.

Father Jonathan shook his head. “That is not possible. At every age, at every century the Dark Angels become smarter, and they cannot be trapped the same way. And as the journal mentions, taking it to church is the only Achilles’ heel that it has right now.”

Mathew sighed. “So I guess we just *have* to find a way to take *Æsa* to church.”

“We also need to confide with the Bishop of the Catholic Church, without that it would be difficult to carry out an exorcism.” said Father David quietly. The fifty something Chinese monk seemed to be a man of few words, and this was the first time he addressed the bunch.

“Moreover,” he added, “we need to chant verses from St. Michael’s exorcism prayer before the Dark Angel can be banished. This was the instructions that Father Louis, our chief elder of the monastery in *Luhr* has sent us with.”

The word exorcism sent a shudder of uneasiness through the three.

“I thought exorcism was done when somebody is possessed. But...I have...I must tell you that the Dark Angel comes out of Trisha’s body whenever it prays to its lord. I have seen it myself.” said Katarzyna hesitantly.

“You have seen its *actual form*?” asked Father Jonathan incredulously. “They...they never let anybody see them in that form. There must be a *reason* behind it...how...wha...what does it look like?” He asked wide eyed, like a child wanting to know against all his wisdom about the monster.

A shiver ran through Katarzyna as she narrated that dreadful afternoon when she had come face to face with the incubus.

When she came to the part about how she had perhaps sacrificed herself to save the children, Father Jonathan shook his head violently.

“We cannot allow that. Now I understand why it allowed you to see it in its demonic form. For the ritual where it possesses your soul would have to be performed by the Dark Angel in its original form. We need to stop that at any and every cost. The soul of the Righteous is a very precious treasure to the demons of hell. If it gets successful in its mission, then end of the world would not be really far.”

“I am willing to do anything that you need me to.” said Katarzyna. “If it stops the devil from possessing my soul, I am even willing to take my own life.” She added bravely, though the fear was peeping through it, like a moon in a cloudy sky.

Father Jonathan smiled. A look of something between admiration and amusement flickered through his face. “You cannot do that. Suicide is a mortal sin and by doing that you would without any other effort on your part land on the Devil’s doorstep. We need to find another way out of this mess. And we don’t have much time I see.”

There reigned silence for a few moments which was broken by Father David. “You asked about exorcism.” He said addressing Katarzyna. “An exorcism is not only performed when a particular body is possessed by the demon. It is also the ritual through which the demon is banished to the infernal fires of hell, to answer your question.”

In the midst of their conversation about verses and rituals, Katarzyna suddenly remembered the parchment paper that had accidentally come back with her and now lay buried under piles of books and letters in a locked drawer in her room. Without even bothering to excuse herself, she abruptly left the table. Every pair of eyes looked at her with surprise and remained silent with puzzlement till she returned within the next few minutes.

“This...this came back with me.” She said holding the piece of parchment out towards Father Jonathan. “It was perhaps accidentally stuck to my shawl. It *was* very windy, the day when I saw the creature in the woods.”

Curiously Father Jonathan took it from Katarzyna and as he and Father David poured over the ancient parchment, Mathew, Ian and Katarzyna looked at them, expectantly, yet without making any movement, afraid to disturb their concentration for even the slightest moment.

It was hardly a minute before he and Father David both looked up. There had been a terrible transformation in both their facial expressions. Tiny beads of sweat were seen on

Father David's forehead and his hands placed on the table trembled slightly if one watched it closely. On the other hand, Father Jonathan's pallid face spoke volumes even before he opened his mouth.

"This...this is a page from the Codex Gigas." He informed in a voice laden with terrifying awe.

However the rest did not seem to know, neither were the impressed by that name.

Seeing the ignorance on the faces that surrounded him Father Jonathan took a deep breath and in a voice that trembled significantly he continued. "The Codex Gigas is more commonly known as the Devil's Bible."

This time there seemed to be a flicker of recognition on Ian's face, observed Father Jonathan. Perhaps because of his fascination with antiquities the name was familiar to him he concluded. But Ian remained silent, and let the priest continue.

"It is perhaps one of the most intriguing, intimidating and horrific representation of the bible. Intriguing, because there are more mysteries surrounding the Codex Gigas than any other book known to mankind. Intimidating, since it is the only bible in the world that has a picture of the devil painted in one of its pages with the utmost care and meticulousness."

Father Jonathan looked around the table. Everybody including the ethereal Trisha, who he had already been introduced to, was listening him intently. He continued after a pause. "And *horrific*, because each page that measured around ninety centimetres by fifty centimetres was made of donkey or perhaps calf skin.

It is estimated that to write the entire book that would be around three hundred plus pages, the skins of one hundred and sixty donkeys were used."

The page had been kept in the middle of the table when Father Jonathan had started his narration. In the midst of which Katarzyna had curiously picked it up. However, the moment she heard about the source of the parchment, she threw it away, shaking with revulsion.

Father Jonathan smiled at her bleakly. "Ten pages from this medieval book have been missing. No one knows where they are, and what the pages may have contained. But now I think at least one of these pages have been found."

"Wha...what exactly do you think is written on the page?" asked Mathew curiously. "My Latin is not that good, but whatever I can make out.... It...it seems to be some sort of invocations, something that perhaps invokes Satan himself."

Katarzyna's blood ran cold and she remembered the demon in front of the Demon King. *If I had arrived slightly later, would I have actually witnessed the unthinkable?* She wondered. Involuntarily, the old lady started to shiver, as the implications of the laggard knowledge set in.

"What mys...?" Mathew paused abruptly. He had just opened his mouth to ask about the mysteries of the Codex Gigas, but right then he noticed Katarzyna trembling. The poor lady looked petrified. Even without a confirmation from her, he realized that she was reliving the horror of that frightful afternoon and rushed to her side. Noticing that, Father Jonathan too stopped speaking.

Gently Mathew helped Katarzyna out of the chair and led her towards the stairs with firm instructions that she goes to bed immediately.

"But I have not served the guests any dinner yet." She protested feebly.

“Don’t worry about that.” said Ian scrambling out of his chair. “I will look to it.” He added valiantly, although his face revealed that such things have never been attempted by the current Marcussen ever in his life.

“Ahem... please don’t worry about that,” said Father David, getting up as well,” We are on a fast for forty days and forty nights. We have to discard the cravings of the flesh, for only then we will be strong to fight the demons. In fact,” he added as an afterthought, “once we do find a way to take the Dark Angel to church, starting a few days before the rites, all of you too need to be fasting, for we need to be cleansed ritualistically. And now if you will excuse us, we need to leave. We will come back once again tomorrow.”

“But, but, where will you go? Where will you stay?” asked Ian jumping up and almost blocking the path of the two monks. Unknowing perhaps even to himself, he was fearful of letting the *Patronus Fides* out of his sight.

“Don’t worry,” said Father David amusedly, understanding Ian’s fear. “We won’t desert you. We are staying as guests of the Catholic Church here in Darjeeling, and we need to leave now, for soon it would be time for our prayers.”

It was almost eleven at night. The house was silent, and so was the sleepy Darjeeling countryside. Through the glass windows Ian could see the thick fog enveloping the surrounding garden in its gossamer clutches. But inside the warm kitchen, sleep was the last thing in the two men’s mind. Now equipped with the knowledge that the *Patronus Fides*, was on their side, as well as the dreadful apprehension of the Devil’s bible, both Mathew and Ian were determined that even if it takes all night, they would not budge, till they found a way to drag the Dark Angel to Church. Trisha too seemed to ponder on that singular problem relentlessly.

Mathew like the father he was, had tried to firmly ask Trisha to go to bed. Smiling through her reflections she had shook her head making signs, which Ian had awkwardly interpreted to Mathew that souls do not need to sleep as the body does. Reluctantly Mathew had agreed to have her there along with them.

Soon silence reigned even inside the kitchen as both the men, powerful in their own way were left helpless and brooding over the problem. Through the mirror Mathew spied Trisha too hovering over the kitchen cabinet her haggard face etched deep with frowns of anxiety.

Suddenly as each lay lost in their thoughts, the ground started vibrating. It was first a very illusive feeling. However, soon the rumble became apparent and fearing an earthquake both the men stared at each other. Slowly the pots and the pans too started to shake as the men frantically looked around, and accidentally Ian happened to glance at the mirror.

What he saw shocked him beyond words, for he saw Trisha spinning uncontrollably. She was trying to stop herself, but was clearly out of her depth at what was happening around her. Within moments Ian realized that the poltergeist activities were completely due to the energy that Trisha was radiating.

He remembered that few days back Trisha had confided in him about what had caused the hurricane in Katarzyna’s kitchen the first day. She had admitted ruefully that at times even against her wishes, she gave out a kind of energy that made the surrounding area feel like it was in the midst of an earthquake. Something must have frightened her, or excited her terribly.

“Trisha!” said Ian sternly, “Stop it. What is it? Talk to me.” He secretly knew that the stern tone would bring her back to normalcy and perhaps stop her from causing another tornado inside the kitchen.

Mathew looked up surprised, he couldn't tolerate that someone would use that tone to talk to his daughter; even if that someone was her uncle. He had just opened his mouth to admonish Ian but suddenly, everything stopped shaking, and the rumbling halted as well. Trisha too seemed have broken out of her involuntary trance.

Although she still shook and wavered slightly, through the mirror she made frantic signs to Ian. Mathew tried to understand, tried to keep up with the way the fingers spoke the words to Ian, but he couldn't.

However, soon, Ian's expression changed from one of puzzlement, to one of amazement. Mathew watched as a mysterious code seemed to be exchanged between the two while he remained in the outer periphery, frustrated and abandoned.

Ian had not exactly understood the cause of Trisha's sudden burst of energy. She had been quite calm for the last few days and secretly he had congratulated himself for keeping the girl calm and composed in the time of such crisis. However, the moment her dynamism had started manifesting itself around them, he had first panicked, his thoughts automatically going off to Æsa. Perhaps she lurked in the corners, and that presence had frightened Trisha.

But, the moment he could see Trisha's ethereal face through all that spinning, he realized that the girl was more excited about something rather than being frightened. As Trisha trembled with anticipation and tried to get her fingers to stop shaking for a moment, tried to express through the limited signs she knew, exactly what she was thinking, Ian stared at the mirror frowningly.

It did not make sense, either she was too fast or he was not understanding her words clearly.

“Make one, make it!” he whispered trying to match the words to the signs Trisha was making. “But that does not make any sense!” he exclaimed his frustration taking over. But only for a moment, till light dawned on him, like tiny pieces of the sky seen through the shades of a tree. It did make sense, his heart beat picked up like a train picking up speed after it leaves the platform. As realization dawned on him, on the idea, that no matter how fantastic the plan sounded, there was a tiny possibility that it just may work.

With eyes shining as excitement and possibilities seemed to bubble in them, Ian turned to Mathew who stood impatiently by, dying to understand the conversation between his daughter and Ian.

It took Ian not more than ten minutes to explain to Mathew what Trisha so brilliantly had suggested. But it took the better part of an hour for the idea to sink in. And then the logistics needed to be discussed. However, as the hours of the night slowly crept by, the two men, along with Trisha revelled in the idea; in the possibility that they just might destroy the Dark Angel without it even having a hint of what was happening around it.

However time was extremely limited and both the men couldn't wait for dawn when they would need to start working on their plan.

CHAPTER 26

Ian

It had been over a decade since Ian had last stepped inside the threshold. The last time he had stepped out of it, he had been carrying his mother's coffin on his shoulders. The entire cathedral had been decorated with her favourite flowers. The air had been heavy with the intoxicating fragrance of lilies of the valley and roses. The wreaths around the open casket were profuse and abundant—as if the blow of death could be softened by the fragile, the delicate presence of flowers. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, mingled with the bitter sweet smell of furniture polish and floor wax, he could still smell the sweetness of the flowers of the past.

The cathedral was empty. The tall narrow arches, signature of gothic architecture beckoned to him. The ornate stained glass windows welcomed the sun in colourful slices of the rainbow in the empty hall. The rosewood pews on both sides of the main hall looked almost desolate compared to the last time he had been there; when the place had been overflowing with people. Friends, relatives, well-wishers, all were there. All looking for Ian, wanting to be the first ones to let him know how deeply sorry they were for his loss.

Yet the underlying tones of almost everybody had been the same. *Did Gloria Marcussen leave behind a will that included something for them from her vast treasure of antique jewellery?* He remembered thinking cynically. She had died of cancer at sixty five. And Ian was grateful for that. Grateful that his mother did not have the doomed Marcussen blood run in her veins and thus had lived to see old age, free from the curse.

The Engjahæð Cathedral now Ian realised had been built on the same site that the Romanesque church burnt down by Father Birger had stood before. Ian marvelled at the fact that so much had changed in Engjahæð in the past few centuries. The town had thrived to become a popular tourist destination, with buildings, summer houses of the affluent, even pubs and night clubs to entertain the tourists. But the church had remained untouched. Telling the story of God's glory, reminding people that all that was needed was a little faith. It had been rebuilt by Ian's ancestors and for centuries the Marcussens had been the solitary funders of the church.

Although it had been quite some time since his last visit, Ian remembered his holidays in Engjahæð as a child. He lived with his parents in Copenhagen, but the long holidays were always spent in their ancestral soil. Attending Sunday mass had then been mandatory in the Marcussen family. However, unlike other children, he didn't mind. He used to love listening to the sermons, the powerful melodious church organ, while the choir sang tunes in praise of Jesus Christ and the Holy Father. At that time, there was a huge stained glass window right behind where stood the statue of Jesus on the cross. It depicted Jesus' ascension to heaven. As a child, Ian had always been captivated by that scene. Jesus, amongst the white marshmallow clouds while the golden sun glowed like a halo around his head. He was surrounded by eleven apostles who stood around—their heads bowed in reverence. The scene spoke of a merciful God. Yet one that commanded the

unconditional respect and trust of his followers, for the expression on His face was one of determination and power that lay beyond human comprehension. As a child for no explainable reason, Ian had always felt secure in the knowledge that from the heavenly abode, Jesus always kept a watch over him.

Now as he stood alone inside the cathedral, he wondered regretfully, *when had that transition taken place? When did I change from that trusting and innocent lad to the cynical ruthless man that I am now?* However, like the prodigal son, he was back once again in the path that his Heavenly Father had chosen for him. And he was glad, his soul rejuvenated and the anticipation of the approaching battle pumped his heart with adrenaline.

It was during his grandfather's time that, that particular stained glass had been replaced with another one, the reason for which was unknown to Ian. Now behind the statue was another that had painted on it the birth of Jesus surrounded by the angels and the Virgin Mother and Joseph. It was a beautiful piece of art, no doubt, yet Ian did not hold it the same awe, in the same inspiration as the one from his childhood. Perhaps the beliefs set in one's childhood are not easily erased after all.

Ian took a left from the main church hall and opened the door that led towards the church offices. After about fifteen metres, in the long corridor, there were stone steps that led down towards a basement. Right where the steps ended, there was an iron door similar to the ones found in medieval castles. There was a huge lock on it. However, Ian came prepared with the key.

Before he made this journey, he had already spoken to the priest as well as the board responsible for the upkeep of the church about his intentions, his request. As he knew, he was gladly granted whatever he wanted, as being the sole surviving Marcussen the funding of the church came from him and his company.

Ian opened the lock and curiously pushed the door open. It was extremely heavy and opened with a groan as if reluctant to let anyone inside its belly. A musty smell hit him the moment he entered. There was a light switch at one corner. Ian switched on the light, though the dim solitary bulb did little to illuminate the corners of the room. However it was enough to see what he was looking for.

Among the cobwebs and the dust, among the broken pews, and the occasional handle less chalice, the huge ornate stained glass of Ian's childhood, stood covered in a blanket of dust in one corner. Just looking at it, brought back memories of his childhood. Of his grandparents, of holidays and Christmases and also of Katya, for they had always attended church together, two children sitting between the grandparents as their parents sat on the next pew.

Ian smiled to himself and took out his mobile to make the call.

Mathew

Mathew had always led a demanding life. But, that had been the nature his of business, and all the matters he had handled, had been business related. But he was not prepared for the kind of pressure that life brought him right now. There were too many challenges, too many battles, and too much of emphasis on faith—not the kind a person has upon himself, or his abilities, but the kind that the Bible teaches you. He had been under the impression that that kind of faith had been erased since the middle ages, and found himself uncomfortable, doubtful even, surrounded in that atmosphere.

Too many anxieties like worms wriggled in his mind, each demanding more attention than the other. The experts from Calcutta were down; going through his tea estate. Analysing, taking samples, asking him questions, and Mathew had to concentrate on that practical part of his life as well. Although at times, it became difficult to even be polite or patient with their numerous questions, but he had to. For that was his real world, the practical world.

On the other hand his emotional, his unnerving involvement with the demonic world of Æsa, was taking its toll on his physical and mental well-being to a great extent. He felt that he lived his life within a mixture of hallucinations interspersed with small bouts of reality.

Only he understood the supreme effort that it took to share the same roof with the Dark Angel. And he did it for his cherished daughter. But sometimes as the other day had been, even the reminder of his daughter could not keep him within restraint.

The botanical experts from Calcutta were put up in the guest house that fringed the tea estate. All meetings, all analysis and experiments conducted on the dying plantation were held there. Arrangements for all their meals too were made there. Mathew preferred it that way. However, common courtesy required that at least once he should invite his guests to the plantation house for dinner. The dinner had fortunately been uneventful, though Mathew had been quite fretful through it, afraid that Æsa may just make an unwelcome appearance. However, he let out a sigh of relief as the red tail lights of the plantation jeep disappeared in the dark narrow lanes of the estate taking his guests back to their quarters while he stood alone at the car porch and bade them goodbye.

“You are unnecessarily going through all this trouble you know.”

Mathew jumped at the voice. He had not realized when Æsa had slowly crept up behind him. He turned around reluctantly.

“All you need to do is just ask. I told you that. But no! You like to make your own life so very difficult. What *is* with you people?” she said spreading her hand in mock despair. “Here you are wasting your money on a couple of bumbling nerds, when just at a single nod I can bring back your plantation to its formal glory. Even tilt the scales slightly for you to make a bigger profit. But it’s so difficult to make you humans see reason sometimes.”

“Yes, I have seen exactly how helpful you have been. And no thank you. I will handle my problems by myself.” said Mathew, his sarcasm almost palpable.

Perhaps that evening’s stress had made him more defiant.

“The only help I need right now from *you* would be to just let me know how the hell, can I destroy you.” he almost spat the words.

However, the moment the words were out of his mouth, he froze, realizing his mistake. He had never meant to antagonize Æsa, but sometimes as was the case right then, the frustration was just too much.

She had been standing several steps higher than Mathew. But suddenly, as swift as a sudden gust of wind, she flew through the distance that separated him from her. Fear gripped Mathew's heart into a tight clutch. His eyes widened in shock, while Æsa's seemed to narrow into yellow reptilian slits.

"Don't think for a moment that just because till now I have spared your life, I would hesitate to take it; you ungrateful scum!" She exclaimed through gritted teeth as her claw-like fingers held his neck in an iron grasp. "No, I think...I think I should just tear a piece of your throat, just to teach you all a lesson." She said breathing hard; trying to subdue her demonic anger.

Oxygen to Mathew's brain was slowly getting cut off. He could feel his head growing heavier and numb, while his body shook with craving for oxygen. Like a heroin addict needing a fix. However, he was completely helpless. He didn't seem to have the strength to lift a finger, let alone fight her. Mathew stood still, petrified; disbelief painted on his face, for he couldn't imagine that he would die right then.

She was too close to him. Her yellowed eyes almost penetrated into his soul. Her breath had the foul stench of a carnivore, while her teeth had suddenly turned into sharp bluish white canines. It was like looking inside the mouth of a shark. There wasn't even the remotest resemblance of that being to his daughter Trisha.

He was suddenly overcome with sadness knowing that he might never see Trisha again as the Dark Angel stared at him and his neck with an emotion bordering on almost lust. He observed everything, as if in the last few moments of one's life, every detail gets embedded in the mind. Moments longer than eternity passed, as each stared at the other. One horrified, while the other tempted. However, eventually, Æsa retreated letting go of his neck.

"It's not going to be so easy." She said with a crooked smile. "I have a plan for you. For all of you. So just live each day, thinking that it's going to be your last." She looked hard at Mathew before turning around and leaving him standing all alone in the still night with the sounds of the crickets in the background.

Mathew had not told anybody about that incident. He didn't want to upset Trisha, nor did he want anyone to know how embarrassingly frightened he had been that night. But now that they could finally see some light to end the reign of terror, he had decided to keep his mouth and his emotions under control. Decided to remain subservient in Æsa's presence.

However, the task that he had in hand was almost an impossible one, because of the time constraint; what he needed to do, was needed to be done, before the Dark Angel came for Katarzyna's soul. And anyone he called and spoke to about what needed to be done, either laughed at him, thinking he was mad, or laughed with him thinking he was joking. And when they finally realized that he was serious, they politely refused to do it.

The last few days had only been filled with rejections. No amount of money could persuade anyone to undertake the task that Mathew had for them. Depressed, Mathew

had almost made up his mind to start doing it by himself for that seemed to be the only way.

However, that afternoon, as he sat alone in his office, his mind blank, a pounding headache gradually spreading, his cell phone rang suddenly. The number was unknown.

“Hello?” Mathew exhaustedly answered the phone.

“Mr. Brown?” enquired a gruff male voice from the other side.

“Yes?” replied Mathew.

And then heard intently what the man had to say. After a few long moments, a glorious smile, like a sunrise through the mountains spread across Mathew’s face. For the one who spoke was practically God sent. A man who was willing to perform Mathew’s impossible task within the given time frame. Mathew realized as he kept the phone that his headache had vanished completely.

Katarzyna

After dinner Katarzyna slowly walked out to the garden and settled down on the wrought iron bench. It was the only time when she could find some peace in her house. Although with Mia gone and Ian in Denmark, she was the only visible member in the house—Trisha being the invisible one, but throughout the day with million things to be done, she hardly had the time to even breathe.

The night was very chilly. Temperature could not have been more than a few degrees centigrade. But the sky was luminous with millions of stars like princess cut diamonds studded in an infinite velvety backdrop. Katarzyna looked up at the sky. She did not know what she was looking for. Perhaps like all those years before, she needed guidance from the Almighty; needed to know that there was after all a plan, and that she wouldn’t lose her life, her soul, being an accessory in devising the dominance of evil over mankind. It had become a nightly ritual—this late hour, when Katarzyna wanted to feel one with God, with the universe.

She scoffed away any fear in front of the others, and needed to put up a brave front especially for Trisha. But alone, away from well-meaning yet probing eyes, her lips trembled, her heart fluttered like a little bird trapped before a tiger. Unwillingly her courage, her faith wavered.

The nightmares that invaded her sleep in the past few days were terrible. Blasphemous. The fires, the tortures, the screams interspersed with each other were more frightening than anything within human knowledge. And somehow, at the deepest corner of her heart, she was certain that once she presented herself to the Dark Angel, her life, or afterlife to be more precise would be more horrifying than what her nightmares promised to be. She was not afraid to die, she argued. She had lived a happy and complete life. But she was completely opposed to sacrificing her life for the entire length of which, she had been a devout Catholic, to the altar of the Dark Lord. She however, did not regret making

the pact. For when she had made it, it had been necessary. But now that the end was nearing, she couldn't help but be afraid.

There was a plan; an inconceivable impossible idea that had been derived and smoothened to form into a proposition that might just work. However, whether it worked would only be known at the last moment. And if it was a failure, it would be too late to stop cataclysm.

Katarzyna closed her eyes, and behind the closed eyelids the image of her granddaughter became luminous. Mia, the one she would miss the most if anything happened to her. Almost every day she called from Calcutta wanting to know what exactly was going on. However, Katarzyna had successfully evaded all queries, and somehow had also convinced her that there had never been any apparition of Trisha in the house. She had convinced Mia that it had all been a hallucination on both their parts. Perhaps the fact that they both missed Trisha so much had made them victims of those illusions.

Mia had wanted to come back to Darjeeling to be with her, but she had hurriedly refused saying, now that Mia was in Calcutta, she should spend some time with her parents as well.

Reluctantly Mia had agreed, not used to defying her Grams at all. But sometimes Katarzyna wished she had not stopped Mia from coming back. She was afraid that she might not see her granddaughter again. With her eyes closed, she could almost feel Mia's essence around her. However, that feeling was also mingled with something else. Something stronger.

Slowly, Katarzyna opened her eyes; in the distant horizon she noticed a pale orange glow. It was very subtle, almost non-existent. However, as she concentrated on it, puzzled, wondering what exactly it was, the glow became brighter. Katarzyna watched, mesmerized unable to look away even for a moment. It was a feeling that she could not define.

She was transported back to her childhood. Back to the night in the forests around Trzebinia where she had hidden beside her brother inside the haystack; when she had been terrified of the death that surrounded her, devastated with the loss of her parents.

The night when the North Star had shone bright and she had felt the presence of God guiding her. This night felt the same. The entire atmosphere seemed to suddenly change. The solitary night slowly filled up with warmth, with a magical assurance.

Although there was no reason, in her heart she knew something significant happened in the last few moments. She stared unblinkingly at the horizon as the orange glow gradually disappeared not leaving even the slightest trace behind. However, its warmth seemed to have found a permanent place within her heart. It seemed to take over the shadowy chill of fear, of imminent defeat and in its place filled her heart up with the courage of the righteous. She smiled. She had found her answer. And finally after many days she knew that she would have a peaceful sleep that night.

Æsa

Tick tock tick tock. The minute and the second hands moved relentlessly yet time seemed to not move—at least not as fast Æsa wanted it. She had colossal plans. Plans which, when she thought about, filled her demon heart with nefarious joy. She could almost taste the excitement as she planned the sacrifice of hundreds to quench hers and her Dark Lord's centuries' old thirst. She fantasized ruling the world with fear; with brutality, only sparing the lives of the ones who bowed before her powers and willingly declared their allegiance to her and her Lord.

Yet the time had still not come. The first sacrifice had to be Katarzyna's. For the soul of the righteous would give her the inimitable power she was looking for. But as much as she would have welcomed hastening the process, the sacrifice needed to be made at the right moment, the moment when the gates of hell would open to engulf Katarzyna's soul and bestow upon Æsa the power that she craved for, as a reward for her sinfully commendable feat. Unfortunately June sixth the fateful day, was still a good two weeks away.

However in the meantime Æsa was tired of existing within Trisha's body. The body was not strong enough. But she knew it wasn't only Trisha's body that was weak. No mortal carcass was strong enough to hold the powerful, the corrupt soul of a demon for long.

Already tiny blotches of purple, the sign of rotting flesh had begun to be visible in places. She took an inane amount of care of her temporary shell, as she liked to refer to the body. Fruits, vegetables, an absurd amount of water, all she consumed with religious regularity with the hope that perhaps that would ward off the decay of flesh for a little longer.

Although once she could propitiously sacrifice Katarzyna at the feet of her Lord, she wouldn't need a mortal body to exist anymore. She would be able to change into any form—male, female, human, animal, for as long as she wanted. Not like how it was now. She could only change into an image for less than five minutes. And returned back to her demonic form even before those few minutes were up.

She stood in front of the mirror and the young face of Trisha stared back. The eyes, the lips, the cheekbones, all were striking. Yet, thought Æsa dispassionately, never would Trisha be the heart-stopping knee-buckling beauty that *she* had once been, centuries back.

Trisha's looks were quite bland, she concluded. *The first thing I would do, once I get the power, would be to look like I did all those years back*; Æsa resolved. She knew that as much as she would rule the world through terror, a beautiful exterior always helps. To entice people and to make them servile to her corrupt plans.

Her thoughts turned to the future. Sixth June that year was a Saturday. The day governed by the planet Saturn—the planet that beguiles man to forsake spirituality for materialism. Saturn the tempter. The planet that represented the fallen angel himself. It was also the considered as the sixth day of the week by International Organisation of Standardisation. The third six that completed the number that would bring the end of the world.

With perverse pleasure Æsa reflected on the nightmares that she had intentionally filled Katarzyna's nights with. Almost as if getting her prepared for what lay ahead of her for eternity. Sacrificing her to the Dark Lord, pushing her into the depths of hell would be torturous in ways that would not be bearable to any mortal.

It would be like pushing a fawn into a pride of starving lions. The only difference would be that in case of the fawn it wouldn't survive the torture long. However, Katarzyna would experience the agony over and over again, in a loop eternally.

Revelling in such pleasant thoughts made Æsa's frustrating wait almost tolerable. *All good things comes to those who waits* she thought; remembering John Milton's poem. And the day she waited for was going to be special; a day which comes once in five thousand years. For on June sixth, Saturday, the sun at noon will be swallowed by the demons causing a solar eclipse; an eclipse that would last for exactly fifty six minutes. That was when she needed to damn Katarzyna's soul to the nether worlds.

The almost hour long eclipse meant that she would have ample time to commit her evil deed. Happily, humming a cheerful tune Æsa decided to look around for Mathew. It always gave her immense pleasure to torment him unnecessarily.

CHAPTER 27

Time, spinning seconds, minutes, hours and days into its web of infinity, along its path finally brought June sixth into the lives Ian, Mathew, Katarzyna, Trisha and of course Æsa. Each of them had awaited its arrival with a myriad of emotions that ranged from fear, frustration to excited anticipation.

The day dawned chilly and the entire valley was enveloped in a thick mist. The mist along with it brought a silence, a gloominess. People became reluctant to venture out onto the perilous hilly roads. Radios declared that kind of weather in the month of June as a freak of nature. People were advised to stay indoors for the overhead dark clouds threatened to bring a hail storm although till then there was no sign of rain.

There were weather reports that spoke of a solar eclipse that was visible once in five thousand years, however experts were doubtful whether by midday the skies would clear for the heavenly phenomenon to be visible. The eclipse was supposed to start at sharp noon and continue till 12.56 pm.

The local people of Darjeeling and its surrounding valleys were not interested in an eclipse that would either way remain invisible. They were more worried that they were advised against leaving their homes—understanding the seriousness of the brewing storm. The entire valley was enveloped in stillness. Even birds seemed to have decided not to venture out of their nests on that day. The mist twirled around floating lethargically engulfing every bit of the valley—as if within its white gossamer it held mysteries that were best kept hidden.

Katarzyna had not slept a wink the night before. When her bedside clock showed it was 4.00 am, she gave up the idea of sleep and sat at the kitchen table drinking cup after cup of tea till her body felt alert like one on anabolic steroids. Faint shadows lined under her eyes. Yet exhaustion seemed to have departed from every cell in her body.

It was after all exactly a month from when the Dark Angel had vowed to come for her; mind body and soul. Knowing that, she didn't want to waste what could be her last day on earth, sleeping. And thus wordlessly she had sat at that table waiting for when the beginning of the end would finally arrive.

The bold knock on the front door came just a few minutes before the minute and the hour hands of the kitchen clock fused together on twelve. It was what Katarzyna had anticipated for hours yet when it finally arrived, a shudder involuntarily shook her.

The house was empty. Even the spectre of Trisha was not around. However she knew that the one who stood at the door was no friend. Making the journey from her bedroom down the stairs to the front door, she halted at several places.

Her favourite knickknacks; the photographs of her son when he was young, of Mia when she was a baby, all the mementos that her eyes had just brushed over for several years seemed now to stand out. Reminded her of the happy times. The crayon marks on the wall paper made by Mia when she was a toddler, the scratch on the side of the teak cabinet in the hall that had been caused by the movers, the same day as when they had moved into this house, when her son was a boy of five. Every little thing awakened memories of yesteryears and subtly hinted that once she opened the door, there was no

turning back. That she wouldn't be alive to make any more memories, or cherish the ones that have already been made.

As she had perceived correctly, the Dark Angel stood on the other side of the door. It was impossible to mistake her as Trisha, for even within the same body, the difference was oceanic. The smirk, the cruel glint, all was as strange on Trisha's face as was a Christmas tune in a funeral home.

For nights and days along with the *Patronus Fides*, The Plan had been conceived and formulated.

Yet the worry remained as to how exactly would Æsa want to sacrifice Katarzyna. Would she come for her or would she force Katarzyna out of her home through unknown supernatural means? Although she had no proof why she had felt so, Katarzyna knew that Æsa would come for her to her home. She was sure that the pleasure of murdering her in the name of ritualistic sacrifice in the sanctity of her own home would be too much pleasure for the Dark Angel to resist.

“What? Had you been expecting someone else? A happy ending perhaps?” the bestial glimmer in Æsa's eyes that accompanied the question declared that Katarzyna had better been expecting her.

Katarzyna nodded unable to trust her voice; and motioned her to come in.

Æsa was wearing a very strange outfit; something that seemed to have been picked out of a page of medieval history. She wore a black gown with a tight bodice and a long flowing skirt. A huge golden belt, which Katarzyna was certain was made of actual gold, was buckled around her slim waist. The belt itself was adorned with a dazzling array of precious stones. Over her gown she wore a claret red cloak and the hood drawn against her face imparted a shadowy mystery to the face.

It was almost as if she was preparing for a play; thought Katarzyna. She refused to let that faint idea that Æsa was dressed as someone preparing for some kind of ritual grow within her mind. For that would also remind her of the role that she herself would play in such a ritual.

“Oh my! How chilly it is inside.” declared Æsa as she stepped inside the house.

She rubbed her palms against each other and looked around curiously. However, noticing the fire burning in the hall seemed to confuse her slightly. She glanced at Katarzyna while trying to mask a feeling of caution. It was a very subtle action. One that went completely unnoticed by the otherwise occupied Katarzyna.

In the next moment, Æsa strode forward her skirt sweeping the ground while Katarzyna followed her in with a fearful docility. Inside her ribcage her heart pounded like the waves in a tempest that crashes against the rocks. However, her immense self-respect stopped her from exhibiting her true fright in front of the demon.

On reaching the hall Æsa turned around. With narrowed eyes she seemed to observe Katarzyna who stared back at her unblinkingly.

“How old you look now little Zinih.” She said, her voice pregnant with mock tenderness. “I just cannot fathom why the most beautiful, the most magnificent of all mortals withers with age. Why can't life be lived with the vigour, within the blossoms of youth? Why does one need to go through the frailty, the ailments, and the ridicule that old age brings along with it? Not that I don't understand death. Death is necessary; death makes way for new life. I accept that. But the insult old age brings? Is that necessary?”

She said expanding her hands on both sides of her body in a sign of exasperation as if to a question that baffled her.

“Pity you would not be making the journey to heaven. Otherwise you could have asked Him the question.” Æsa added slyly.

In an instant Katarzyna’s heart seemed to become heavier by a ton, rooting her to the spot as she understood Æsa’s words. She knew the time had come, and everything depended on how she acted. But, she was not sure how to proceed.

However, she needn’t have worried, for Æsa seemed to completely take over the reins.

“But don’t worry,” Æsa continued, “fortunately my lord loves youth, loves the budding body of a nubile young girl. And you are lucky. Because right before the ritual, I am going to transform you back once again to your youth; when you would have been much more pleasing to the eyes.” declared Æsa magnanimously.

She turned around and flung her cloak aside while drawing out a tiny bejewelled dagger from some secret pocket. But something seemed to suffocate her; to make her uncomfortable. She gulped a couple of times and rubbed her palms on her neck, trying to loosen collars of the gown—almost as if they were suddenly too tight for her. Once again a shadow of caution seemed to fall over her demonic features and this time even Katarzyna noticed it.

Then sudden realization seemed to dawn on her. With a sneer that spoilt an otherwise beautiful face, Æsa exclaimed. “Damn! Your house is disgustingly pure with holy vibes. The aura around is revolting. Almost as if...as if...” her voice trailed off.

Katarzyna stood at a side. Motionless. Not offering any answers, neither asking any questions. Æsa stared at her with unmasked irritation.

“We don’t have much time.” She said annoyed. “But first you need to take me to your bedroom. The ritual needs to be performed in that part of the house which you spend most of your time in and since you sleep in your bedroom every night, I am assuming that would be the right spot. Or is it the kitchen?” she asked as casually as if she was asking the way to the rest room.

Katarzyna couldn’t move her eyes from the dagger. With horror she stared at the sharp gleaming tip.

“Sheesshhh Katarzyna, I don’t have the whole day you know.” said Æsa impatiently.

It may have been fear, it may also have been that with age, one’s abilities of comprehension reduces, but it did take Katarzyna a while to understand Æsa’s demand. She remembered Father Jonathan saying that in the case Æsa did come to the house, she would insist to be taken to such a place. Katarzyna also seemed to remember something else.

“Please,” she said nervously licking her dry lips. “If you are indeed looking for a place that I spend most of my time in, that would not be my bedroom or the kitchen. For the past few months, my hobby has been to grow various flowers in a greenhouse in the back. I have spent hours there, and sometimes in times of trouble...as I...as I have been going through in the last few weeks, I have spent more time there than here. The beauty and the serenity of that place relaxes me.”

Katarzyna stopped; out of breath for her thundering heart had been a constraint while talking in long sentences coherently.

Æsa narrowed her eyes and looked at Katarzyna distrustfully. However, Katarzyna looked back unblinkingly, while her inner turmoil rose like a tsunami in the ocean bed. Yet, one looking at her from the outside would have never been able to guess her inner feelings.

After moments that seemed to drag on for eternity, Æsa spoke. “And where exactly is the place?”

Katarzyna nodded, motioning Æsa to follow her. As Katarzyna brushed passed Æsa, suddenly Æsa gripped her wrist tightly. Terrified Katarzyna stopped as Æsa stared hard at her. Her glance almost seemed to penetrate through Katarzyna’s body.

“I hope you don’t have any tricks up your sleeve. Don’t think that by changing the part of the house, you would escape what I have in store for you.” She said.

Katarzyna shook her head. “Either way I know my time ends today,” she said. “There is no reason for me to lie to you just before that time.”

Æsa seemed to be satisfied with her answer followed Katarzyna as she led her through a narrow corridor towards a different part of the house.

Æsa felt the air in the corridor was slightly suffocating. The only word that she could use to describe it would be heavy. A sense of claustrophobia swathed her. She found it quite an effort to breathe. Almost as if the air around them had traces of some noxious gases in it.

However, she knew she was above anything that could touch a mere mortal. She knew that only a fool would attempt to kill her in that manner. And Katarzyna was no fool, especially since Æsa was certain that Mathew would have narrated the disastrous results, of trying to kill her with *Fugu* fish. Moreover, if indeed there were some toxic fumes, it would have affected Katarzyna long before it remotely affected her.

Yet, something did not seem right, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. Unfortunately although she had possessed Trisha’s body, she had not inherited any of Trisha’s memories and hence Katarzyna’s house and its layout were completely alien to her. Æsa regretted that. She was certain that in those memories lay the reason behind current discomfort.

With conflicting emotions that alternated between nervousness and caution, Æsa rubbed against the blade of the dagger she held in her hands. It was not just any dagger. Its iron blade had been forged into shape and sharpened in the fires of hell. It was the only one that had the power to banish anyone, man, woman or demon, to the depths of hell with nothing more than just a slash that drew blood off a being. And if that particular feat was performed during a solar eclipse, Satan granted a wish to the one who performed it—perhaps as a ‘thank you’ gift for the soul that would, from then on enrich the pits of hell.

However, legends have it that in case a Dark Angel or a demon was stabbed with it, the punishment that lay in store for them was unspeakable; was horrifying even by standards of hell. They burnt ceaselessly within the infernal fires as a punishment for failing.

In fear of the excruciating castigation, no demon had dared to use the dagger against another, or even against man, before Æsa. But not her. She was confident that she would use it perfectly. She was not scared and knew what she wanted. Was confident that her reward would be so much more special—for the soul she was presenting the Dark Lord was a special one; one that was supposed to rise above rather than sink below.

For centuries the internecine dagger had lay buried at the foothills of the Himalayas in a cavern, unknown to men. It had not been easy for her to obtain it, in spite of the supernatural powers she possessed. However, here it was in her hands and she was determined to use it exactly the way she had dreamt—the way she had fantasized. Such thoughts kept her encouraged stopped the fear that something may be amiss.

After perhaps fifteen seconds they ended up in a beautiful circular glass house. Abundance of colourful flowers bloomed around the room. The room would not have been more than fifteen feet each way. There were flowers all around while in the middle there was an empty space that housed two rattan chairs and a glass table. It was drenched in shadows that arose from a dim lamp plugged in at a corner. Apart from that, all sources of sunlight seemed to be boarded up. Observed Æsa.

“I am sorry, for the mess.” apologized Katarzyna. “These plants can’t survive with very bright sunlight and needs a lot of shade. Hence the dim light. “I was in the midst of arranging the flower pots when you came.” explained Katarzyna and stepped over the pots that had blocked the entrance.

“I had hoped that maybe I would be able to finish this greenhouse just the way I want it. Leave it for my granddaughter.” She added regretfully. Her voice gave away the sadness that she felt—perhaps because she realized that this would be the last time she would be inside her glass house; that she would never again see Mia.

Æsa did not answer, she looked around curiously. In spite of the abundance of beautiful flowers around, there was something extremely depressing about that place.

The corridor ended right at the entrance of the room. The flower pots seemed to be arranged in a certain pattern making the area look slightly strange. There was no path that led inside, for the flower pots were placed forming a design that barricaded even the entrance to the room.

Although Katarzyna seemed to be saying something else, Æsa blocked it out. She was not interested in an old woman’s life stories. Time was running fast and she needed to get on with the sacrifice. Following in Katarzyna’s footsteps, she stepped over the flower pots and entered the room and looked around curiously. The sense of claustrophobia suddenly heightened. She had a strange feeling. As if the walls were closing in around her.

Was Trisha allergic to flowers or pollen that I was not aware of? Is that the reason why it’s affecting me as well? How else can I feel so weak? So drawn? Wondered Æsa. Her chest had tightened considerably, her heart beat louder than a freight train. For the first time from the moment she had entered the body of Trisha, she felt tiny drops of sweat form on her forehead.

She looked around nervously, and decided the faster she performed what she came for, the better it was. She turned towards Katarzyna who seemed to be observing her with an odd expression.

“As much as I would like to hear such entertaining facts about your green house and your useless life, I really have no more time to waste.” declared Æsa with a sneer as she closed the distance slowly between her and the old lady.

With dismay Katarzyna stared at the gleaming dagger held in Æsa’s hand.

“Stop!” bellowed a voice suddenly.

Both spun around towards the source of the voice and found Mathew standing right at the entrance looking breathless and desperate.

Æsa snarled and in a moment her face almost transformed to another creature.

“You dog!” she hissed, “You just don’t know when to give up do you?”

“Please, listen to me.” He said raising both his hands. “What would you get murdering an innocent woman? An old lady? Can’t you for once show some mercy?”

“Don’t talk to me about mercy.” screamed Æsa. “The fact that I am standing here and listening to you whining like a little girl and not killing you is mercy enough!”

From the corner of his eyes Mathew noticed Katarzyna softly retreating, one step at a time towards one part of the flower bush. He realized she needed still more time. He was not sure whether he should step inside, get closer to Æsa, but right then it did not seem necessary. She was completely unaware of the Katarzyna’s retreat. Her eyes blazed with hatred and anger at being stopped at a crucial point.

“No, please,” pleaded Mathew again. “Just tell me what you would get by killing her. Let me understand how an old frail woman’s murder can be useful to someone as mighty as you.”

“I have no time to argue with such worthless mortals. In the entire plan you are worth even less than an ant.” Spat Æsa as she walked towards him.

Fearfully Mathew took a step back while with a quick lightening glance he realized that Katarzyna had vanished behind the flower bushes. Æsa approached him and he could hear her grinding her teeth with fury at his impertinence to stop her.

“You know what?” she said advancing with the dagger held out in a stabbing position. “I think I will just get rid of *you* first. And then deal with the old hag. Send an extra soul to hell. I am just *sick* and tired of you; repulsed by the constant goodness that you try to portray. Nauseous of your whinny little ways. Oh poor me. My wife killed herself, my daughter is dead. Oh poor me.” Mimicked Æsa. “Don’t you realize that even when all is lost, you are still a lot happier, a lot fortunate to be on earth? Yet you spend your days being miserable. Let me just show you once for all, what misery is all about.”

Mathew retreated further inside the corridor as Æsa quickened her steps towards him. But the moment she reached the pots at the entrance she couldn’t seem to go further. There seemed to be some alien force that stopped her. Puzzled she turned around and realized that Katarzyna was missing.

Muttering a curse under her breath she strode back into the clearing and looked around for Katarzyna. However, every time she came towards a flower bush, she didn’t seem to be able to go beyond it. Finally she gave up after a few attempts and spun around and glared at Mathew. Her eyes held enough wrath to burn Mathew to cinders had she the power.

“What is it? What have you done to me?” she whispered vehemently.

A smile with the brilliance of a thousand light bulbs spread across his face.

“Demon trap. The flower pots are arranged to form a demon trap.” He said.

“You interfering cur! Do you think a common demon trap will destroy me?” she asked proudly.

And suddenly with a deafening shriek that seemed to arise from the belly of Trisha's body, there stood in front of him a demon so horrendous, so terrible that for a while Mathew could not believe that he was not in a nightmare. It stood tall and terrifying; with snake scales over its body, reptilian eyes that spewed scorn; a forked tongue that appeared almost spasmodically from its purple orifice which in any of God's creature are referred to as a mouth. But in such abomination, the mouth seemed too tame to be called as such. With its claw-like finger it touched the flowers around it and suddenly they seemed to rot and decay right in front of Mathew's eyes creating small breaks within the formerly existing perfect enclosure.

"You think you are clever." It snarled and stepped over the lifeless body of Trisha, "I can burn the entire place down do you know that? You think just by watching a couple episodes of a TV series, you actually have the power to stop me. *Me?* The most powerful Dark Angel to have ever traversed the earth?"

"No. I don't think the demon trap would destroy you." Smiled Mathew; still looking fearlessly at the demon. "But this certainly will."

At that moment there was a loud whirring noise in the background. Like that of a motor of some sort. The Dark Angel looked around and saw that the shutters that had kept the glass house dark was suddenly folding one on another and the rest of the space was being revealed.

CHAPTER 28

As the artificial dusk of the glass house started to disappear, the first thing that became visible to the Dark Angel was Christ. He stood there right in front of Æsa floating above the earth in a cottony cloud cluster while the apostles stood surrounding him—their heads bowed in worship and reverence.

No! It cannot be. Thought Æsa. *How did I get here? Where...what is this place?* Her mind screaming with questions, faster than she could register. She spun around; looking wildly as daylight started to stream into the once shadowy enclosure. With the elimination of the last piece of shutter, disappeared the mystery of where she was.

Now the spectacular ornate stained glass, the one from Ian's childhood stood proudly embedded in a large window. Right on the opposite wall visible through a gothic-style arch stood a marble altar covered with red and gold silk before the Holy Cross and the Son of God. The huge brass candle stands that lined both sides of it as sentries, glowed golden from the light of thick beige candles. At a corner stood a tall book stand with The Holy Bible opened on it. Two rows of carved rosewood pews were placed right before the altar. On every available surface there was a profusion of flowers dousing the air with their sweet smells.

It did not take more than moments for Æsa to realize that she was in a church. A place that couldn't have been more than fifty feet each way, therefore not in any way as grand as a cathedral, but nevertheless, it was a church. She could feel heat, spreading through her demonic body like she was having sips of acid. With every emergence of her forked tongue, she could feel the atmosphere around her—suffocating her, weakening her; like she was inhaling fumes of nascent sulphuric acid. Around her, stood her enemies watching her every move with satisfied eyes.

Æsa's eyes roved over all of them—taking account of each of her foes.

Her eyes first fell on Katarzyna and then on Mathew. *Should have killed the bitch when I had the chance and Mathew, he would have been the easiest to kill,* she thought with regret. She only then noticed Ian who stood alert and cautious; observing her observing them. *Jannike was supposed to take care of that one—looks like I had been wrong. Jannike's death had been in vain. The poor bird; it couldn't rub the venom into Ian's wounds before its death;* lamented Æsa.

Finally she turned towards the two monks who stood slightly away from the trio. Her narrow eyes widened slightly for she knew, that was where she met her match. There could be no mistake in recognizing them. Their long touching-the-toe woolly habbits, the almost unnoticeable crest sewn on the chest, the grey hood that covered their heads gave away too much. She knew that in front of her stood the *Patronus Fides* the ones that like hawks had kept account of every bit of her life on earth.

There was an unnatural, a strained silence inside the church hurriedly constructed church as each observed the other. Mathew doubted whether he was even breathing normally.

However, he being the one who had observed the Dark Angel from the closest vicinity—had spent the most amount of time with, realized with some satisfaction that for the first time she looked frazzled, scared even. But it was difficult to judge, for being in a form alien to any man, the scaly lizard like face held no expression familiar to him. Yet the demon seemed to have stopped in its steps.

Ian too watched the Dark Angel with guarded, sceptical eyes. He was uncertain about exactly what he had expected. But perhaps the image in his mind had been of a more dramatic nature. A vision had played in his dreams and sometimes even in his waking hours like a movie, over and over again. He had expected that the moment the Dark Angel realized that she was in church; she would probably crumble and wither away like vampires in sunlight, as he had seen in almost all vampire movies.

However, with a sinking heart he realized that, that seemed not to be happening. The demon *was* affected no doubt, but not enough to disintegrate instantly.

He recalled that decisive night when they had been struggling for a solution and it was Trisha who had finally come up with it. Make it...make it...she had excitedly shown through sign language. And although for a few moments it had baffled Ian, but soon he had realized that she was talking about *building* a church in a place where Æsa would definitely come, rather than dragging her to a church.

It had been a brilliant plan; one so simple yet effective. For they were all certain that the Dark Angel would definitely come for Katarzyna, and that was the incident around which they had worked.

Worked day and night to construct the House of God. After the construction of the physical structure, the four corners of the church and the altar had been sanctified by washing it with holy oil and incense. And holding the holy mass. All the prayers and rites had been performed by Father Jonathan and Father David. They had also been performing regular prayers every day.

When Ian had for the first time laid his eyes on the place completed, he knew that it would work. That they would for sure destroy Æsa and her malicious plans under the roof of the holy abode.

The combined voices of Father Jonathan and Father David brought him back to the present. Both their heads were bent over two leather bound books that Ian assumed would be the Bible.

In unison both the priests read aloud. *“In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Let GOD arise and let His enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Him flee from before His Face. As smoke vanisheth, so let them vanish away: as wax melteth before the fire, so let the wicked perish at the Presence of GOD.”*

There was an angry growl from the Dark Angel. The words disturbed her. Pained her ears—almost as if some crude iron spear poked at her eardrums. Yet she knew that she must win. After all she had not broken out of prison that held her for centuries just to be banished back to hell.

“My, My!” She exclaimed although it took a considerable amount of effort to hide her pain. “St. Michael’s prayer? Tch...tch...” she said nodding disapprovingly. “You think that would do the job? Destroy me? Was that your plan my dear Jonathan?”

She moved a step closer and touched the flowers around her. The plants instantly withered and turned into ashes. “Look at your demon’s trap. How really strong it is!” She exclaimed sarcastically. “You bring a fishing rod to catch a whale. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry at your ignorance.”

Ian and Mathew turned towards the priests their faces clouded with doubt. However, Katarzyna kept staring ahead, confident in the power of prayers. She knew that demons were sly, extremely masterful of stirring the innermost fears of man. And the only way to avoid losing the battle was not to give in to that fear.

Fortunately both the priests remained undisturbed by Æsa’s taunting and continued to pray aloud. *“Judge Thou, O’ Lord, them that wrong me: overthrow them that fight against me. Let them be confounded and ashamed that seek after my soul. Let them be turned back and be confounded that devise evil against me. Let them become as dust before the wind: and let the Angel of the Lord straighten them. Let their way become dark and slippery: and let the Angel of the Lord pursue them. For without cause they have hidden their net for me unto destruction: without cause they have upbraided my soul....”*

But the Dark Angel was not discouraged. For any onlooker, it would have seemed that the prayers were not having any effect. Yet, if one observed closely, the slight tremble that accompanied her every movement, the slight shakiness that she spoke with, became visible. Moreover even if one of them realized the effect it was having on her, they couldn’t really compare notes—not right then.

“Jonathan!” Æsa’s voice cut through the prayers like a blunt saw. “What *made* you become one of them? How weak you have been throughout your life. As a child you were a slave to the landlords, and now you are a slave to these Marcussens. Protecting them, respecting them. Don’t you realize that this clan does not deserve your services? That they are so corrupt, so extremely fallen that salvation should never *be* theirs? Why do you think they are the chosen ones? Chosen by my Lord?”

Father Jonathan stopped praying and raised his head. There was a faint shadow of hesitancy in his eyes. It did not escape Æsa’s sharp eyes. Encouraged by even that slight action, she continued. “You think you are serving your Lord. Doing his bidding. But you are just a glorified bodyguard, nay a watchman to the Marcussens and I can’t imagine a strapping man such as you would donate his life to serving a clan who least deserve it.”

“Father,” urged Father David softly. “Please, do not stop your prayers. Do not listen to what she has to say. Remember she is trying to hinder your belief, to raise doubts in your heart.”

Father David’s words seemed to take the right effect. Shamefully Father Jonathan bent his head and looked at the passage that he was reading from and then once again joined the older priest in prayers.

Outside the fog was thick and unyielding. Nothing was visible. Just a blurry white light that like a lace curtain hung on all the church windows. Æsa knew that time was running out, soon the eclipse will end and the deed that she had prepared for days would be undoable. Would be in vain. She knew she had to use all the strength she had to stop them. But it was not easy. Being inside the church seemed to have sucked out all her powers. She felt like the one drowned; under water with heavy chains and iron weights tied to her.

Every action seemed to require an elephantine amount of effort. The prayer, the holy words like salt water on metal started to erode away at her. Not just her strength or her spirit but also physically. Her scaly skin gradually stretched tautly over her veins and flesh and slowly tiny tears started to appear on the scales. As she looked down upon her hands horrified, the scales tore revealing the yellowish flesh underneath it. A greenish black liquid started to ooze out of every slash. The pain was excruciating and she dropped the magical dagger on the floor.

She understood that in order to stop her decay she needed to perform her sacrifice instantly. It was now or never. With a roar that worked in blocking the sound of the prayers Æsa suddenly changed her form into something more horrendous; a form that defied every creation of God.

In a moment where had stood the reptilian form, now was a being that looked like a huge Mandrake trunk—a very ugly, dirty brown knuckled trunk that seemed to be made out of a slimy, moldy flesh. The trunk was gigantic—touching almost the dome of the church. The weight of that monstrosity made cracks like famine affected fields on the creamy marble exposing the grey cement beneath. The entire place shook with the effect. The reptilian eyes with its yellow pupils were still there, embedded within the fleshy trunk. But every branch had turned into a slithering serpent. There were tens of them. Their tails seemed to rise out of the trunk while their bodies moved around dangerously. Their mean tiny eyes watched the group viciously and slowly they started to grow in size. Panic seized Ian Mathew and Katarzyna, although the priests very wisely didn't raise their heads from their prayers.

Their voices grew louder in order to drown the hissing sounds of the slithering serpents. *“O' Most Glorious Prince of the Heavenly Armies, St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in the battle and in our wrestling against principalities and powers against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Come to the aid of men, whom GOD created incorruptible, and to the Image of His own Likeness He made him; and from the tyranny of the devil He bought him at a great price. Fight the battles of the Lord today with the Army of the Blessed Angels, as once thou didst fight against Lucifer, the leader of pride, and his apostate angels; and they prevailed not: neither was their place found anymore in Heaven. But that great dragon was cast out, the old serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, who seduceth the whole world. And he was cast unto the earth, and his angels were thrown down with”*.

Suddenly each viper shot out like an arrow and wound around each of them lifting them off the ground. Even the priests were not spared. Their books flew off their hands as they struggled against the tight serpentine chains. Katarzyna screamed while Mathew and Ian tried to break out of their captive state.

However not only was their struggle in vain, but they felt it was wise to stay still as the surrounding serpents came close, hissing at them—showing their scarlet mouths and their sharp curved fangs that came dangerously close to the unfortunate men. The group was in a state of complete panic as the vipers slowly moved close to their necks, almost blocking the air and choking them to death.

Ian started to struggle, wanting to somehow come out of the demon's clutches. He suddenly had a boost of adrenaline, and was determined, that even if he died, he would die trying to save the rest. For it was his battle, the result of hundreds of years of misdeeds performed by his ancestors, that had given power to the Dark Angel, but he will save them no matter what it takes. However, it was easier said than done, for the grip of the serpent that held him was too tight. There wasn't enough space to breathe—let alone maneuver.

Finally Aesa was pleased with her efforts. She knew she had them all. It wouldn't take more than a moment to end each of their lives. The slithering snakes were more venomous than anything man has ever come across and one bite would kill them instantly. Yet she wanted to prolong this moment. Wanted to let them know exactly where they had gone wrong with their plans. She was enjoying herself too much seeing the mere mortals helpless against her vast powers.

The fog outside was thicker and there was still fifteen more minutes for the eclipse to end. Enough time to kill all of them, and save precious Katarzyna for the final sacrifice.

In a voice that cut through the quiet church air, a voice that sounded like nails scratched against a tin, the Dark Angel spoke—recited rather. The poem that for centuries had been kept hidden in the journal of the Marcussens.

*“When all else fails, God prevails,
No evil shall arise afore God's eyes,
For God's light, and God's sight
Robs the Devil of all his might
In God's house, with God's will
Slay all demons, end all evil.”*

It was followed by a demonic laughter that filled the space echoing maniacally. “You did everything, yet forgot the most important element. The light of God, the all seeing eye of God. The sun. The sun that right now lies swallowed by the demons in the sky. Lies powerless in the hands of eclipse.” said the Dark Angel.

Everyone stopped struggling immediately, and what the demon deciphered of the poem slowly dawned on them. Any further struggle felt useless since all realized that they were spending the last few moments on earth. Katarzyna bowed her head, praying to the Almighty—not for salvation, but to stop the demon from using her soul for corrupt purposes.

Ian leaned back against the fleshy bindings and closed his eyes, counting his last few breaths. Would I die and finally be reunited with my Katya? He wondered. He wanted to avoid thinking how everything and everybody's life was in trouble because of him, for he didn't want to die tormented, didn't want to roam the earth for his job was undone; he had read somewhere, that was what happened to souls, if their life on earth had been unfulfilling. He didn't want to spend eternity like that. Behind his closed eyes, he had a vision of Katya, but somehow suddenly, that vision overlapped with Trisha. The young innocent Trisha, the one who had kindled paternal love in a cold heart.

Suddenly even with his eyes closed, Ian felt the light around seemed to have grown considerably brighter. Quickly he opened his eyes and realized indeed it was so. The inside of the church seemed to brighten up with a golden glow. Still tied within the serpent's clutches he turned his head and saw that the sun was coming out from behind the shadow of the moon.

But it can't be. He thought. Such phenomena are predicted accurately and there was no way the experts would have calculated it wrongly. He looked down at his watch. Although his hands were bound strongly, and it was quite an effort to do so, yet he realized that he was right, the sun was indeed coming out of the eclipse ten minutes before time. The Dark Angel seemed not to have noticed it, as she stood facing the opposite side.

But Ian saw the surrounding hills slowly appearing, the day brightening, and the sun, its power once again restored was shining through the stained glass, through the very part that held the heart of Jesus. Soon the rays of the sun became brighter and brighter and like a living thing crept up towards the Dark Angel slowly, surreptitiously.

Two things occurred concurrently. It would have happened quite swiftly. For otherwise, Æsa would have definitely noticed it. But to Ian, it seemed to have taken place in slow motion. As the sun's rays crept up reaching slowly towards where stood the demon, he saw Trisha. At first he couldn't believe it. He was sure, he was hallucinating. But No. It was Trisha he realized after a while.

There was the same innocence, the same softness that he had seen in her, through the mirror, in her spectral form. Yet there she was, in a room without mirror and with a shock Ian realized that it just wasn't a spectral form. It indeed was Trisha. How it happened, he was not sure. But she had somehow seemed to have gotten inside her physical body, and she approached the abominable demon stealthily from behind. In her hand was held the Dark Angel's dagger. Ian wanted to warn her, to stop her, for he was sure, that the little knife would not have the power to destroy the demon. He wanted to tell her to wait, for the sun was almost out, and would definitely destroy the demon. But he didn't dare open his mouth for the fear of risking her life.

Determinedly Trisha advanced, without making any noise, and just as the sun rays were almost about to touch the demonic trunk, with a war cry, she stabbed the corpulent trunk with it. No one else had noticed Trisha's approach and had even not realized that the first cry had indeed come from Trisha. Almost in the next moment, the sun rays reached the

Dark Angel, and there was a scream of agony as the huge trunk and every of its serpentine heads burst into flames, dropping Ian, Katarzyna, Mathew, and the priests on the floor.

The earth shattering scream pierced through everyone's ears till all had to cover their ears, to minimize the sound. There was such excruciating agony in that scream, such terror, that all realized that the dagger that stabbed the Dark Angel must have been a special one, for no ordinary knife would have been able to cause such grief—both physical and emotional to the Dark Angel.

Thick spirals of murky smoke rose from the parts where the sun rays touched the creature; Ian with satisfaction thought that, that was exactly what he had expected to happen in the first place.

And then as in the light of God, burnt the infernal Satan's pawn, with incredulity and eyes overflowing with tears of joy, Mathew took the first few faltering steps towards his beloved daughter.

She had been given strict instructions to keep away from the entire ritual, yet because she had defied the rules, they were finally all saved.

Trisha looked at her father with joy through eyes that were nothing more than pools of tears. It was a poignant moment, a moment showered with equal amounts of affection and victory as father and daughter hugged each other fiercely; understanding the value of that relationship which for most of the time, for most of our lives in fact is taken for granted.

Within moments there remained nothing but cinders on the floor of the church and the one who had been known as Æsa, the Devil's own Dark Angel existed no more.

Joy, relief, faith, all was restored into the lives of the people whose belief, whose courage stopped the dissemination of evil. There were tears in Katarzyna's eyes as she hugged Trisha fondly; silently thanking the Almighty for his mercy, his miracles.

Ian stood slightly away from the crowd, feeling awkward as if he was prying on a family reunion. But suddenly Trisha detached herself gently from Katarzyna's and Mathew's hugs and with a shy smile approached Ian. Then without any further words, she flung herself on him and hugged him in a tight embrace. In a moment all awkwardness disappeared from Ian's mind and he hugged his niece, holding her against his heart revelling in the moment, the moment that became all the more special for it displayed the power, the magnanimousness of the Almighty.

Father Jonathan and Father David looked at each other, their smiles making words redundant. Peace has once again been established on earth. Their job was done, and their faith in the heavenly Father never more absolute.

EPILOGUE

Farther than man has ever been, has ever attempted to learn about, in the realm of the infernal fires where molten lava bubbled relentlessly; in the realm where tortured souls screamed in agony, where the putrid smell of burning flesh hung in the air, there, amidst all the misery and the retribution was a hall of gold. Its pillars studded with precious gems the size of one of which on earth could have kept three generations of a man in affluence. The floor was diamond studded, with rugs made out of the skin of the fairest of all maidens on earth. In life vanity about their beauty had overtaken every other emotion and in death, they served to decorate the living room of the one whose name need not be taken.

And amidst all that wealth and morbid luxury sat the prince on his throne alone in that great big hall. A throne made of blue sapphire that dazzled brilliantly. A pensive smile curved the sides of his thin lips. A malice-filled glint in his eyes spoke of what might be in his heart.

Everything was going exactly as I had planned. Thought the prince contently. The destruction of the Dark Angel had been right as I had willed. Aesa was growing too greedy, too vain—sins that Dark Angels were supposed to spread among mankind, not succumb to. Her greed for power had made her careless, arrogant and she needed to be destroyed.

Yes. He thought pleased, his plan was progressing exactly how he wanted it to. Thus He did not lament the death of one that worshipped Him. Did not worry that his Dark Angel was unsuccessful in her mission.

Let the Marcussens revel in their false victory, find solace in the childish battle they had just won. It wasn't over yet. He thought. For the one that was to come in the years that followed was one that even he waited for with bated breath.

One that would for sure bring my reign on earth; thought the Prince satisfactorily. One that would be born from the seed of a Marcussen—one whose existence all were unaware of. The one who was growing slowly, cell by cell in Trisha's womb—the result of the immoral union between Ian Marcussen and her on that fateful night when her body had been ruled by the Dark Angel.

Author's Note

There's a saying, 'Even the longest journey starts with just a single step forward.' It has never been truer for me, than when I started writing *The Lying Reflection*. Some years back, when the world was a much safer place, one of my friends had visited Skagen in Denmark. As she spoke about her trip, she mentioned going to the beach where two seas met.

Just that partial sentence created a story in my mind. At that time I had never been to Denmark, yet thanks to Google, it wasn't very difficult to find out about the point in Skagen where the North Sea and the Baltic Sea met; but they didn't mix. Of course scientists have given explanations about the phenomenon saying that the density of the waters of the two seas are different.

Yet the writer in me imagined that sort of landscape to be a representation of the good and evil in this world. Where they meet, but never mix. And so was born the novel, and along with it was born *Æsa*—an antagonist who doesn't apologize for being evil, doesn't give a sad backstory as to why she is evil, proving that there can never be any justification for malice, for evil.

At times writing from her point of view, the way she saw the world, the way she argued about the unfairness of the Almighty, I used to become very uncomfortable. Somehow, some of her words created questions in my mind that I had no answer to. But that is when I realised that I have actually created the perfect Dark Angel, because that is the true vocation of evil. To falsely convince us that our bad deeds are justified.

Just like the two seas meeting, in each of us lives a bit of *Æsa* luring us, tempting us to do the wrong thing. On the other hand in each of us lives a *Katarzyna*, who is kind, caring, resilient and with an unshakeable faith in herself and God.

The choice is ours, who we follow; because we can only be one of them, there's no grey area. For remember, although the two seas meet, they don't mix.

About The Author



Pael Khugan has worked as an editor, an educator and is presently the Executive Director of an international financial and corporate consultancy firm. Writing, however, has always been her first love.

The Lying Reflection is her second novel. Her first novel The Never Ending Nightmare has been a favourite among the horror fans and is in the midst of being converted to a screenplay for the silver screen.

Pael lives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia with her husband and their son where she is working on her next novel.

THE LYING REFLECTION

THE LYING REFLECTION

If you like Classic Horror stories like The Omen.....
You are going to love this book.

When Trisha received an ornate antique mirror for her eighteenth birthday, little did she realise that it was fated. For only through her could the ancient demon step into our world.

The Marcussens were among the most illustrious noble families of Denmark. In their veins flowed the Viking blood and their ancestral history could be traced back to the fifteenth century. They had everything, wealth, honor, fame.....and a curse that broke through the barriers of generations. For they were the chosen ones; chosen by the Prince of Darkness himself. Their family was doomed to endure amongst them the birth of Dark Angels—demons born to promulgate destruction of man.

Centuries back one such Dark Angel was born a Marcussen. She had created terror and tyranny that almost brought the end of their ancestral kingdom. Through a hallowed rite she had been trapped and kept a captive over generations.

But now, she is out and determined to finish what she started; to make man kneel before her Lord and her. Only a Marcussen can stop her.

Ian Marcussen was the odd one in the family for neither was he superstitious, nor did he have the patience to pay heed to family legends. He had a business to run. But when what he thought were childhood myths, started to become real, when he felt the presence of unparalleled evil accompanying his every footstep, he knew that his grandfather had foretold of a time, when it would be up to him to restore faith in the world.

Can Ian slay a nemesis he doesn't believe in?
Can he succeed where his ancestors had failed?

