WAR CRY

A NOVEL

Sunita Singh

Master of Arts

(Creative Writing)

Higher Degree by Research

2 0 1 0

RMIT
"Agar firdaus bar roo-e zameen ast,
Hameen ast-o hameen ast -o hameen ast"

If there is paradise on this earth,
It is here, it is here, it is here….. (India)

Persian Poet Amir Khusrau
Prologue

Circa 1844

Oudh, India

The kingfisher hovered above the placid water of river Gomti, over the northern fringes of the city, its wings flapping with alarming rhythm, twirling to keep its precarious balance in the Awadhi dusk. The bluish red plumage on its neck quivered in the cool breeze as it saw a sparkling silhouette in the cold green depths. When the tiny fish rose to the surface, the kingfisher transformed itself into a bird of prey. In a flash of absolute dexterity, it dived, skimming the surface of water, and caught the fish. As it rose again a shattering roar of cannon resounded in the air.

On the ghats, Samaira turned back to look towards the minarets of the Bara Imambara. The guns sounded again and again, deafening in their magnificence. They stopped on her count of eleven. Eleven gun salutes! That could only mean that the Bahu Begum Sahiba had a son, a son who would one day become the ruler of Oudh. Samaira had already taken a dip in the river. She started to pick up her clothes, piled neatly on the steps of the ghats. This part of the ghat was exclusively women only, which provided adequate privacy to the purdanashin.

She glanced down towards her companion sitting on the last step before the edge of the river. She was looking up at her with stupefied insolence. 'Mumtaz, let's hurry up. You realize of course the significance of the cannon shots, don't you?'

'No, Appa jaan'. Mumtaz hugged the thin muslin towel to her body protectively.
Samaira was amused. There was absolute horror in her kohled eyes as the significance of Samaira’s words sunk in. Ironically, the smudged kohl around her eyes gave her a ghoulish appearance, as water drops on her face made her fair complexion paler than it already was.

‘Nothing to worry about, love. I think that the Nawab Sarkar has been blessed with a grandson.’ Samaira tried to assuage her friend’s fear.

'Insha’Allah! That would be the best news my ears have heard in ages.' A huge smile spread across Mumtaz’s face.

'Good. Now let’s hurry lest we miss the festivities.' Soon both of them were chatting excitedly as they dressed. They climbed the stairs till they reached the top where in the enclosed changing room the elderly Saira Bibi awaited them. She was their official chaperone and warden.

Mumtaz and Samaira, who had just turned sixteen, were nautch girls or tawaifs. They entertained the rich with their voice, dance, and ada. They were not prostitutes but refined courtesans and were adept in the age old art of pleasing men. They had been tutored from an early age in singing the melodious ghazals and the dance form of thumri and kathak. Their graceful persona and mannerism evoked an overpowering eroticism bordering on lust. They epitomised the culture of Oudh and were the gems at the court of the Nawab.

Samaira, Mumtaz and the elderly Saira Bibi walked up to their waiting tonga, the horse carriage. Their Tonga passed through the narrow lanes of Lucknow with occasional glimpses of the imperial palaces, Chattar Manzil and Kaiserbagh in the distance.

There was an illusion of timelessness in the fabled and exotic capital of the
kingdom of Oudh. Lucknow was at the time rightly adjudged the Constantinople of the East

The man knelt on the exquisitely patterned Persian carpet and raised his hands in prayer. His face was radiating with intense joy as he thanked God for blessing him with a son.

Though this human occurrence has affected a countless fathers, there was certainly a difference of circumstance here. The kneeling figure was the Sahib-i-Alam Wali Ahad Mirza Bhadur Wajid Ali; the Crown Prince of Oudh, one of the richest kingdoms of India. He had been given the joyous tidings by a maid who had ran all the way from the Zenanan Dhorhi, in an attempt to be the first to reach the prince. She had been well rewarded by Prince Wajid Ali Shah. He had at once removed a Basra pearl necklace from his person and placed it in her grateful hands.

He now slowly raised himself from the floor, and turned around. Anyone watching him pray would have seen that the prince had an aura which was majestic yet benevolent, a rare phenomenon for royalty. The Crown Prince was nearly twenty two, and was considered handsome in his unique way, though some would argue on the contrary. Considerably stout, he loomed tall in his stance. A life of excesses had rendered his complexion pasty and his physique ungainly, yet his face retained a radiance which, some would say, only manifests itself in those who are privileged by fate. He had inherited the ruddy tinge from his Iraqi forefathers who had hailed from the province of Nazaf. His upturned moustache and curly long locks could not hide the gentleness of his features. His large ruminant eyes, enmeshed with thick eyelashes, now twinkled at the news of the arrival of his son.

He wore thin translucent muslin angarkha decorated with embroidered zardozi work embellished with gemstones and gold thread work. His pointed cap with the diamond studded tiara, was set fashionably at an angle. The Crown Prince now clapped his hands to summon an attendant.
Soon festivities were in the air. The Oudh darbar was illuminated with lights and embellished with elaborately made garlands of marigolds, red roses and fuchsias and other exotic flowers to celebrate the grand occasion. The noblemen, patrons and other luminaries arrived to congratulate the Crown prince and the King.

Sweets, clothes and money, were distributed to the poor and needy in the evening that followed the news of the arrival of their future ruler. Not one to miss the festive spirit, Samaira in the gathering dusk, walked through the noisy and bustling bazaar of Aminabad. As she had predicted, the popular bazaar was swarming with people. Young and old alike, mothers carrying their young ones, were busy eyeing the stalls where they would make their purchases after receiving their share from the state treasury.

The whole city looked like a mela, a huge fair. Troupes of artists had flooded the by-lanes enticing the patrons with their varied shows, be it the madari who with his trained monkey, or the bhalluwala with black bear which enthralled the children. There were even the tamashbins, or the trapeze artists who walked a high rope balancing with the aid of the long stick.

Samaira’s attention suddenly focused on a small crowd which had formed a circle. That must surely be the cock fights, she surmised. She edged towards the crowd in a bid to get a glimpse of the fight. Both the cocks were evenly matched with their white bodies and rich red crowns. They looked comic rather than menacing. Samaira laughed at their brave attempt at clawing the head of their opponents, the flurry of coloured feathers exploding as they made contact, ready to kill or die fighting.

She mused that if the kindred spirit of these fearless birds could somehow be replaced in her countrymen, then together they could fight the might of the British Empire. The air was thick with conspiracy and it was only a matter of a few years
that Oudh would be among the many kingdoms that came under the British
domain unless a unified resistance was made to oppose such a move.

Samaira roused herself from this train of thoughts and decided that she did not
want to spoil the gaiety of the hour by hoping for the impossible. The citizens of
Oudh everywhere this evening were in their own humble ways marking the joyous
occasion; a subjects’ show of solidarity and love for their king. The subjects prayed
for the continuity of the magnanimous administration and offered heartfelt
blessings to the newborn.

Samaira decided that she wanted to end the day by taking a tonga ride which would
pass Chattar Manzil Palace. She might be able to get a glimpse of sundry noblemen
and other luminaries in their fine clothes and carriages arriving there to
congratulate the Crown prince and the King. Although she had been to the palace
on numerous occasions to perform nautch, it was a delight to capture its beauty
and the surrounding ambience every time there was an occasion to celebrate. The
people in Oudh prayed in unison that evening, for the continuity of the
magnanimous administration and offered heartfelt blessings to the newborn. It was
a time to rejoice and usher in the era of good governance.

As the festivities died down, the king, Amjad Ali Shah hoped that the arrival of his
grandson would prove propitious to the fate of the kingdom, which now hung in
precarious balance. But for others the birth had brought a perplexing set of
circumstances. It was an inopportune time for Oudh. Though ostensibly a free
state it was under the rule of the British East India Company. Much of the
kingdom had been annexed under the treaty of 1801. Ever since then the kingdom
called the ‘garden, granary, and queen province of India’ had been exploited by the
British to provide for a buffer state between their presence in the East and South,
and the remnants of Mogul Empire to the North.
The prince, Wajid Ali Shah though, was content with the state of affairs. Though realizing that the British were eating into his land slowly, there was little he could do to counter their presence nowadays, or so he thought. Inwardly he feared them, and could not envisage taking on their might by defying them. It was this trait in his character that set him apart from his forefathers. He could not exhibit valour, even when the need arose. By acknowledging British supremacy, he made an attempt to focus his energies on other pressing matters, namely the happiness of his people and his love and patronage for the Arts. It was his escape from the unpalatable truth but one which he would eventually have to face. Women were his only weakness and he married three hundred and fifty nine times. This life of hedonism was to taint his name in the pages of history one day. The association with the women was indeed legal under the Islamic faith, but not a permanent one. It was just as he preferred. The arrangement, if one could call it that, was convenient to all parties involved.

On the banks of the Gumti, four miles west of the Chota Imambara, stood the impeccable house of General Sleeman, the British resident in the kingdom of Oudh. His was an important position in the British East India Company. The role of a British resident in the Indian kingdoms was to safeguard the interests of the East India Company by acting as the Company’s agent. By adopting such a move, the British made sure that they kept strict guard on the movements of not only the royalty but commoners too. The resident would inform the Company of any dubious happenings, not in the interests of the Company.

The lawn outlining the tall edifice was tended by more gardeners than it required, as immaculate as the master it represented. It was a mélange of colours by virtue of flowers such as zinnia, crimson roses, raat ki raani, oleanders and creepers which found their way up the walls of the house.
Only a matter of fifteen minutes by tonga ride from the British cantonments, the resident’s house was colonial in style with white walls and bottle green French lower doors and windows. The resident felt a familiar sense of English pride even though it evaporated as soon as he stepped out of the bungalow, bringing in the stark truth of being on foreign soil.

Inside, General Sleeman paced the floor of his bedroom. He disliked the Nawab and the Crown Prince. Especially the Crown prince. He loathed it when the commoners put the stature of the duo to exaggeratedly lofty heights. A few days ago, one of his two main khitmadgars, Parsadi, had started recounting tales of their ‘magnanimous’ king. At first, Sleeman had been a patient listener but could not keep up with this pretence and had dismissed the servant. He now tried to remember fragments of the conversation.

‘Breakfast is ready, Sahib’ Parsadi had announced.

The General had been fastening his belt when the servant had entered the bedroom. The General caught his reflection in the mirror and a frown began to form and deepen the existing lines on his forehead.

‘All Right. Give me a moment, and, what are you smiling about?’

‘Sahib, allow me to be the bearer of good news. In case you haven’t heard already-a son has been born to the Crown Prince. We are joyous and it is a time of celebration in this kingdom.’

‘Is that so?’ the General retorted, trying to mask the sarcasm in his voice, ‘I guess a minister from the Court must be on the way to give me the good news. Well, I understand that you people love your king and the prince which, as a loyal subject you should, but you eat the Company’s salt, always remember that. And someday, we might ask for this loyalty ourselves.’

‘No, no…Sahib. You, you misinterpret me. I am a mere servant assigned to your services. We as people are happy for the king and just want to be part of his
happiness during this time. Please do not read more than there is to it. The truth is that he has been a good king to us realizing his responsibilities well.’

‘Do you remember Sahib, the famine that had wrecked our village Bashirathpur last summer’, Parsadi continued in the same breath, ‘Despite his ill-health, huzoor took the initiative to tour the village and provided gallons of water every day for two months to nullify the damage the drought had done to the crops. Not only that, Sahib, he had also provided food and other necessities to the villagers during this time.’

‘So? That’s his job. Do you not understand, you simpleton!’, the General was now growing impatient and made no move to disguise it.

‘Ji, Sahib. But not all kings or people ‘who are in power’ are so considerate. May, may I take your leave now. The breakfast must be getting cold.’ Parsadi tried to excuse himself from the uncomfortable predicament he had landed himself in. Maybe he had already said too much.

‘Hmm. Yes, go and if I were you, I’d be thankful everyday to the British’.

Recalling the incident, a few hours later, the General had smiled sardonically. ‘Benevolent king indeed’, he muttered to himself. He knew very well that the king played only a titular role in the affairs of the East India Company. What he could not fathom was why the locals still loved their king so much? Natives, they were beyond comprehension, he said to himself.

The Company played on the clemency of the ruler and tried to exploit his generosity to suit their malevolent ends. They knew that the Nawab would not exhibit even the slightest show of resistance if they were to entirely annex his kingdom one day. If kings did not acquiesce to the demands of the Company their kingdoms were taken away from them. Nawab Amjad Ali Shah did not want to accept this bitter truth and face the same predicament.
There were numerous demands from the side of the East India Company in the form of loans and other grants which weighed heavily on the Nawab. The British Army, having acquired monstrous proportions was testimony to the fact that by maintaining it, the king had to pay a very heavy price. Day by day the state treasury was being depleted to accommodate the constant financial demands the British made to suit their imperial ends.

The king was also getting old. He did not want to see the kingdom usurped by the imperialists. Not one to believe in reckless violence, he never propagated it. From his son, Wajid Ali Shah he had no lofty expectations in the department of warfare. His son was a good man and would make a great administrator one day. Almighty Allah knew he had shown insurmountable interest in managing the affairs of the state and reorganizing the Army. He had transformed the entire face of Oudh and turned it into a cultural abode. But when it came to true warrior spirit, his son simply did not have it. It was just as well as Nawab Amjad Ali Shah did not want to lose his son. The only way at the moment to deal with them would be to give into their demands, each time they came to him, eating into the royal treasury.

Inwardly, the sickly king foresaw a bleak future for Oudh. The malignant cancer was ravaging his body inside and it was whispered in the royal circles that the king did not have much time. Maybe it was Allah’s wish that He wanted the king to remember his kingdom when it still had a semblance of its old grandeur.

Three years after his grandson’s birth, the king died after battling with the dreaded disease which makes few exceptions on who it wants to spare. It is as final as death itself.

His physician had advised the queen of the king’s decline but the news cut through the queen’s heart like the edge of a dagger. There was a heavy pall in the air. The
begum was aggrieved, realizing fully the implications of her bereavement. She had loved the king dearly.

The Crown prince consoled his mother. Yet he had seen it coming just as she had. His father had not been keeping well for the past few years, the disease rendering him bedridden in its last stages. His son was weary of maintaining the sovereignty and royalty of his ancestors. He was weary of bowing to the never ending demands of the East India Company. In the end the Company had won. He blamed the Company for the disease, and his father’s death.

The resident was soon informed of the death of the Nawab. The noblemen gathered at the Court to offer their commiseration. So did the king’s people. They were teary-eyed, nobles and commoners alike. The Court was crowded to its full capacity with sounds of wailing women reverberating in the colossal vastness.

The Prince made an appearance amidst the mourning crowd and sat on the silver throne on the austere dais, the jewelled velvet tapestries having being removed.

‘Shah zada, it feels as if he is amongst us. To guide us, as always. We can envisage his benign face looking at us and asking us what ails his subjects. O Royal One, tell us it is not true. We beseech you’, Manohar Singh the minister, spoke falteringly.

‘Deewanji, it is true. Now help me deal with my loss in a manner which does not involve the British. At least in this moment in my life I do not want to tolerate their meddlesome ways.’ the Prince replied with an air of solemnity.

‘Ji huzoor.’

Suddenly there were murmurs in the crowd near the entrance to the palace.

‘What is it?’ the Prince asked.

‘Shah Zada, the carriage of the resident has arrived.’ the royal guard replied.
‘Usher him in then.’ Wajid Ali Shah was already envisaging the futility of what he had just told Manohar Singh.

General Sleeman heralded his arrival at the Court with his retinue of British officers. His ridiculously upturned moustache belied his grim stance and impeccable clothing. He now removed his hat and hastened towards the prince and took his seat next to him.

‘Shah Zada, please accept my deepest sympathies at this sad moment in your life. I, as a representative of the honourable East India Company, feel for you in this of your profound loss. It is so inspiring indeed; the king seemed stoical even in the last stage of that dreaded disease. He was a true nawab and one who would be always missed’, the resident feigned with undetectable solemnity.

‘Yes, dear friend. It is one loss which will take a long time to heal. I suddenly feel orphaned and yet I must be strong and resolute, if not for myself, then for my people.’ The prince stood up as he felt the resident’s outstretched hand on his shoulder. His rotund face, otherwise full of vigour, was pallid.

General Sleeman spoke gently, ‘I will have to set up a meeting with my seniors to decide on the next course of action for the kingdom of Oudh’. He looked at the prince searchingly. ‘Shah zada, can we retreat to the private hall where I can have a word with you alone?’

The prince looked appalled. ‘General, can this wait? I have to inform other begums of Abbu Jaan and my cousins, step brothers and sisters and decide upon the burial. I do not have much time, you see.’ the prince uttered in shocked disbelief, not looking at the resident in his eyes. This is going to be difficult, he said to himself.

‘Do not worry, Shah Zada, this will only take a moment. Shall we retire to the private hall now?’ there was menacing edge to the resident’s voice, though subtle.

The Prince rose, feeling his strings pulled like that of a puppet. He was followed by the Resident, leaving loud whispers of the crowd of mourners in his wake. As they
walked over the thick carpeted floor, the General could not help but admire its intricate pattern and decided that he had to have a replica in his own living room. As they walked the long corridor to the hall, the ghosts of ancestors of the prince stared at them from the adjoining walls in the form of paintings captured by artists. In the long line, another painting was to join them soon, that of the deceased, Nawab Amjad Ali Shah.

They reached the ornate hall with light emanating from a sole chandelier. ‘Now, Shah Zada, you do understand that according to the Treaty of 1801…,’ the General began to speak, easing himself to a nearby couch upholstered in iridescent silk with woven zardozi work.

‘Please, General, I fully understand that according to the treaty, I will ascend the throne, but only in name. The Company will have actual rights over the kingdom and any decision I make, big or small, has to be first accepted by you and the Company. My Abba Jaan had made me privy to the situation and prepared me for this day. I just ask of you, General, that in this time of my loss I make all the arrangements as to the proper burial ceremony of my father so that his soul rests in peace. Please take this as his last wish. I would be indebted to the East India Company if it did not intervene in this matter’. The Prince tried to compose himself, clutching the small table adjacent to a pillar. He had to be calm or whatever little dignity was left in the death of his father would be lost. He thought wryly about the unfairness of the situation. The resident beckoned him to sit on the opposite couch facing him, but Wajid Ali Shah waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal.

‘But of course, Shah Zada. You misunderstand. We want nothing more at this moment than for the Nawab to depart for heaven in the most regal way possible. I am sure you will do justice to your father’s last wish.’ General Sleeman now smiled viciously, complacent in the knowledge that the Crown Prince well understood as to his standing where Oudh was concerned.
Getting up, he continued, ‘I must take my leave. As for your coronation, I will advise you once I have spoken with the other officials. Please take care of yourself and your family Shah Zada’, the General bowed and left the hall leaving the prince to contemplate what he had said.

❖

Praise is to God, Lord of the Universe,
the Mercy giving, the Merciful!
Ruler on the Day for Repayment!
You do we worship and you do we call on for help.
Guide us along the Straight Road,
the road of those whom You have favoured,
with whom You are not angry,
nor who are lost!

(First chapter of the Quran, the Holy Book of Islam)

The official mourning of the death of the Nawab lasted for three days. During this time common people came from afar to offer their condolences quietly in a manner befitting the Islamic Faith. The palace came alive again as invitees poured in. There were kings and representatives of kings from nearby kingdoms who had come to show their solidarity with the Crown Prince in his time of loss.

As was customary according to tenets of Islam, the mourning was followed by a lavish banquet at the Court to honour the departed soul. Verses from the Quran were read out loud. The large gathering of luminaries included representatives of the East India Company who were conspicuous in their crimson and white uniforms. Officers William Butler and Jack Garrison accompanied General Sleeman, along with six others.
Officer William Butler, of medium height and freckled face, had an uncanny sense of humour. Trying to keep his wit about him in such a melancholic ambience took a great deal of fortitude on his part. Turning to his counterpart, Jack Garrison, taller to him by several inches, he quipped, ‘look at the gathering. They’ve turned out in hordes. As if the Nawab was a young man of twenty and had suddenly died a tragic death. They should be grateful that death put an end to the old man’ agony.’ He rolled his eyes.

‘Ssh! Have you totally taken leave of your non-existent senses? Lower your voice, you imbecile,’ his colleague and friend, Jack Garrison chided. He then looked around and admired the majestic opulence of the palace and whistled softly, ‘I don’t understand anything about this titular bit, but the Nawabs sure live in splendour, if only in name. I wish I was a Nawab and could house a hundred nymphets in my harem!’ he chuckled, his brown eyes twinkling.

Officers then silently admired the grandeur around them, taking in the mélange of the royalty that had gathered.

Just then two khidmatgars came towards them, dressed in the Indian attire of white dhoti and yellow silken embroidered kurta.

‘Sahib, the banquet has been laid. If you would care to grace the occasion by joining in the feast, the Crown Prince will be obliged. This way Sahib,’ one of them spoke while the other led the way. Both the officers followed them. They reached the place where the banquet had been laid and were served with the silver cutlery by the other khidmatgars. They could see that the General had already proceeded with his share of the feast and was heavily engrossed in a conversation with a noble.

‘The food is sumptuous. Especially these kebabs…mmm., they just melt in your mouth. What do you think Jack?’ William Butler muttered, in between bites.
‘Yes, indeed! Mouth-watering. I’ve heard that Lakhnavi cuisine is quite popular all over India’, Jack replied. Jack felt a genuine connection with the country. He knew all about the food and other elaborate traditions and often regaled his battalion with his colourful tales of the land.

‘I guess it’s the legacy of the moribund Mogul Empire.’, William said, in between mouthfuls.

‘The General is coming towards us.’ Jack said in a hushed tone.

‘Eaten to your heart’s content, boys?’ The General looked at the two officers, amused.

‘Yes, Sir.’ both the officers replied sheepishly. ‘We are almost done. Shall we proceed now?’ William Butler asked.

‘No officers, not quite yet. I have to see the Prince first. It seems he has retired to his quarters. I will go and have a word with him first. You wait with the other officers till I come back’, the General then excused himself.

❖

A fortnight later preparations had started for the coronation ceremony of the Crown Prince. The moment had finally arrived.

A long line of carriages waited outside the palace courtyards. The palace was alive with activity and the chaos that accompanies such an occasion. The investiture of Crown prince was an opulent affair and no expense had been spared to celebrate the grand occasion. Inside the many ministers of the Crown Prince greeted the never-ending invitees whilst showing them their seating arrangements.

The whole length and breadth of the palace gallery was crowded with a spectacular assortment of nobles. The members of the East India Company occupied paramount place amongst them. Just then there were loud whispers. The Crown
Prince emerged at the entrance to the Court with one minister on either side of him.

He smiled at his guests and acknowledged them with a slight bow of his head. Wajid Ali Shah wore a sea-green brocade angerakha. The borders of the tunic were embellished with zardozi embroidery, a signature art of Lucknow. The neckline of the tunic was studded with precious gems, jade, ruby, sapphire and one of Prince’s favourites, basra pearls. He made for a formidable figure. He had regained his radiant complexion which only a few days ago had disappeared as a result of his father’s demise.

The Prince walked up to the dais on the velvet carpet covering the mosaic ground, his golden slippers shimmering in the dazzling light of the multihued chandeliers. On either side of him were the seated guests. He was followed by the faithful ministers of the late Nawab, Manohar Singh and Asif Haider, holding his long beaded jamavar shawl from behind. He reached the dais and stood there, his expression one of mature anticipation. His Uncle Abdul Ali and Cousin Haider Ali stood on the dais along with the resident waiting with the Crown that would adorn the new wearer’s head. The Crown was solid gold and adorned with sizeable nuggets of emeralds and diamonds.

Abdul Ali stepped forward and put it on Wajid Ali Shah’s head. He then hugged his nephew. So did Haider Ali. The General took his turn in hugging and shaking hands with the new Nawab and a thunderous applause resounded in the Court followed by sounds of cannon shots being fired outside. Various Hindu ministers touched the Nawab’s feet and the Muslim ministers bowed their heads.

The musicians waiting for this moment broke into the popular Qawali. The line-up of programs and festivities continued well past midnight followed by a spectacular feast. Alms were distributed amongst the poor who had collected outside the palace walls, eager to be let in to witness the royal ceremony. It was an
occasion to celebrate. It was a landmark in history. The rule of new Nawab would continue with the compassion and wisdom mirroring the old.
Chapter I

1844

Davenlock, Scotland

The three brothers strode along the rivulet behind the majestic castle of Davenlock, its tall iron gates paling in the distance. Jack, the eldest spoke,

‘Both of you, not a word about this to father or else this is our last hunting expedition. Especially you Mathew. If you so much as utter a word, as you somehow invariably manage to do because of your slow wits or rather a lack of them, then I will make sure that you never bunk any more mathematics tuitions with Mr. Fletcher.’

‘C’mon Jackie, don’t overstress that tired brain of yours’, Mathew replied blithely, trying to keep pace with his elder brother. ‘Have I ever told anybody about our hunting expeditions in the past?’ he almost looked innocent, trying to hide a smile forming at the corners of his mouth.

‘Is the word ‘daft’ emblazoned on my face? Don’t make me recount the number of times when father found out because, quite frankly, you didn’t give him much choice but just dropped mere clues to put the pieces together.’ Jack turned and looked hard at his younger brother. Mathew seemed like a mischievous cherub, his brown blonde hair glistening in the sunlight, coming through parting clouds.

Charles, all of sixteen, was lagging far behind as he had just stumbled and sprained his ankle and was in no rush to join his elder brothers. He had shot three hog deers last week and was quite satisfied with his score. He would let Jack and Mathew do the hunting today. Younger than Mathew by two years and Jack by four, Charles displayed a vast maturity. He looked at the familiar sight of his brothers squabbling with an amused expression on his face.
‘Hey Charles, what’s keeping you? You seem not too enthusiastic as to what unfolds today. ‘Jack chuckled, throwing a pebble at Charles’s path. ‘You better move fast if you don’t want the dark to beat us to the game and, why in the name of God are you limping?’

‘You go on Jackie, don’t wait up for me. I just sprained my ankle. I just wanted to accompany you two today. And don’t worry about Mathew telling tales to father. I’ll make sure that he doesn’t,’ Charles replied, winking at Mathew.

‘I know you both only too well. I guess I wanted some spectators to witness a spectacular hunt and am ready to pay the price. You too should consider yourselves fortunate at the honour.’

‘You sound more conceited as each day passes. Not good, I tell you.’ Charles grinned.

‘I’ll second that. Amen.’ Mathew chimed.

Jack and Mathew paused under a big oak tree to catch their breath. Charles looked at them as he climbed uphill. In appearance they were very different. While Jack had dark hair and restless blue eyes, Mathew had deep amber eyes and brown blonde hair. There was a certain anxiety in Jack’s manner which reflected in his eyes. He was handsome, if one could call him that, in a dangerous wolf-like way, his features almost ruthless, with a sharp pointed nose and full mouth. He looked like his father, Blake Hamilton. Mathew’s looks were softer, almost feminine.

Charles smiled to himself realising early on that he himself resembled Jack more. It was just as well. But what Jack lacked was a certain rare sagacity which Charles possessed. He did not get agitated over trivalities and seemed to accommodate human failings as natural.

He now joined his brothers under the oak tree and looked at the expansive surroundings. It all belonged to them, this mammoth acreage. Eighteen thousand acres of hills, timber, wheat fields and meadows.
Blake Hamilton, Marquis of Davenlock and father to the three boys, had worked hard at his estate. Maintaining the tradition of his father and forefathers, he worked hard to deserve his title of a Marquis and the owner of Estate of Davenlock, situated in the heart of Border County, six miles south of Hawick. He had added to his vast ownership by working out shrewd alliances and dealings.

He was a good father to the boys and they loved and respected him in return. Blake knew deep down that the Estate would one day go to Jack, according to the Law of Primogeniture and had hitherto encouraged Mathew and Charles to choose their careers and station in life. He had never allowed this bit of truth to adulterate the love the brothers felt for each other. He had rather prepared them for this fact from early on lest this bit of knowledge come between them. Jack, who had turned twenty this year, would inherit the state after Blake was gone. Blake was working out a marriage alliance with the Ramonfields to marry off his eldest in three years’ time to their winsome daughter Gabriella, to add to his already magnificent Estate by the dowry that would be got.

‘Give me the muzzle loader, Mathew. This is a good spot for a wild boar to be sighted as well as a hog deer and for Pete’s sake, not a sound from you two’ Jack said, taking the long gun from Mathew while gesticulating to Charles, who was again lagging behind, to keep quiet.

They had reached the dense growth. The impressive growth of rich herbage and the tall trees suggested the presence of the small game that would soon be stalked by the boys. The sun shone brilliantly now and then, making Jack squint his eyes and carry the heavy muzzle loader with beads of sweat forming near his brow which he wiped with his already dirty shirt sleeve.

‘Sssh. Not a sound, I said.’ Jack saw something move ahead of him at a distance of about hundred yards and the leaves rustled at the particular spot. Jack used his thumb to pull back the hammer to the load position, and tried to mute the click of
the hammer as it fell into its catch. He had already loaded the gun at the beginning of the hunt with the powder and the ball. He now finally slipped in the firing cap.

Jack then brought the stock up to his shoulder, and looked down the barrel at where he had last seen the movement. All he could see was a flicker of rushed movement through the leaves. There it was again. He closed his eyes momentarily and then looked back again at the same spot. Now he could see the full perspective. It was the ear of the hog deer which had twitched. The face was hidden in the shrubbery, but now that he knew where the head was, he moved the barrel down and left till the bead aligned at the joint where the forelegs met the cleft of the body. Their father had taught them where the heart lay by showing them dead game. Jack took a deep breath and slowly squeezed the trigger. The gun roared as the recoil of the big gun slammed him back. The brothers waited, squatting, holding their breath behind the bush from where Jack had fired the gun. Then something fell with a heavy thud.

The boys rose and walked gingerly towards the sound. They stopped near the carcass. It was a hog deer in its last throes, already the lustre of its black eyes was becoming a static glaze of death.

‘Congratulations!’ Mathew and Charles shouted in unison.

‘You have managed to shoot three hog deer and one wild boar in one single week. But then again there’s no need to get carried away. We all have our moments. And then there was the luck factor. The poor animal literally came to you feeling a bit suicidal.’ Charles said, putting a hand around Mathew’s shoulder. Then they both laughed heartily, clapping their hands.

‘Why, thank you, you two. But wait, do I see somebody going green with envy. What can I say? What was that saying, yes, something like, ‘sour grapes’, no?’ Jack laughed trying to roll over, pointing his finger at Charles in a mock gesture.
‘Now, Charles, you be a good sport and replace the muzzle loader back into Father’s study as discreetly as possible. We should already be heading back to the house.’

‘Why does it have to be me all the time? Let Mathew run this errand for you. Don’t you remember what happened the last time?’

‘C’mon, Charlie, at least you are discreet when you are opening the gun case cabinet. Mathew is such a maladroit when it comes to…’ Jack trailed off as Mathew protested midway.

‘Stop casting aspersions on my name all the time, Jackie. At least have some faith in your little brother.’ Mathew said in a shrill tone. ‘Let me do the honour, please.’

‘All right, all right. But if father catches you red-handed, you know what that means.’

‘Yes, yes, I know what it means. You do not have to spell it out for me.’ Mathew was growing cross with his eldest brother.

‘If you two are finished squabbling, can we go back? It’s going to be late otherwise.’ Charles stifled a yawn making circles on the ground with a twig that he had just picked up.

‘How’s your sprain?’ Jack asked with concern in his voice.

‘It’s better now; it won’t kill me, unless you plan to carry me on your back all the way.’

‘Hmm, yes maybe, why not? And while I am at it I might just dump you into one of the surrounding valleys.’ Jack chuckled.

The brothers started walking downhill towards the Estate. It would be a long walk; with Mathew leading the pack. The sky was turning violet, hinting at a deeper hue within a few moments.
Jack and Charles walked side by side, with Jack trying to lower his walking pace for Charles’s benefit. They were busy planning a credible story lest they were caught in an awkward situation with their father on the way.

They reached the well manicured lawns with oleanders, jasmine, hibiscus, zinnia and a host of other flowers and shrubbery adorning the boundaries, and entered the Iron gates. The house was in a six hundred acre sprawling expanse of land, the tall pine trees growing in two neat rows added to the vastness of the house. Two pillars were erected with marble busts of lions on their top columns. Their palatial house was a sight to behold and it had taken Blake Hamilton’s great grandfather Vincent Hamilton, nearly fifteen years to build. But it had been well worth the effort. There were fourteen master bedrooms and five suites in all, with a splendid living room affording a panoramic view of the vast estate and the rolling hills and the meadows. It was their mother’s favourite place in the whole house.

Nancy Hamilton had aged beautifully. With her auburn hair tied in a neat bun, her face only showed a hint of wrinkles when she smiled, with small creases forming around her cerulean eyes. The adage ‘wrinkles should only indicate where the smiles have been’ applied aptly to her case. Mother to the three boys and wife to Blake Hamilton, she took her duties as a mother and a Marchioness rather seriously. Though married to Blake at the tender age of eighteen, she did a fine job of managing the house and the estate. Blake never tired of praising her and was thankful that she was his wife.

As the boys arrived the door was opened by the middle-aged butler Paul. ‘Good Evening, Master Jack, Master Charles. Your father is in the study and has asked for the both of you along with Master Mathew.’

Jack and Charles exchanged blank glances. Jack said to Charles, ‘Go call Mathew, what’s keeping him so long at the stables?’
‘I think the love of the new stallion Moore is keeping him.’ Charles managed a half grin, anticipating his father’s reaction to their dare devilry earlier in the day.

‘The love that he feels so passionately for that daft horse will be replaced by something else tonight, which is the love for his inconsequential life.’

‘All right, all right, I'll go and call him. In the meantime, why don’t you go and gauge father’s mood’ teased Charles.

‘Not in a million years. Remember we’re in this together.’

‘As far as I can remember, you were the one who shot the pretty deer.’ Charles quipped.

‘Oh, come now. Go and fetch Mathew.’

‘All right, all right.’ Charles started walking towards the back door which led to the stables.

Jack in the meantime, checked his reflection in the mirror next to the big ceramic vase in the hallway. He tried to brush off the dust and the dried grass from his breeches and the leather boots. In the mirror he could see his mother coming towards him. He turned around to face her.

‘Why do I get the feeling, Jackie that you have been up to no good?’ Nancy said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

‘C’mon Mother, aren’t we allowed to have a bit of fun now and then? Life would be so inane without it.’

‘If that is the case, then perhaps you should help your father more in running the estate. I don’t want to get into an argument with you on the subject as I never win. Your father has asked for all of you in his study. So please call Charles and Mathew’, Nancy replied, suddenly pensive.
‘Please Mother; tell me he is not upset.’ Jack asked, his voice carrying the fear that comes from respecting somebody well enough not to want to let them down in the slightest manner.

‘Of course, not my son. He has been party to much wilder stuff than you could ever imagine, my boy, in his heyday,’ Nancy said, laughing. ‘It’s just that he wants to talk to you brothers man-to-man.’

‘Heavens no. Not that again. All those ‘words of wisdom’ are so soporific; they put me to sleep instantaneously.’

‘Aye, but it’s for your own good, young man. You should have those kinds of talks with your old man even more often.’

At that instant, Charles and Mathew came through the back door. Seeing their mother, they took turns in greeting her, shaking off the last vestiges of their day from their clothes.

‘Now off you all go to the study’, Nancy said in a mock authoritative tone. The boys went, accepting refreshments from Paul on the way.

Mathew hid the muzzle loader under the ornately upholstered mahogany couch in the living room. He would transfer it back to the study tomorrow at the most opportune moment, he said to himself. The two mounted Stag heads on the opposite wall stared dumbly at him as if tacitly party to his little secret.

The study adjoined the living room. Its huge entrance comprised intricately carved massive doors of the finest wood in Scotland. The fire was already lit.

There, seated on his leather chair, with a pipe in his mouth and monocle in place, was Blake Hamilton. He made for a handsome figure. With his dark hair greying at the temples and his forehead bearing deep lines, one did not have to be introduced to the man to know that he was a man of distinction. And yet when he was
introduced, the impression he made was even more far-reaching. It ran in the Hamilton blood.

He was engrossed in a book and looked up instinctively as the boys entered the room.

‘All right, lads, take a seat’, Blake said matter-of-factly, putting the book down. ‘I have been contemplating for a while now the path your future is going to take.’

He seemed different. Charles, who was the most perceptive of all the three, could make out certain tiredness in his voice. Age seemed to be getting the better of him.

They seated themselves facing their father on the chairs opposite the huge writing desk.

‘Jack, my boy, you do realize you will have it fairly easy in life. In the sense, you do need to be vigilant and meticulous as far as running the estate is concerned. But more or less, you are set. You will not have to face much struggle, unlike your younger brothers here.’

‘But, Father. Do we have to talk about it today? I mean…’ Jack was already repenting what he had just uttered.

‘No buts, please, Jack,’ his father interrupted sternly. ‘Don’t you think that I have been blind and an imbecile not to observe that ever since you have returned from Oxford, your focus has been elsewhere? It is high time you starting learning the ropes and helping me in my day to day affairs. Tomorrow, you will join me as we have to set out before dawn for Stirlingshire to buy some portions of properties on auction. As for you Charles and Mathew, your holidays will be drawing to a close within a fortnight and before you go back to your respective colleges, I want from both of you a serious consideration of what you want to achieve in your careers. Do I make myself completely clear? And Jack, tell your mother to get your packing in order for we should be gone for four days. I think I have made myself amply clear. Now if you will excuse me’. He then resumed his reading, picking up his
monocle, a sign that he would not accept and hear further arguments to what he had just said. As always, he had the first and last word.

The boys stood up to leave maintaining the solemnity of the occasion, wondering if they had any say in that discussion which had just transpired. At best, it was a monologue, a monologue where their father had the authority to utter the whole speech.

‘One more thing,’ Blake said, while holding the pipe firmly in his mouth. ‘Please put the muzzle loader back in the gun case cabinet.’

The colour went from the boys’ faces.
Chapter II

1855

It was cold and grey at Royal Military College at Sandhurst. The winter was early this year.

As far as the eyes would take you, the deciduous trees that lined both sides of the tall establishment bore dull yellow rust on their leaves. It took a great deal of discipline to get through the day. Charles remembered his days in Davenport when he would refuse to get out of his bed despite repeated pleas from Paul.

He readied himself for another day of rigorous training.

He had an appointment with the Commander later that afternoon to discuss the path that he would be taking in his military career. Charles had an inclination of what would transpire that afternoon. He knew he had done extremely well for himself. He could feel it inside and felt a new confidence surge through his veins.

There were hushed murmurs among the training staff on the first day he had landed at the college that he was a dandified young man, given his extremely good looks and an even greater lineage, that he was at the academy to while away his time and would soon go back to his castle. His comrades used to snigger at his back and say he would not last a day. They tried all kinds of tricks to make Charles leave as they could not stand him and his background. How could he have it so easy in life while they toiled to be where they were now?

Charles remembered wryly one incident. He had just arrived at the academy with his luggage which seemed to hold his colleagues in awe. It had contained all sorts of paraphernalia and he had argued with his mother not to overdo it. But she
would have none of it. So it was that he had fifteen suitcases in all, comprising the finest of wardrobe and shoes.

After the first day of his training, he had gone for his bath and when he came back to his room, he could not find a single suitcase. It seemed as though he never had any belongings except for a pair of clothes that he had left, piled neatly on his bed. When he had looked out the window in confusion, he saw his comrades huddled together on the training grounds looking up at him. They were pointing in his direction, clapping their hands and laughing, doubting over a great bonfire. The great bonfire was all his belongings going up in smoke.

Rather than report the matter to the Commander, Charles spent the first month of his training in his uniform and the set of clothes that his comrades had left out.

His perseverance and patience during these times won their friendship and trust. But he was glad that his sojourn at the Royal Military College was coming to an end for he felt that he was ready for the adventure that was India.

The meeting with the Commander had gone off fairly well. The Commander had not been surprised to learn that Charles had decided to enlist in the Armies of the British East India Company. A young man of his calibre deserved no less. After all, it was the most prestigious company and Charles was one of the most competent of men who had ever trained at the Royal Military College. His future prospects seemed bright.

Charles, after bidding farewell to his colleagues and the staff, was ready to go home. He had been awarded a leave of fifteen days before he began his voyage to India to join the British cantonments there in the kingdom of Oudh.

Quite a bit had changed in Davenlock in the meantime. Jack, now married to Gabriella Ramonfields was a changed man, running the estate under his father’s watchful eye. He had managed to double the vast fortunes of the estate through
tact and a little guidance from his father. It helped, though, that the sizeable dowry that his bride had got went into making Davenlock the biggest estate in the Border County.

Gabriella Ramonfields, only daughter to her parents, Fiona and Davis Ramonfields, had been spoilt excessively since childhood. Her green eyes set closely together on her freckled face sometimes gave her a crafty appearance, yet as she smiled her eyes twinkled and she could charm any onlooker. Her fiery red hair only accentuated the colour of her eyes and her persona. Given to her upbringing, she was somewhat of an exhibitionist and an attention seeker. She wanted Jack all to herself if she could help it. She went to ridiculous ends to make him stay at home and have her all to him. Jack, torn between running the estate and attending to the capricious demands of his wife, sometimes pondered whether this was what meant to be the heir apparent. He sometimes envied his brothers, who were free to do as they fancied, one choosing an adventuresome career in the British armies and the other having joined the Royal Navy.

Charles would be home soon. He was looking forward to seeing his brother and relive the old days, if only for a short while. His thoughts turned to hunting which he had so immensely enjoyed with his brothers in their growing up years. He sighed.

As Charles finally arrived in Davelock, Jack could hardly contain his excitement at seeing his youngest brother. But he kept himself in check lest he offend his wife. Nancy Hamilton, with ample help from Blake had turned the castle inside out for Charles’s arrival and a ball had been arranged in his honour later that evening. Blake Hamilton had prepared a formidable guest list and planned to show off his son’s achievements in grandiose style.

As the guests started pouring in the evening, the castle radiated with merry making and music. Charles danced with a few of the beautiful girls and broke their hearts
when they learnt of his future plans. He was amused by the attention that he attracted from the opposite sex.

To mark the occasion, Blake Hamilton presented Charles with his greatest ancestral possession, the sword of Blake’s great grandfather, who had fought in the Scottish civil war, from the side of the Scottish Royalists. The sword had been in the family for over two hundred years. Its sharp stainless steel blade and the symbol of the majestic lion engraved on its metal trim, jutted out with his eyes as twin emeralds and a large stud of ruby as its voracious mouth. It had a matching scabbard with the design as elegant as the sword that it held within.

Often as a child, Charles had admired the family heirloom kept in a glass case in his father’s study and envisaged himself fighting a battle in a far off-land with the sword in hand.

Charles was deeply moved by this gesture and was overwhelmed when the crowd before him bowed in ovation. Jack hugged his brother with his father following and one could have easily missed a flicker of activity in the corner of the large hall amidst the resounding applause. It was Gabriella. She was hastily climbing the steps to her wing in the castle, her face contorted. To witness the spectacle of her father-in-law giving away the ancestral possession to Charles was sheer torture to her and it seemed that the sword itself had cut through her heart.

Somehow Charles and Gabriella had never really liked each other since the beginning. Gabriella had deeply resented Charles’s presence in Jack’s life. Jack was genuinely fond of his youngest brother and felt a void when Charles had left for his military training. Gabriella could never stand this truth. Maybe it stemmed for the fact that she was the only daughter and had never known to share. Charles understood her demeanour and made efforts to steer clear of coming in the way of the couple.

The celebratory night drew to a close and the next couple of days were the happiest for the Hamilton’s’. Charles was impressed at Jack’s success in expanding
the Estate and was happy for his brother. Jack had changed and was a far cry from the Jack of old times who was laid back and took things easy in life.

Jack and Charles resumed their ‘hunting expeditions’ of small games and missed Mathew especially then as he was away on his training for the Royal Navy.

Before long it was time for Charles to leave and it was a tearful farewell.

‘I guess this is it, folks,’ Charles uttered wistfully as they all reached the harbor area, the smell of sea pungent.

Blake and Nancy Hamilton had come to see off their son. So had Jack. Gabriella suddenly had an inexplicable headache and had excused herself.

‘So, when do we see you next, my son?’ asked Nancy, teary eyed, hugging her son tightly.

‘Mother, we talked about it. Don’t do this to yourself, please,’ said Charles, hugging her back.

‘Oh, Charles, my boy, do you have to go so far away?’ she said, in between sobs. Usually a very composed and calm woman, Nancy could not keep up to her resolve of not breaking down in front of Charles.

‘Don’t, Nancy,’ said Blake and then turning to Charles, he said: ‘my boy, I know you will do very well in India. The Hamilton blood flowing inside you is reason enough that you will not disappoint me. Now, go out there and grab what you can of this wonderful present called life.’ Blake said proudly, hugging Charles and patting him at the back at the same time.

Jack came forward, with his resolve weakening. Taking his turn to hug him, he said, ‘Now Charlie’, ‘you be a good boy and take care of yourself, and when you can, come back. You hear me, you come back, and you come back for good’, said he, falteringly. Their hug lasted for a few seconds before they finally parted.
‘It’s all right; you all are acting as if I was writing my own eulogy. I need to do this. Please, I’ll take care of myself, and when I can, I’ll visit.’

It was nearly time for the ‘The Maiden’ to start her long voyage as the crew and the captain of the ship had taken his position announcing on board to all passengers to cut short their goodbyes.

Charles climbed on board the large ship, ready for his journey to the mystical land of India. She was a beauty, The Maiden, one of the jewels of the East India Company. Her masts were tall and grandiose just like the company it represented. Charles admired the ship for a while before turning his attention to his family who had accompanied him. As he looked down at them, a million thoughts ran through his mind. He afforded a wry smile and waved to them, his heart beating fast. I might never see them again, he thought to himself.
Chapter III

Samaira woke up from her recurring dream. Sweat dampened her face as if someone had just splashed water on it. She reached for her dupatta and wiped her face, taking a huge gulp of water from the silver glass kept at her bedside. She tried to run her fingers through her long thick hair but it was tangled.

Getting up from the bed, she felt the same emptiness inside her that she felt every day. This emptiness had become her constant companion. Who was she? Where did she come from? Would she always be a courtesan or did she have a higher calling in the scheme of things?

The tormented chain of thoughts died away when she heard her name being called out by the old Haseina Begum.

Mumtaz sleeping on the adjacent bed stirred and mumbled something unintelligible in her sleep.

Given her past, the nightmares that wrecked her nights showed no signs of ebbing away.

She was all of six when it happened.

Admiring her mother combing her hair in the mirror she asked her,

‘Ammi Jaan, will I grow up to be as beautiful as you?’

‘Of course, my lovely, you will grow up to be far more beautiful. And you know what; my daughter will be a princess as I will marry her off to a handsome prince.’
Her mother then picked up the discarded clothes on the floor and took them out to the palatial courtyard to give to the dhobi for washing.

‘No, Ammi Jaan I will never marry! I will always stay with you and Abba Jaan ‘
Samaira started jumping on the bed.

Coming back to the room, her mother continued, ‘my darling daughter, it’s the way of the world. One day when you grow up you will have to get married.’ Samaira’s mother gently picked her up and put her on her lap. Then she kissed her on her forehead, settling the strands of the girl’s hair which were blocking her eyes.

‘My little angel, I have so many things planned for you that I could never do in my life…I would love it if you could achieve even half of them, Samaira.’

‘I know Ammi Jaan, don’t you start’, Samaira shrieked. Laughing, her mother put her on the ground and stood up. Opening the chest of drawers placed near the bed she took out a silver box. She opened the lid and took out a sparkling gold chain. In its centre was a twin pendant of swans, one made of emerald and the other of ruby.

‘Come closer, my child’, her mother beckoned.

Samaira’s eyes were riveted on the chain and she exclaimed, walking closer to her mother, ‘Ammi Jaan, it’s so pretty! Is it for me?’

‘Yes, my baby. It is a family heirloom and has been in your maternal family for many generations. You are old enough to keep it now. Pray, never lose it child. Be careful with it as it is a harbinger of good luck and prosperity.’ She said, lifting the little girl’s lustrous hair and placing the chain on her delicate neck.

‘Oh, I love it. Thank you Ammi Jaan.’ Samaira’s eyes gleamed as she admired the chain in the mirror.
She started jumping and checked her reflection in the mirror, her hair flaying wildly. She then picked up her rag doll from the floor and started admonishing her in a hushed tone.

Her father had been a local zamindar, wealthy enough to command respect in the spiritual city of Benaras. He enjoyed the reputation of being a fair and generous landowner who would often loan money to the needy farmers who in turn mortgaged a slice of their land to him. A God fearing man, Haider Ali always believed in fair dealings and never ever duped his clients of their lands. No wonder then every morning a large crowd of needy farmers gathered at his threshold.

‘Shabnam, where’s Samaiarra?, he asked his wife, sipping tea on that fateful morning.

‘She’s gone to the neighbour’s house to play with her friend Kamala’, Shabnam looked confused, from amidst the clothes and fineries spread on their bed.

‘You do realize that we don’t have enough time. We have to be out of the house by mid-afternoon if we are to make it to the wedding in time. And you haven’t even packed.’ Haider Ali started pacing the room, finishing his tea in one big gulp.

‘Please don’t get upset. I’m almost done here. Carrying so much jewellery is not such a good idea as we have to cross that thick undergrowth to get to Lucknow by tomorrow,’ said Shabnam, taking a breather from packing.

‘You are a zamindar’s wife, for God’s sake! Act like one. I want my relations and others to know that I like to live life king-size. What is the use of amassing such huge wealth when you cannot show it off at least on occasions such as weddings of our near and dear ones?’

‘I know that. It’s just that the wedding is in another city and, and….’she trailed off; realizing that if she went on it would only infuriate her husband more.
‘Oh God! You and your premonition. Nothing bad can come to Haider Ali and his family, all right. Have some faith in Allah. Now call Samaira from her friend’s house and get her ready. We are leaving in two hour’s time.’ He left the room in a huff to make arrangements with the horse carriage lad for the long journey ahead.

Shabnam folded both her hands and let out a silent prayer.

❖

‘Ammi Jaan, I look so pretty, na?’ asked Samaira, looking at her mother expectantly. She need not have asked as she knew the answer to the question. Dressed in tussar silk ochre lehenga with a golden iridescent brocade blouse she looked like a little princess. On her hair, she wore colourful beads intertwined with golden ghungroos. Her shoes had filigree work on them. She clutched at the gold chain given by her mother a few hours ago.

‘Now, Samaira, off you go and play in the courtyard, I have to get ready myself. Your father will be really angry if we’re late.’ Shabnam said, ‘and don’t spoil your clothes, all right.’

Samaira nodded her head and ever so gently lifted her skirt and went outside the room. Her mother smiled at her and got back to the mirror.

Shabnam took care that she wore little jewellery for the journey. When she got to the venue she could always pile on more of it. Thuggees were rampant these days and it was a risky business to reach another city whilst crossing the jungle on the way. These jungles were home to the thuggees. Worshippers of goddess Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and destruction, they were infamous for being merciless to their helpless victims. Word had it that after robbing their victims of their possessions they strangled them despite their cries for mercy.
Sometimes she could not understand her husband. Though usually an endearing person he behaved in a completely different manner when they were in the company of his relations and in-laws. He became domineering and condescending towards her, getting irritable over the smallest of trivialities. She knew deep down that he resented her for not bearing him a son. Although he loved Samaira, to him it was not the same as having a son. And now that they had to go to his cousin’s wedding it would start all over again for her, the taunts and sarcastic remarks for not bearing a son to carry the family bloodline. It was not in her hands that she had been unable to do so. Having suffered three miscarriages early on in her marriage, she had given birth to Samaira amidst fervent prayers to Allah. She cherished her daughter deeply and wished that no harm ever come to her.

‘All right, Samaira, you can go and tell your father we are ready.’ Shabnam then took one final look at herself in the mirror, adjusting her hair.
Chapter IV

The horse carriage was an enclosed one. Inside it there was room for six people to sit along with their possessions. Small windows on either side of the enclosure offered a view outside. Sturdier and far more comfortable than other prevalent tongas, it had cost Haider Ali a small fortune. But for the rich zamindar money had never been an issue. Especially now when he had to attend his first cousin’s marriage. He wanted his advent at the wedding to be a conspicuous one and for everyone to take notice.

They were nearly halfway to their destination but the upcoming dusk would offset the progress they had made so far. Soon it would be dark and the tonga lad Lalprasad would have to halt the horse for the beast’s much deserved food and rest.

‘Listen, please tell Lalprasad to continue the journey well into the night once the horse has had his rest’, Shabnam said beseechingly to her husband. She held Samaira’s head gently in her lap as she slept soundly.

‘He knows that already. Let me remind him again.’ Haider Ali could not miss the urgency in his wife’s voice.

‘Lalprasad. You can make the carriage stop at an appropriate spot and feed your horse. We will also have refreshments we have brought on the way. But continue the journey well into the night so that we cross this thick undergrowth safely and as soon as possible. Do you hear me?’
Very well, Sahib. I am just waiting for the right spot to halt. Ahh! There…is that spot all right?” said Lalprasad, turning his face to Haider Ali while slowing the speed of the beast. He was pointing to a distance of about a hundred yards. The spot was devoid of any trees and seemed like a clear place to have refreshments and rest for a while. There was a small river flowing nearby. The spot was almost perfect. Had it not been for the approaching twilight the family might have had a little picnic and enjoyed themselves.

‘Yes, that seems like an apt place to stop’, said Haider Ali, looking towards his wife for acknowledgment. She nodded her head. Samaira stirred in her lap as if about to get up.

They stopped soon after. Freeing the horse from his saddle and carriage, Lalprasad patted him on the back and gave him water from the can he had got. He then gave him his fodder to eat.

‘Wake up Samaira so she can have some snacks,’ said Haider Ali to Shabnam stretching his arms and upper body to shake away the numbness of the journey. He opened the small door of the carriage to get out. He stepped out and, taking Shabnam’s hand helped her to climb down from the carriage.

‘I don’t think it is such a good idea. She might start experiencing motion sickness all over again. I think I should just let her sleep for as long as she wants to. If she feels hungry she can have something along the way.’ Shabnam looked at the surroundings warily. She suddenly felt uncomfortable but maintained a nonchalant stance lest her husband notice it and admonish her again.

‘All right, whatever you think would be suitable. At least give me something to eat, I’m ravenous.’ Haider Ali smiled at Shabnam, feeling guilty at having made her upset earlier in the day.
'I'll go inside the carriage and fetch you the kachoris for the journey. It seems to be getting cold. I'll put a blanket over Samaira as well.' Shabnam climbed up the carriage and disappeared from view.

She put a small pillow underneath Samaira’s head and drew her favourite blanket over her daughter’s small body. Samaira smiled in her sleep. Shabnam kissed her on the forehead and looked on at her daughter’s cherubic face for a few moments. Allah bless my angel always, Amin, she uttered aloud.

She then alighted from the carriage, her hands holding the boxes containing the snacks. To her horror, she realized her worst fears had come alive. She tried to scream but could only make a hollow sound. A sound which hurt her throat and yet could not be heard.

The thugees had surrounded them from all sides.

They had already strangled Lalprasad with a yellow cloth. He died, trying to scream, flaying his arms wildly for help. But help would not come as they had gotten hold of Haider Ali too and tied his arms at the back.

They were ten in all and wore black turbans over their faces. They looked menacing and meant business as they had not spared any time in killing the tonga lad.

‘Please, please, leave my husband…..take whatever you want’ Shabnam pleaded, running towards Haider Ali. It had taken her awhile to take in the gravity of the predicament.

‘Get inside the carriage!’ cried out Haider Ali, feeling a blow across his face at that very moment, numbing his cheek and forming an ugly bruise.

‘No one will go anywhere! Now woman, if you fear for the life of your husband you will turn in all your belongings, precious, non precious, to us or else you just saw what happened to that poor tonga driver’, said the leader of the group.
‘Yes, yes…please don’t hurt my husband! I will give you everything we have…’ said Shabnam crying, ‘can I go inside the carriage to fetch my belongings…?’ She asked, looking in the direction of the thuggee who had spoken to her.

‘Go, but don’t think of anything, woman! We are ten and you are only two. I would say those are really unfair odds.’ The leader started laughing vilely at his own joke. Others joined him and their laughter reverberated around the thick undergrowth. Shabnam closed her eyes and said a silent prayer that Samaira would not get up.

She went hurriedly inside the carriage and took care that she did not rouse Samaira. Samaira was blissfully asleep unaware of the turmoil happening outside.

Shabnam took out all her jewellery from her bag placing it in a cloth, also taking out the diamond earrings and necklace that she wore along with her gold bangles.

Stepping outside, she discreetly locked the carriage from outside. Walking falteringly towards the leader, she stood, transfixed waiting for further signal from the leader. The thuggees had made a small fire in the meantime and stood close to each other.

‘Sardar, how can we be sure that she has got everything from the carriage? I’ll go inside and have a look’, said one of the men who was holding Haider Ali.

‘I swear to God, I have got everything. I even took out the jewellery that I was wearing. Please believe me.’ Shabnam cried in desperation.

‘Show me what you have got,’ the leader spoke now.

Shabnam walked in his direction handing him the pouch. He opened the knot of the pouch and went through the contents. He removed his veil and smiled. His eyes were bloodshot as if from lack of sleep. A deep scar ran down from his left eye all the way to his cheek giving him the appearance of the ruthless criminal that he was.
‘My, my! What have we got here? Ma Kali shall be really pleased.’ He eyed the jewellery hungrily, his dark eyes gleaming.

‘Who are you people?’ he asked, looking at Haider Ali whose pale face suggested that he might faint any minute. He had been dealt several blows by the thugs.

‘Please, please let us go. My wife has given you everything we have got. If you leave us we will give you more. Just leave us please and I promise that you will be rich man. I am a zamindar from the city of Benares’, pleaded Haider Ali, envisaging a flicker of hope.

‘Is that so? Hmmm…on second thoughts you should not have told me who you are. You know why I became a dacoit. It is because of creeps like you. My father was a poor farmer toiling day in and day out at his land. He had to get my sister married off so he took a loan against the meagre land that he owned. And you know what happened after that? He asked no one in particular, red rage suddenly flowing through his body.

‘….his land was snatched away from him by the greedy zamindar. My father soon died of a heart attack.’ he continued, ‘No! I will not let you go! You hear me! You zamindars suck the blood out of the poor! It is because of you and the like that we have become thugs in our own land, driven by poverty and desperation. I’m going to enjoy killing you both. In fact, we might even vary from the usual way we kill our victims. Strangling with a mere cloth is no way to die, is it now? It is too easy a death. You two are special.’

Haider Ali trembled, ‘please, please I’m not that kind of a zamindar. I am fair and generous. Ask any person in Benares and they will tell you. Please spare our lives!’ He felt another blow this time across his chest. He dropped to the ground.

Shabnam ran towards her husband but was caught by her hair by one of the veiled thuggees. She cried in pain. They circled her and one of them took out a large knife, its blade glinting in the dark. She looked at the approaching figures with
dread. They caught her hands and forcing her head skywards slit her throat in one single stroke. Blood spurted out and soaked her green sharara as she fell, life slowly draining out of her frail body.

‘No!’ Haider Ali screamed like a man possessed, trying to free his hands.

‘Sardar, I think he is anxious to join his wife. Shall we relieve him of his agony?’ Spoke one of the thuggees chuckling.

‘Yes, yes. Don’t wait. For Ma Kali has favoured us tonight. This loot will make us wealthy. She will be happy to drink the blood of not one but two humans.’

Inside the carriage, Samaira watched through the small window. She had shrieked inconsolably at having seen her mother die in such a gruesome way. But it seemed the shock had numbed her voice and no sound came out of her little mouth. She tried to open the carriage frantically but her mother had locked it from outside. She wanted to run to her father. To hug him. To protect him from the evil men. To run away with him.

Outside the thuggees surrounded Haider Ali this time. He looked at them in fascination, without a sign of protest. He had resigned himself to his fate but prayed inwardly that his little Samaira be rescued from this hell unscathed.

‘Kill me, please kill me. I can take it no more,’ he said, in between sobs.

The leader beckoned one of the thuggees to him and said, ‘Go inside the carriage and check if that damned woman wasn’t lying. I don’t trust their breed. There might be more dough there in for us. Go!’

‘Ji, Sardar.’ The thuggee started walking towards the carriage.

Haider Ali’s only sign of hope died. He waited now for death to grip him in her embrace.
Just then they heard hoof beats of horses nearby. One of them said hurriedly,
‘Sardar, I think somebody is approaching this side! We should just kill this man and
leave as fast as we can. Word has it that the British have employed spies to destroy
our sect and kill us. They usually roam the jungle on horses during the night.’

‘All right, all right. Kill him’. The leader was preoccupied with the bundle
containing the jewellery.

One of the thuggees walked towards Haider Ali and held his head upwards, just
like they had held Shabnam’s, and eyed the gold chain around his neck. Jerking it
hungrily, he pocketed it in his kurta. Then holding him by his hair he slit his throat.
The blood that spurted out instantaneously fascinated the whole sect. Too many
killings had hardened their hearts and they were now devoid of any emotions, even
killing for the mere pleasure of it. He wiped his crimson hands with his tunic.

They collected the three bodies and threw them one by one into the river.

They then disappeared as stealthily into the night as they had come. They seemed
like a figment of somebody’s horrid imagination.

If they had waited a little more they would have heard Samaira’s loud banging on
the carriage door and her uncontrollable shrieks.
Chapter V

Samaira sat inside the carriage, motionless. The image of her parents’ throats being slit played in her mind over and over again. Though her tears had long run out, her small body shook convulsively. Witness to her parents’ ghastly death in mute horror, her childhood also died with them.

Then she became aware of the sound of horses.

They were five riders in all. Seeing a fire and a carriage standing not too far from it their suspicions were aroused. They could not see any horse that might have drawn the carriage. Had they been aware of the goings-on of the night they would have known that the horse had bolted into the jungle when his master had been strangled to death.

The leader of the pack put his left hand in the air motioning for the rest to halt. They obeyed. Dismounting from the horse, he walked towards the fire tentatively, seeing drops of blood on the ground. He soon had an idea of what might have transpired. The trail of the blood led to the river flowing nearby.

‘Jaivrat! Come here’, he shouted to the nearest man. ‘Whatever happened here has the tell-tales sign of unspeakable evil. There is nothing we can do. It’s too late now. Let’s head back to the town as planned’, said one of the men.

‘No! Wait. We must be sure that the people who have been killed here are indeed dead. If not we must help them.’ said the leader, then as an afterthought added,
‘Wait, what about the carriage? Go and see if anybody is in there’, said Khilawan motioning to Jaivrat.

‘And you, Mohan, go and see if there are any survivors in the river.’

‘Sardar, it’s quite spooky around the thick undergrowth and there are evil spirits lurking at this ungodly hour. We should just head to the town’ he said, shivering in the icy breeze.

‘Coward! Do as I say or we will leave you here to join those spirits while we head to the town.’

‘Ji, ji, Sardar.’ Mohan then retreated in the dark towards the river to see if the dead were indeed dead. Following the course of the river he went further down until he could finally see three bodies floating. Bringing the lantern closer he realized that there was one woman and two men. He called aloud to one of his comrades and started walking in the water. He and his comrade then pulled out the three bodies from the water one by one, taking them where their Sardar was standing.

Khilawan looked at the bodies. All had been killed in the same fashion except for one of the men who must have been strangled as his neck bore an unsightly blue mark. The other two bodies’ throats were slit and there was a thin crimson line on their necks where the knife must have done its job.

In the meantime, Jaivrat had started walking towards the carriage, and tightening his grip on his talwar tied to the belt around his waist, he stopped as he reached it. He tried to unlock it from outside. The door did not budge. With his sword he demolished the locks. He opened the door swiftly. Though it was dark inside, he could see the silhouette of a small shaking form.

‘Gopi, light the lantern and bring it here’, he shouted to one of his comrades.

Igniting the lantern Gopi held it above his head and gave it to Jaivrat. Taking the light Jaivrat peered inside. A small girl was sitting rigid, her face ashen. Her face
was smeared with dried tears, her eyes swollen and red. She looked at the man who had opened the door blankly and said something incoherent.

Jaivrat asked her gently for her name. Instead of replying to him, she kept saying, ‘they killed my Ammi jaan, they killed my Abba Jaan…they killed my Ammi Jaan, they killed my Abba Jaan..’

Keeping the lantern on the ground, Jaivrat reached out his arms and took hold of the little girl, lifting her out of the carriage. He then took her to their leader, Khilawan, near whom lay the three bodies. He shuddered and looked away. But the girl shrieked loudly suddenly finding renewed strength. She ran towards the bodies and dropped her small body on the bosom of the dead woman.

‘It seems she saw her parents being killed and is in a state of shock. What shall we do with her?’ asked Jaivrat, a note of concern in his voice.

‘Well, the only thing we can think of is getting her to Hasiena Begum’s kotha. We might fetch a good price for her. She seems quite all right and of good robust blood. Though she is choosy, Hasiena Begum will not be able to refuse this one. What do you think?’ asked Khilawan, admiring Samaira.

‘I don’t know. She seems so petite and helpless. But maybe you are right. Haseina Begum is known to raise the girls she has like her own and makes fine courtesans out of them. In fact we might be doing her a favour this way. You said we might get a good price as well.’ Jaivrat not himself convinced of what he was saying.

‘But what shall we do with the bodies? We must ask the girl which faith she belongs to and must let the departed go in honour of their faith’, said Jaivrat wistfully.

‘I think you are right. You ask the girl. I think she has taken to your gentle stance.’ Khilawan uttered matter of factly.
After the bodies of Samaira’s parents had been buried according to the tenets of Islam and a funeral pyre had been raised for the body of the Tonga lad and the body cremated, the work of the men was finally done. Samaira had looked on without emotions at the last of her parents.

The men had made themselves comfortable by putting more wood into the fire and sitting around it.

‘I’m really enervated. Whoever was here earlier will not come to the same spot again. Rather than heading to the town at this hour, let’s spend the night here. We’ll have a clearer head in the morning and can decide about the girl’s fate then.’ Khilawan let out a yawn and went over to the huddled group. Untying his turban, he folded it to make a pillow and lay his head on it. Jaivrat followed suit and took Samaira’s hand as he went. The group toned down their chatter to let their leader relax.

‘Take out the madeira from my bag, Jaivrat!’ Khilawan shouted. The group smiled. It had been quite a day for them and their throats were parched from lack of liquor. This meant that their leader was in a good mood.

Jaivrat made Samaira sit with the group. The men stared at her dumbly. Why did their leader have to bother with this little girl? Couldn’t he leave her here itself? They all knew that their leader was a man of conscience and there were moments when it would be futile to argue with him. This was one such moment.

Samaira sat in front of the fire. Her stupor seemed to have lifted and she was suddenly hungry. She had not eaten since they had started their journey from Benares. She looked at the men sitting not too far from her for the first time. She was not frightened of them. She was not frightened of anyone anymore.

Jaivrat in the meantime had got the liquor from the bulging saddle bag tied to his horse. He distributed some to the group in brass pots. They accepted eagerly and hailed their leader, waiting for him to have the first sip. When Khilawan took a
huge gulp they cheered and drank impatiently. They knew there was plenty to drink as they had just robbed a merchant’s house taking with them what they could find.

Samaira watched their camaraderie in silence.

‘Give some to the girl. At least she will be able to sleep’, suggested Khilawan to Jaivrat. Jaivrat poured a little madeira into a pot and, getting up, walked towards Samaira. He handed the pot to her. To his amazement, the little girl accepted the drink without any sign of protest and finished it in one big gulp. She then lay down and gazed at the starlit sky for a long time before finally closing her eyes.

Morning soon came. The sun rose high above them blinding their eyes with its rage. Some of them moaned, recalling the night and the excess of liquor they had consumed. They shielded their eyes from the harsh sun with their forearms.

Khilawan was already up. Having bathed in the river, he now offered Surya Namaskar to the Sun god, a Yoga ritual he never missed.

The thick undergrowth comprised of peepel trees along with some other bushes and the dense shrubbery provided a safe haven from lurking danger. There was a far-off cry from a wild boar somewhere deep inside the forest.

Walking over dried leaves, Khilawan called out to his comrades to rouse them from their slumbers and get ready for the journey ahead to the town. One by one they went to the river to wash their faces and freshen up.

Samaira had been awake long before any of them. She too followed them and washed her face with water in the river. Jaivrat kept a watchful eye on her. She went inside the carriage to fetch a few belongings that had been left there. She then joined Jaivrat and sat with him without uttering a word.

The men readied their horses by feeding them and making them drink water from the river.
‘Let’s go or we will be late when we reach the town. We’ll have something to eat in the town.’ Khilawan mounted his horse.

‘First thing that we should do is go to Hasiena Begum’s kotha and place the girl in her safe hands so we can no longer worry about her. What do you say, Sardar?’ asked Jaivrat picking up Samaira and putting her and her belongings on his horse.

‘All right. As she won’t tell who she is or where she is from, somebody might recognize her in town and we might be in trouble. Also I’m not sure whether we should ask a price for her. My conscience won’t allow it. It is just not right after what she has been through. We have other means of making money. I don’t want to stoop to the level of her parents’ killers. Now let’s go!’ He dug his feet into the sides of the horse.

Jaivrat smiled inwardly knowing the outcome of the matter all along. He knew his leader well and thanked God in silence. He then sat behind Samaira, and taking in the reins of his own horse, followed his leader.

Samaira looked back at the spot where her parents had been buried the night before and bid goodbye to them for the last time.
Chapter VI

Hasiena Begum’s Kotha was a popular destination in the suburbs of Lucknow. Visited by the rich landowners and the literati of the capital, it was a popular place for entertainment of various art forms. Its courtesans were refined women who were given lessons and riyaaz in singing and dancing and the art of fine conversation and poetry. Her kotha was also home to various British officers.

Three storied and its architecture distinctly mogul, it stood out in the suburb. Inside there were lavish rooms exceeding the count of fifty. One could experience a bustle of activity on entering the premise. Small girls being given lesson in singing and dancing, young lithe girls on the threshold of womanhood, a giggly lot anticipating the turnout of guests in the evenings. For many it was a pleasurable place, a brief escape from the real world.

Though all courtesans were not prostitutes, some of them were. It was left up to them and was entirely a matter of choice. Hasiena Begum’s kotha depended heavily on patronage from the Nawab of Oudh and her rich clientele. Her best and most attractive courtesans were sent to the Nawab’s Court on popular occasions such as festivals and feasts to entertain the long line of invitees. Hasiena Begum prided herself on being given such an honour.

Samaira finally ate some food offered to her by Shaira Bibi, on the insistence of Hasiena Begum. Shaira Bibi, a matronly figure, was a close domestic aide of Hasiena Begum. She used to don various hats as far as her work was concerned. Hasiena Begum relied on her heavily and sometimes wondered what she would have done without her all these years. She also acted as a chaperone to young girls who wanted to go outside the kotha for shopping or for other matters.
‘Shaira, now show Samaira to her room. I’m sure she must be tired after all she has been through. Maybe later you can introduce her to the other small girls who’ll keep her engaged and perhaps bring back her childhood, or what’s left of it.’ Hasiena Begum then retired to her private rooms for an afternoon siesta, a luxury she could afford and never missed.

Shaira Bibi took Samaira’s hand and led her up the curved marble staircase.

They passed some rooms on the way and there were sounds of laughter and gossip coming from them. They stopped in front of one.

‘All right child, this is your room. You can rest awhile. Sleep if you want to. You look very tired.’ Opening the door Shaira Bibi smiled at Samaira and made her sit on the bed. Her room was big and stark. The diaphanous curtains on the two stained glass windows flooded in light creating a spectrum of rainbow colours on the mosaic floor. Samaira watched in fascination, momentarily forgetting her woes. The bedspread on the wooden bed was an exquisite sanganeri print sourced from Rajasthan. An almirah stood nearby with its doors intricately carved and filled with minakari work.

She lay down presently but could not sleep. She knew that her circumstances had changed. She was suddenly thrown on dark, uncertain waters. What or who was a courtesan? Who were all the girls the woman was talking about? Was this some sort of a school? She suddenly felt like a captive in this place.

She felt the sound of the door creaking. She lifted her head to see who was at the door.

A pair of big inquisitive eyes stared back at her. They belonged to a girl not much older than Samaira. She had curly hair and fair skin. The girl smiled.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

Samaira did not reply. She looked at the ceiling listlessly. But the girl stood there.
‘My name is Mumtaz. What’s yours? Shaira Bibi says you need a friend. That is why I have come here.’

‘Will you be my friend?’ she tiptoed towards Samaira, glancing down at her.

Samaira sat up and looked at her. She then smiled weakly.

Waking up Mumtaz was quite a task. A task which Samaira loathed but performed as a must-do morning ritual.

‘Get up, you sleepyhead! Hasiena Begum is calling us.’ Samaira threw a pillow at her friend, half amused, half irritated.

‘Guruji is here for our riyaaaz. If you don’t get up within ten minutes, you can forget about your breakfast.’ Samaira then disappeared into the wash room.

Putting the pillow on her face, Mumtaz cursed silently.
Chapter VII

It was Charles’s second day in Lucknow, and already he had formed mixed impressions of the city. The heat was oppressive. So were the flies. They were everywhere with the heat and dust, specially the dust which tended to get inside his clothing. It spread with the sweat creating large round damp patches on his shirt. Is this what he had asked for when he had requested a posting in India? He did not want to admit it to himself but he was already having misgivings about this strange land.

‘How far is the place from Camp?’ Charles asked Madho Singh, a khidmatgar entrusted by brother officers to show Charles around the city and as his personal attendant at Charles’s quarters. His first day at the British cantonment at Madiaon had gone fairly well, just managing to wake up after the arduous journey from Bombay.

‘It is 20 kos from the Kaiser Bagh Palace, Sahib’, Madho Singh replied, quite amused at the Captain’s evident plight. Charles’s clothes were totally wet with his sweat. His impeccable uniform was now a dirty-brown and did not look like a uniform at all.

‘Are you all right, Sahib?’ Madho Singh enquired, with a trace of mischief in his eyes.

‘Yes, I’m fine. Why do you ask? It’s just this damn heat. Is it always so hot in the northern parts of India?’ Charles wiped his brow with an already wet handkerchief.

‘Aye, it gets worse Sahib. The coming months will be even hotter. We are used to the heat here. It is all right for us. In fact, this is pleasant for Indians.’ ‘Halt’, Madho Singh abruptly motioned for the tonga to stop.
The tonga was hastily brought to a stop near a small stall where a man was selling some kind of a fruit juice.

‘Sahib, would you like to have some sugarcane juice to beat the heat. It is highly effective to combat the hot weather and is delightful to drink as well.’ Madho Singh looked earnestly at Charles. Charles merely nodded, too tired and uncomfortable to say anything.

He then helped himself to a huge glass of the juice and to his surprise, loved the taste. It was cool and extremely refreshing. The taste was sweet with a tinge of tang. For a few moments he forgot all about the heat.

‘Madho, I’ll have another one of those’. Charles ordered Madho Singh. ‘Most definitely, Sahib. That’s the best way to beat the heat around here, I told you’. Madho Singh then rushed along to get his Sahib another glass.

‘Well, I couldn’t agree with you more, but enough. I hope you remember that I have to be there with Major Outram at the Palace of the Nawab to pay my courtesies to your Nawab. And I like to honour timelines.’

‘Barabar, Sahib. Shall I just pay the man?’ he enquired. ‘Yes, and give him bakshish too from my side’ Charles tossed him an anna.

As they rode off in the creaking tonga, Charles gazed at the passing impressions of the city, soaking in the scenes around him, this time with a little appreciation. There were myriad colours all around him. Small bazaars on either side of the road were lined up selling almost everything one could want in a domesticated life. Utensils of various shapes and sizes, garlands of marigold and roses to offer the deities to whom the Hindus prayed with incent sticks and agarbattis, Indian dresses being sold in the numerous cluttered shops and stalls serving sweets and other delicacies with tempting aromas. Madho Singh kept Charles informed about the various details that Charles might have otherwise overlooked. He especially liked the huge banyan trees that lined either side of the road; their gnawed trunks telling
their silent tales, witness to the vagaries of time.

‘You know Sahib, Lucknow is a popular city for a number of reasons. It is the cultural soul of India. The Nawab is a great patron of the arts. He is a fine poet and he devotes his free time to writing. He also patronizes the great classical singing and dance. It is quite usual during times of celebrations for his palace to be a mélange of various forms of merry making; singing and dancing. He is a great hedonist and believes in making everyone have a good time while they are invitees at his palace. So Sahib, make the most of your evening.’

Charles listened to Madho Singh with amusement. It was evident that his attendant held the Nawab in the highest regard.

‘Well, I am looking forward to the evening, no doubt about that,’ Charles quipped, a little animated about the prospects of attending the celebrations all of a sudden. He had to get back to his quarters at Madiaon to clean up and dress for the occasion. He still had ample time to be back to the city in the evening.

The ride to the Cantonment was a long dreary one and Charles started feeling sleepy as the green picturesque countryside went by in a series of slow motions.

‘We are almost there, Sahib. Stop the tonga, Shivcharan.‘ The driver called out, ‘Hurrhhh...!’ , reigning in the beasts.

Madho Singh escorted his new Sahib inside the bungalow. It was single storied with a patio. The architecture was distinctly colonial. As the two men walked past the small lawn, Charles could see a banyan tree not far from the distance and was delighted. They hurriedly crossed the patio and Madho Singh took him straight to his master’s bedroom as he could gauge that Charles was not up to touring the place at the moment. He opened the main door leading into a comfortable sitting room. A few steps led to the bedroom, plain and stark in contrast to the one he had at the castle in Davenlock. It took Charles momentarily back to memories of his own castle.
There was a certain hint of nostalgia in his eyes and he took a deep breath.

‘Shaabash, Madho Singh. That was quite a tour you gave me of Lucknow, aye’ Charles chuckled. ‘I imagine I will see you at the training grounds two days from now if I’m not wrong.’

‘I am always at your service, Sahib. Yes, I will look forward to seeing you again. I shall take my leave now. Please rest while you can Sahib. Salaam.’ Bowing generously, Madho Singh left the quarters.

Charles stared at the retreating figure. He had quite liked the fellow. He sat on the bed, taking off his shoes. He then unbuttoned his sweaty shirt, throwing it in a corner of the room. He would later give it to his attendant for washing. He then lay down on the bed. Staring at the white ceiling as if under hypnosis he did not realize when he must have fallen asleep.
Chapter VIII

Charles woke up with a start. It was a bad dream and worse still, he was running late. Good Lord! He had overslept. He was now worried lest he offend the Nawab by turning up late.

A cursory glance around his room made him realize that Madho had got his entire luggage inside which he had kept in a corner of the room. Charles sighed with gratitude. He now picked up one suitcase, putting it onto the bed and started rummaging through the contents. What should he wear? Keeping the heat in mind, he decided to wear his cotton shirt and his olive green gabardine breeches.

After bathing, he hastily changed into the selected clothes on the bed. Looking at himself in the mirror, he could not help but admire his reflection. He had inherited his father’s aristocratic features. At least he had inherited something after all, Charles thought wryly, smiling to himself.

Walking out into the evening, Charles found the weather had indeed cooled due to a recent drizzle. Calling the attendant Lallan, he told him to get the tonga for the palace.

After exchanging ‘salaams’ with the tonga fellow, they rode off into the sunset evening. The horizon seemed mesmerizing, almost surreal. He had often heard tales about the Awadhi dusk from colleagues at Sandhurst who had been to India, but watching it for the first time was an experience that had to be witnessed firsthand. The sky wore various hues of crimson, sapphire and a deep violet. Charles sighed blissfully, feeling at peace with the adventure that was Lucknow. With renewed hope, he was looking forward to his innings here.

As they neared the palace, Charles told the tonga man, Shivcharan to stop the carriage as he wanted to walk a bit towards the palace to observe the splendid
architecture.

Various shades of green covered both sides of the land. The vast expanse of rich herbage was staggering. The plains, as far as the eyes could see, were studded with white pavilions and of course, a very Mogul and yet, Victorian architecture. He felt familiar in these surroundings. He then shrugged his shoulders. No, not another bout of nostalgia, please. He hastened his pace lest memories of another place start crowding his mind.

Charles presently entered the Court. Though he did not realize it, this moment would linger in his heart till the day he died.

Two men carrying huge embroidered fans smiled obsequiously at him and bowed their turbaned heads in honour. Charles managed an awkward bow himself. Despite the pleasantness of the evening, he felt the all too familiar sweat forming near his brow. He did not know what to expect of the Nawab. What if he offended him? He would pay his courtesies. From what he had heard, the Nawab seemed an endearing man, which would be just as well. It was important for Charles to forge cordial relations with the Nawab as his regiment was stationed in his kingdom after all.

This web of thoughts died a natural death as Charles saw someone he had never quite seen before. Resplendent in fuchsia beneras silk with floral motifs, the young woman’s body was like a heavenly body. Her skin was a golden shimmer, translucent and radiant. Her mahogany eyes, accentuated with lightly smeared kaajal, shone like fiery sparks. She seemed a woman who knew the fatality of her beauty and the effect it had on mortal men. Charles averted his gaze lest he seemed too obvious. He tripped slightly on the Persian rug as he retraced his steps. The woman took notice of the movement and smiled coquettishly.

At that very moment, there ushered in a retinue of noblemen, announcing the arrival of the Nawab in impeccable Urdu. Charles understood some of it and drifted slowly back into the grand palace. He took in the grandeur of it now. The
ceiling was as high as it would take for a mortal to crane his neck till its last stretch. There was intricate enamel and gold work all over the ceiling and the walls. Huge chandeliers hung low and their beams lent an ethereal halo to the whole Court. The gallery was filled with furniture of pure silver encrusted with gems for the seating for noblemen. There was ornately hued stained glass work on the windows.

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah soon arrived. He had become stouter since his coronation ceremony a few years ago. He now wore an angrekheka with mukesh work and embroidery at the borders. His signature cap was silver plumed on this occasion and he wore golden filigree shoes which managed to emphasize his dandified appearance.

Everybody stood up and bowed to offer their regards. So did Charles, along with Major Outram, the present British resident whom he had joined in time. They had been seated at the forefront, ahead of the long line of noblemen, patrons and others in the Court. It was an acknowledgement of the privilege and importance attached to the power of The British East India Company.

The Nawab was seated presently on his regal chair on the dais with a nobleman whispering something in his ear. The Nawab smiled. He formally acknowledged the gathering, thanking them for their presence and announced the lineup of long programs including the classical dance kathak followed by singing of ghazals and poetry and finally dinner and madihra.

Charles looked over his shoulder searchingly but the woman had disappeared. He found instead Lieutenant John Patterson coming towards him. John was a friend he had made on board his journey to India on ‘The Maiden’. Charles was relieved to find a comrade on this occasion.

‘How do you do my friend?’ Charles greeted Patterson.

‘Very well Captain. I had hoped to see you here today. I’m glad that Providence has been kind enough to entwine our paths again.’ Patterson admitted candidly,
with a twinkle in his eyes.

‘Yes, I know. I entertain the same sentiments as one feel easily lost in a new place.’

‘So how are you taking the scenes of this quaint city, may I ask?’

‘Very well, indeed. It’s just that the heat gets to you. But I shall get used to it in no time, or so everybody says. But I myself am not convinced.’ Charles smiled broadly, winking at Patterson.

The centre of the Court was cleared and there came a group of nautch girls, looking radiant in their Indian attire. In the middle was Samaira. Charles held his breath, feeling a knot in his stomach. She was the same woman he had been enchanted by a few moments ago. So she was a courtesan. That meant that approaching her would be a far easier task than he had anticipated.

The group broke into an impromptu dance with Samaira occupying centre stage. Her swift movements bore the grace which only comes with years of practice. Charles was held in a trance. Her lissome body moved to the tabla beats in a natural rhythm. There was an inherent spontaneity to her art. While the rest of the group often faltered and looked askance, Samaira led the way.

The group bowed before the Nawab when the nautch was over and there was a thunderous applause from the long line of invitees.

‘That was quite a treat. What do you think?’ Patterson asked Charles contentedly.

‘Yes, indeed. I particularly liked the nautch of the girl holding the stage on her own….’Charles replied.

‘I know, I know. That’s the beautiful Samaira. One of Nawab’s favorite nautch girls.’

‘Oh, is she? I can see that the Nawab has good taste’ Charles smiled. He suddenly felt envious of the Nawab.
‘Wait. So it has been precisely two days in a new city where you are in charge of a whole regiment and what do you do? You fall in love. That would make for some story in the cantonment the day after.’ Patterson laughed gently at his own hastily drawn conclusion.

‘Well, I’ve heard a lot about Indian beauties. If I fall for one, it’s no fault of mine, my friend. You profess to be my friend, right? More than meeting the Nawab, I am interested in meeting her. Could you somehow arrange it?’ Charles continued earnestly.

‘Well I could certainly try,’ Patterson replied. ‘I happen to know one of her friends in the group. Mumtaz, quite an angel herself. You wait here, I’ll be back.’ He then disappeared in the crowd.

Charles seated himself presently, waiting for his friend. Accepting a fourth glass of wine from an attendant, he took a small gulp, finally enjoying himself. He was engrossed in the deep voice of the ghazal singer, Mirza Gafur. It was obvious that he was a gifted singer as he rendered ghazals one after the other without his voice losing any of its freshness that it was bestowed with. Charles felt a tap on his shoulder and looked up. It was Patterson gesticulating for him to get up.

‘Listen carefully,’ Patterson whispered into Charles’ ear, ‘She is waiting for you outside, in the Royal Gardens. Don’t keep her waiting too long’ and he winked at Charles. Charles grinned back at him. Finishing his wine in one huge gulp, he turned towards the Gardens.

Samaira was waiting anxiously outside. Despite the weather she felt herself shiver. The man was indeed handsome. With his blonde hair and eyes a colour which seemed quite rare even for an Englishman, a deep cobalt blue. She smiled to herself. She had definitely enjoyed every bit of his attention that he showered her in the palace. Though she was used to men showering her with praises she had
never felt as nervous as she was feeling at this moment.

Then she saw him coming towards her and pretended to look bored.

‘Salaam’ Charles said, smiling at her. ‘I thought that you danced beautifully so I decided to praise you in person.’

She looks far more ethereal from up close, Charles thought. She had changed into something far less formal but which still made her figure noticeable.

‘That is very gracious of you to pay me compliments. Thank you.’ Samaira replied, with an edge of formality in her voice. ‘Are you an officer with the British Army? I have never seen you around before. You must be new?’

‘Well, yes I am the Captain of the 32nd Regiment of Foot. It has just been a day in this magical city for me’, Charles was surprised by the curt formality in Samaira’s voice.

‘Do you like it?’ Samaira asked innocently.

‘I like it now’, Charles said boldly, taking a step closer to where she was standing.

Taken aback by his remark, Samaira looked away. It was her turn to be flustered.

‘So tell me, Samaira, that’s a lovely name, by the by, how do you speak such impeccable English.’

‘You forget I’m a natch girl. My profession is to please men through my art of natch. A large part of Hindustan is now ruled by the British East India Company, so there are English officers to please as well.’ She tried to mask a certain pain in her kohl eyes. ‘So I had a tutor to teach me English.’ she continued.

Charles realized that he had, in asking an innocent question, upset her, and maybe opened a plethora of well-buried pain. He quickly changed the subject.

‘I would love it if you could show me around the city perhaps someday in the near
future.’ That sounded a little desperate, even to Charles’s ears and he cursed himself silently. There I go, jeopardizing all even though it has just begun, he chided himself inwardly.

‘That can be arranged’ Samaira replied, much to Charles’s delight.

In the distance, she saw Mumtaz waving to her.

‘I must take your leave now as my troupe is waiting for me.’ Bowing slightly Samaira rushed inside the Palace, her sweet perfume lingering in the evening breeze.
Chapter IX

There was a huge smile on Charles’s face. He held on to the pillow tightly as if he would never let it go. It seemed to him that there was an incessant rapping on the door which would not go away. He was holding Samaira in his arms. She was still wearing the pink chiffon sari with the golden border which she had changed into after her natch in the Court of the Nawab. Looking transcendent, the strands of her hair flew softly in the gentle breeze with the overpowering fragrance of raat ki raani. She looked deep into his eyes while one of his hands reached towards her cheek to caress it. The touch of her skin had an effect on Charles that he had never experienced before. He met her gaze, removing the strands of hair from her face. Drawing her close to him he bent his head to kiss her full mouth. Samaira’s lips parted invitingly. The rapping on the door grew louder.

‘Damn you’, he muttered under his breath. ‘Who is it?’ he asked, fumbling into his robe, still groggy from sleep. He remembered the revelry of the night before and experienced a dull ache in his chest.

‘Sahib, it’s me, Madho Singh,’ came the voice of the khidmatgar from the other side of the door.

‘It’s an official matter and the Colonel has sent for you. A junior officer of the 32nd Regiment of Foot has come to escort you. He is presently having tea in the drawing room awaiting your company. I have already laid your breakfast in the dining area and have brought your tea. Pray, please get ready Sahib.’ The khidmatgar then put the tea tray on the table in the small patio and retraced his steps to attend to his daily chores.
Charles hastened to open the door and picked up the tea from the table hurriedly. As he took his first sip he wondered what was so urgent it could spoil his plans for a day which he had envisaged spending with Samaira.

His thoughts went back to the previous night.

Samaira had come back outside to join Charles in the Royal Gardens after her next dance. She had teasingly told him that she would show him around the city but it could only be arranged in the late afternoon as she would be busy with her riyaaz and dancing lessons. Charles had tried to conceal his enthusiasm by saying it would be just as well and lied that he had the Parades in the morning till noon. He knew the game well but had never felt the need to play it before. Well, he would enjoy every bit of the chase and was in no particular rush. He foresaw long innings for himself in India. She was a special woman and she deserved special treatment. He would win her over in good time.

Although it was a day off for him from the cantonments, he knew something must have come up for the Colonel to have called for him in such circumstances.

He took out his uniform from the sole cupboard in the room and went inside the bathroom taking the leftover tea along absentmindedly.

He had not had much success with women in the past. Although there had been quite a few, he sometimes wondered whether they were attracted to him or his name. The vigorous training at Sandhurst had put an end to his romantic liaisons and he had ever since been occupied with more pressing matters rather than finding women for himself. His sole aim in life was now to make the most of his military career and prove himself.

And then he had met Samaira.

After bathing he put on his uniform, a knee-length scarlet and gold tunic with white trousers.
‘Madho Singh!’, he shouted standing near the door, buttoning his tunic, ‘Come here for a second’. Then he retreated into his room and sat on the diwan facing the door.

Madho Singh came rushing inside, ‘you called for me, Sahib?’

‘Have you seen my boots? Did you take them out for polishing?’ he asked while looking around the room for them, settling his wet hair.

‘No, Sahib, I didn’t. As far as I can remember when you came back last night you were barefooted,’ Madho Singh said with a hint of mischief in his voice, hiding an impish grin.

Charles suddenly remembered that when he had met Samaira on the Royal Gardens she had removed her sequined slippers to take a walk on the dewy grass and had urged Charles to do the same, a whim he had immediately attended to. How he had enjoyed it. His spirits had soared further as he had been under the influence of wine. Just then her friend Mumtaz had appeared out of nowhere to call Samaira inside hastily acknowledging Charles with a slight bow of her head. He had then gone on outside and seeing Shivcharan, the tonga lad; he had left for his compounds. He did not even remember bidding customary goodbyes to brother officers and Major Outram.

‘What are you grinning about?’ said Charles, noticing that the khidmatgar was still standing there. ‘Go and get my spare boots from the store’. Why, in God’s name did he have to make a fool of himself in front of Madho Singh all the time, he muttered to himself.

‘Right away, Sahib?’, and bowing generously Madho Singh went to fetch his master’s boots.
The matter had indeed been one of official nature. The Chief Commissioner of Oudh had been on an unannounced tour of the State meeting up with the various regiments and an impromptu parade by the 22nd Regiment of Foot followed by a luncheon, arranged in his honour. Being Captain of the Regiment, Charles had to lead the Parade. Charles had enjoyed being at the helm of affairs and got the first taste of being a Captain of a garrison. The Chief Commissioner had been impressed with Charles and believed the future of the Regiment was in good hands. It had been nearly half past three when the Commissioner had finally left for Cawnpore, the next city on his itinerary to be toured and inspected.

Much to Charles’s dismay, he realized that he was running late and could not keep the appointed time with Samaira. Bidding hasty goodbyes to the Colonel and the junior officers he left hastily, feeling disoriented. The Colonel, John Inglis, and his staff looked on with puzzled expressions.

The Colonel shook his head and then muttered ‘women’.

Oh God! Don’t let Samaira get upset, Charles prayed inwardly. ‘Hope she is still there when I reach that Godforsaken place.’

‘Aye Shivcharan, you do know where Dilkusha is…right?’, Charles asked the Tonga lad earnestly.

‘Sahib, I have stayed all my life in Lucknow. Of course, I know where it is. I will take you there in no time. Don’t you worry.’ Pulling the bridle he whipped the horse and the carriage gained momentum.

Dilkusha kothi was a popular hunting lodge of the Nawabs and also used by the British Officers. It was built around 1800 by the then British Resident Major Gore Ouseley close to the banks of Gomti river.
Charles realized that he did not even have time to go back to his compound and change his uniform. It would be just as well. At least he had a valid reason to be late but hoped fervently that Samaira would not get offended and think of Charles as just another British officer who considered her a mere amusement.

‘Can’t we go any faster, Shivcharan? It seems to be taking forever.’ Charles said impatiently.

‘Sahib, we are almost there. See, here’s the outline of the temple. Dilkusha is just next to it,’ Shivcharan, trying to placate Charles, wondering who the Sahib had to meet so urgently.

‘I can’t see anything. Oh yes! Now I do…why, thank you, Shivcharan’, Charles said, with some of his old demeanour being restored.

They reached a building that loomed tall in the skyline. It had been styled on the lines of the English baroque but till retained a hint of Indian architecture. Its gardens surrounded it lending the feel of vast expanse, of a great green park. Charles could see the river flowing nearby. Samaira had indeed chosen a good spot for their rendezvous. Alighting from the Tonga, he asked Shivcharan to stay near the busy temple. He would call for him if he required him. Bowing his head, Shivcharan had obeyed his master and taking the reins of the horse, went in the direction of the temple which bore a deserted look save for a few devotees now and then. The sound of temple bells echoed in the distance.

Charles looked around for a carriage near the building. There was one. It was enclosed and had chikankari curtains on the windows. But there seemed no one inside. Charles started walking towards the carriage. A man was squatting on the grass and smoking a beedi. He reckoned he must be the man driving the Tonga. Just then he saw Samaira sitting near the river deep in a reverie. She did not see Charles approaching her. She was wearing a finely embroidered ochre salwar kamiz and her long hair was parted neatly and fell luxuriantly on the sides of her
shoulders. She threw a pebble in the river and watched in fascination the ripples it created.

‘Salaam walequ姆’ Charles greeted her with a smile, sitting beside her. She stiffened and picked up her duppatta from the ground draping it around her as if suddenly cold.

‘Walequ姆 salaam’ she said blankly, not looking Charles in the eyes.

Sensing her aloofness he hastily added, ‘I guess I should apologize for my lateness. It’s just that that none other than the Chief Commissioner of Oudh decided to bestow a surprise visit to Lucknow. The Colonel and I were not really prepared for his impromptu arrival. A long and elaborate salutary Parade had to be organized in his honour.’ If only she would look up, Charles thought. He noticed that she looked far more enticing in broad daylight. Her eyes were downcast accentuating her thick, long eyelashes.

And then she finally looked up and Charles saw her blush.

‘It’s all right,’ she said thoughtfully, ‘I quite enjoyed myself near the river. It’s so peaceful here and the solitude has rejuvenated me after last night’s exertion.’ And in the same breadth added, ‘So what would you like to do first? See the city? Do you have anything particular in mind?’ She looked hard at Charles. She loved the colour of his eyes. They were such an unusual blue. His red uniform was very becoming on him. He looked every inch a Captain.

‘Can we stay here for a while? As you said it’s so serene away from the chaos of the city, if you know what I mean?’ said Charles pleadingly, thinking ‘who wants to see the city when I have you beside me.’

‘Most of the day has been lost, as it is. Maybe you can show me around the city some other time. We can sit here awhile.’
'Oh..in that case I have to be back in Hasiena Begum’s kotha latest by 6 o’clock. There are some taluquedars coming and a natch has been organized for them followed by a poetry recital.’ She smiled, searching his face for any change in expression.

Charles felt a stab of jealously rising in his chest but tried to hide it.

‘Oh, is that so? Of course. Work comes first.’ He looked away, suddenly feeling awkward and not knowing what to say next. He had never felt tongue-tied in the company of a woman before, maybe because he had never met an Indian woman before. He tried to choose his words wisely.

‘So do you like being a Captain so far?’ Samaira asked, gauging a change in Charles mood and making light banter.

‘It depends on whom I’m commanding,’ said Charles, looking at her. ‘So which part of the city is Hasiena Begum’s kotha. Maybe I could come over sometime and watch you dance again. Am I welcome there?’ he teased.

‘You don’t have to ask, you are welcome there by all means. As a matter of fact, you can come with your fellow officer, John Patterson. He is a regular there. He seems to have been smitten by my friend Mumtaz,’ she laughed.

It was a deep throated laughter and she had laughed with abandon. Charles laughed along with her. Ever since he had met her he had noticed a certain sadness in her eyes. But now it had gone. His hand accidently brushed against hers and he let it stay there. She did not try to remove it but stopped laughing. The moment seemed like eternity. Samaira felt awkward suddenly, not knowing what to say next. She then gently removed her hand from under Charles’s. Charles wondered if she was offended.

‘I…I have to go,’ she said pulling her dupatta close to her. Then she got up trying to brush away the twigs of grass from her salwar and adjusted her hair.
‘Wait! It’s only twenty past five. You said you would go at 6 o’ clock,’ said Charles getting up himself.

‘Well, it takes at the least half an hour to reach Hasiena Begum’s kotha from here. And you don’t know Lucknow the way I do. In the evenings the streets are so busy with all the bazaars sprouting up. I must really get going. I don’t want to anger Hasiena Begum. She is like a mother figure to me.’

‘All right. When will we meet next then?’ Charles was feeling disheartened.

‘I will send a messenger to your compounds when and where we will meet next. This week is going to be really busy for me,’ said Samaira haughtily, motioning the tonga man to bring the carriage over.

‘But how do you know where I’m staying?’ Charles was puzzled.

‘Why, through Officer John Patterson. I will ask him. Now I must bid adieu. Salaam Walequm!’ With a slight bow of her head she hurriedly climbed inside the carriage not looking back.

Charles watched her go hating the uncertainty of their next meeting. He watched the carriage until it finally disappeared from view.

Letting out a deep sigh he sat on the same spot trying to relive the brief interlude of just a few moments ago.
Chapter X

October 1856

Nana Sahib was an unhappy man.

His lawful rights had been denied him. What would the English know? The almost regular slights to his pride were taking their toll on him. He would have his way with them one day. He was waiting for an opportune moment to show itself.

Dhondu Pant, better known as Nana Sahib was a man of great wealth. Nearly thirty four he was one of the adopted sons of the last Peshwa Baji Rao II. Baji Rao’s power had been taken away by the British and in exchange he had been granted a pension of eight lakh rupees per annum. The Peshwa was discontented since he was not allowed to stay in Benares or Muttra but in Bithur, a small village near Cawnpore, a city where the British had one of their biggest military set-ups. Though exiled to the Kingdom of Oudh he took solace in the fact that the ‘pension’ had seemed to be an adequate amount to continue his extravagant lifestyle. Fond of his adopted sons, he had naturally ingrained in them indulgent habits which he himself was so fond of.

His father’s death in 1851 had not prepared Nana Sahib to deal with the British. The East India Company had terminated his father’s pension at once. Nana Sahib resented the fact deeply and had tried hard to plead his case to the Company but of course, his pleas had been turned down.

He sat presently in his Private Chambers. A stray chandelier lit and a soft hallow of light highlighted the damask weave of the gold upholstered couch. Across it he sat on a high chair itself upholstered with burgundy velvet embroidered with gold thread.
He was wearing one of his favourite silk robes with a cashmere shawl wrapped loosely. Stout and of fine appearance he made for a regal figure. With a string of pearls in his hand which he was now turning in his fingers as if beads of rosary he was contemplating hard as to his next course of action if the present one failed. The last few nights had been one of mental turmoil as a result of which there were fine circles around his eyes.

He hoped that the Court of Directors in London had examined his case favourably. But was mere hope enough?

He had sent his men to accompany Azimullah Khan from Bombay. He expected his arrival tomorrow from the Bombay Port.

His ears were straining to hear some favourable news as to his financial future. In the end, it was all that mattered. Money.

When his father had died, Nana Sahib had grown overnight.

He had taken on his father’s role as the new Peshwa and the running of the Palace at Bithur had become his affair. Though he had tried to curb the household expenses to a large extent, try as he might his father’s numerous dependents had made the expenditure extremely heavy and it had spiralled beyond his means.

The British Commissioner had seemed ostensibly sympathetic at his plight. He had even tried to convince Nana Sahib to sell off the large property that he had. He went a step further and suggested that Peshwa sell off the stud farm that housed horses, elephants, camels and other animals that Nana Sahib had inherited.

The British simply did not understand. They did not know that to a man of his standing, he could not simply sell off his property, his large stud. What would the people say? What would they think of the Peshwa. He would look like a fool in his
people’s eyes. The British had the gall to strip him and his father not only of their titles but also now of his father’s pension since he was not the biological heir.

His only hope now was to appeal to a higher authority. He had heard about the goodness of Her Majesty in London and the fairness of the Court of Directors. Yes, he would appeal to them.

Momentarily feeling exhilarated at this small sliver of hope he had decided upon setting about the impending task. His thoughts turned to Azimullah Khan, his close confidante and secretary. As a child, Azimullah Khan had been a destitute until finally he and his mother had been rescued from the famine of 1837 and provided shelter in a mission in Cawnpore. He was then granted admission in the Cawnpore Free School. Of an astute mind and wit, he soon learnt fluent English and French which was quite an accomplishment for an Indian in the prevalent times. Having worked with many Englishmen he soon learnt their ways and became adept at honing his skills as a well-read and charming young man. After the death of Baji Rao II, he soon joined the Court of Peshwa, Nana Sahib. In time he became one of his closest and wittiest nobles.

Having sent Azimullah Khan to England to plead his case, Nana Sahib had anticipated his arrival eagerly. Now that time had finally come. It had taken two long years. Though his absence was felt by Nana as he greatly weighed the word of his secretary in all matters large and small, he did not mind the fact as he had been sent away on the greatest matter that had rankled the Peshwa no end. It had cost the Peshwa a small fortune but it had been well worth the effort.

Finally the day had come when he would know where he stood with his wealth or the lack of it.

He heard someone approaching his Chambers.

‘Shrimant, Salaam. Azimullah Khan has arrived and seeks your esteemed company as he waits in the darbar.’ Bowing, his eyes never looking up the khidmatgar kept
the breakfast tray on the silver table near the couch. The other khidmatgar kept his brocaded kin cob for the Peshwa to don after his bath.

The Peshwa dismissed them by clapping twice. They obeyed, bowing again and closing the doors as they left. The sound of their feet ebbed away leaving behind the morning chatter of the sundry birds.

Going towards the jharoka, he lifted the diaphanous curtains. The retinue of his nobles had arrived with Azimullah Khan. He smiled weakly.

He donned the kin cob and skipping the breakfast headed straight to the darbar. On the way he saw his favourite mongoose and sat down to play with it awhile. The activity soothed him and helped him take his mind off the matters which worried him day and night.

He tried to take a momentary breather to hide his anxiety lest he appear too eager in front of his nobles. They of course understood the predicament of their Peshwa and genuinely felt that he should be granted what was lawfully his. The Peshwa had been a kind and generous man towards his ministers.

Keeping the agitated mongoose aside on the courtyard outside his Chambers he collected his robes about himself and took the long flight of stairs leading to the darbar.

The darbar had a gallery on either side of the big hall where velvet upholstered chairs were kept for seating the nobles and ministers of the Peshwa. The middle arcade was covered with intricately detailed Persian carpet. The end of the arcade had a podium on which was the throne of the Peshwa. It had seen better days. Once bejewelled with precious stones of various hues and the silk specially imported from China it now bore a barren and naked look. The fine iridescent upholstery was still there. It was all that was there. It had been Nana’s idea to remove the precious stones and gems lest the prying eyes of the English fall on them. It was no secret that when the English liked something that they saw it was
only a matter of time before they possessed it. In the case of the Peshwa he had been privy to his most prized possessions being taken away from him one by one. But not the throne. He would not give it away. To him it was a symbol of his power, his lost prestige and maybe, just maybe with enough perseverance he might get it back one day.

He had tried the path of goodwill and diplomacy. But where had it got him? He had hosted various entertainments for his European guests. There had been elaborate dinner parties to honour the British Officials where the last and smallest of details had been worked out so that they did not offend them. He could play the game of billiards expertly but allowed his guests to win. He even showed off his huge collection of guns by celebrated European makers and his collection of swords and daggers. Despite this, not only was his title of a Peshwa not officially acknowledged by the British, he was not even allowed to stamp letters with his father seal as he wished to.

When the Peshwa finally reached the darbar he was brought back to the present.

Seated amongst an array of nobles was Azimullah Khan. The English weather had definitely agreed with him. He seemed fairer and handsomer than the last time the Peshwa had seen him. He along with the others stood up and bowed their heads.

‘Ah, Azimullah, come close my friend’ and the Peshwa then hugged Azimullah Khan dearly. Azimullah smiled and embraced him.

‘Your Highness, it is a pleasure to see you after all these months’, said the Secretary.

‘Mantrijan, I would like to have a private word with my Secretary. I’m sure you all have important work to attend to.’ The Peshwa then dismissed the other ministers who bowed and left the darbar. He then turned to Azimullah Khan whose face now seemed withdrawn. He was unable to meet the Peshwa’s expectant eyes.
‘Shrimant, It greatly saddens me to be the bearer of bad news. But with a heavy resolve I tell you what transpired in England after all our strategic planning and hope in the British system.’

‘Yes, yes. Do so, you were always a forthright man and it is one quality that sets you apart from the other ministers. Come straight to the point.’ Nana Sahib sat on his throne as if suddenly the force of truth might make his legs give away.

‘Your Majesty, the Court of Directors in England has rejected your appeal. I tried my best to convince them but they would not change their minds. We were under the wrong impression about them. They take their sense of English pride too far and say what has happened with you has been fair under the new laws.’ He grimaced as he recounted his experience in England.

‘My worst fears have come true, Azimullah. I guess I knew it all along but kept deluding myself.’

‘Your Highness, this is not the end. Don’t give up. After you hear what I have to say you will feel a new force surging through your veins. The British are not as mighty as we thought. In fact, quite the opposite’.

‘What do you mean, Azimullah? Don’t keep me in suspense. Tell me what is it that you saw in England that makes you so confident’, the Peshwa now stood up and walked towards his agent.

‘I mean, my stay in England was quite an insight into the society of the Englishmen. I was invited for many important engagements where I met some of their greatest men such as famous writers like Charles Dickens and poets like Tennyson. I even met her Majesty Queen Victoria. Contrary to what we believe and envisage about her, she is a petite woman who seems in awe of her German husband.’ he chuckled.

‘Hmm, is that so?’ The Peshwa was quite amused to hear something so trivial about a lady whom so far he had held in great reverence.
‘Your Highness, the British are not invincible. Due to the grip of the Industrial Revolution the whole of England is covered in smoke and soot. The rains make the slums of London worse than any slum I have seen in India. The weather is really harsh and it is a wonder why the Englishmen here keep complaining about the Indian weather when they should be singing praises about it. The British are in a bad way.’ he continued.

The Peshwa listened with keenness.

‘On my way, I stopped at the battlefield of Crimea and saw the poor conduct and leadership of the British officers. These are all signs that the British Empire is doomed and is already crumbling.’ His face was suddenly aglow as he realized the implications of what he had just said.

‘Maharaj, this is the time to strike a blow against them. Their mighty sway on India is loosening. Now is the time. They might have terminated the petty pension they used to give you but don’t you worry about that when you can rule the whole of Cawnpore. The day is not far when you will be the king of entire Cawnpore one day.’

‘But I don’t have enough strength in the army. How will it be possible?’ the Peshwa, said his initial wave of disappointment having been replaced by a new zeal of emperorship.

‘Your Highness, there is growing discontent everywhere against the British. The seeds of doubt have already been sown. The village folk, the Talukdars and other rulers whose territories have been annexed…all are eager to get rid of them. We all have a common cause. Why don’t we join forces with these people?’ He said trying to convince the Peshwa who now seemed deep in thought.

‘I will not deny thinking on the same lines before your arrival, my friend. I had a foreboding that my case might get rejected in London. My next course of action is definitely a rebellion against these so called ‘men of superior race’. Now my
resolution has become stronger and I await the right opportunity to present itself. You must go and rest awhile as you have endured a tiring journey. We will speak again on the matter when your spirits have rejuvenated’, and then thumping his secretary’s back as a sign of vowed alliance he retreated to his Private Chambers to contemplate his new role as a rebel leader. The thought definitely appealed to his royal ambitions and touched a chord in his soul.
Chapter XI

Ramchandra Panduranga, or Tatya Tope, like many others, felt deeply for his Peshwa. He was the son of one of the most important nobles, Pandurang Pant, at the Court of the late Peshwa Baji Rao II. When Baji Rao II was exiled to the kingdom of Oudh, Tatya Tope’s family had also shifted with the Peshwa to Bithur.

Nana Sahib and Tatya Tope had become good friends since childhood. Tatya Tope had always looked up to the Peshwa and had deeply resented his plight once the Peshwa’ pension had been stopped. He had no tolerance for the British and their ways. Fair skinned and of a sinewy built he always wore his trademark topi which had been gifted to him by the late Peshwa Baji Rao II.

He had been now called by Nana Sahib in his Private Chambers. Something important must have come up for the Peshwa to have called on him at such a late hour. He hastened from his bed and lit the bedside lantern looking for his topi. Having found it and adjusting it on his head he hurried towards the Chambers of the Peshwa.

The Palace was dimly lit with mashaals and looked almost surreal in the dark. The guards manning the gate bowed to him and ushered him in as he went past acknowledging them with a quick greeting.

As he reached the Peshwa’s Chambers he went straight in, a privilege he had been granted by the Peshwa himself.

‘Nana Sahib’, he called out aloud, finding the bed empty.

‘I’m outside. Come out into the Courtyard, Tatya,’ he heard the Peshwa call to him.
The Peshwa sat on the thick ornate railing outlining the Courtyard overlooking the Palace. Tatya Tope came and sat next to him.

‘You were right all along, Tatya. My appeal in London has been rejected by the Court of Directors. Azimullah is back and gave me the news. I should have never trusted them!’ said the Peshwa, his face contorting into an ugly smirk.

‘Yes, I know, Your Highness. Azimullah came to my Quarters after he met you appraising me of the situation. I wanted to come and meet you but decided against it as I thought you needed some time to yourself.’

‘Tatya, I have always admired your spirit of fearlessness and able leadership. Now the time has finally come to invoke that spirit and put it to the test. Azimullah Khan and you are two of my most able men and I have high expectations from the both of you. I entrust you from now on the responsibility of enflaming the minds of natives. Gather as many people as you can, princes, rulers, talukadars, who have, like me, fallen prey to the unfair policies of the British, especially the Doctrine of Lapse, introduced by Lord Dalhousie. I want to turn our dissatisfaction into our main weapon and drive out the British. Now, it is late, my friend! Go and have your rest as tomorrow you have a long day ahead of you. It will be new dawn for me. I pray fervently to God that the new dawn brightens my horizon.’

Tatya Tope stood up and touched the Peshwa’s feet.

‘Maharaj, I give you my word. You will not be disappointed.’

When Tatya Tope bowed and left the Courtyard, the Peshwa sat alone till the sky brightened heralding a new dawn.
Chapter XI

November 1856

The capital of Oudh housed the magnificent building popularly known as the Residency. Though originally constructed in 1780, the British Officials that occupied it from time to time had modified the interiors to suit their individualistic tastes and sensibilities. Looming tall, it stood above the river Gomti affording a panoramic view of the city of Lucknow. The Residency was situated in the heart of the city and was surrounded by other buildings constructed for British Officials and soldiers. In the vicinity were offices, stores, a church, private houses and a banqueting hall.

The current occupant of the Residency was Sir Henry Lawrence as the Resident of Oudh. Major Outram had recently been sent to command the British Army in the Persian War. Sir Henry Lawrence had then been appointed as the Chief Commissioner of Oudh. Though fifty one years old he looked far older than his years. The Indian sun had taken its toll on him. His cheeks bore deep lines and his eyes had an air of melancholy and gravity about them.

His father was a man of fortitude and had spent most of his life in India as a Colonel. Born in Ceylon, Lawrence was sent to a boarding school in Ireland. A man who did not speak much, he did not make friends easily. But when it came to work he was the most industrious and did well for himself in India. Appointed as a Resident in Lahore in the State of Punjab in 1847 he had well deserved the post and was knighted consequently.

But the policies of Lord Dalhousie irked him no end. The kingdom of Oudh was in a bad way. Lord Dalhousie's policy of annexation of states where the king did
not have a rightful heir to the throne was brewing a storm of resentment amongst the Indians. According to Hindu Law it was legal to adopt if the king did not have a biological heir but now due to Lord Dalhousie’s reform this right had been taken away from them. As a result the Kings of Oudh were an unhappy lot. They were now openly complaining about being treated so unfairly. This resentment was not confined to the kings but also the Talukdars who were being deprived of all their lands and villages to which they could not prove a legal title. The humble villagers were not too pleased with their new masters either. At least in earlier times their crafts had value which could take care of household expenses. But the English did not have any use for them and slowly their meagre means of sustenance were also dwindling away. The sepoys in Oudh had always been a privileged class but it seemed that privilege was being taken away. Their grievances had been listened to attentively in Lucknow earlier but now all that had changed as their new British Officers were far less tolerant of them.

Sir Henry Lawrence realized that the British Officials in Lucknow were not tactful in their dealings with the Indians. Most of them were having altercations amongst themselves and could not get along with each other. Having newly arrived in Lucknow, he intended to change the scenario. A tall order. But Sir Henry Lawrence was a man of iron and strong will. Already he had opened the doors of the Residency for nobles and commoners alike for the first time since the annexation of the state. He was sympathetic towards them and tried to resolve their matters with fairness and transparency.

He now held darbar over such a matter, an ancient Indian practice of Indian rulers where they listened to the woes of their subjects and tried to find a remedy. The man in question was Talukadar Raja Sangram Bux Singh, owner of fifty one villages.

Sir Henry Lawrence sat on his chair across the desk checking the legal documents of the man and realizing that they were in order.
‘So what seems to be the matter, Raja Sahib?’

‘Resident Sahib, I have heard about your greatness and good word travels far and wide. As my papers indicate I am the landowner of these villages. The lands belonged to my ancestors since six generations. But I do not have a rightful heir and have adopted my nephew, Bijai Singh who will inherit the estate once I’m gone.’

He had strong aristocratic features. His turbaned head seemed huge in proportion to the rest of his body. His moustaches were thick and well groomed a sign of stature in Indian society. The man must have been in his late fifties but looked years younger than Sir Henry Lawrence. His fingers bore various rings which seemed to have astrological connotations.

‘Two days ago three British Officials came to my fort in the countryside and have advised me that all my land will be taken away from my family once I’m dead. Is that true?’ he looked expectantly at the Chief Commissioner.

‘I’m afraid it is true, Raja Sahib? Under the reform of Lord Dalhousie if a King or a Talukdar such as yourself does not have a legal heir, the property will get vested with the Company Sarkar, ’ he answered, his eyes downcast.

‘But, but Sir Henry I thought that this reform was limited to the rulers and emperors and not to us. Is that not the case?’ The man asked a note of desperation and disbelief in his voice.

‘No. It is related to all those who hold sizeable amounts of property.’

‘Can’t you do something? What will happen to my family? Where will they go once I’m dead? Could you not look at my case in a different light, I beseech you, Sir Henry,’ his eyes were moist and he was trying a hide a tinge of indignation in his voice.
‘Look, Sir, Let me talk to some higher officials in my division. I do not promise you anything but I will certainly try everything in my power. Leave these documents behind and come and collect them a fortnight from now.’ Sir Henry soothed him, genuinely feeling the injustice of it all.

The man rose folding his hands as a sign of helplessness. Bowing he left the office of the Chief Commissioner.

Sir Henry Lawrence sighed.

He had a long task ahead of him. Though he could not guarantee success in the matter he would try and help the man as far as possible.

If the Centre kept up with these reforms he could almost vouch for the fact that there would be mutiny by the Indians. He would mutiny if he was pushed to a corner like this.

He wondered that if there was to be a rebellion were the English really prepared. The military dispositions at Lucknow worried him. The placement of the troops was not systematic and well planned. The Infantry, the Cavalry and the Artillery were all scattered haphazardly. Then there was the magazine which was almost unguarded. God forbid in the present circumstances, if there was to be a mutiny, and all signs showed that, the city was not guarded at all. The barracks of the only European regiment, the 32nd Foot were on the outskirts of the city.

He had met the Captain of the Regiment, Captain Charles Hamilton on his first day in the city and then in the Court of the Nawab where a feast had been held for the festival of Eid. Quite a likeable fellow he was. He seemed capable enough for his command.

He would soon have a word with the Captain and discuss the position of the troops when he met him next and also voice his fears to the Colonel of the Regiment.
His immediate state of anxiety was somewhat allayed and he went inside to his Private Quarters to have his evening tea.

He missed the presence of his wife Honoria especially on occasions such as these. She had understood him best. Prodded on by her endearing nature and help, it was she who had helped him in becoming a better man. As a result he had begun to prosper in his career. She had also developed warmth in his demeanour which few others had been unable to penetrate. He was not the same man ever since she died.
Chapter XII

I'm in love, Charles smiled weakly, blissfully happy in the revelation. Did she feel the same about him? Whenever he looked into those unfathomable eyes he could only read a certain longing for acceptance, but love? Well, he would just have to wait and find out. With each passing day she had started meaning more and more to him. Then there was her easy compatibility with Charles. He could open up to her about his day to day happenings and his exasperation at being on a foreign soil. He was having his initial hiccups about understanding Indians. But Samaira made it so simple for him. She not only empathized with him but encouraged him to view the situation from an Indian’s perspective. He sometimes marvelled at her wisdom which belied her actual years. How could she, who had never ventured very far from her kotha know so much about life and human behaviour. It was this virtue besides her breathtaking beauty which drew him to her.

They now met regularly in Hasiena Begum’s kotha. Charles frequented the kotha whenever Samaira performed the natch. Samaira had introduced Charles to Haseina Begum and Mumtaz. Both had accepted Charles warmly into their social circle. John Patterson who commanded another Regiment had become a dear friend to Charles. Patterson used to dote on Mumtaz and sometimes Charles and John went together to the kotha where they stayed well past the natch was over mingling with other fellow officers and Indians. After the natches were finished there were Urdu poetry recitals followed with some Ghazal singing. Though British officers could read and speak Hindi and Urdu fluently Charles was having trouble with his. It was at moments such as these that Samaira helped him, and he
was a much happier man for that. With her help he had begun to appreciate the fine art of Urdu poetry and the nuisances of the capital’s tehzeeb and etiquettes.

He had finally begun to settle into the Indian way of life. The sepoys in his regiment were simple and good-natured fellows without any malice in their hearts. He saw how most British officers treated them and was appalled. He vividly remembered one incident that he himself was witness to. It had happened in the Oudh Infantry when he had gone there for the purpose of procuring the signatures of the Colonel on a legal document. He had been waiting in one of the barrack rooms when a fellow officer, Hugh, had come to greet him. He had never liked the man for his obvious conceit. This particular officer used to frequent Haseina Begum’s kotha as well. On more than one occasion he had misbehaved with Samaira, making lewd advances towards her. Once, Samaira had hastened to stop Charles from starting a fight. On this particular day Hugh came up to Charles and asked in amused contempt, ‘so how is that girlfriend of yours, err, what’s her name...I forget, yes, of course, the beautiful Samaira?’

‘She’s all right. I’m here on an official visit and not to discuss my personal life... so I would like to wait for the Colonel in quiet, thank you.’ Charles cut him short.

‘Of course not, but I’m sure she must be really something in bed....I mean she must have been trained really well in that godforsaken brothel. How I would love to find out.’

‘If you are trying to test my patience then you certainly have won, for I will not listen to Samaira’s name being taken with disrespect’. Charles then advanced towards Hugh whose face held an ugly smirk.

‘My, my...so Mr. Charles Hamilton indeed has feelings for that native woman, after all. You know what, she is just a courtesan...she doesn’t belong to you...she belongs to us all. Maybe we can share her.’

‘That does it!’
Charles leapt at Hugh with savage fury. Just then there was a knock on the door. Both men stopped. A purplish hue had begun to form on Hugh’s neck. He cursed Charles silently, feeling a dull pain where Charles had held him. An Indian sepoy had brought coffee for the men. He was holding a large earthen vessel containing the hot coffee on his head. He called out, ‘hot coffee, Sahib’. Just then Hugh removed his boot from his left foot and hurled it in the sepoy’s direction. The boot hit the vessel and broke it. Hot coffee ran down the poor man’s body. The sepoy let out an agonized cry.

Charles cried out, ‘you animal!’ He rushed to the poor man’s aid and poured cold water from a nearby vessel onto him. He then made the man lie on the ground and hastily went out to look for the army doctor in the compounds. Having found him they rushed to the man and the doctor put a soothing balm and ointment all over the burnt areas. The doctor also gave the man some medicines to ease the pain.

Hugh had conveniently disappeared from the scene. Charles reported the matter to the Colonel on seeing him but nothing was ever done about the incident. Charles was later told by his fellow officers that such occurrences were common and the authorities hardly did anything about them. In fact, they contributed to such incidents. Charles had been disgusted by it all and vowed silently that if he ever saw Hugh again he would break his neck. Providence had been on his side when he had been presented the opportunity sooner than later. Sure enough Hugh had come to the kotha one evening. On seeing Charles he had tried to escape but Charles had been too fast for him. Seizing him by the collar Charles had punched him twice in the face rendering it crimson and blue. He also heard the sound of teeth breaking, to his utter satisfaction. Patterson had reached Charles’s side and pulled him away inside the parlour of the kotha. He had then rebuked him good-naturedly urging Charles to let the matter go. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Hugh had staggered outside onto the empty street and managing to mount on his horse, had rode off into the darkness.
He had not been seen in Hasiena Begum’s kotha since. Word had it that he had resigned from his regiment and had shipped back to England citing a case of an incurable illness.

Charles was looking forward to yet another evening with Samaira.

Having had a gruelling day in the Native Lines, he was in need of respite from the humid weather. Madho Singh, his loyal khidmatgar had accompanied him and now offered him the sugarcane juice which had become Charles’s favourite. Madho Singh had now become accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of his Sahib. On his part he quite liked the man, who despite being a white man, never acted like one. He was different. Local gossip had it that he was from a royal background. But Madho Singh never saw him throw tantrums of any kind. In fact, there were times when Charles was so happy with Madho Singh that he would simply engulf him in a bear hug. Madho Singh had to remind Charles that this was simply not done in British India. He was a Sahib and should act like one. Rather than taking Madho Singh seriously, Charles was always amused by such talk.

Just a day before, Charles had gone out hunting with Patterson near the Dilkusha Palace. The Palace had brought back sweet memories of his first date with Samaira. How vulnerable and lovely she had looked. He remembered the warmth of her hand as he touched it that day. Charles sighed.

‘Sahib, would you like some more?’

‘Who wouldn’t? It’s like being in paradise…’

‘Sahib, the juice has such impact on you?’

‘The juice?’
‘Isn’t that what you are talking about?’

‘Oh! Shut up, Madho Singh. Please go and fetch my bag from the barrack room.’

‘Yes, definitely, Sahib.’ So his Sahib was in love. Madho Singh smiled wickedly and sighed.

Charles wiped his brow with a piece of cloth. The heat was indeed unsettling.

Sitting uncomfortably on the rattan chair, he saw Shyam Lal, a sepoy of his regiment approaching him. He was Charles’s favourite amongst his men. Devoted and most committed to his Regiment, he had seven years’ exemplary service to his credit. Amongst his other favourite was Brijesh. He had recently joined service but was a fast learner. Charles used to chat up with them after the Parades in the morning. In no time he was able to learn of their humble origins and even humbler aspirations in life. Like most native sepoys in the Army, their main aim in life was to be able to provide two square meals a day for themselves and to send whatever meagre salary they earned to their families back in the villages. For this they became accustomed to insults and blows from many British officers.

Though they never complained Charles empathized with them. But he felt that his hands were tied. How many Hughs could he beat up to change the system? Charles pondered grimly. He had recalled the adage ‘beware the fury of a patient man’. Maybe it would be deemed true in the near future. There were already reports of signs of disaffection in towns and cities surrounding Lucknow. Such reports were growing in number with each passing day.

‘Good afternoon, Captain. I apologize for my absence from the Parade today’, Shyam Lal spoke, his brows knit in a frown.

‘That’s all right, Shyam. I would like to know the reason for your absence, though.’

‘Sahib, I have received a telegram from my village stating that my father has taken seriously ill. I would be requiring a leave of absence to travel to my village and see my father.’
'Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, Shyam. Of course you may go at once. And…don’t forget to convey my wishes to your family.’

‘Thank you, thank you, Sahib.’

Charles saw the tension from the dark man’s face ease. His eyes had seemed red and swollen as if from continuous crying. Charles patted him on the back saying everything would be all right. The man then suddenly broke into a fresh flood of tears.

‘Sahib, your kindness touches me. You don’t know how it was for me and other sepoys like me before you were commissioned as the Captain of this regiment. We are lucky to have you.’

‘Aye, Shyam. That is not true. Don’t go all maudlin on me. I’m just doing my job. Any other officer would have done his job in the same fashion.’

‘No, Sahib. It’s not that. Even you know it. You treat us as one of you. Equally and fairly. Not like a subhuman being. May Lord give you a long life’, and he bent to touch Charles’s feet. Charles moved away. He then groped in his pocket and took out three gold coins which he always kept as a lucky mascot and thrust them in Shyam’s hand. These coins had been in Charles family for five generations and had been given by his father when he was embarking on his journey to India.

‘No, Sahib. I can’t accept them. I know what they mean to you. Also, it’s not protocol.’

‘Keep them! You might need them. I know the remuneration that you get is paltry. Remember your father is not well. And now off you go!’ Charles gave him a gentle shove in the direction of the gates of the Native Lines.

‘Thank you, thank you, Sahib.’

Charles watched him go until he disappeared from view.
Charles sighed. I will miss him, he said to himself.

Hasiena Begum’s kotha was a bustle of activity in the evening. There was a fine mélange of British Officers, Taluquadars and the other glitterati of the city’s society. Servants in uniformed attire offered delicacies and madeira to their sundry guests. Hasiena Begum personally greeted each and every guest who came. Though she had grown considerably obese with age, her skin was taut and still kept the remarkable peachy perfection of her prime, with not a wrinkle in sight. Her heavily embroidered zardozi sari added allure to her amiable persona. She now looked around for Samaira wondering what was keeping her, considering the first natch was hers. She knew that her favourite protégé was in love. It had been evident as Hasiena Begum knew Samiara like a mother knows her daughter. She saw Shaira Bibi and called her. ‘Can you go and see what Samaira is up to? The first performance is by her. Almost everybody has arrived.’ There was a note of impatience in Hasiena Begum’s deep voice.

‘Ji, Begum’ Shaira Bibi gallivanted along the huge living room checking out all the guests and bumping into one. She apologized profusely. It was none another than Taluquadar Ranbir Singh. Hasiena Begum watched her and shook her head in exasperation. I have a fine assortment of servants and matrons, she muttered to herself.

As Shaira Bibi reached Samaira’s quarters, she found the door locked. Tapping gently on it she called out to Samaira.

‘Hasiena Begum is asking for you, Samaira. Please come down at once.’

‘I will only take a minute, Bibi. Is Charles there already?’ Samaira asked from the other end of the door.
I didn’t see him. Maybe he is on his way. Please you don’t worry about him. You get ready fast, my love.’ Shaira Bibi then opened the door to the adjacent room and went inside to check on the other courtesans.

Samaira looked at her reflection in the mirror with appreciation. She was looking forward to meeting Charles. She sighed deeply. He had meant so much to her in such a short span of time. Every time she met him she felt loved and nurtured a feeling that had long eluded her. How safe she felt when she looked into those deep blue eyes. Although Hasiena Begum had warned her not to fall for Charles as she did not trust Englishmen, even Hasiena Begum knew that Charles was not like the rest. He genuinely cared for Samaira. Samaira never let such doubts prey on her mind and had started envisaging a future with him...Maybe get married and have a few children. She smiled at the thought.

Having adjusted her hair into neat strands and wrapping the iridescent paprika sari carelessly around her shapely body she opened the door to her room. She looked around for Mumtaz across the big hallway. She must have already gone downstairs. Lifting her sari slightly she started climbing down the ornate staircase.

Having reached the spacious living room she saw the fine array of guests looking in her direction with admiration. She met the eyes of Charles and smiled. He walked towards her. So he had worn sherwani and pyjama. She laughed gently. Charles became uneasy.

‘I knew I would look like a clown in this Indian attire. But Madho Singh said I would look like a Nawab. I should have known he was jesting.’ Charles adjusted the collar of his sherwani uncomfortably.

‘You look just fine. I was just trying to unnerve you. Seems like you really take the word of your khidmatgar rather seriously. I am beginning to feel jealous.’

‘Aye, he is a fine fellow. Takes good care of me. When somebody else should be doing that’, and Charles smiled mischievously.
‘Maybe you should marry him.’

‘I would have if he was a woman.’

And they both laughed heartily. Just then Samaira saw Hasiena Begum approaching her.

‘If you too are done talking, Charles can I steal away my lovely Samaira for some time.’

‘Ah, she’s all yours Begum. By the by you look as divine as ever.’ Charles took Hasiena Begum’s hand and kissed it.

‘Ah what a charming young man you are. Just please always take good care of my Samaira. And now Samaira it’s almost time for your performance.’ Samaira nodded and went in the direction taking her place in the centre stage. As the table beats were started by the various musicians she broke into a well rehearsed kathak dance and soon had all the guests enthralled. All eyes followed her curves as she moved gracefully. Charles looked on proudly. All the guests were envious of Charles. I’m going to propose to her tonight, lest somebody else steal her away from me, Charles said to himself wistfully.

As she finished the natch, there was a thunderous applause. Samaira shyly bowed her head and gave way to another courtesan to begin her performance.

She joined Charles presently who never took his eyes off her. She became red under his unbroken gaze.

‘You know I hear from the British that it is bad manners to stare.’

‘Who cares about manners when I have somebody as lovely as you beside me? I had a suggestion to make? Can we retreat to the jharoka for some time, away from prying eyes? I want to ask you something.’ Without waiting for her response, he took Samaira’s hand and led her away. As they reached the balcony, Charles held
her face with his hands, looking deep into her eyes. Samaira averted her gaze as she felt her face flush a crimson red.

‘Oh my lovely Samaira, will you marry me? Please say yes for I cannot bear to live without you for another moment.’ Charles looked on at her searchingly, out of breath.

Samaira looked back into his eyes and tears welled up inside hers. Though she had been startled by the sudden proposal, she slowly nodded her head.

‘But, but what will I tell Hasiena Begum? Will, …will she let me go?’ She said, suddenly becoming pensive.

‘She treats you like her own daughter. Of course she would let you go.’ Charles reassured her, enveloping her in a big hug. He had realized long ago that she had a troubled past and had vowed to himself to never ask her about it and hurt her. He understood that she felt a lot of gratitude towards Hasiena Begum.

He kissed her eyes and wiped her tears. Holding her hands he waited for her to compose herself before finally bidding farewell.

The following morning, a messenger was sent to Charles’s compounds. Sir Henry Lawrence needed Charles to see him at once in the Residency.

Charles was troubled by the urgency in the message. It could only mean one thing.
March 1857

Though the British chose not to realize it now, their unsound policies were taking a toll on their most precious colony.

The Indians were dissatisfied with their rule. They wanted to be rid of them. Not only had the British encroached upon their lands, they also did not have any regard for their religious sentiments.

The year was 1857. The air was thick with conspiracy. There were hushed murmurs all around. It was almost time. Time for the age old prophecy to come alive. The stars were indeed in the favour of the Hindustanis. Ever since the battle of Plassey in 1757 and the British having won the battle, predictions were abounding by Indian astrologers that the rule of the British would end in hundred years’ time. That year had come.

The new Chief Commissioner of Oudh was apprehensive at the state of affairs. He sat in his office contemplating the sudden anarchy that seemed to have seized the city of Lucknow. Though the long and arduous task of organizing the newly annexed Kingdom of Oudh had challenged him, he realized he had a long road ahead of him. Having settled in uneasily in his new garb of Chief Commissioner he sat on the high backed olive green leather chair, deep in thought.

The Governor General of India, Lord Canning had envisaged in Lawrence a man who was fair and just. Canning knew that the natives were still suffering from slights to their self respect at their kingdom being taken away from their
benevolent king Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. Canning was well aware that Lawrence was the man for the task of conciliating the hearts of the common man and the Royal family. The Nawab had been exiled to Calcutta a year before and the family he had left behind was an embittered lot.

Lawrence on his part had kept Lord Canning posted on the affairs of Oudh through regular correspondence. His practice of meeting feudal barons in frequent durbars, peasants and other important nobles had won him respect and renewed courtesy. His efforts had finally bore fruit. The revenue was collected with ease and ostensibly a feeling of wellness seemed to pervade the large province.

But that was not the case. Lawrence knew that all too well. He did not have to wonder far to know what the cause was. For years he had been pleading that the only permanent basis of power lay in the colonised’s absolute belief in the generosity and wisdom of the Government. That belief had long begun to be marred.

There was a talk of greased cartridges that had recently been introduced by the East India Company. After gruelling experiments in England a new rifle had been developed which effectively combined long distance accuracy with a less protracted method of loading. Hitherto it had been decided to bring the Enfield rifle into general use throughout the army in colonized India.

The new rifle had three grooves, and the powder and the bullet were made up together in a single cartridge-like the cartridge for a musket. To load the rifle, the end of the cartridge containing the powder had to be bitten by the mouth or nipped off so that the charge would ignite. The cartridge consequently pushed down the rifled bore of the muzzle. To make the flow of the cartridge easier, the paper of which the cartridge was composed was heavily oiled. This paper was composed of either beef fat or pig fat, the cheapest fats that were available. Otherwise the cost of the new cartridge would weigh heavily on the Company. Such a move was agreeable to the European troops. But not so to the Indians. If
the paper was composed of beef fat it would insult the religious sentiments of the Hindus who worshipped the cow as a religious deity. If it contained pig fat it would insult the Muslims’ religious sensibilities. It was then suggested that the new cartridges should be issued to the British troops only.

But the suggestion was soon ignored.

The atmosphere in the Oudh army had become one of mistrust and suspicion. The rumours were spreading fast that the British were at it again. This time they would strike such a blow against their religion that the Indians would lose their caste altogether and lose their face in the community. They would become devoid of any identity amidst their own people. Nameless, casteless and thus social pariahs. The hurt deepened old wounds which had not healed. By the will of God they would have their retribution on the firanghees. Their patience had been tried. Such was the general resentment and mood of the people.

Lawrence understood the predicament all too well. It had been reported to him that the men of the 48th had stopped saluting officers not of their unit. He wrote to the Governor General in one of his letters to him, ‘it would perhaps, be well if the 48th were sent to another province.’ Lord Canning sent him a reply, fully trusting the wisdom of the Chief Commissioner – ‘the 48th Regiment or any other which you may wish to get rid of, may be moved to Meerut. Let the Commander-in-Chief know if you find it necessary to send it away, but do not wait for any other opportunity. Should you have to dispose of a second, it can go to Cawnpore in the first instance; but I hope this will not be necessary. It is very desirable that our mistrust of particular regiment should not be made notorious, and the removal of any corps from Oudh to a place where troops are not wanted would be understood at once. Of course if you have regiments which are really untrustworthy, there must be no delicacy in the matter.’

The Governor General Lord Canning too had well gauged the situation that they were in. But the best tactic at the moment was not to show or cause any panic.
They could not show their mistrust of the Indians openly or the natives would turn hostile.

Lawrence was well aware of the fact that the subalterns had found their voice in their rebel leaders. The discontented Nana Sahib and men like Tatya Tope and Azimullah Khan were inciting them and urging Hindus and Muslims to unite in this hour of need. There were other rulers and princes whose kingdoms had been denied them due to the Doctrine of Lapse and they all stood up for the common cause. They now joined hands with the peasants, the taluquads and sepoys of various regiments and planned their move against British rule.

In another one of his letters to Canning, Lawrence wrote, ‘I have received many letters on the state of the army; most of them attribute the present bad feeling not to the cartridge, or any other specific question, but to a pretty general dissatisfaction at many recent acts of Government, which have been skilfully played upon by incendiaries. This is my opinion.’ He also added-‘if the Sepoy is not speedily redressed, he will redress himself. We measure too much by English rules, and expect, contrary to experience, that the energetic and aspiring among immense military masses should like our dead level, and our arrogation to ourselves, even where we are notorious imbeciles, of all authority, and all emoluments. These sentiments of mine, freely expressed during the last fifteen years have done me injury, and I am not less convinced of their soundness, and that until we treat natives, and especially native soldiers, as having much the same feelings, the same ambition, the same perceptions of ability and imbecility as ourselves, we shall never be safe.’

The evening had almost drawn to a close when he had finished this last letter of the day to the Governor General. Having apprised him of the situation in Oudh he pondered to himself that he had done at least half of his job. He had also called the Captain of the 32nd Foot stationed on the outskirts of Lucknow for an informal
chat the following day on having the dubious situation under control. The Captain, Charles Hamilton’s Regiment, comprised mainly of Indians. It was a well known fact among the entire Army in Oudh that the sepoys in this Regiment were the most trustworthy and Charles was extremely fond of them. He could not bear the fact that his men could ever be charged with deceit and unfaithfulness. He had placed his full trust in them. Though Sir Henry Lawrence was particularly happy with the conduct of this Regiment, it was his duty nevertheless to caution the Captain about the present state of affairs in various other regiments who were showing initial manifestations of discontent. He feared that the evil air might taint the faithful sepoys of 32nd Regiment as well.

There was a knock at the door of his office by the khidmatgar announcing supper. Lawrence realized he was not hungry at all.

❖

The following day brought with it a new hope of the situation easing. Lawrence wished as much. Sleep had eluded him ever since his wife had died. He was prone to sleeping less now than ever. Dressed immaculately in his breeches and red tunic he was fastening its buttons as he awaited the arrival of Captain Charles.

‘Sahib, I have brought your chota hazri.’ The khidmatgar had got his breakfast tray and he now kept it on the dining table awaiting a sign of acknowledgement from Lawrence.

‘Thank you, Mohan. You may leave now. Please inform me when the Captain arrives as I would be in my office. I have just realized there is something I need to attend to immediately.’

‘Ji Sahib.’ Bowing, he left the room noiselessly like a shadow whose existence is there but not one of significance.

Early that morning he had received a telegram from Lord Canning and now Lawrence hurried towards his office to open it. He wondered what the contents
would be. Reaching his office he realized the native orderly was cleaning it. He dismissed him with a wave of his hand. The orderly bowed and left obediently.

He pulled the high-backed chair and sat on it. Lifting a pile of envelopes kept on the right side of the writing desk he looked for the telegram when he heard a knock on the door. It was Mohan, the khidmatgar.

‘Sahib, Captain Hamilton is here to see you. He awaits your presence in the living room.’

‘All right. I will only take a moment. Please offer him tea and snacks.’

‘I already have Sahib. He is presently having tea.’

‘Excellent. I’ll be downstairs shortly.’

I guess the telegram from Lord Canning will have to wait; I’ll see the Captain first and see what he and his regiment is up to, Lawrence thought to himself.

He took the long flight of steps to the living room holding the smooth banister as he glided down each step. He had begun to like the Residency a good deal. Having made some minor changes to the furniture he now felt almost at home in the premises. How his wife would have liked the spacious ambience. The thought of Honoria brought a dull ache to his heart. He closed his eyes momentarily offering a silent prayer to her soul.

The Captain was seated on the ornate couch savouring his tea. He is a handsome fellow, Sir Henry thought.

‘Good morning, Captain. How are you this morning?’

Charles was blissfully unaware of Sir Henry Lawrence’s presence until he spoke. He stood quickly spilling his tea on the Persian carpet.

‘Good….. Good morning, Sir Henry. I didn’t see you coming.’ He managed, flustered. He had met Sir Henry Lawrence on earlier occasions when the Chief
Commissioner had first been posted to Lucknow. He felt deep respect for the man almost instinctively. He had heard about his goodness from fellow officers.

‘I didn’t mean to startle you. Would you like another cup of tea?’ Lawrence was quite amused at the obvious discomfort of the young Captain.

‘No sir. I’m quite all right. I had almost finished. I believe you wished to see me urgently.’

‘Yes. That is indeed true. Please sit.’

Lawrence sat on the opposite couch facing Charles. The window in front of them afforded a view of the busy bazaar outside the building. They could hear the multitudes of voices of vendors crying hoarsely for people to come and buy their wares. Lawrence came to the point. ‘There has been trouble brewing in the Kingdom ever since the annexation. Sections of people are unhappy, people who have been loyal to the King. Then there is the other section of people who are making the most of this opportunity. These agitators are provoking the people towards violence.’

Charles looked at his superior’s face. ‘I have heard reports. They want to release their grievances. The Colonel and I are looking out for any trouble makers in our regiment.’

‘That’s a good cautionary measure. I believe you have heard reports about the Berhampur incident. A few stray cases of unrest have also been reported from the city of Calcutta. They’ve targeted the bungalows of the British officers, set fire to them.’

‘Sir, I’m aware of the incident at Berhampur. But I don’t understand why it originated? Something must have offended the sepoys to act like that.’

‘A new rifle was introduced to the regiment. But word got around that the greased cartridges were made up of the cow and pig fat. You know that the cow is sacred
to the Hindus and touching pig fat is sacrilegious to the Muslims. So I believe there was an uproar based on that. I knew from the start that introducing those cartridges was a bad idea and had even sounded out the Governor General about it. But I guess. All to no avail. The fire has started now and I think it is going to engulf us in its fold.’

He continued with a sigh, ‘It has been decided that the 19th from Berhampur will be marched in disgrace to Barrackpore, which as you know is on the outskirts of the city. There they will be disbanded, setting an example to others. Hopefully the message will be sent that we will not accept riotous behaviour. But my main worry is; will that suffice to stop them?’

Charles turned uneasily on the couch, and then spoke with a solemn air, ‘I don’t know to what extent the uproar is going to grow, but I feel strongly about their cause. I mean, first we take their land away from them. We eye the treasure of the various kingdoms and start annexing them one by one in the garb of dubious reforms. We play with their religion. We treat them worse than animals. And now these greased cartridges...I mean we should have seen it coming. We can disband a regiment but not the whole army. They’ll take the disbandment stoically like other incidents in the past.’

‘I feel for them myself. But what can we do? We’re British and in a conflicting position. We have to safeguard the interests of the East India Company. And we must act promptly if we have to curb the situation in hand. Do you realize that there are only forty five thousand British troops against half a million natives? The Governor General has sent for British troops from Burma to balance the number in case of a rebellion. I pray fervently that they arrive in time. I have already spoken to Colonel Inglis of your regiment. I must now ask you to keep your eyes and ears open as regards your men and give me a full report of other regiments. And please report any suspicious activity at once.’
'I trust my men irrevocably and I know they will prove their loyalty with the last drop of their blood. I'll discuss the matter with fellow captains of other regiments and get back to you in a week.’

Captain Charles stood up at once, his figure as stiff as a ramrod. Then saluting Sir Henry Lawrence he left the premises, a much disturbed man. He hated the seed of doubt that he would have to place in his men. How meaningful they had become to him in such a short span of time.

He sensed a full-bloodied rebellion arising. Then he thought about Samaira. The timing couldn’t have been more wrong. How he wished he had not waited all this time to marry her.

Mounting his horse, he rode through the busy bazaar surveying the myriad scenes around him impassively. He felt a certain chill despite the April heat.
Chapter XIV

May 1857

The city of Lucknow was seized with anarchy. So was the entire state of Oudh. News of violence by the natives had begun circulating. There were reports that the city of Meerut witnessed mayhem and chaos over the introduction of the new cartridges.

This had been caused by the men of the 3rd Light Cavalry. The controversial new Enfield rifle had been issued to one of the European regiments at the beginning of the year. All the European troops in this regiment had started using the cartridges, marvelling at its efficiency. It was then planned to introduce this rifle to the native regiment—the 3rd Light Cavalry. The parade to learn the new firing drill was to take place on April 24th. But by this time word had spread that the new greased cartridges were smeared with cow and pig fat. The natives, Hindus and Muslims alike, vowed not to touch the cartridges and thus defile themselves. On their part, the natives had warned the European Officers of the regiment of their intentions. If they were made to bite the ends off these cartridges, they would rebel.

John Patterson had been dispatched by the Colonel of his regiment to Meerut to gauge the state of affairs in the city, on the orders of Sir Henry Lawrence in the first week of May. His dear friend and comrade Charles had been summoned to accompany him but had been personally called back by Sir Henry Lawrence at the last minute to discuss the present predicament.

Meanwhile in Meerut, Colonel Curzon, Military Secretary to the Commander-in-Chief had postponed the parade to the following morning. He tried to think of a panacea to end any objections to the new cartridges. Finally reaching a solution he
ordered his comrades to announce to the natives to tear the ends of the cartridges with their hands and not to bite them off with their mouths. This way both parties would be happy.

Late that day he heard about the arrival of Commanding officer John Patterson of the Light Horse stationed in Lucknow.

Now Colonel Curzon was a fickle-hearted man. Little realizing that the trouble was far from over he even asked the acting Adjutant what he thought of the matter of holding the parade the next day. Though belonging to an esteemed family, Curzon never really had a remarkable career in the Army. As a result he had not enjoyed a rapid promotion in his regiment. He was an arrogant man who was disliked by European as well as native troops.

Presently back in the comfort of his bungalow, he was having a glass of wine, his mood withdrawn and pensive, when the butler announced the arrival of Commanding Officer John Patterson.

‘Usher him in then.’

John Patterson presently joined him in the big drawing room.

‘Good evening Captain. Sit. Would you like a drink? I’m sure you had a long and arduous journey from Lucknow.’

‘Aye, Colonel and in this sweltering heat...’ John Patterson smiled good-naturedly, taking his seat near the Colonel. He wiped his brow as if to emphasize the point.

Colonel Curzon had gesticulated to the butler to get more drinks. The man arrived shuffling uneasily, a tray of a bottle and glasses. Patterson helped himself to a drink.

‘I believe you know the purpose of my visit. Sir Henry Lawrence had advised Mr. Wilson, the Colonel of Light Horse to send me to feel the mood of the natives as we know trouble is brewing……’
‘Hmm…is that so? But there really is nothing to worry about. You underrate my capabilities. I might sound pompous but I can handle a bunch of natives.’

Curzon’s face had turned crimson as he poured more wine into his goblet.

‘Sir, I’m merely following orders. Captains of the other regiments have been dispatched to other cities in Oudh, Allahabad and Cawnpore… ‘

‘Of course, I’m not taking it personally. But rather than wasting your time here in Meerut, you and your Colonel ought to be concentrating on Lucknow. Meerut is in good hands. I don’t know about the other cities. Just today morning when the native troops had declined to accept the new cartridges, I took action immediately. Let’s see how they refuse my orders tomorrow morning. If they do, they’ll regret it.’

‘Yes, I heard about that on my way to your bungalow from the Officers’ compounds. But Colonel, maybe we should deal with the matter in a more sympathetic light. After all…’

‘What? And give these niggers reason to believe we’re scared of them? And now, I’ll excuse myself as I have a long day lined up tomorrow. I believe you are going to give a sound report of the matters here to Sir Henry Lawrence. Don’t forget to give my regards to him. He is a remarkable man. Good night, Captain.’

He rose, swaying lightly, and patted Patterson on the shoulder. Patterson got up and saluted him before the butler saw him to the door. So much for a sound state of affairs, he thought to himself.

Thus the following morning, Colonel Curzon went again to the acting Adjutant, a harsh man himself, for a reassurance about the decision he had taken. The Adjutant advised him that he should commence the parade immediately or else the natives would feel that the British were scared of them. The orders were then given. Ninety men of the 3rd Light Infantry marched out on to the parade ground. The Adjutant ordered them to take three cartridges each. Not one man moved.
The Havildar Major was then instructed to load and fire his carbine. He obeyed
duly, showing the impassive men new motions of the drill. The Adjutant then
ordered the cartridges to be served out to the men. But none of them accepted the
cartridges saying they would get a bad name if they did so. Only two Hindus and
three Muslims accepted the cartridges. Without further ado, the defiant men were
taken off duty and confined to their lines. The five men who had accepted were
dismissed.

The following morning a court of inquiry was assembled, ostensibly to decide the
fate of the native troops who had not acquiesced to the orders of the Adjutant and
the Colonel. But their fate had already been decided. They were convicted and
sentenced to imprisonment for ten years. On Saturday 9th May 1857 all the eighty
five men were assembled at the European Infantry ground. Their sentence was
read aloud. They were then stripped of their uniforms and their boots were
removed to chain their ankles. Most of them took the humiliation stoically while
others cursed aloud the British Officers standing on either side of them with their
rifles loaded.

They were then taken to prison.

Certain British Officers, who felt for their men, went to the gaol to visit them.
They were moved by the scenes in the prison. Some of the Indians cried bitterly at
their plight. Most of the men had been in the service for forty years. Now when
the time had finally come to retire and live on their pension they had been sent to
gaol for standing up for their Faith. The men of the 3rd Light Cavalry were well
known for their fortitude which they had displayed in the various battles fought for
their imperial masters. It had all come to nothing.

There were murmurs amongst many superior British Officers that the sentence
was taken in haste and was unduly harsh. John Patterson, still in Meerut had
dispatched a telegram to Sir Henry Lawrence, apprising him of the situation. Sir
Henry Lawrence on hearing of the incident from Lucknow expressed his regret that such a move had been deemed necessary and strongly condemned it.

The morning on Sunday 10th May was like any other with the May sun rising high in the sky with all its scathing glory. The blazing heat had shrivelled the sundry trees. The scanty flowers on either side of the roads had withered in the baked earth.

The evening church parade held every Sunday was postponed until seven o’clock in lieu of the heat. As the British began to stir from their afternoon siestas to dress up for the parade they were alarmed to see black smoke rising from all directions. Their worst fears had been realized.

The Native Infantry Lines had been set fire to. The bungalows of the British Officers were burned. There were heavy cracking sounds of musketry fire all around them. The sepoys of various regiments of the Meerut Division had gathered their arms and were on a shooting rampage. They shot all Europeans on sight. There were rampant scenes of carnage and unspeakable horror in the bazaars where the shopkeepers ganged up with the rebels in the killing spree.

John Patterson, on his way back to Lucknow was caught up in the uproar. Riding wildly through billowing smoke he came across several ruffians who brandished their tulwars wildly aiming at his horse and him. He never wavered but kept going, realizing that the only way open to him was through the native bazaar where the uproar seemed to have died down. He could rely on the speed of his horse to save him. Arriving at the scene he treaded cautiously at first. He felt dizzy and nauseated for a moment. The scenes before seemed from another world. Mutilated bodies of Europeans covered the entire bazaar. The pool of blood seemed to have dried, a shade of maroon. Then there were several charred bodies whose faces were beyond recognition save for the eyes which were rolled heavenwards.

Patterson vomited. Taking his can of water from the saddle he had a few gulps and then made the horse gallop along at a steady trot. Suddenly he stopped. There was
hardly any empty space left on the street which was not covered by the dead. Taking the reins in his hand he stepped gingerly over the bodies until he finally came to the road which would take him back to Lucknow. Then he heard voices behind him. They belonged to the rebels, saying in Hindi, ‘Maaro, maaro, chotna nahi!’ They must have been about fifteen in number.

Patterson didn’t look back. He closed his eyes and offered a last prayer to God. He felt the tulwar pierce his heart from the back. Blood spurted, staining the face of his horse that wildly kicked its hind legs into the air. Patterson fell on the ground with a heavy thud.

The rebels smiled, one of them wiping the blood from the tulwar with Patterson’s uniform. They then gathered around the dead body to check for any valuables. The mutiny had started.
Chapter XV

May 15th, 1857

When the news of Patterson’s ghastly death reached Lucknow, Captain Charles Hamilton was hosting the Morning Parades. A messenger dispatched by the British garrison from Meerut brought the dreadful news. Charles felt his knees go weak and he needed the support of a nearby podium. No, not Patterson, God no! In such a short time they had become close. It was John who had made Charles’s early days in India tolerable and had introduced him to his vast network of British officers and Indian gentry. Why, it was Patterson who had arranged Charles’s first meeting with Samaira. Charles felt a dull ache in his heart and felt guilty at having not accompanied his friend to Meerut. Only he had not been called at the last moment for a meeting with Sir Henry Lawrence. Lawrence had warned the Colonel and Charles of impending violence and had sent Patterson to gauge the state of affairs in that fateful city. His troubled thoughts returned to what Sir Henry Lawrence had said to him in the Residency: ‘...This, this fire has started and it is going to engulf us all...’. He then thought of Mumtaz, who had evidently been in love with Patterson. Patterson had shared his feelings with Charles and had been planning to propose to Mumtaz after the anarchy had died down. Had she heard about his death? He didn’t want to be the one to break the news and yet he felt it his responsibility to do so. He owed it to Patterson. He owed it to himself.

Colonel Inglis of the 32nd Regiment of Foot lamented the loss of John Patterson and called on his officers and soldiers to strengthen their resolve and show courage and perseverance in this hour of need. Though the 32nd Regiment comprised mainly of British troops and officers, the few native sepoys that were there were
extremely loyal. Patterson had been liked by the whole Regiment due to his easy charm and disarming nature. There were now sad murmurs amongst the sundry officers, native and British alike.

Approaching the Colonel in the barrack room, Charles put up a resolute demeanour and asked to be dismissed. On being asked what the urgent matter was, Charles simply said, ‘it concerns Patterson.’

The Colonel slowly nodded his head and put his hand on Charles’s shoulder, ‘go’, sighing deeply, ‘but come back soon as we have a meeting with Sir Henry Lawrence later in the evening.’

Charles saluted him and retreated towards the exit. Turning swiftly towards the door he took long strides towards the gates where a carriage was waiting for him, organized by the Colonel. It was just as well. He was far too occupied to have driven a horse to Hasiena Begum’s kotha.

Were the British finally paying the price for their mass colonization of lands that did not belong to them? Had the hour of reckoning indeed come? Would there be a full bloodied rebellion? If so, what were to become of him and Samaira? Were they fated to come to same end as Patterson and Mumtaz?

His heart went out to Patterson. Reminiscing about their time together Charles had realized, maybe for the first time that Patterson never really liked the Army. He had joined the services out of peer pressure. Thoroughly fond of Indians he had eschewed violence of any sort towards them. Charles wondered whether Patterson had really put up a fight at having been surrounded by rebels or had he become simply resigned to his fate. He sighed. He would never know.

The carriage had almost reached Chowk, the area where Hasiena Begum’s kotha was situated. Charles braced himself. This was going to be tough.
'Shivcharan,' he called, 'Pull over at the Iron Bridge and wait there. I might be a while.' Charles dismounted from the carriage.

The short distance to the kotha afforded a view of the busy streets on either side. A few of Indians stared at Charles and made ugly gestures, an open sign that the ongoing disorder in the city was not going to stop, but grow. Charles ignored them. Climbing the long staircase to the parlour he contemplated on how he would tell Mumtaz about Patterson's death. He almost turned back to his compounds to grieve his friend's death alone. No, he would have to be strong. He knocked on the ornate door. It was Shaira Bibi who opened it.

'Sahib, salaam. Please, please come in. I'll call Samaira.' She bowed and ushered Charles in. Her wrinkled face showed a flicker of surprise at seeing Charles at such an early hour when he was generally busy with the morning parades.

Charles seated himself on the couch. Maybe he would tell Samaira about Patterson and she could break the news of his death to her friend.

Samaira arrived with a huge smile on her face. Charles eyes were downcast. 'What's the matter Charles? Is everything all right? You look pale.' She sat beside him pulling his face towards hers. 'Are you all right?' she repeated, her voice a mixture of concern and panic.

'Samaira, it's .......it's Patterson.' Charles said, finally looking at her.

'Yes...what about him?' Samaira held his face.

'He's dead.'

Samaira looked at him searchingly, her expression one of shock and disbelief.

'Oh no! Poor Mumtaz. She will be devastated, Charles....how, how will we tell her? She had been awaiting his return from Meerut eagerly as she knew he would propose to her. Hey Allah! My poor Mumtaz.'
Charles embraced her, putting his hand on her head.

‘I know, Samaira….you have to tell her. She is closest to you.’

‘But, but……..how did he die? Is it due to the present chaos…this, all this…talk of a mutiny?’ she asked falteringly.

‘Yes. You must have heard about the incident at Meerut where the 3rd Light Cavalry had refused the orders of the Colonel to accept the new cartridges. They were sentenced to imprisonment…….’

‘I know about that….An officer from the Light Horse was here last evening for the natch and I had overheard him talking about the incident to Hasiena Begum. Did John die as a result of violence that erupted as a result…….’

‘I’m afraid so. He was to arrive two days before but was held back by the 60th Rifles there….and knowing Patterson, I don’t think he put up a fight in his final moments. A gentle soul that he was.’

‘So, it’s really happening. The mutiny has started…..’

‘Yes, there are all the signs. I will be seeing Sir Henry later in the evening to discuss our position and the next line of action. What worries me is that the Magazine is on the outskirts of the city and almost unprotected. If the miscreants get their hands on the weapons the situation will become worse than it already is. My regiment, the 32nd, the only European Regiment, has its barracks outside the city. It is a good deal further away from the lines of all the native regiments. Though Sir Henry Lawrence has already appealed to Lord Canning to send more British troops to Oudh, we are really unprepared for any kind of emergency. The Indians are openly flouting the norms. Most of the Native Regiments are on edge, waiting for an opportunity to rebel. All of us have been advised to act normally and wait for the tide to pass. But I think if we don’t take control of the situation now, it might be too late. British women and children have been killed’, he continued,

‘Cantonments have been set on fire. The Native Lines have been burnt to the
ground. Word has it that the mutineers in Meerut are now headed to Delhi. We don’t have any reports as to what’s happening in Delhi but I’m sure there’s trouble there too. We must prevent what has transpired in Meerut here in Oudh.’

‘Oh Charles, I know what John meant to you…….’

The gravity of the situation had started to sink in finally, for they were quiet for a long time. Charles’s face was tense with his brows knitted in a deep frown. He suddenly looked aged despite his youth. He didn’t want to lose his Samaira to the present crisis.

‘Samaira I know your countrymen have been wronged. The East India Company is to be blamed for the present predicament. We have played with the sentiments of natives for decades now and we are finally getting what we asked for……. Sometimes I hate the situation that I’m in…..I don’t want to fight the natives, yet I must.’

‘Charles, let’s run away from it all……my love.’

‘I wish I could, Samaira….but they need me….There is nothing more in the world I want than to be with you, from this mental anguish that I’m going through, I feel that I’m on the wrong side. I have fallen in love with India; I have fallen in love with you. Oh my Samaira………….’ They hugged for what seemed like an eternity.

❖

In the evening Colonel Inglis arrived at the Residency, accompanied by Charles. The air was solemn and quiet. They were ushered in by the khidmatgar.

‘Sahib has been waiting for you in his office. Please have a seat.’

They acknowledged him with a slight nod of their heads and sat on the couch in the living room. Colonel Inglis then turned to Charles,
‘I believe Sir Henry Lawrence knows about John Patterson’s killing.’

‘Yes. I believe so, sir. The messenger from the British Garrison at Meerut had already been to the Residency to give a firsthand account of what transpired.’

Just then Lawrence came, gliding down the last stairs looking at the men and acknowledging them with a wave of his hand. Colonel Inglis and Charles rose to greet the Chief Commissioner of Oudh. He walked up to the two men and sat on the couch opposite them.

‘Sit, sit, Gentlemen. We have a long discussion ahead of us.’

‘The massacre at Meerut has left us stupefied and taken us by surprise. I have reports of the officers who have died as a result belonging to regiments stationed in Lucknow. John Patterson being one of them. A remarkable fellow. He will be greatly missed.’

Colonel Inglis spoke, ‘Yes sir. He was a dear friend of Charles as well.’

‘If there is a lesson to be learnt from the violence in Meerut, it is this-we should not wait any longer and sit around waiting for the same to happen here. I believe you have already heard, Colonel, that the 48th Native Infantry and the 7th Oudh Irregular Infantry have been acting defiant, these past few weeks.’

‘Yes sir, we have heard several reports of ensuing violence and the state of disorder in the city. But since we have not been given any orders to curb the situation we feel our hands are tied…….’

‘That is why this meeting, Colonel. I had been waiting for more orders from the Governor General as well. I’m afraid we have to wait for proper protocol before we take the matter into our hands. Charles, you remember what we last discussed?’

‘Yes, most definitely sir.’ Charles replied, suddenly awakening from his reverie.
‘I have a plan. I would like to have the Residency and the Machi Bhavan, the nearby establishment, to be fortified. These are two crucial buildings and can be converted into defensive positions. I have been in touch with other fellow officers and plans are already underway to bring stores of supplies. Guns will be mounted, trenches will be dug, and more ammunition will be stored in makeshift magazines. I have also asked for various cannons to be displayed along the walls. I know that is extreme but it will send the message across to the mutineers that we mean business.’

‘Heartening news, Sir. We’ve heard reports about the action from other regiments. Is there anything the 32nd can do?’

‘I’ve also been contemplating on the plight of English women and children. I would like them to be brought up here in the Residency, rather than staying in their independent bungalows. They might be the first target of violence by the natives. On the advice of the Financial Commissioner I would like a battalion of British officers of your regiment to come and guard the Residency from now on. That will ensure protection for the women and children.’

‘Sorry for interrupting sir …May I say something?’ The Colonel looked askance.

Yes, go on Colonel….what is it?

‘Will the women agree to come up and stay in the Residency? I mean, even now some of them act as if nothing is happening. They seem to be taking the ongoing crisis far too lightly. They would hate to be parted from their husbands.’

‘I know that, Colonel, but they will have to be convinced for their own safety. We don’t want them to be our weakness in this hour of uncertainty. Their own husbands will convince them. This is the best possible course of action.’

‘You are right Sir’, the Colonel and Charles confirmed in unison.
‘I have also received reports from Cawnpore where the Peshwa Nana Sahib, his loyal confidantes and aides, Azimullah Khan and Tatya Tope are attempting to incite people. You might remember that the Nana Sahib with his usual retinue of nobles had paid a visit to Lucknow to meet the Financial Commissioner. The Commissioner had reported to me that his demeanour had indeed been one to arouse suspicion. He seems to have thrown in his lot with the mutineers, though we are not sure yet as he openly claims to be loyal to the British. Cawnpore has four native regiments, the 1st, 53rd and 56th Native Infantry and the 2nd Cavalry. The proportion of the European troops to the native ones is ten to one. This difference in itself is a bit unsettling. Although the General there has assured me otherwise, I have serious doubts. The city is experiencing the same state of anarchy that Lucknow is seized with. Despite this General Wheeler seems to have an abiding faith in Nana Sahib.’

‘We all know that Nana Sahib disagreed with Lord Dalhousie’s policy of Doctrine of Lapse. He is not a man to be trusted in these troubled times. I have written a letter conveying my apprehensions about Nana Sahib’s motives to General Wheeler but I have a feeling it’s not going to be of much use. Still, I felt it was my duty. This is not a good sign at all. The neighbouring cities are facing the same plight as we are. This mutiny is going to spread like wild fire. So Colonel certainly let’s get our womenfolk and their children to the Residency. You and the Captain will need to ensure that the Residency and Machi Bhavan are fully fortified.’

‘Sir, you will not be disappointed’, the Colonel said briskly.

‘Good, and now gentlemen, you have a long task ahead of you. Please duly keep me informed.’ Sir Henry Lawrence arose, a sign that the meeting was over.

‘Sir, one more thing’, the Colonel turned towards the Chief Commissioner.

‘When should we start sending the women and children to the Residency?’
‘As soon as possible, Colonel. We don’t have any time left and we can’t take any chances as to their safety.’

❖

As they rode back in silence in the coach the men looked dumbly on either side at the posters on the walls of the city by the Indians urging Hindus and Muslims to unite and drive away the firinghees from their motherland. The Colonel shook his head and sighed,

‘I still don’t believe it is finally happening Charles. I mean it had to happen sometime but it seems so surreal.’

‘I know Colonel. We must accept it and start preparing ourselves for any eventuality. I think Sir Henry Lawrence has shown great foresight and wisdom in planning the course of action that he discussed tonight.’

‘I know Captain. He is remarkable man and I think we are really fortunate to have him as a Chief Commissioner of this large state. God knows we need an able man like him at this hour. Coverley Jackson, you have met him once, haven’t you? The Chief Commissioner in charge, when the former Resident, Major Outram had been called to command the Persian War, annexed the Kingdom of Oudh without any foresight. He should given it at least one thought as to the dire consequences we will face and what we have in our hands right now is the aftermath to such an action. I’m not alone in thinking that it was a mistake. The Nawab was, after all a good king and not a threat. And what does he get for his goodness? Exiled to Calcutta and subjected to a life of a commoner. A sorry state of affairs indeed.’

‘I know Sir. The Nawab is greatly missed. I’ve met him on a number of occasions at his Court and he never made us feel out of place. I think our lot is finally getting what we deserve.’

The Colonel smiled weakly.
'Even then, Captain, we have to put up a great fight and show them that we are made of sterner stuff. My bungalow. Stop!’ The driver of the coach obliged and both men got out of the carriage.

It was a full moon that night, throwing reflections to the Colonel’s Bungalow and rendering it in light. The varied creepers that went up till the third storey cast eerie shadows on its walls. The place was serene save for incessant buzzing of the crickets.

Charles saluted the Colonel and bid him goodnight.

‘Captain, would you like to join me for a drink before you go back to your compounds?’

‘Thank you sir but I must call it a night. Thank you all the same.’

‘All right. Seven sharp at the barracks then.’

It had been a long day. Charles finally reached his compounds. He wanted to retire to his room to grieve his friend’s death in private. By now Samaira must have already told Mumtaz about her loss. Charles sighed and closed his eyes.
Chapter XVI

29th May, 1857

Through the efforts of the 32nd Foot Regiment, the wives and children of almost all the British Officers had been brought to the Residency. The building had become overcrowded and in the scorching May heat, the conditions were barely tolerable. There were women of all ages, young and old alike, some with toddlers, their native ayahs running after them, some about to give birth. The old sat in their private rooms with beads of rosaries running through their fingers in constant prayers.

On the orders of Sir Henry Lawrence a group of the 32nd was sent to move three miles north of the city to keep watch on the native lines at Madiaon.

In the evenings, at the dinner table Sir Henry Lawrence used to urge his guests not to be alarmed and live in constant fear. The present preparations had been undertaken only as a precaution. He discouraged any talks of a rising rebellion and tried to soothe the fears and agitations of his sundry guests.

Though he put up a brave front, Sir Henry Lawrence was broken in health and spirits. He missed England. He felt a heavy foreboding that he might never be able to dear country ever again. Perhaps, it was just as well, he thought. He would die a brave man and a true Christian.

Lawrence had organized patrols throughout the city to bring back reports of the latest happenings. British spies were disguised as natives in the bazaars to pick up any talk of a mutiny or any important information and it was duly reported back to Lawrence.

The financial Commissioner and other British officials tried to argue with Lawrence that the holy places of Indians such as the temples and mosques should be destroyed as they overlooked the Residency and Machi Bhawan and in the event
of a mutiny, might obstruct their cover. Sir Henry vehemently opposed such a move.

‘Just as my God is sacred to me, so it is with the others. I’m not going to incur the wrath of Gods by acquiescing to such a move. If we have to die we will, but not by resorting to such despicable measures. And gentlemen, my opinion will stand unchanged so let’s not pursue the matter anymore.’

Though the officials were exasperated by the decision they knew when to accept defeat as Sir Henry Lawrence was an obstinate man.

Charles frequented Hasiena Begum’s kotha less and less. Though he missed Samaira and he constantly ached to meet her, pressure on him had increased manifold. His time was spent between guarding the Residency and visiting the Madiaon cantonments which were a good deal away from the city. It had been a while since he had had a good sound sleep. His khidmatgar, Madho Singh had also been stationed in the Residency. He had become a personal favourite of Sir Henry for his quick wit and diligent manner. He had become easily accustomed to Lawrence’s habits and worked hard at easing the tension of the Chief Commissioner. He was most helpful to the womenfolk in the Residency by attending to their demands and sending any messages that they might have to their husbands.

It was daytime on 29th May when Charles was enjoying a brief moment of respite when Madho Singh had brought him his favourite sugarcane juice. Charles was standing on the gates of the Residency when Tariq, a personal messenger of Hasiena Begum, came running in.

‘Sahib, Salaam’, he greeted Charles, bowing his head.

‘Salaam, Tariq. Is everything all right? What brings you by?’ His thoughts suddenly went to Samaira. How long it had been since he had seen her last. He handed back the glass to Madho Singh, who was looking on at Tariq eagerly.
‘Sahib, Samaira wishes to see you urgently.’

‘But she’s all right….isn’t she?’ Charles grabbed him by his shoulders and shook him.

‘Yes, yes, Sahib…everything is fine at the kotha. But she wishes to see you as soon as possible. In fact, today…if possible.’

‘All right, tell her I will visit her today.’

Bowing the messenger left the premises. Charles turned to Madho Singh, who had been a mute spectator, ‘listen Madho, you have to do me a favour. When the Colonel arrives here as he is scheduled to in an hour’s time, tell him that something urgent came up and I had to leave. I will not be gone long.’

‘Sahib, don’t you worry. I will take care of it. Now you must hurry and see if everything is all right with memsahib.’

Charles rode off at full gallop. The safest way to travel to the city was by not stopping on the way through the busy bazaars. What could possibly be the matter? Charles was inwardly for the opportunity to meet Samaira after what felt like a lifetime. He had missed her.

He soaked in the scenes around him. Noticing the stares and murmured cursing of several natives, he rode on warily. Few bowed as he passed them. He smiled at those who did. The situation seemed beyond salvation. It was almost the end of May. The heat showed no signs of relenting. Everything was going against the British, even the weather was not on their side.

He finally reached Hasiena Begum’s kotha. The entrance looked deserted. In its hey days it was witness to a long line of coaches and opulent carriages, palki-gharees heralding the arrival of its distinguished gentry. With the Nawab’s exile and the present disorder few had time to visit the kotha. The Nawab, its greatest patron was greatly missed by all.
Charles started climbing the steps and reached the short distance between the parlour and the entrance to the drawing room. On finding the door closed he knocked lightly. It was opened by Tariq.

‘Please, please come in, Sahib.’

‘Tell Samaira I’m here, Tariq’

‘Yes, Sahib. She has been expecting you.’

Just then Hasiena Begum came in. She suddenly seemed old with fine lines around her eyes which Charles had never noticed before. Once stout, she seemed to have lost a considerable amount of weight.

‘Salaam walequm, Charles’, she hugged him dearly.

‘Walequm salaam, Begum .How have you been?’

‘I wish I could say well, Charles, but that is not the case, is it? We are in a bad way. With all our patrons gone the business is faring poorly. My favourite girls are lost in their own worlds, most of them missing their paramours. As you know Mumtaz was devastated by John’s death and has become a lifeless form. She will not talk to anybody or eat anything. She seems to be in a state of stupor and I’m worried for her. It is due to the efforts of Samaira that she has started eating a little lately.’

Charles became pensive.’ I know how tough it must be for you Begum these days. The situation is about to get worse as the current reports suggest. It would be a good idea to keep your supplies of food as well as other stuff stocked.’

‘As a matter of fact we have. You know how it is in the bazaars. You come to know what’s happening. We have our spies as well. Though business is down I have sold a bit of land here and there to tide the bad times. I did not want to. I wanted to bequeath the property I have to my girls after I’m gone, but I guess there will still be enough.’
Suddenly Hasiena Begum changed the subject.

‘I know you and Samaira love each other dearly. You plan to marry her, don’t you?’

Charles’s eyes were downcast, ‘I love her more than my life. Yes, I want to marry her but I want this disorder to die down first, Begum.’

‘I understand Charles, but what if it doesn’t? God forbid that something might happen to you? Samaira could never accept it.’

‘Begum, rest assured, nothing will happen to me, I’m an Army man. Remember?’ Charles managed a weak smile, suddenly introspective.

Shaira Bibi, came inside the living room bringing tea and refreshments. Salaaming Charles, she offered him and Hasiena Begum tea, keeping the tray on the adjacent table next to the couch.

‘Thank you Shaira Bibi. Could you please ask Samaira to make haste as I have to be back at the Residency.’

Just then Samaira came down the stairs. Dressed in an olive green sari she looked as ethereal as always. She smiled at Charles who smiled back, rising from the couch.

She walked towards them. Charles enveloped her in his strong embrace. She blushed and turned away; shy in the presence of Hasiena Begum.

‘Come sit, Samaira’, the Begum urged.

‘Oh Charles, please take me with you. I can’t bear to be without you anymore.’ She suddenly blurted out.

‘But, but…Samaira, you know I can’t. You are probably a lot safer here than in the Residency. I couldn’t put your life in jeopardy. That would be selfish.’
‘She’s right, Charles. Please take her with you. In these uncertain times who knows what will happen next. At least this way, you both can spend time together. Later you might not get this chance and you will regret it for the rest of your lives. I don’t you want you to have the same fate as Mumtaz and Patterson. Take her with you, son.’

Hasiena Begum suddenly burst into tears. ‘God knows she has been my favourite child. So what if I’m not her biological mother, I love her more than her natural mother would. It tears me apart to see her in this constant agony and uncertainty of when she’ll see you next. So son, please take her before my resolve weakens.’

Samaira started crying and hugged Hasiena Begum, ‘you are the only mother I know and have loved, the other is only a surreal dream, Ma.’

Charles was moved by the scene before him. It brought back memories of the world he had left behind. He had come very far and that world now seemed hazy and like a fable.

‘All right, if that’s what both of you wish. Don’t worry, Hasiena Begum, I will get Samaira here from time to time to meet you when the situation allows. When this turmoil is over, I will marry your lovely daughter but not without your presence and blessings’, Charles managed a full throated laughter despite the bleakness of the atmosphere.

Hasiena Begum smiled wiping her tears with her duppatta. ‘Thank you, thank you son. I knew instinctively that you were not like the rest. And now, Samaira, I hope you have got your belongings ready. And before you leave, I must give you something that belongs to you, please wait.’ Getting up, Hasiena Begum went to her quarters.

Charles came and sat beside Samaira, pondering over the fact what he would say to his superiors once he got Samaira into the Residency.

‘What are you thinking about?’ Samaira asked gently.
‘How’s Mumtaz coping?’ Charles asked concerned, ignoring her question.

‘Oh, she is better now. I didn’t want to leave her but I know she is in good hands.’

Just then Hasiena Begum came, clutching something in her hand. Advancing towards Samaira, she said, ‘when you came here as a little child, you were wearing this on your neck. Maybe it was a token of love from your parents.’ It was a sparkling gold chain, in its centre a twin pendant of swans, one made of emerald, the other of ruby. Lifting Samaira’s hair, the Begum put the chain around her slender neck.

Samaira touched it, trying to awaken memories long dead and buried deep inside her. She did not want to cry anymore, her tears had dried. From now on she was going to cherish her life and not lament it.

‘It’s beautiful.’ Charles commented.

‘It is, son. My Samaira has royal blood flowing in her veins just as you do. Please take care of my daughter. May Allah be with both of you and give you long life. And now you must leave if you don’t want the dark to beat you.’ The Begum’s eyes were brimming with fresh tears.

Samaira got up and hugged Hasiena Begum for the last time. She went towards Shaira Bibi, who was standing behind Haseina Begum and embraced her too.

‘Samaira we really must be getting going.’ Charles stood up, picking up his shako from the couch.

‘Just a few moments, Charles. I will go up and bid Mumtaz goodbye.’

Hasiena Begum held her hand, ‘It is not a good idea Samaira, and she will get more melancholic. You leave her to me, she will be fine.’

‘Are, are…you sure?’
'Yes, my love. Now you two must make haste before darkness falls. It is not safe anymore. Go!

Charles and Samaira rode in the darkness. Samaira clutched Charles tightly from behind, her hair flowing wildly in the air.

‘Let me think of a way to tell the Colonel about you. I don’t know what his or Sir Henry Lawrence’s reaction will be.’

‘So, I am an embarrassment for you, is that it?’ Samaira replied haughtily.

‘Don’t be silly! What has gotten into you? It’s just that they would be expecting me to be doing my duty as a Captain, not with my paramour at his hour.’

Samaira did not answer back. Charles felt her body stiffen and she loosened her hold on him. He pulled in the reins and stopped his horse. He dismounted and looked up. Samaira was staring blankly into the darkness.

‘What is wrong with you?’ he asked softly.

‘Nothing. I’m a just another courtesan and not good enough for you. Added to that the fact that I belong to another race, an ‘inferior’ race. I will be an embarrassment to you at the Residency. It was convenient for you when we met privately and in the confines of the kotha. Now when the time has finally come for you to face the British world where I am concerned you are already having doubts about our relationship. Please take me back to the kotha.’

Charles pulled her down from the horse. Holding her by her shoulders, he looked into her eyes.

‘Why are you acting like this? I have loved you with all my heart. Are we finally having a lovers’ quarrel.’ Charles smiled, ‘What is wrong, sweetheart?…tell me.’
'Nothing. I’m just something to amuse you for a while. And then you forget about me and don’t meet me for days.'

‘That’s enough! Let’s go and get married right now. I love you, my darling, how could you ever doubt that? It’s just that ever since this whole business of the new cartridges began and the kingdom was annexed, I have had less and less time for myself or you. I have to follow orders and do as I have been told to do. The situation is really bad and we are preparing for battle, no less. I’m really heartened that I could meet you today and will be able to spend more time with you now amidst this turmoil. But if I had my way I would have made you stay at the kotha as you would have been far safer there than in the Residency.’ Charles hugged her. She stiffened at the touch of his body.

‘What has gotten into you? Let’s find a maulvi and get married. You are more precious to me than anything else and I will prove it to you. Let’s go.’

Charles took Samaira’s hand and made her mount on the horse. Following suit, he took in the reins.

‘It is all right, Charles. I know nothing feels right. Please forget the way I have acted and lets head towards the Residency.’

Neither of them spoke again till they reached the Residency.
Chapter XVII

30th May, 1857

The air on the evening of 30th May was still. Not a breeze brought respite to the night but the scent of raat ki raani trees on both sides of the Madiaon Native lines brought a certain freshness which belied the grim scene within its boundaries.

Sir Henry Lawrence had moved to the Madiaon cantonments to be near his troops. Some of the officers of the 32nd had also been stationed there to keep guard during the night.

Lawrence sat on the high chair contemplating the news that one of his staff had just given him. The mutiny at Lucknow would start at nine o’clock following the sounding of hour. It was now eight o’clock.

‘Are you sure, Wilson?’

‘I am, Sir. The information was given to me earlier in the evening by a native sepoy whom I have trusted for years. Sir, there is still time. You can give orders to disarm the native sepoys before they resort to any mischief.’

‘And openly show them that we distrust them? I have my doubts. I will not show any alarm or panic. What if this report is untrue? What if they just want to give us a reason for provocation? I don’t want to make any hasty decisions. We will make a fool of ourselves if we act impulsively’

‘But, sir, what if the report is true?’

‘In that case, we will have to take that risk.’
With these words, Sir Henry Lawrence walked onto the verandah to take a breather from the constant stress that seemed to have taken charge of his life. He saw troops, both European and Indian, patrolling the lines. His mind was in turmoil. He did think that he had made the right decision but the seed of doubt haunted his better judgment. He had dispatched a telegram to the Governor General urging him to send more European troops in the event of the mutiny. They were yet to arrive. Lawrence knew that as a Chief Commissioner of Oudh he would have to send men of the 32nd to neighbouring cities as well. He envisaged a rebellion rising in Cawnpore. It was only a matter of time before the enemy would strike. Aye, how he hoped respite would come soon.

When dinner was announced he retreated into the dining room and called for Wilson. He soon arrived, his face drawn and gaunt. ‘Join me for dinner, Wilson.’

‘Aye, of course, Sir.’ Wilson instinctively looked at his wrist watch. It was ten minutes to nine. He wiped his brow with the sleeve of his tunic.

‘Then let’s sit and eat, shall we?’ Lawrence commanded. He looked at Wilson. A middle-aged man, he showed signs of straining under pressure. Lawrence shook his head in disapproval.

‘I must say, Wilson that if a mutiny was to start at 9.0’ clock, then your friends are not punctual.’

Wilson did not reply. They both started eating dinner in silence. Suddenly the dining table shook violently sending the cutlery the floor. There were heavy sounds of gunfire and yelling outside the Native Lines. Wilson fell on the floor cutting his hand on a broken wine goblet. Lawrence rushed towards the verandah. Wilson hurried after him. Surveying the scene in the moonlight, they looked around anxiously. By then the native officer on guard approached them and asked Wilson expectantly,

‘Am I to load Sir?’
Wilson turned around and repeated the question to Lawrence, his manner faltering.

‘Yes load, by all means! Also, get my horse…..fast! I’m going to drive the miscreants away. Till then, officer, make sure that none of the rebels are able to enter the Lines.’

Wilson looked at Lawrence with astonishment and a certain dread. How could he trust a native officer to keep guard on the cantonments? What if he had joined with the rebels?

The native officer had saluted Lawrence and drew up a guard of a further sixty sepoys, all of them bringing up their muskets in unison. They took their posts obediently allaying Wilson’s fears of disloyalty.

Lawrence rode off into the night in search of the rebels. A small force accompanied him. He also commanded a battalion from the 32nd Regiment of Foot to guard the road that led up to the city. He did not want the mutineers to reach English womenfolk and their children. The thought of the people coming to harm in the Residency made Lawrence shiver despite the humid night. He reassured himself that he had entrusted the Residency to the most able officers of the 32nd with Captain Charles Hamilton and Colonel Inglis at the helm. He respected both men and had abiding faith in their abilities. But he must send an informer before the night ended, to tell them about the mishap in the Madiaon cantonments.

Sir Henry Lawrence need not have bothered. For a while, the rebels were distracted by looting the bungalows of the British Officers and plundering their own lines. They then set on fire bungalows on either side of the Madiaon cantonments, belonging to English officers. There was heavy smoke in the air followed by sounds of musketry in the distance. No method to the madness was exhibited by the rebels. Their heavy shouting showed scant regard for any fear they might have if they got caught eventually, cursing the English openly. They simply did not care. Their gods had finally bestowed upon them a chance for retribution. For them, it was an auspicious hour. Their hour of reckoning had finally arrived.
The eventful night was not over yet. One could see the heavy smoke and fires burning in the distance from the rooftops of the Residency, three miles to the south. The womenfolk gathered on the roof to see the spectacle. The commotion caused by the gunfire and heavy shouting had roused them from their sleep. The wife of Colonel Inglis, was one of them, trying to calm the others. They all sighed and held each other's hands as a tacit sign of surrender as to the uncertainty of their fate. Some of them might never see their husbands, fathers, brothers again, who were all out there keeping guard on the city.

Charles and Colonel Inglis had been posted at the dilapidated fortress, the Machi Bhavan, to watch over the ammunition that had been stored there. Hearing the news they worried for the safety of the womenfolk at the Residency. The Colonel commanded Charles to go and inspect the area around the Residency.

‘But Charles, you better be back before dawn for further orders from Sir Henry Lawrence.’

‘Yes Sir. I'll do a quick survey around the Residency and be back. It's apparent that the miscreants have not yet reached the city and are still at large in the countryside, but it would do us good to be doubly sure where the womenfolk are concerned.’

‘I know Captain. It is what Sir Henry Lawrence would have done if he was here right now. Now off you go and give me some good news. My ears are straining to hear some…..’, the Colonel shook his head.

‘Yes, sir. I won't be gone long.’

Charles galloped off in the direction of the Residency which was a short distance away from the Machi Bhawan. His thoughts were filled with Samaira. Perhaps she should have stayed at the kotha with Hasiena Begum. It won't be long before the
miscreants made the Residency their target. Had he made a mistake in bringing Samaira to the Residency?

The serenity of the night belied the violence that was going on at the countryside but Charles knew it was only a matter of time before the mutineers reached the city.

He reached the Residency feeling assured by the heavy guard put up by men of his Regiment. On seeing their Captain, the officers saluted and crowded around eager to discuss their predicament.

‘Captain, it has started’, they spoke in unison.

‘Yes, yes officers. Calm Down.’ He thumped the shoulders of those surrounding him.

‘I came here for a quick inspection. By no means should the supplies that we have got, especially the ammunition be left unattended. Also the Colonel sends orders that no man, who has been assigned a post here, is to leave the premises until further orders. We await orders from the Chief Commissioner. Till then the safety of the people inside the Residency is your responsibility. I hope I make myself clear.’

‘Yes, absolutely Captain,’ they spoke as one, their voices echoing in the night.

‘Good. Now I will go inside and have a quick tour of the place.’

Charles went inside the Residency walls, entering via the big hall that led up to the living room. There was a single spiral staircase from the living room which led upstairs to the chambers, and further up to the roof. The living room was lit dimly, the last flicker of candlelight ebbing away. Just then Charles saw a shadow flash past him and he instinctively touched the bayonet attached to his waist.

‘Sahib, it’s me! Madho...’

‘For God’s sake! What are you doing here dancing around in the darkness? Have you lost your marbles?’ Charles was annoyed at his khidmatgar.

‘I came here to the kitchen to get water for the English memsahibs. They all on gathered at the roof following the noise.’

‘I know, I know. It has started, Madho, the rebellion by the sepoys.’

‘Sahib, it would have started sooner or later. I hope the rebels come to their senses soon. Nothing has ever been accomplished by bloodshed and violence. Please take care of yourself when you are out there. You have memsahib to think about as well.’

‘I know, Madho but I don’t care about myself. I’m a soldier first and it is my duty to fight in the event of a battle’, Charles became pensive as he spoke, ‘Where’s Samaira? Is she upstairs too?’

‘She must be in her chambers; Sahib. I had brought her dinner upstairs, to her room. She said she would sleep after dinner as she was very tired.’

‘All right. I’ll go and check on the others first. They don’t need to panic unnecessarily. The situation is still under control. Can I have some of that water?’

He eyed the earthen jug of water that Madho Singh had in his hands. He was suddenly thirsty.

Madho Singh obliged duly. Charles gulped it hurriedly and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his red tunic. Giving a quick pat on Madho Singh’s back, Charles took the staircase and hurried towards the roof, taking long strides. On reaching it, he saw the vast roof almost vacant but for one portion in a corner where the women sat, huddled together listlessly. They all looked up in his direction almost relieved to see him. Charles suddenly felt out of place. Young and old sat side by side, their
expression fearful. It had been a remarkable move made by Sir Henry Lawrence to bring them up to the Residency.

They started crowding around Charles asking him expectantly whether their husbands were safe and alive in the Native Lines.

‘Ladies’, he spoke, ‘I have come here to soothe your apprehensions as regards the violence that has besieged the city. Please rest assured that there have been no casualties reported up till now. Our men are fighting the enemy at this hour.’

‘We heard the terrible noises, Captain. Though we are not scared for our lives, we do fear for the safety of our innocent children here…’, one of them, spoke her face wet with tears.

Please be strong for the sake of your little ones. We are doing our best to safeguard the Residency. Sir Henry Lawrence should be here soon.’

After hearing Charles, there were murmurs among the crowd. The women felt reassured with what he had just said to them. One by one they rose, retreating back to their chambers.

Charles sighed, watching them go. He unbuttoned the top button of his tunic, not able to stand the humidity. The heavy smoke billowing in the sky only worsened it.

Let me go to Samaira now, he thought.

Taking one final look at the smoke filled sky, he took the staircase and retreated downstairs. Madho Singh had told him which of the several rooms in the Residency Samaira’s was. On reaching it he knocked softly.

‘Samaira, it’s me, Charles. Please open the door,’ he whispered.

There was no answer. Charles’s heart skipped a beat. He knocked again, this time, forcefully. Still there was no answer. He started pacing the corridor, not knowing what to do next. Just then he saw the Residency surgeon, Sir Joseph Fayrer,
approaching a tall, distinguished man of sixty. He had been recognized widely for his medical skills.

‘Is anything the matter, Captain?’

‘Surgeon, it’s Samaira, she won’t open the door. I’m concerned.’

‘Yes, yes, of course.’

‘I had met her in the living room later tonight and she had complained of a severe headache. I gave her a medicine which has a soporific effect. Maybe she’s asleep right now.’

‘But surely she must have heard the thunderous sounds of all the musketry and the noises?’

‘No, Captain. The medicine is strong. So my guess is she’s still asleep. Anyways, there is an old woman down the corridor who needs my help. I’ll see you again later.’

Charles watched him go. He was in a dilemma. Should he go back to the Machi Bhawan knowing that Samaira was all right or should he wait? He ached to see her and would not be content if he had not done so.

He knocked on the door for the last time. This time it opened. Samaira peeped from the other side, her hair dishevelled, and her eyes puffy. She smiled at him. Charles smiled back pushed her back and closed the door behind him.

‘I gather that you do not like staying in the Residency. Is that not the case, my angel?’ Charles asked, holding her in his arms. ‘You realise what has transpired tonight is that the rebellion has started. ‘There was no element of surprise in Charles’s voice as he uttered those words.

Samaira asked him,
'Are you all right? I thought you were at the Machi Bhawan. It’s three in the morning.'

'I am fine.' He continued,

'I saw it coming. It’s just that now we have a situation on our hands and the question is; are we really prepared for it? Though Sir Henry Lawrence’s efforts, things are all right in Lucknow but it’s going to spread like wildfire in the rest of province of Oudh. Samaira I want you to be careful around here. Please take care of yourself. I had to come to check up on you. I might not be able to see you for days now, my love. And I must leave now.'

He then hugged Samaira before finally bidding her goodbye.

The dawn of 31st May brought momentary respite from the ongoing violence. The country seemed quieter. Sir Henry Lawrence had frequented the countryside the night before fighting the enemy with his small force of troops of the 32nd.

He now marched towards the race-course. He had reports that the mutineers from the 71st were assembled there. On reaching it and seeing the huge crowd of the sowars, Lawrence along with his troops fired their muskets upon them. The mutineers started to escape feeling outnumbered. But luck was on their side as they were joined by the 7th Cavalry, their numbers rising significantly. They made their escape fast and as a result only sixty were caught and were taken prisoner.

Sir Henry got off his charger. He went close to the prisoners. He shook his head disdainfully as he passed each one of them, muttering ‘you have dug your own grave.’ The dark eyes were unable to meet Sir Henry Lawrence’s gaze for here was one man they had genuinely respected. But they seemed devoid of any guilt either.

‘Officers, shackle them.’
The troops gathered around the native sepoys and fettered their ankles, leading them away.

‘Put them in the jail for the time being until their fate is decided. An example will have to be made of them. And the rest of you, let us head back to the Residency.’

Getting on the grey charger, Sir Henry Lawrence led the way and the troops followed. A small force of them had been assigned the task of taking the sixty prisoners to the gaol. The prisoners were led away barefooted on the baked earth, their feet cut and bruised. But they walked on stoically sneering at the troops who led them.

Sir Henry Lawrence had not slept for two consecutive nights and he inwardly felt on the verge of collapsing. His frail body had already been tested to its limits but he put up a brave front as this was no hour to rest. Setting spurs to his charger he rode on in the direction of the Residency with the troops.

The city bore a deserted look. Last night’s violence had its effect on it. The sundry bazaars were closed; with shutters pulled down in the innumerable shops. Though there were parts in the city where the riots had involved heavy looting, the city seemed dead for the moment. The Lucknow Police had remained faithful and Sir Henry Lawrence had received reports that it was doing all it could in its power to curb the violence. Sir Henry Lawrence was glad that they already had stocked food, grains and other necessities in the Residency and the Machi Bhawan.

On having reached the Residency, Lawrence saw the troops at the entrance and congratulated them on doing their job well. For their part, they picked up Sir Henry Lawrence and brought him inside the Residency walls, hailing ‘Long Live Sir Henry, Long Live Sir Henry’. The cheer resounded throughout the Residency compounds.

They all accompanied him inside the big hall. Proceeding on to the living room, Sir Henry Lawrence finally showed signs of relaxing as he took a seat on the couch,
surrounded by the troops. The native servants rushed towards him, each holding trays of water and other refreshments. Picking up an earthen jar from a tray, Lawrence gulped down the contents. He felt life slowly draining back into him.

‘Officers, the enemy seems to have been beaten presently. Though the country is quiet now, make no mistake this is just a lull before the storm. But it is small consolation that we have this momentary respite to discuss our strategy and planning further. I will move back to the Residency as I feel that the vast stock of arms and ammunition needs to be guarded and we can make the Residency central to our plan. I have stationed a battalion of the 32nd itself at the Madiaon cantonments so that we do not lose communication with the country. That way the neighbouring districts will also be guarded and discontented sepoys will not resort to any mischief. Does any one of you have any further suggestions, officers?’

One of them spoke, ‘Sir it would be a good move to get more supplies of ammunition to the Residency from the Machi Bhawan. As we all know, the building is in a bad condition, in the event of an attack, it might not hold out and the enemy will get his hands on the arms.’

‘I know, officer. I was thinking along the same lines. Though we have tried to fortify the Machi Bhawan, it is still not strong enough. I believe we will not remove all the supplies from there, yet it is a good idea to get the majority of it back to the Residency.’

He continued, ‘One of you go down to the Machi Bhawan right now and ask Colonel Inglis and Captain Hamilton to come down to the Residency. I would like to discuss with them the strategies that we finally adopt. A lot still needs to be done at the Residency to strengthen it further. Though it will disappoint the ladies, I’m afraid the beautiful flower garden will have to be dug up for trenches. Garrison, I assign you this task. Get as many labourers as possible. Also I would like some local reliable architects to be brought down here. We could work around building secret passages and getaways in the face of any eventuality.’
Officer Garrison saluted Sir Henry Lawrence saying in a crisp, clear voice, ‘yes sir.’ Then turning around swiftly he proceeded to accomplish the task assigned to him.

Sir Henry Lawrence continued, wiping his brow with the small handkerchief that he held in his hand, gulping more water, ‘I believe that the ladies in the neighbouring districts of Lucknow will also have to be brought up here to the Residency. The districts will no longer be tranquil in the coming days. I know the Residency is packed to its capacity but we have no other option. There is the other building, the Begum Kothi, which can accommodate a few but the rest will have to be brought up here.’

One of the officers spoke, ‘Sir, you should try and get some rest. We will come back and discuss this further. You seem gaunt and feverish. Should we call for Dr. Fayrer?’

‘No, no. I’m all right. I guess I will retire for an hour or so. Please let me know when you require any support.’ He dismissed the officers, and then headed towards his chambers, closing his eyes.

Colonel Inglis and Charles arrived at the Residency in the evening having been informed about the arrival of Sir Henry Lawrence. They had maintained an overnight vigil at the Machi Bhawan for two nights in a row now. Their eyes told the story of their not having had any sleep. Charles stifled a yawn as they waited for Sir Henry Lawrence to appear. They had been informed by Madho Singh that Sir Henry had been resting in his chambers and would awaken shortly.

Charles sipped his tea slowly as he surveyed the scene at the Residency. He looked out of the nearby window where the garden was being dug up to make trenches. Little children crowded around labourers watching in wonder. The ayahs followed the little children as they played pranks on them running around and hiding behind the bushes and the trees. Charles smiled. They were like little cherubs who were
oblivious to the perilous land they stood upon. Their innocence had yet not been scarred by danger.

‘Charles, I’ll be back in a moment.’ Colonel spoke sitting beside Charles.

‘I’m going upstairs to see my wife. She must be worried amidst all this confusion and turmoil. Tell Sir Henry I won’t be long.’

Charles stood up himself, walking towards the window. He saw Jack Garrison, instructing the labourers in the heat. His face was heavily sun burnt. Once handsome, he now looked haggard and old.

‘Good evening, Captain,’ Sir Henry Lawrence came up from behind. ‘I believe you heard what happened yesterday. I had sent out my informers to Machi Bhawan.’

‘Yes Sir. We maintained a vigil at the Bhawan at the time and I came to the Residency last night for a quick inspection and to calm the womenfolk. Sir, you handled those scoundrels with remarkable tenacity. It is due to your efforts that the rebellion was curbed.’

‘But it is far from over, Captain. On the contrary, it has just begun. Come, take a seat. Where is the Colonel?’

‘He went upstairs to check upon Mrs Inglis. He should be here soon.’ Charles sat on the couch facing Sir Henry.

Colonel Inglis soon arrived and joined them in the planning that followed. ‘Sir’, he said, ‘the Residency is safe for the moment as the mutineers’ forces are still scattered. The rebels seem to be preoccupied with looting and murder in their own cantonments. This kind of a thing always happens following an outbreak. The period afterwards is followed by confusion and a struggle for power. Their actions thus are not unified. We can take advantage of this momentary lull.’

‘Precisely, Colonel. I gave orders earlier in the day that the Residency be fortified further. As you can see outside the garden is being dug up for trenches and secret
exits. Also, Colonel it is your responsibility to move back the supplies of ammunition from the Machi Bhawn to the Residency. We will leave just a little at the Machi Bhawan. Both of you will take commands at the Residency. I want my best men in here. We will leave a small force stationed at the Machi Bhawan but that is it. Also, I have given orders that the English womenfolk from neighbouring districts be brought here to the Residency as the countryside is no longer safe. Charles it is your responsibility to arrange their arrival. Also attend to their needs and check upon the stock of supplies. If need be, arrange for more.’ Sir Henry’s voice grew tired.

‘The most important matter is the Magazine, I’m afraid. It is almost unguarded. We may have to destroy it. If the enemy gets his hand on it, he will use it against us. I have worried about the location of the Magazine ever since I came here.’

Sir Henry became pensive.

Colonel Inglis spoke, ‘You are right about the Magazine Sir. Gaining possession of the Magazine might already have occurred. That leaves us with little time. That’s all I can think of at the moment. So let us get started with the other things, shall we?’

Life inside the Residency became unbearable for the women. As more and more families from neighbouring districts moved in, the Residency was packed to capacity. There was no privacy anywhere. Lucky were those who had moved in earlier as they still had small rooms to themselves. They, along with little their ones spent days which seemed longer and longer by the hour. Adding to it, the insufferable May heat took its toll as children fell ill with alarming rapidity.

Samaira had soon made friends with most of the women. She particularly took interest in playing with the young children as they gave her joy. Though the environment was gloomy with an uncertain future looming large before them, Samaira tried to remain cheerful and positive. Some of the women took to sewing
to keep them busy and to remain focused for the sake of their children. Others helped in the kitchen. Samaira delighted everybody with her Mughlai and Lucknavi delicacies.

‘So have you seen your Charles lately?’ Jane asked, Samaira’s roommate, who had recently moved to her room. They both now stood in the large kitchen.

‘No, as a matter of fact, I haven’t.’ Samaira was taken aback at the question.

‘Well, don’t you miss him? He hardly comes in here.’ Jane teased her as Samaira poured oil into the large pot.

‘Thank you, Madho’, Samaira continued, ‘I do, but what can I do? Though he is at the Residency, his garrison has work to do…I mean; I can’t be selfish and have him all to me. He does come and see me when he can…..’

The talk about Charles made Samaira miss him even more. The last time they had met was on the night of 30th of May. It was now 8th June. They were both in the Residency, and yet they were so far apart. Samaira sighed. Stirring the contents in the kadai, she wiped the beads of perspiration on her forehead with her dupatta.

‘Madho, I think the mutton is almost done. Will you give it the finishing touches?’

‘Ji memsahib.’

‘Good.’

Coming close to Samaira, he said, with a note of concern in his voice, ‘I could not help but overhear what Jane memsahib asked you about Sahib. Would you like me to give him a message from your side?’

‘Thanks Madho, but no. I know Charles is busy. I don’t want to distract him after what is happening all around us. The East India Company needs him.’

‘Well said, memsahib.’ Madho Singh smiled proudly.

Samaira smiled back. ‘You are the master of the kitchen now; I’m out of your way.’
As she was leaving the kitchen absentmindedly, she bumped into Mrs. Jacobs, an elderly woman who despised Samaira, as she did all Indians.

‘Aye, can’t you see where you are walking? But I should understand….you Indians are all clumsy and uncouth people…….’her nostrils flared and her leathery face became red.

‘I, I’m sorry, Mrs. Jacobs, I, I didn’t see you coming.’ Samaira was visibly flustered.

‘Hmm you should be. I wonder what that Captain saw in you. You two are such a mismatch. And to think he is the son of a Marquis. How could he be such an imbecile?’ She paused. Samaira tried hard to fight back the tears that were about to stain her face. Trying to ignore the old woman, she started climbing the staircase hurriedly. Mrs. Jacobs looked on and feeling contented. ‘The little tart’, she muttered to herself.

Reaching her room, Samaira closed the door from inside. She started crying as she sat down on the small bed.

‘Aye, what is the matter?’ Jane looked up from her book.

Samaira did not answer.

‘What is it?’ Jane stood up from her bed and sat beside her. ‘Are you missing him, eh?’

‘I guess so.’ Samaira smiled weakly.

‘I know it’s that mean woman, isn’t it? Why don’t you tell her what you think of her? She enjoys doing this to you.’

‘Jane, do you think…’ Samaira said wistfully, ‘that I made a mistake in falling in love with Charles. I mean I’m Indian and he is a Scot. Will we be ever accepted socially?’
'You followed your heart, didn’t you? And that’s what counts. I know it sounds clichéd but love knows no boundaries.’ She patted Samaira’s hand. ‘And besides, why do you care about other people? You two are lucky to have found each other. Don’t let that feeling be tainted by meaningless people.’

Samaira was glad that she had found a friend in Jane as sometimes she missed Mumtaz deeply. How must she be coping with John Patterson’s death? When all this was over, she would visit her and Hasiena Begum. She missed her old life. Those carefree days, when she and other courtesans would all gather around Hasiena Begum and listen to all the colourful tales of her heydays. When she had met Charles she used to anticipate his arrival eagerly at the kotha. How Samaira and Mumtaz had shared their feelings at the end of the day. Samaira felt a wave of nostalgia overwhelm her. She wondered whether moving to the Residency was such a good idea after all. She saw less and less of Charles. Living amongst strangers had made Samaira rethink her decision. Maybe Charles was right all along. I should have stayed at the kotha.

‘What are you thinking about?’ Jane’s voice resounded in Samaira’s ears.

‘Oh, it’s nothing really. I was just thinking about my childhood friend. I just hope she is all right. She lost her love recently.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘It’s all right. He was English as well. He died as a result of the violence in Meerut.’ Samaira paused, envisaging Mumtaz’s face when she had left the kotha. It was gaunt and Mumtaz had looked as if she would never get over John Patterson. ‘You know’, Samaira continued, ‘Mumtaz was really used to my being around, considering me her elder sister. I miss her now. I wonder if she is all right.’

Jane tried to lighten up the grim ambience, ‘So tell me something about your life at the kotha. I’ve heard that you were rather popular with the men, ahem, English and Indian alike. Is that true?’
‘I don’t know whether I was popular with them, I just know I enjoyed my art. I used to lose myself in it entirely. I guess it is the dance in my life that has seen me through. Dance and of course, Hasiena Begum, to whom I’m like a daughter.’
Samaira started smiling at the recollection of Hasiena Begum and a flow of warmth ran across her heart. Being away from Hasiena Begum had made Samaira value her even more.

‘Why don’t you visit them while you can, I mean, the city seems peaceful enough. I believe the 32nd Regiment of Foot and other regiments have been successfully able to curb the rising rebellion. It has been nipped in the bud, so to speak. I believe that we might soon be out of the Residency and in the comforts of our own homes again.’

‘Somehow I have a feeling that I will not be able to see them ever again.’

‘Don’t talk gibberish. When will you ever try to see the sunshine in your life?’ Jane rolled her eyes, ‘When all this is over, you will see them again with Charles by your side.’

‘You think so?’

‘I know so. Just have happy thoughts in your mind and things will turn out fine. You know, many people would want to have the life that you have. Sometimes, I envy you.’

Samaira picked up the pillow from her bed and hit her friend softly on the head. They both started laughing, with Samaira forgetting her woes momentarily.
Chapter XVIII

June 10th 1857

The lull that had followed the breakout on 30th May carried with it an ominous air. Nobody was assured by it, least of all Sir Henry Lawrence.

The Residency bore little resemblance to its old glory. The lavish gardens had been dug up leaving trenches and passageways. Huge cannons had been mounted on its roofs more as a means of scaring the enemy away than for any functional use. Its tall walls told discreet tales of hidden troops and troops who were visible in good measure.

The enemy would have to be daring to approach the mammoth building. But the enemy was not of a sound mind. His mind having long been possessed by demons of retribution. There was no fear in his mind and soul now, only a raging ambition. He had suffered. This was his last chance at salvation and vengeance for his people. If he failed, he would never be able to meet the eyes of those people.

It was no use now pacifying the enemy or making him see reason. That time had long gone. To do such a thing now would only fuel the wild fire. The enemy had been naïve once. The mental scars that it left behind had become weapons with which the enemy would wage his battle.

And a full bloodied battle it would be. The war cry had sounded.
Samaira’s hands were covered in blood.

She was losing blood fast. She crouched where the wound was in her lower stomach, but it only made the blood ooze out more, engulfing her now frail body in its red vastness. She tried to scream from the pain but instead felt dizzy and weak. Charles was kneeling down by her side, holding her in his arms, crying.

‘Samaira, please, please, don’t …’, kissing her lifeless lips, carrying her towards the spiral staircase, whispering into her ear, ‘please hold on for a while. We will find Dr. Fayrer and everything will be fine. My Samaira will be fine.’ Charles was delirious as he started climbing the staircase. Samaira kept looking at him as this alone made her pain ease. Upstairs Charles headed into the vast hall where several mutilated bodies of troops were lying in their separate beds, some receiving medical treatment, some having lost the need to receive it.

Charles gently put down Samaira on a vacant.

‘Dr. Fayrer,’ he called, ‘please, please over here, we need you. Please, please fast.’

The doctor looked in Charles’ direction and nodded.

Reaching Samaira’s bed doctor stooped down towards the still form. He took her right wrist in his hand and felt for her pulse. Samaira’s eyes mirrored a fixed glaze, her lips parted.

‘What’s the matter, doctor, why don’t you treat her?’ Charles asked, his voice rising with slow indignation.

‘Doctor!’, Charles yelled, losing the last thread of sanity, ‘please do something fast, she is losing blood!’ Charles took him by the collar and started shaking him.
‘Get a hold on yourself, Captain, she’s gone.’ Dr Fayrer said gravely, not meeting Charles’ eyes. He then put his hands on Charles shoulders. He turned towards the lifeless body and closed Samaira’s eyes, shaking his head as he did so.

‘Gone? How dare you?’ Charles gave the doctor a strong shove sending the old man reeling. Were it not for Jack Garrison who was standing behind him, the doctor would have fallen.

Charles turned towards Samaira and knelt down by her side. He then shook her body gently but she would not respond. The dirty sheets had soaked up the blood from her lifeless body and Samaira’s parted lips were the colour of death. It seemed that her last expression had been one of a smile.

❖

Samaira woke abruptly and gulped down water from the earthen jar kept on her bedside table and cupped her hands with some of it splashing the water on her face, which was covered in sweat. She glanced at Jane, who was still sleeping, snoring gently. Getting up from the bed, Samaira walked towards the only window in the room to let in some air. Opening it she realized it was dawn still. She could hear the crisp sound of the boots of European troops who had kept a night long vigil around the boundaries of the Residency, outside as well as in. The dark light of dawn bestowed a ghostly view of the building. Samaira shivered. Where was Charles?

She had dreamt of her death for three nights in a row now. Was that the end she would meet eventually? Oh! How she longed to see Charles for the last time.

She would send a message through Madho Singh as morning came.

Jane stirred in her sleep. Samaira got back to her bed, having lost all desire to sleep. She examined the dream over and over again in her mind like a morbid sequence of events. She was surprised at herself. Somehow she felt no fear, dying in Charles’
arms soothed her restless soul as if she had finally attained peace. At least it was an improvement from her earlier torrent of dreams.

Samaira smiled feebly and pulled the covers onto her face. Thank you God, for what it's worth.

❖

The cavalry of the military police in Lucknow rebelled on the morning of 11th June. The men disobeyed orders from their English superiors and rode out of the city. The infantry joined them the following morning igniting a new backlash of rebellion which had ostensibly curbed a few days ago.

Sir Henry Lawrence gave orders to the men of the 32nd to find the miscreants and shoot them on sight. Charles had lived on the road for two days in a row in pursuit of the fugitives with luck favouring the latter. En route he met former sepoys whom he had doted on. They helped him by telling him the whereabouts of the miscreants. But it was of no use. Word had it that they already had joined their comrades who were now being united as a force by the discontented rebel leader Nana Sahib.

The outskirts of the city bore a deserted look with danger lurking everywhere. Charles took the long journey back to the Residency with his men. They rode on in a silence that became uneasy by the minute. Charles felt helpless. What news was he going to give to the Chief Commissioner? That they could not capture a band of cavalry and infantry men? The scoundrels did not even possess any sophisticated weapons to begin with. Yet they had escaped. Hiding in the vast countryside, making for the nearest districts and joining hands with their brethrens.

Charles shrugged his shoulders and looked around at his men who rode on in dejection. They all feared facing Sir Henry. A man far more capable than they
would ever be. Jack Garrison rode beside Charles gingerly, gauging the Captain’s mood.

‘It’s almost as if they vanished into thin air, Captain.’

‘You forget, officer, that the land belongs to them. They know its secret hideouts and passages. We wouldn’t find them even if we spent a lifetime here. Then they have their allies with them. The scores of villages on either side, how is one to know who has given them shelter? We can’t tell who traitors are and who our friends are. We checked five villages but it’s not enough.’ Charles shook his head, shielding his eyes from the harsh sun. He brought his charger to a slow trot, trying to lower his pace for Garrison’s benefit. Over time, Jack Garrison had proved his mettle and Charles had grown extremely fond of him. There was something about Garrison that reminded Charles of his dear friend, John Patterson.

‘It’s almost as if our friends’ hands are tied. But can’t we openly fight the villagers and threaten them with consequences.’

‘You know we can’t do that, Garrison. That would be openly flouting all norms and giving them the excuse that we started this battle. They would all turn hostile. Right now at least there is a semblance of normalcy in certain areas with a fear in their hearts about dire consequences if they turned against us. That would all go away.’

‘We never really had any inkling that it would come to this, did we Captain? Let’s hope Providence is on our side.’ Garrison wiped his brow with the sleeve of his tunic.

They rode hard in the direction of the Residency. Nobody spoke on their way, all having been exhausted by the heat and the futility of their pursuit.

❖

June 15th 1857
On the morning of 15th June, Charles allowed himself the rare luxury of venturing inside the Residency Walls. How he had longed to meet Samaira. He felt bad for her and knew that she might be finding it daunting to live amidst so many people who didn’t approve of her. At least she had found a confidante in her roommate, Jane, niece of Colonel Inglis.

Charles had been assigned post at the Machi Bhawan and night long vigils around the city to nab the mutineers, along with brother officers.

He had lost considerable weight, his face pale and drawn. Sleep eluded him and constant fatigue had taken its toll. His body ached in places he had not known existed from continuous horse riding and the harsh sun had led to a deep tan that highlighted dark circles around his eyes. The vitality of the azure blue of his eyes seemed almost incongruous in his gaunt face.

Entering the drawing room, he now looked around for any native servants who might carry his message to Samaira. Womenfolk usually stayed upstairs as this portion of the Residency was used by Sir Henry and the Army for discussions and strategies for curbing the ensuing rebellion.

With no one in sight, Charles grew impatient and decided to take the stairs that led to Samaira’s room. As he took the first step of the spiral staircase, a familiar voice resounded in his ears.

‘Sahib, is that you?’

It was Madho Singh’s voice. Charles turned around.

‘Yes, of course, it’s me, Madho. What is wrong with you? Have I been away for so long that you cannot recognize me?’ There was a note of irritation in Charles’ voice.
‘No, no, Sahib, you misunderstand me. Memsahib has been asking for you for a while now and I haven’t been able to locate you, that is all. She will be so happy to see you.’ Madho Singh couldn’t hide his delight at seeing his benevolent master.

Charles softened his stance.’ So, how have you been Madho?’

‘Sahib, I have seen better days. It gets worse as we speak. It has taken its toll on you. You seem weak.’

‘It is nothing Madho. It is my duty. Anyways, where’s your memsahib? Has she been missing me? More importantly, I hope you have been taking good care of her.’ Charles smiled and relaxed his hand on Madho Singh’s shoulder.

‘You are right. She misses you and she seems melancholic all the time.’

‘That’s my Samaira, all right. Make some of tea for me while I go and check upon her?’ Charles patted him on the back and started climbing the staircase that led to Samaira’s room.

Madho Singh looked on at his Sahib as he disappeared from view and advanced towards the kitchen to make the tea.

Reaching the long corridor, Charles bowed as he passed the aged women he met on the way. They were a picture of misery, all apprehensive about a fate which hung in precarious balance. This time Charles did not feel like allaying their fears and giving them false hope. They should be prepared for the worst, he thought wryly.

Reaching Samaira’s room he knocked on the door gently. He waited, excited at the prospect of meeting his love after such a long time.

Jane opened the door.

‘Good afternoon, Captain’, Jane greeted Charles brusquely.

‘Aye, good afternoon, Jane. How have you been?’
‘I’m fine, thank you. Won’t you come in?’

Charles felt awkward as he ushered himself inside the room looking for Samaira.

‘She went towards the balcony. I’ll go call her.’

Charles sat on the bed near the window and surveyed the room. He looked at the large portrait of the former resident Sir James Outram. Previously this room had been his private study on the first floor. The fine collection of books stacked neatly in a glass book case reminded him of his own father. It almost seemed a lifetime since he had left Davenlock.

Charles had the occasion of meeting the Resident on a few occasions and had realized immediately that he was the man to be reckoned with in the event of a war. It was no wonder than that he had been called for the Persian War to command the English Army. Just then he heard footsteps near the door and Samaira came in hurriedly, drawing the long strands of her hair away from her eyes.

‘Oh! Charles, I missed you my love….’and she bent to hug him.

Charles arose from the bed and enveloped her in his arms.

‘I missed you myself, sweetheart.’ He kissed her.

‘Where have you been all this time?’ Samaira sat on the bed and Charles did likewise.

‘You know about the incident on 11th June? I pursued the mutineers out in the countryside and since then have been keeping vigil in the city during the night. During days I’m in Machi Bhawan.’ Charles then said in a concerned voice, ‘Samaira I wish that you would go back to Hasiena Begum’s kotha. You’ll be most safe there, please. I’ll take you there at once.’

‘You know I won’t go. I want to be near you. And please stop bringing the subject up every time we meet.’ And then abruptly she added softly, ‘I want to die in your
arms…’ Samaira tried to make light of the remark lest Charles be upset, and tried to manage a chuckle. But apparently Charles was not amused.

‘Aye, you stop talking like that or else I’m taking you at this very hour to the kotha. I hate it when you talk like that. Why are you so fascinated with death? You are never going to die, you hear me!’ Charles was almost livid putting his hand on her shoulder.

She looked up from his embrace. ‘I love it when you are this annoyed. I just wanted to see how much you love me.’ She snuggled closer to him.

A knock on the door made Samaira stiffen and she wriggled out of Charles’s hold on her.

‘Sahib, I have brought your ginger tea. Just the way you like it.’ Madho Singh walked inside with a tray in his hand balancing the fine bone china tea kettle and cups. Putting the tray near the table where Samaira and Charles sat, he poured tea into the two cups and offered them one each.

‘Thank you, Madho.’ Charles murmured.

Samaira smiled at Madho Singh, who smiled back.

‘Would you like me to bring you anything else, Sahib?’ Not receiving a response, he knew when he was not needed and then left the room quietly.

‘What are the reports on the mutiny?’ Samaira asked nonchalantly.

‘Not good, not good at all. It has started in Cawnpore as well. Sir Henry sent some of our officers from 32nd on General Wheeler’s request. Reports say that the General is paying a heavy price for putting so much trust in the Peshwa, Nana Sahib. The Peshwa has become somewhat of a rebel leader and all mutineers seem to be joining in his ranks. He is gaining ground as we speak with his team of Azimuallah Khan and Tatya Tope.’
‘I pray to Allah that all this ends soon. It is such an unnecessary loss of so many innocent lives. A war never really solved any matters.’ Samaira commented despondently.

‘I hope so too, my love. I hope so too.’
Chapter XIX

July, 1857

Siege of Lucknow

The blistering month of June was drawing to a close. The mutineers seemed to be gaining ground in their outrage and plunder of the city. The East India Army was fearful of the future prospects. What was earlier touted as a mere rebellion was slowly taking the proportions of full bloodied war. The mutiny had spread to Delhi and almost the entire Province of Oudh.

Sir Henry Lawrence called for a meeting with all the Officers to discuss the repositioning of troops in the Residency and the blowing up of the neighbouring building, the Machi Bhawan.

Sir Henry sat on the high maroon chair surveying the morose faces of the men of the garrison.

‘Gentlemen,’ he spoke in a brusque voice, ‘I am of the opinion we ought to have only one position, and that all arrangements should be made with reference to a sudden concentration at the Residency.’

Colonel Palmer, who was now in command at the Machi Bhawan, spoke.

‘Sir Henry, I had a suggestion to make. The mutineers are, as we speak, momentarily occupied with looting and plunder. It might be prudent to blow up the Machi Bhawan at midnight. Whatever meagre supplies are left there, will be brought up here at the Residency during the afternoon.’
Lawrence replied, ‘it definitely sounds all right. We will not meet with any resistance from the mutineers and I think, like you said, it is now or never. I give you full command to carry out the task and brief your men of the same. I believe Colonel Inglis and the Captain of the 32nd are downstairs as well. It would do you good to apprise them of the same on your way out of the Residency. They can, in turn prepare the womenfolk of heavy sounds and possibly heavy smoke and dust during midnight so that don’t unnecessarily get agitated and frightened.’

The Machi Bhawan was vacated and all the little supplies had been left there were duly removed during the day. Night fell and just enough ammunition was left for the building to be blown up. Colonel Palmer led all the men out. Exploring the building for the last time with his men, he finally gave the orders, ‘Blow the damn thing away.’

The ammunition was ignited and the men drew away from the building followed by Colonel Palmer. The moments that soon ensued bore testimony to a noise so deafening that all the doors of the Residency flew open. A vast column of smoke and dust enveloped the dark sky. The men coughed surrounded by the heaped debris, their faces blackened by the dust and smoke.

Despite the forewarnings, the womenfolk caused commotion at the Residency. The little children shrieked with terror. There were bits of bricks and mortar in some of the rooms. All the rooms of the top storey were filled with dust so that the women had to light candles to reassure their children and soothe them.

Samaira and Jane, who had not slept a wink, now sat in the dark. Charles had prepared them for the noise earlier in the day. Some bricks from the ceiling landed on the table adjacent to Samaira’s bed smashing it to pieces. Both the women shivered.

‘Keep sitting where you are. I’ll light a candle. It must be here somewhere.’ Samaira got up, groping in the dark, dispelling with her hands the smoke and dust which
came in the way. Finally reaching the mantelpiece where some books were kept, she ran her fingers along its full length till she found a stray candle.

‘Samaira, why didn’t you heed my advice earlier in the day when I asked you to stay in the same room as the other ladies downstairs. It would have never come to this.’ Jane’s voice carried with it a tinge of impatience and irritation.

‘I never thought that when the Machi Bhawan would be blown up, the impact would be so far-reaching, quite literally,’ Samaira tried to humour Jane but met with no response. Samaira then added, ‘all right; let’s find our way downstairs together.’ Samaira went in the direction where Jane was sitting. Jane got up and groped for Samaira’s hand. They held each other’s hands and went out of the room touching the walls as they walked. The amount of smoke that had gathered in the Residency was appalling. Both of them put a hand across their nose not to inhale in the polluted air as they climbed down the spiral staircase.

They could already hear the sounds of children crying from the rooms below and debris and heaps of ruins were spread all over the mosaic floor.

‘Oh my God’, Jane said quietly, ‘It’s going to be a long night.’

Samaira added solemnly, ‘this too shall pass.’

❖

On the morning of July 2nd, Sir Henry Lawrence worked diligently in his small room, setting tasks for the various officers.

The Residency had been cleared of all the ruins and debris that had gathered during the night. The native servants were taking a momentary breather from the gruelling task before they began their next task of preparing breakfast.

Reports were already thick in the air that the blowing up of the Machi Bhawan had attracted the attention of the mutineers who now sat with their eyes on the Residency. It was an uncertain time. As Sir Henry Lawrence drew maps of the
Residency in his diary as to the repositioning of the troops, a shell flew inside his room through the small window and exploded. The Chief Commissioner did not even have time to turn around and see the explosive and escape. The door to his room locked, Lawrence collapsed on the bed without being able to utter for a cry for help. Already a frail man carrying his burdens alone, he lay on the bed, his wound mortal.

The noise of the shell exploding had already reached the corridors and Captain Wilson knocked incessantly on the door. On finding no reply he called out to Lawrence,

‘Sir Henry, are you all right?’

Lawrence gathering all his energy spoke in a low voice, ‘I’m killed.’

Captain Wilson with the help of soldiers of the 32nd barged inside the dilapidated room. The group was moved to see Lawrence in such a helpless state.

‘I’ll go call Dr.Fayrer,’ Charles rushed to get the doctor.

He glided down the stairs to the quarters of the doctor. Having found him there he caught his arm.

‘Dr.Fayrer, Sir Henry has been mortally wounded. Come with me.’

‘Oh My God! Not him too. Let’s go.’ Dr Fayrer caught Charles’s shoulder as if the weight of his knees might give him away.

‘Doctor, are you all right?’

Yes, yes, I am. Come. Let’s go. Sir Henry needs us.’ Picking up his medical case lying on the top of a small cupboard, both the men hurried towards Lawrence’s room.

As they reached his room, they saw, Colonel Inglis administering a small glass of fruit juice to the dying man.
Dr. Fayrer advanced towards Lawrence, stooping over him. He had lost a lot of blood, his sheets soaked in crimson.

‘Everybody out! I don’t want such a large crowd here. I’m sure you’ve all got some duties to attend to.’ The crowd of the soldiers then dispersed leaving behind the two Captains, Charles and Wilson along with Colonel Inglis.

Sitting near Lawrence’s side, Dr. Fayrer examined the wound. A piece of shell had passed through and the upper part of his thigh had been torn to shreds. Lawrence studied the grim look on the face of the doctor and asked repeatedly, in a frail voice, ‘How long have I to live?’ Dr. Fayrer marveled at the indefatigable spirit of the man. Looking at Lawrence for some time, the doctor finally said, ‘About forty eight hours.’

Outside the Residency, a battle had already been started by the mutineers who now fired their muskets. Charles went outside to redirect the troops.

‘Colonel, we cannot keep him in this room. A war is raging outside. His apartments are too close from where the musket fires have started and the enemy is continuously throwing shells. We should move him to my apartment, which is far more shielded against the artillery.’

Lawrence was then moved to Dr. Fayrer’s apartments in the northern portion of the Residency. A further consultation with other surgeons was held and all of them reached a unanimous verdict that even if they amputated at the hip joint, it would not help matters much. Try as they might they would not be able to save Lawrence.

Evening drew to a close but the heavy musketry fire refused to die down. Lawrence’s bed was surrounded by his staff, his nephew and all the officials of the garrison. Each of them bore a despondent look feeling already lost without the leader who they had taken for granted at this crucial hour. Madho Singh knelt at the bedside crying quietly as Charles put a hand over his shoulder.
‘Colonel Inglis’, Lawrence spoke, ‘I want my epitaph to be read as, ‘Here lies Henry Lawrence, who tried to do his duty.’ Would you,…would you all grant me that.,’ he coughed.

‘Of course, Sir Henry. You tried to do more than your duty, Sir. You led the way always when we were astray. In these times of crisis, we took solace in your impeccable wisdom….‘Colonel Inglis looked away, lest he be labelled a weak man.

‘Now I can join my wife whom I have missed so much, my lovely Honoria. Pray, please forgive me all those who feel I have wronged them. Ramlal, Shankar, Madho, please forgive your Sahib…’ Sir Henry folded his hands towards the native servants but Madho Singh got up and caught his hands and kissed them, ‘Sahib, please don’t talk like that…We must have done some good deeds in our past birth to have such a master as you. Please do not embarrass us by asking for forgiveness.’

‘My dying wish would have been that India had not come to this. The way the native landholders had been dealt with by the Government, this country would now be scarred by this mutiny forever as a blot to what could have been a just and benevolent rule by our men. I ask for forgiveness from each and every Indian who has been wronged.’

Charles and other men of 32nd hung down their heads in resignation. So did Colonel Inglis and Dr.Fayrer, along with Colonel Palmer and Captain Wilson.

As precious life ebbed away from Lawrence’s body, he asked to receive the last rites. The sacred ceremony was performed outside the verandah of Dr.Fayrer’s apartments. In the dark, the enemy’s explosives hissed through the air and pillars came down one after the other. The ceremony finally reached its completion and Lawrence, calm and collected now, chose his successor. He directed that Major Banks, Commissioner of Lucknow should succeed him as the Chief Commissioner of Oudh. Colonel Inglis, Her Majesty’s 32nd Regiment of Foot, would command all the troops. Major Anderson, Chief Engineer, would be the military consul.
Even in such a state, he gave explicit instructions as to the defence strategy. His main concern was the economization of the ammunition and the protection of women and children. He urged the troops that in the event of any eventuality they must never surrender and keep the English flag flying high. His voice was almost a whisper now. Dr. Fayrer came by his side and advised Lawrence to sleep.

‘I would advise all of you here to let Sir Henry rest a while. He needs it. He should not exert himself. I'll stay by his side and check upon him intermittently.’

Barring Madho Singh and Ramlal, the crowd dispersed to join in the fighting that was taking place outside.

❖

On the morning of 4th July, Sir Henry Lawrence passed away.

His last hours had been filled with intense agony. He had repeated the prayers and psalms that were read out to him. As death took him in her refuge, his face finally bore the glow of contentment and bliss. His body lay on a couch in the apartments of Dr. Fayrer and four soldiers were summoned to carry him to the Residency churchyard. As they lifted the lifeless body, each took a turn to lift the embroidered white coverlet and kiss the forehead of the great man. They then carried him to the churchyard where the Chaplain awaited. The tall walls of the Residency reverberated with the thunderous sounds of the cannon and the heavy musketry. Sir Henry was buried in a grave befitting that of a common soldier, that being one of his last wishes. The Chaplain then read out a prayer in haste. The Chaplain stood alone as he said the prayer for the stern necessity of the hour spared no soldier to pay last honours to their dead leader.

Inside the Residency there was a strange contrast of heavy pall of gloom and inertia as against the constant musketry and loud noises of the ammunition outside. Having heard about Lawrence’s death the womenfolk lost their last vestige of hope. In their brief sojourn at the Residency, Lawrence had become a pillar of
hope and reassurance to them always keeping a cheerful stance around. They had started feeling secure for themselves and their children. Now him being gone, they suddenly felt their mortality creeping up on them. They dreaded the future and what it might bring in its wake.

The old became more cynical and the young began to lose their patience with the futility of it all. Samaira and Jane did their part in allaying their fears but they did not feel so secure themselves.

‘Oh, Jane, I feel so selfish sometimes.’ Samaira said resignedly.

‘Why do you say that? You have been most helpful around here, even when people have been really vicious towards you.’ There were fine creases on Jane's forehead now, bellying her age of twenty two years.

‘It’s not that. I like it here now. I mean…..’ Samaira shook her head.

‘Tell me, what is it that is troubling you? I don’t understand….’ Jane frowned.

‘I mean, here I have been trying to spend time with Charles and diverting him from his duty, pressing him to make time for me. He should be out there wholly, and not have to worry about me. This is not the time for me to spend time with him. In fact, I should have been the one to have encouraged him always to do his duty first. I come later.’ Samaira adjusted her chiffon sari absent-mindedly looking outside the window which was locked. Smoke billowed out from all sides of the Residency.

‘I don’t know whether you did the right thing by moving in the Residency or not. But this much I can tell you, if I had been in your place I would have done the same. I couldn’t bear to be away from my love at this hour. Who knows what the future holds. So try to make the most of your time here. I know every day it gets more impossible for you to meet Charles. A war is raging outside but don’t lose hope, this crisis shall die down. Sir Henry never wanted us to feel this way. He kept
up hope within all of us. Don’t let that fade away. Let that be a tribute to his memory.’
Chapter XX

The mutineers had surrounded the Residency from all sides. They were now a full force of eight thousand in number and were backed by the military police and the various discontented Taluqedaris. Smug in the knowledge of a sound collection of weapons to intensify their rebellion, the mutineers fired shots one after the other with a new found rage seething in their veins.

Inside the thirty seven acres of the Residency, the number of men guarding it paled in comparison, a mere one thousand and seven hundred. It was evident that the man of the hour was being greatly missed. Some say that had Lawrence been alive the siege of the Residency might never have taken place.

As the July sun crept up to its zenith in the sky unleashing its fury, so did the enemy outside the Residency. The defenders inside stood stoical returning the musketry and the cannon fire with only a seven inch wall as a barrier. The ground shook and the women in the second storey of the Residency were badly hurt as walls exploded. One by one they were rushed to Dr.Fayrer’s quarters with bullets hissing in the air. Some did not make it to the doctor’s quarters and were taken instead to the churchyard.

Amongst the injured was Miss Palmer, Colonel Palmer’s daughter, who not having heeded warnings of coming down to the ground floor of the Residency paid a brutal price. Her left leg was taken off by a round shot. The floor crimson, as she was rushed to Dr.Fayrer’s quarters making a scarlet trail as she was led away.

Mrs.Inglis sat along with the other women, huddled together on the ground. They read from the Bible repeating verses, hoping for an easy death. Samaira crawled on
the floor passing each one of them and soothing them. Jane did likewise but it hardly helped matters. A ghastly end loomed before them and some of them could not take the strain, losing their sanity.

Just then Colonel Inglis arrived inside where the women sat. His face was heavily smeared with mud and soot. One of his sleeves was torn and blood oozed out from it. His eyes searched for his wife who suddenly rose from the ground unable to hide her mixed expression of dismay and glee. She hurried to where he stood but he motioned for her to stop.

‘Ssh! On the ground, all of you. Standing up could cost you all your lives.’ The Colonel then took a gingerly step forward keeping his eye towards the window pane.

‘Are you all right, my dear?’ Mrs.Inglis asked in a shaky voice as drops of blood followed the Colonel as he walked.

‘I’m all right. It’s a small wound. A bullet grazed my arm. I’ll survive. I just came to tell you ladies to stay close to the ground floor and not defy warnings or else you’ll meet the same fate as Colonel Palmer’s daughter. Her leg is being amputated as we speak.’ His voice was almost a whisper now.

‘But what if the enemy gets inside? We might meet a fate worse than death.’ News of Cawnpore massacre has already reached their ears. Women and innocent children had been hacked to pieces there. Those who had been spared had been raped and left to die as they saw their husbands being butchered right in front of their eyes.’

‘Don’t speak like that! What happened in Cawnpore? It happened due to bad planning and General Wheeler’s irrevocable trust in that dethroned Peshwa, Nana Sahib. If it comes to that, I will shoot you all myself rather have these mutineers dishonouring our womenfolk. My only point in coming here is to stay on the ground and be careful of the musketry and round shots that will continue to
bombard the Residency. I would require your assistance in helping us with the wounded in the Banqueting Hall which has been converted into a makeshift hospital. Anyone wanting to volunteer can come.’

‘Oh, anything is better than this constant waiting. Waiting to be rescued, waiting to be killed. Please, Colonel take us all.’ Mrs. Jacobs spoke in her melodramatic voice.

‘I need someone to stay here. The women who have little children should not nurse the wounded.’ Colonel Inglis took solace on a rickety chair which stood nearby, still keeping his eyes on the barricaded windows. ‘The Banqueting Hall is filled with the wounded and the smell of death is all pervading. It might weaken the resolve of even the strongest. About ten European troops are brought in everyday on an average. Those who require amputation invariably die within a couple of days. So please be patient with the wounded and the dying.’

‘You underrate us, Colonel. We will do our best in helping. They are our men who have been injured while trying to save us. That’s the least we can do for them.’

‘All right, then. Just pack a few belongings for yourselves and come with Madho Singh in the evening when it’s darker and the mutineers are at bay.’

Just as the Colonel rose to leave, the shelling of the Residency started again abruptly with heavy bombardments in the air. Brick and mortar fell on the floor as the enemy opened grape shots one after the other on the building. The women screamed and started towards the corners of the ground floor. As Samaira led the elderly women towards safety, bricks and mortar fell on Mrs. Jacobs’s head and she cried out in agony. Samaira rushed towards her. Just then bullets shot through the closed window hit Samaira’s lithe body all over and she clutched at her stomach and held onto a pillar in the midst of the large hall. The broken glasses of the large window fell on the floor, with the sliver of glass injuring two small children, who cried out in agony.
‘Samaira! Are you all right?’ Jane rushed towards her side ignoring all protests of safety from other women.

‘I’m fine, Jane. You, you, run for cover.’ Samaira then collapsed on the floor. Her sari was soon soaked in blood. There were deep gnashes where the bullets had entered her body.

‘No!’ Jane cried out as tried to shake Samaira kneeling by her side.

Colonel Inglis, who himself had been wounded in the thigh by shards of broken glass rushed towards Samaira.

As she lay on the floor, Samaira’s mind went through a series of flashbacks. She saw herself as a little girl dressing up in a lehenga and her mother braiding her long hair telling her a story about a princess. The little Samira smiled at her reflection in the mirror. Somehow Samaira could not see her mother’s face. It was a blur. Then she saw Charles meeting her at the lawns of the Nawab’s Court complementing her on her dance. Samaira tried to smile but couldn’t. She saw Hasiena begum admonishing her as a mother would admonish her daughter and little Mumatz and Samaira playing hide and seek in the corridors of the kotha.

Perhaps this was death. No, not now. She felt herself drifting in a fog.

As the bombardments ceased, the women gathered around Samaira. Colonel Inglis and Jane knelt by her side.

‘Quick, let’s rush her to Dr.Fayrer. She is mortally wounded. I’ll go fetch Charles.’ At the mention of Charles name, Samaira’s eyes flickered open and she made an effort to speak. But no words could come out of her mouth. Jane took a small glass of water and put it to her lips.

Just then as if by a wave of telepathy, Charles pushed aside the huge door to the ground floor which was heavily damaged. His eyes searched for Samaira in the
large group. His heart started pounding so fast that he was unable to stand its beating.

‘Where’s Samaira?’ He looked at the group questioningly. The women could not meet his eyes.

‘Charles, over here, we have no time to waste!’ Colonel Inglis shouted. He had lifted Samaira up with Jane’s help.

‘Oh, no! Dear God no!’ Charles mad the short distance between himself and Samaira in quick strides and lifted her up with his hands. He kissed her forehead and headed for the exit with the Colonel and Jane right behind him.

As they walked under the open sky, the bullets made hissing sounds past them. Cannon shots spattered against the high walls of the Residency and form their prepared positions, the defenders opened steady fire. Crimson uniforms flitted about the trees as the European troops kept up a stable momentum of musket fire. Jane and the Colonel ducked but Charles walked on in long strides, never wavering his eyes on Samaira who now lay unconscious in his arms.

‘Charles, Dr. Fayrer is in the Banqueting Hall attending to the wounded. Let’s take her there.’

‘Yes, Colonel’ A numbness had descended over Charles. Please God, I don’t want to lose her! She means everything to me. It can’t happen…I’m dreaming and this is the worst dream of my life.’

As they reached the Banqueting Hall, they were surrounded by more scenes of misery. Though the Banqueting Hall was safe from the mutineers’ wrath as it housed captured royalty of the Oudh kingdoms, the atmosphere inside was oppressive. No air crept in as the windows were barricaded and the smell of death lingered. The superfluous smell of the disinfectant worsened the stifling environment. The place was thick with bodies. The wounded occupied almost all
the space the Hall had to offer. They were everywhere. On the floor, on the beds and sofas, a long array of consequence of the ensuing mutiny.

Dr. Fayrer was checking on the wounded when Charles’s agonized cry startled him. He could recognize that voice anywhere. In a short time had come to respect the Captain for his endearing demeanour and his call towards his duty.

Charles had already found a vacant bed near the entrance of the Hall and now lay Samaira gently on to it as the doctor approached him.

‘Please do something. She has been shot in several places and is losing blood fast.’ Charles held the doctor’s hand as he spoke.

The overworked doctor nodded as he saw Samaira’s hopeless condition. He opened his medical case and brought out his tools and clapped his hands to call for the other doctors.

‘We need to perform surgery. She hasn’t much time.’ Collecting his surgical tools along with others, he dismissed Charles and the Colonel, telling them to wait a while. The Colonel was rushed away by the other physicians to dress his wounds.

The doctors then collectively rolled over the makeshift curtains and a few women who had no young children came to assist them in the surgery. There were few medical supplies and almost no water. Before leaving the premises, Charles cast a last forlorn glance at Samaira, his mind contemplating a million thoughts, none of them positive. Unconscious, she looked ashen, like a delicate figurine, devoid of any color, or of life.

Jane came by Charles side, ‘I’ll be right beside her. Don’t worry Captain. She will be fine by God’s grace. She had an abiding faith in her God. He will not let her down.’

I will kill you all for doing this to my lovely Samaira. I will cut you to pieces. Pray that she makes it through or count your last days on earth, he vowed to himself.
Red rage and not pain now flowed in Charles’s veins as he vowed revenge. His inner demons would not let him breathe till he had vindicated his love. He swore softly under his breath as he stood against the dirty wall.
Chapter XXI

Samaira was drifting….She felt weightless. There was an inner peace which had never known existed. There was a glow on her face as her mother smoothed out the strands of hair that moved in the gentle breeze. She clutched at the gold chain around her neck looking down at the twin pendants of the swans. She then let out a contented sigh….

‘It’s no use.’ The surgeon spoke putting his fingers on his eyes and closing them momentarily as they burned from lack of sleep.

‘She already lost a lot of blood when she was brought here. It’s not the number of bullet wounds. Some just grazed her body. But the one that proved fatal was the one that penetrated closest to her heart. Even then we could have saved her. But she lost a lot of blood whilst she was being brought here.’ Dr.Fayrer held his forehead as he spoke the words, his whole body throbbing with fatigue. He looked at Samaira’s lifeless form and felt a poignant ache in his heart. How would he tell the Captain? She had meant the world to him. A selfless woman, she had suffered ridicule from many a European woman during her sojourn at the Residency. Not once had she complained but had finally won them over with her simplicity and firm resolve.

He remembered how once he himself had been out of spirits and had suffered from a recurring fever, its cause unknown; she had administered an ayurvedic
concoction to end his fever. He had recuperated faster than he ever could with the sundry medicines by his side.

As the other surgeons washed their bloodied hands in the water container, Dr. Fayrer draped Samaira’s body with a crisp white sheet, hard to come by in the prevalent circumstances. ‘All right, you all can take a breather and then attend to the new casualties that have arrived. I will go to the Captain and tell him myself about his loss.’

The other surgeons merely nodded as they now had seen death closely and it refused to perturb them anymore. It had become a common occurrence within the Residency walls.

Dr. Fayrer looked across the hallway for any sign of the Captain. The other girl, Jane was nowhere to be seen. It was just as well. He needed to choose his words carefully as he knew the full scope of the Captain’s loss. It was no secret that the two loved each other profoundly.

He saw Jane approaching him across the hallway and straightened, clearing his throat.

As soon as she saw the doctor, Jane hurried towards him, having briefly been called back by her aunt; Mrs. Inglis. She looked expectantly at the doctor, her eyes gleaming with a new hope.

‘How is she, doctor?’

‘Jane, the news I’m afraid, is bad.’ Dr. Fayrer pushed his hand through his long grey hair.

Jane’s heart sank. She felt sick.

‘She didn’t make it. The poor girl had already lost a lot of blood when she was brought here. Though all the bullet wounds were only peripheral there was one
which eventually proved fatal. I’m so sorry.’ His eyes downcast, he was unable to meet Jane’s incredulous gaze as what he had said slowly registered in her mind.

‘No. In fact, I was on my way to tell him. But maybe you could tell him. Samaira and you were really close, I know. Please do that for your friend.’

Jane nodded as the doctor walked away patting her on her shoulder.

Walking towards where Samaira lay, Jane burst into tears, appalled at the unfairness of it all. Even in death Samaira looked ethereal like a porcelain beauty. It seemed she was in deep slumber and would wake up any time. Jane put a sweaty hand on Samaira’s forehead and shuddered at the coldness of it. She bent over and kissed it, her tears streaking her dead friend’s face. She suddenly remembered how Samaira used to talk of death and how she would embrace it readily if it came. At such talks Jane used to admonish her gently. She recollected how Samaira had once commented, ‘I sometimes feel that I might never be able to see Hasiena Begum and Mumtaz ever again.’ Jane had been annoyed and had retorted, ‘Stop talking gibberish all the time. Of course you’ll meet them.’

Jane then erupted into a fresh burst of tears and sat near Samaira for a long time when other women also gathered around her, commiserating.

‘I have to go and tell the Captain.’ Jane then got up and walked towards the exit. One of the women had told her that Charles had been at the Residency Chapel.

‘It’s safe to go out now as the musketry has died down. I think the mutineers are running out of ammunition,’ Mrs. Palmer spoke, as she advanced towards Jane after having attended to a wounded soldier.

‘All right. I have been to the Chapel once. I know where it is.’ Jane cast a glance in the direction of the body thinking of a suitable way to tell Charles. But there was no suitable way. She sighed and headed towards the exit.
Why did you have to take her away? She had her whole life ahead of her. She had an unshakeable faith in you… Oh God! Why?

Jane remembered how Samaira had looked forward to the end of the mutiny to get married to Charles. Yes, they would marry once the rebellion had died down. As the myriad recollections of her friend played in her mind, Jane finally reached the Chapel. The small white building looked eerie in the evening light. Its walls beyond repair, the sacred edifice seemed as if it might give way and crumble to the ground anytime. Two small lanterns hung on either side of the entrance to guide the visitor towards the interiors or what was left of them.

Jane took off her spectacles for a moment, resting her eyes which had turned red. She then wiped her face with the coarse sleeve of her muslin dress before putting them back on. As she entered the dilapidated building, her eyes searched for Charles. The shattered window panes still bore their old glory of intricate stained glass work. The seating benches were turned haphazardly. There was a film of dust resulting from fallen bricks and mortar. The omnipresent peeple plant's growth crept inside in one of the corners. Jane saw a snake rustle past it and out of the corner through a hole. She shuddered. It pained her to see the Chapel in such a state. And there seated on the wooden altar was Charles. His eyes were transfixed on the large timber statue of the Virgin and her Divine Child. He seemed in a kind of a daze and did not turn around to see Jane approaching.

Jane now slowed her walking pace as she neared Charles. ‘Captain…’

Charles abruptly turned around as he got up. His eyes seemed to have a new hope as he searched Jane’s face, clutching her hands.

‘Tell me Jane? Is she conscious now?’ Charles was delirious now as he pressed her wrists hard.

‘Captain, please get a hold on yourself. It would never do for you to be in such a state. They…they tried to save her…They they said…that she had already lost a lot
of blood when she was brought to…’, Jane could not finish as she had started crying. She paused to draw a shaky breath.

Charles, who had caught hold of Jane’s shoulders, now shook her violently as he asked, ‘Where is she now?’

‘She is dead.’ Jane could not look at him as she said those words.

Charles banged his fist against one of the wooden benches, the noise rattling in the air. He cast a questioning gaze at the statue before him, his face contorted. Pushing Jane away, he closed his eyes.

It could not be true. No! This whole adventure called India was playing right before his eyes. Oh! How could he get so involved in it all? Why couldn’t he be content with his lot in Davenlock. Why did he have to cross oceans and experience this emptiness that he felt now? He could not envisage a life without Samaira. No! no!....

Charles then dropped to the floor. As Jane lent a comforting hand on his shoulder he shrugged it away, whispering, ‘Leave me alone…Go.’

Charles sat alone in the darkness for what seemed like an eternity. He then got up, a strange calmness descending over him. As he sat there the musketry had resumed with bullets whizzing in the air outside the Chapel. He felt the futility of it all…England’s majestic ever increasing Empire, the rebellion, the defense, his life…He envisaged Samaira’s face in his mind’s eye as he had last seen her two days before. She had seemed withdrawn and tired. As he had tried to humor her she had told him that she felt guilty for holding him back. When he had asked,

‘Holding me back from what?’

‘Your duty as a Captain.’ she’d replied ‘Oh! I have been acting so selfishly all this while when you didn’t come to see me. I should know better. I’m sorry, Charles…’
and she had looked away. Something had been troubling her. Charles could not put a finger to it.

Drawing her close to him he had hugged her, kissing her on her forehead.

‘My sweetheart, I come to see you because I cannot do without you. I’m selfish so don’t ever think that you are drawing me away from my duty. You make it possible for me to perform my duty to the best of my capabilities.’

Was that why she was gone? No, no! I will not leave those scoundrels alone. I will slice up each one of them for taking my Samaira away from me.

Rising up slowly from the altar, his eyes glowed with a new resolve, his jaw set in a grim line. He hurried out of the Chapel, stumbling over the fallen bricks as he walked towards the Banqueting Hall.

Samaira was buried with proper Islamic faith. Jane, along with Hasiena Begum and Mumtaz had bathed her body and put a scented ointment all over. They were assisted in the task by Mrs.Inglis and Mrs. Palmer. She was then wrapped in white linen.

There was an old Maulvi in the Residency Compound who had served the Company’s salt all his life, known as Peer Baba. Charles had called him for the funeral rights and he supervised them with a stoical resolve.

A native had been dispatched in a heavily veiled carriage in the stealth of the night to bring Mumtaz and old Hasiena Begum, along with the other natch girls for Samaira’s funeral. Mumtaz and the Begum had been beside themselves with grief.

As Samaira was buried, versus from the Koran were read out by the Maulvi. Her face was turned towards Mecca.
Charles stood on as he saw the last of his beloved. Bullets continued to hiss in the air but he and the Maulvi stood their ground until the burial was completed.

As they finally left the Residency graveyard together, Charles turned and cast one last look at Samaira’s gravestone, still not believing that she was really gone. But believe he must. He had a task ahead of him. That was to get the Hasiena Begum, Mumtaz and the other natch girls back to the kotha as soon as possible. The Residency was being pounded into rubbles and could not hold out much longer. The mutineers meant business. He would have to wait for an opportune moment. Usually the enemy took a breather in the shadow of the night but the past two nights had been different. But the longer he waited the situation might change for the worst.

He would have to send them off tonight, he thought to himself. They were his last link to Samaira and he could not afford to lose them.

❖

After exchanging teary goodbyes, Hasiena Begum and her girls were packed off in the dead of the night by the most able soldiers of the 32nd Foot.

Charles and his men, along with Colonel Inglis put up a heavy fight against the mutineers, aided by their weapons but the Residency was slowly captured by the rebels.

Charles lost some of his most able men in the fight; including Jack Garrison. But nothing moved him now as he tried to avenge Samaira’s death.
Chapter XXII

One year later.

As he reached the edge of the forest, Captain Charles Hamilton reigned in his charger and soothed the nape of its neck. It was a signal for the stallion to come to an immediate halt and to keep absolutely still. Nothing moved in this cold dreary wet morning of 23rd December, 1858 except the icy breeze. The false dawn had just come up as he stared ahead. The fort of Shankergarh loomed up with its high perimeter mud wall. This would be the last of the sustained resistance of the rebel forces he would have to destroy, and by the will of God he would have his retribution.

His principal was to reconnaissance for his troops who were camped a mile back. There was no sign of human activity. He needed to take in the lay of the land and work out a suitable vantage point for the guns emplacements and to find the chinks in the enemy’s armour.

There were two guns on the parapets of mud fort of Shankergarh and they faced south and west commanding firepower over the central clearing. In the east was the huge archway with its thick, nail studded Darwaza. The northern and eastern flanks of the fort were shielded by dense and impenetrable bamboo vegetation. In essence it would be a gruesome and bloody fight to bring to his knees Rana Beni Madhav, the talukdar and Raja of Shankergarh.
The Rana had throughout the tumultuous times been one of the main leaders of the revolt which had bloodied and lain waste the land of Oudh, and taken in its sweeping madness the lives of so many British women and children. The Rana had been at the epicentre of the siege of Lucknow, and the guns mounted on his fort now had been used to mercilessly pound the Residency into rubbles.

As the Captain observed, categorized and examined the information, he fought to control his rage. He blamed this man above all for the death of his lovely Samaira. He made a mental note of the landscape with a soldier’s understanding of the terrain. Though he was no artilleryman, he could methodically ascertain the best ways to use the field guns in the storming of the fort, which would play a decisive role. He now had to move hurriedly back to the camp and at the same time, with utmost caution, to prevent his movements being telegraphed to lookout anywhere near the fort. He nudged his horse with his knees and turning him back started off towards the camp. As he drew away into the distance he spurred the stallion to full gallop towards his waiting comrades.

❖

Captain Charles Hamilton stood impatiently as the British force took its position along the south western bastion of the fort which had been planned for the main attack based on his information and strategy. The Shankergarh fort was impregnable, completely surrounded by dense thorny jungle on the three sides, concealing it so well that the chief difficulty was to ascertain the nature and real position of the defence, leaving only the south west where the rebel guns had been positioned to inflict maximum damage and to massacre the aggressor.

Intervening shrubs had been cleared to allow two of the heavier 18–pounder guns that had been brought to the edge of the jungle towards the side which exposed the mud bulwark. The British forces comprised 470 men belonging to the 32nd Regiment of Foot, 170 men from the 2nd Dragoon guards and 375 men of the
Native forces. There were 10 guns which could not be employed due to the jungle on the other sides.

Colonel Inglis Gordon, commander of the Dragoon Guards whispered to Charles. ‘We will use the guns to breach the south west façade you do your bit on the east, eh.’ ‘Yes Sir, and May the lord take us to victory’ Charles took the outstretched hand of his superior in a heartfelt solidarity, saluted and turned back.

Charles made a circular sign with his hands to signal his troops to follow him, and started towards the eastern ridge. Though it had taken time to assemble the full force here, it had been accomplished furtively and they had the promise of surprise on their side. The Captain moved like a predator, stealthily approaching his prey and the bandwagon following him tried to emulate him as best as they could. The going was rough through the dense thorny undergrowth and it took them a while to creep up close to the high wall. Now they waited for the signal…the first volley of the guns. From his earlier observation, Charles had hoped that this segment would have a single line of defence on the ramparts. His command of over 200 men were hidden thirty yards from the wall and positioned for rapid fire. About thirty to forty volunteers were engaged with roughly cut bamboo ladders which they would put on the walls as soon as the fight started and would then scale the heights.

A single cannon shot boomed out through the silent forest. It had begun. ‘Come on, let’s move….before Bení Madho gets up, and give it all you’ve got!’ The men with the ladders rushed to the wall and were about fifteen yards from it when the parapet came alive with hundreds of the rebel militia who thrust their guns down on the approaching Firangees and a torrent of gunfire erupted. Their matchlocks were mostly charged with grape shot and nails and in the ensuing mêlée the ladder boys were almost cut to the man. This was not the right time to bring to mind the rumor, but word had it that the devious chief of Shankergarh was always one step ahead of his enemies. Charles had underestimated the Rana, and a heavy price was paid by this carnage.
‘Open fire!’ was all he could muster in the heat of the moment and his hidden guns volleyed back. The Sipahi of the Rana started falling back, but for every man who was dislodged; his place on the top was filled by another one with alarming swiftness. There were anguished cries of pain on both the sides and the wounded men having faced the brunt were trying to crawl back towards the forest line. The battle raged on with heavy casualties.

‘This is….this is going from bad to worse, worse than we ever speculated Sir….please, I have a suggestion….’ Lieutenant Richard Maxwell, lying alongside Charles, spoke with bated breath, any sound hardly coming from his mouth which had gone dry… ‘Should, should we fall back a little and regroup?’

‘Heck, don’t even think about it, Lieutenant…This day is all we’ve got and by God’s grace we’ll do the best we can…leave the rest to Providence.’ Charles retorted, quite taken aback by the fear and cowardice in the Lieutenant’s eyes. ‘We will have to set an example, by leading from the front. Come, let’s fight like men.’

With these harsh words he jerked himself upright and snatched out his revolver from the leather holster placing it in his left hand to fire, and simultaneously unsheathed his ceremonial sword and brandished it in the air. He had started to move ahead, unmindful of the ball that whizzed past him. Unscathed, he cleared the wild thorny Khair underbrush to reach the open. The indomitable spirit of the Captain inspired others to follow suit in the fine British tradition of yore, and the trinket became a force in seconds marching ahead.

‘Long live the queen!’ and general war cry greeted the puzzled look on the face of the enemy armed forces, seeing such display of sheer fortitude. Rifles boomed, men fell, but the charge was carried forward. Suddenly the earth trembled as a huge explosion shook the very ground they stood on. Through the ensuing dust came the realization that the Darwaza has been shattered by Powder magazine and Commonwealth forces hiding close to it were now crossing into the fort. The
enemy soldiers were bewildered at the sight of the breach in the fort and without any legitimate leadership made the mistake of retreating from the wall.

Captain Charles Hamilton, standing unharmed, realized that he had indeed been fortunate. ‘Move the ladder, boys and let’s try and keep our rendezvous with the devil inside!’

The ladders were placed and the walls scaled. Charles climbed to the crest, beckoning the rest to follow suit. Behind the walls spread out the scattered mud houses and modest huts of the natives. As they stormed the outer fortifications, in the ongoing struggle the natives were systematically bayoneted and shot, and doomed were the souls who came in the way of the advancing British army.

Charles was climbing the steps of the citadel which housed the Rana’s family when a small girl tried to scamper away towards the orchard stretched ahead. He watched numbly as a red flash of a form tried to overhaul her in the run. It was a soldier of the Dragoon Guards in his fine tunic who was reaching for the little waif.

‘Leave the girl! Don’t you touch her!’ Charles screamed, his heart thumping but the man had obviously lost all sense. He caught her from the back and snatched her in his arms, even as the young Captain sprinted forward with all his strength, watching in horror as the savage hurled her high in the air.

She shrieked plaintively, her hair flung wild as she was raised skywards, her fate, hanging in precarious balance, and then started plummeting down. The soldier had his talwar held high in anticipation of contact. The lithe body fell on the pointed blade as she was impaled in mid air.

‘No!’ Charles charged upon the man like an enraged animal, his fists connecting with the soldier’s jaw with such vicious force that it sent him flying onto the ground. He straddled the man; his big boned hands fastened onto the brute’s throat and started to choke the life out of him. The despicable figure lying on the
ground thrashed his arms and tried to force the hands away, but to no avail. The Captain was a man possessed, ruthless power now flowing in his muscles.

‘Do you bloody want to kill an Englishman, Captain? He is on our side! What has gotten into you Captain?!’… Charles tried to take in what they were saying. Still numbed by his emotions, he was scarcely able to realize his folly.

When the realization slowly dawned on him that he had nearly taken his subordinate’s life the strength in his arms drained out of him. He staggered up and asked the man choking and coughing on the ground ‘Just tell me! Tell me, what made you commit such a monstrous crime?!’ Charles shouted, fury making his eyes crimson.

‘It’s an eye for an eye’, the soldier gasped …... ‘In memory of British children and women … murdered by these same beasts in Lucknow and Cawnpore’. He averted his gaze from the Captain. He was now afraid of the formidable figure and if there were ever so slight flicker of repentance in his heart he shook it away.

‘You acted like the Devil himself, you. You deplorable swine! Get out of my sight before I do something that I might regret later! No! On second thoughts, I will not regret killing you and throwing pieces of your body all over the place!’ With blatant disgust, Charles kicked him and now slowly turned to the lifeless form lying in front of him, tossed up like a broken doll. The feelings that he had long thought were dead in his heart now resurfaced and his eyes surged with tears…He could not bear to look at the mangled body. Strengthening his resolve he lifted the poor girl in his arms and put his face to the still warm body… and sobbed uncontrollably ‘Oh, my Samaira. Oh, my little Samaira’

The soldiers huddled together whispering. They looked on at their sobbing Captain and shook their heads in disgust. One of them whispered, ‘All this for an Indian natch girl. Look at him whining and crying like a woman. Captain indeed!’
Chapter XXIII

1858

The Sepoy Mutiny had been suppressed and it had been a year since its flare-up. The restoration process was almost complete, but Captain Charles Hamilton could not help shake off a feeling of heavy foreboding. A certain anxiety and an eerie gloom accompanied the atmosphere. One could not put a finger to it but it was there. You could see a peculiar combination of fear and repulsion in the dark eyes of the natives. Once servile to the extent of being obsequious, they now looked back and held your gaze with a question in their eyes conveying the message, 'leave our land and leave it for good, you have done enough damage to last several lifetimes'. Charles felt sick at the unfairness of it all. The nagging feeling that he had tried to subdue crept up on him again. He was on the wrong side and loathed being 'a gora sahib' as the English were called by the natives.

God! How he wanted to get away from it all to get away from the constant pain that tugged at his heart and gnawed at his conscience like a parasite in his body. But go where? He could not go back to England.........No, he wouldn’t go back there. He would go to a place where life was just starting out, where matters were simpler and expectations lower. Where it would not make a difference what he had accomplished or what his last name was.....Not that he was not proud of his name.
He missed home. He missed his brothers. But he had made up his mind never to return. What was the name of the continent his fellowmen were always discussing….Australasia…Australia? Yes…he would go there, a continent just awakening, a land so raw and pristine yet offering so much. A rebirth of sorts…What had he to lose? Nothing…and what did he have now…Nothing….Everything that mattered to him had been lost ……never to be regained. At least he thought as much at the moment, disillusioned and broken as he was.

The thought of the new land and starting life afresh from scratch brought a momentary respite to his enervated soul. His blue eyes now glistened with a new hope lending his aristocratic features a godlike radiance. There was almost a glimpse of the old Charles but then it quickly ebbed away. He would talk to the Commander in Chief, at the first opportune moment…..and offer his resignation. The recent decorations on his uniform were merely that –decorations. He didn't want them…he wanted his beloved Samaira back. Tears welled in his eyes and he howled like an animal without holding back.

Straightening himself as he heard a knock on the door, he said in a loud voice, ‘Not now, Madho.’

As Madho peeped inside Charles’ room, pleading,

‘But Sahib, you have not eaten for two days…’

‘I will not die if that is what you are worried about. And now Madho, I have a task for you.’

‘Gladly Sahib. What is it?’

‘Please start packing my belongings.’

As Madho’s eyebrows knit in a frown, Charles added, ‘…and no questions.’

❖
The following day, Charles got up from his bed, small for his large and sinewy frame, after spending another sleepless night. Lately he could hardly sleep; the spectres of the rebellion loomed too large in his mind’s eye. The unsavoury memories of innocent women and children being butchered faster than you could say the word ‘go’ were forever etched in his mind. He yearned earnestly for an antidote to put a stop to the constant, anguished cries for help which he imagined he heard all the time.

He picked up his uniform half-heartedly and went about the business of meeting the Commander in Chief, Sir Colin Campbell, GCB, KCSI. Charles had set up an early appointment with him. A final glance in the mirror gave him an appearance of a man who looked much older than his actual years. Though, still very good looking with a firm jaw and lips set in a thin line, his eyes looked tired above the dark circles which had assumed a permanent character. He looked wryly back at his reflection and his blue eyes, enmeshed with heavy lashes, twitched when he afforded a rare sardonic smile at himself.

As he was about to leave his quarters for his appointment with the Commander-in-Chief, Charles could see that Madho Singh had done a good job of packing his belongings. His baggage had been neatly stacked in the corner of his room. He let out a deep sigh.

I'm going to miss Madho. Am I finally ready to go? He tried to convince himself.

As he reached the venue, Charles couldn’t help but admire the offices of the Field Marshal, Sir Colin Campbell. The Chief was an important man and before Charles he had to see various other important officials. The Captain had been waiting in the ante-chamber for over forty minutes now. He checked the time on the clock above the door to the inner office of the Field Marshal. On the right hand side of the colossal mahogany door hung a life-sized picture painting of the Queen. She looked majestic and ethereal; the artist having exaggerated her beauty on paper. On her head she wore none other than the Imperial State Crown. It was an incongruity
in a manner. A queen fragile and exquisite, carrying the entire world on her head. But it would soon crumble.

Sir Colin Campbell had just recently been raised to the peerage as Baron Clyde, for his services during the mutiny and the continued handling of the operations in Oudh until the embers of the revolt had burnt out. The Field Marshal’s aide-de-camp came in. ‘His lordship will see you now’.

The Commander-in-Chief’s reputation preceded him. Being a man of few words to the point of being taciturn, he was very efficient at his job and had perfected the art of war, if there ever was such an art. The various regalia and military decorations on his uniform bore testimony to the fact. In his fifties, he looked far older than his age as does any man who has seen war at close hand. It ages him well beyond his years.

He did not suffer weaklings and word was that he had a heart of stone which seldom beat for any life, his or others. He recognized talent and was vociferous in voicing and applauding the same without any reservations.

Right now, he was looking at a great reservoir of talent in Captain Charles Hamilton who had indeed done the Company proud by his display of valour and duty in curbing the revolt and saving invaluable British lives. He had heard from reliable officials that the Captain had also helped infinitely in the process of restoration thereafter. The General was proud of the man. His old dull face brightened as he looked at the Captain. It was good to know that he had been rewarded the Victoria Cross for his heroic efforts.

‘Good Morning Captain. So what brings you by?’ The Commander in Chief asked matter of factly.

‘Sir, I would like to, would like to …draw your attention to a matter which cannot wait any longer….’ Charles replied, looking slightly flustered and having difficulty
finding his voice. He had thought that this meeting was going to be a smooth affair but evidently he was wrong.

‘Well, go ahead but make it short as I haven’t much time. Before you utter another word, let me congratulate you on securing the Victoria Cross. You do understand that what you did at the Residency was commendable and the restoration work thereof, and from what I can surmise is that the only direction your career is going to take from now on is upwards’, he chuckled, extending his hand, a rarity, coming from him.

Charles relaxed and shook the extended hand and wiped his brow.

‘Well, Sir, since I need to be fast I came here today to hand in my resignation from the Regiment and I would appreciate it if you relieve me of my services as soon as possible’.

‘What! Have you completely lost your marbles?! Don’t for God’s sake talk like an imbecile! I hope it’s not over that inconsequential girl from the Court of Nawab, that dancer! Good you got rid of her, she would have been an embarrassment and you would have been the laughing sto…….’

‘Stop! For God’s sake, stop right way Sir, don’t defile her memory! I beseech you…I don’t expect anybody to understand what she meant to me….and only I know the extent of loss that I have endured. Bereft of all hope as I am at this point of my life, I will not give any authority to even the highest office to speak ill of her…so, please stop….’, Charles stopped abruptly to collect himself and looked away lest Sir Colin see the fresh tears that were about to erupt from the Captain’s eyes.

Sir Colin Campbell took a moment and stood up from his high back chair. He then went around the table and came and stood next to Charles. Offering a comforting hand on his shoulder, the General spoke in a low voice, free from any air of authority that it possessed a few moments ago.
Charles took the resignation letter from the pocket of his uniform and placed it on the table of the Commander in Chief with unsteady hands, and walked out of the office into the outer passage and under the open sky. He did not look back at the Field Marshal. Sir Colin looked on at the retreating figure. He suddenly felt that his life’s work which he had cherished up until that moment was tainted by the ghosts of battles won.

Charles felt free and buoyant in the open air. He had made peace with the battles waging inside him. A future was unfolding before him, beckoning him into her welcoming embrace. He smiled as a strange calmness descended over him.