

*The
Midnight
Rose*

LUCINDA RILEY

PAN BOOKS

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Prologue

Anahita

I am a hundred years old today. Not only have I managed to survive a century, but I've also seen in a new millennium.

As the dawn breaks and the sun begins to rise over Mount Kanchenjunga beyond my window, I lie on my pillows and smile to myself at the utter ridiculousness of the thought. If I were a piece of furniture, a chair, I would be labelled an antique. I would be polished, restored and proudly put on show as a thing of beauty. Sadly, that isn't the case with my human frame, which has not mellowed like a fine piece of mahogany over its lifetime. Instead, my body has deteriorated into a sagging hessian sack containing a collection of bones.

Any 'beauty' in me that might be deemed valuable lies hidden deep inside. It is the wisdom of one hundred years lived on this earth, and a heart that has beaten a steady accompaniment to every conceivable human emotion and behaviour.

One hundred years ago, to this very day, my parents, in the manner of all Indians, consulted an astrologer to tell them about the future of their newborn baby girl. I believe I still have the soothsayer's predictions for my life amongst the few

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possessions of my mother that I've kept. I remember them saying that I was to be long-lived, but in 1900, I realise, my parents assumed this meant that, with the gods' blessing, I would survive into my fifties.

I hear a gentle tap on my door. It is Keva, my faithful maid, armed with a tray of English breakfast tea and a small jug of cold milk. Tea taken the English way is a habit I've never managed to break, even though I've lived in India – not to mention Darjeeling – for the past seventy-eight years.

I don't answer Keva's knock, preferring on this special morning to be alone with my thoughts a while longer. Undoubtedly Keva will wish to talk through the events of the day, will be eager to get me up, washed and dressed before my family begins to arrive.

As the sun begins to burn off the clouds covering the snow-capped mountains, I search the blue sky for the answer I've pleaded with the heavens to give me every morning of the past seventy-eight years.

Today, please, I beg the gods, for I have known in each hour that has ticked by since I last saw my child that he still breathes somewhere on this planet. I would have known the moment it happened, as I have for all those in my life whom I've loved, when they have passed over.

Tears fill my eyes and I turn my head to the night-stand by my bed to study the one photograph I have of him, a cherubic two-year-old sitting smiling on my knee. It was given to me by my friend, Indira, along with his death certificate a few weeks after I'd been informed of my son's death.

A lifetime ago, I think. The truth is, my son is now an old man too. He will celebrate his eighty-first birthday in October

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of this year. But even with *my* powers of imagination, it's impossible for me to see him as such.

I turn my head determinedly away from my son's image, knowing that today I deserve to enjoy the celebration my family have planned for me. But somehow, on all these occasions, when I see my other child and her children, and her children's children, the absence of my son only feeds the pain in my heart, reminding me he has always been missing.

Of course, they believe, and always have, that my son died seventy-eight years ago.

'Maaji, see, you even have his death certificate! Leave him to his rest,' my daughter, Muna, would sigh. 'Enjoy the family you have living.'

After all these years, I understand Muna becomes frustrated with me. And she is right. She wants to be enough, just her alone. But a lost child is something that can never be replaced in a mother's heart.

And for today, my daughter will have her way. I will sit in my chair and enjoy watching the dynasty I have spawned. I won't bore them with my stories of India's history. When they arrive in their fast Western jeeps, with their children playing on their battery-operated gadgets, I will not remind them how Indira and I climbed the steep hills around Darjeeling on horseback, that electricity and running water in any home were once rare, or of my voracious reading of any tattered book I could get my hands on. The young are irritated by stories of the past; they wish to live only in the present, just as I did when I was their age.

I can imagine that most of my family are not looking forward to flying halfway across India to visit their great-grandmother on her hundredth birthday, but perhaps I'm being hard

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on them. I've thought a great deal in the past few years about why the young seem to be uncomfortable when they're with the old; they could learn so many things they need to know from us. And I've decided that their discomfort stems from the fact that, in our fragile physical presence, they become aware of what the future holds for them. They can see, in their full glow of physical strength and beauty, how eventually they will be diminished one day too. They cannot see what they will gain.

How can they begin to see inside us? Understand how their souls will grow, their impetuosity be tamed and their selfish thoughts dimmed by the experiences of so many years?

But I accept that this is nature, in all its glorious complexity. I have ceased to question it.

When Keva knocks at the door for a second time, I admit her. As she talks at me in fast Hindi, I sip my tea and run over the names of my four grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. At a hundred years old, one wants to at least prove that one's mind is still in full working order. The four grandchildren my daughter gave me have each gone on to become successful and loving parents themselves. They flourished in the new world that independence from the British brought to India, and their children have taken the mantle even further. At least six of them, from what I recall, have started their own businesses, or are in a professional trade. Selfishly, I wish that one of my extended offspring had taken an interest in medicine, had followed after me, but I realise that I can't have everything.

As Keva helps me into the bathroom to wash me, I consider that my family have had a mixture of luck, brains and family connections on their side. And that my beloved India

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has probably another century to go before the millions who still starve on her streets gain some modicum of their basic human needs. I have done my best to help over the years, but I realise my efforts are a mere ripple in the ocean against a roaring tide of poverty and deprivation.

Sitting patiently whilst Keva dresses me in my new sari – a birthday present from Muna, my daughter – I decide I won't think these maudlin thoughts today. I've attempted where I can to improve those lives that have brushed against mine, and I must be content with that.

'You look beautiful, Madam Chavan.'

As I look at my reflection in the mirror, I know that she is lying, but I love her for it. My fingers reach for the pearls that have sat around my neck since the day I received them, nearly eighty years ago. In my will, I have left them to my daughter Muna.

'Your daughter arrives at eleven o'clock, and the rest of the family will be here an hour later. Where shall I put you until they come?'

I smile at her, feeling much like a mahogany chair. 'You may put me in the window. I want to look at my mountains,' I say. She helps me up, steers me gently to the armchair and sits me down.

'Can I bring you anything else, madam?'

'No. You go now to the kitchen and make sure that cook of ours has the lunch menu under control.'

'Yes, madam.' She moves my bell from the night-stand to the table at my side and quietly leaves the room.

I turn my face into the sunlight, which is starting to stream through the big picture windows of my hill-top bungalow. As I bask in it like a cat, I remember the friends who have already

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passed over and won't be joining me today for my celebration. Indira, my most beloved friend, died over fifteen years ago. I confess that was one of the few moments in my life when I have broken down and wept uncontrollably. Even my devoted daughter could not match the love and friendship Indira showed me. Self-absorbed and flighty until the moment she died, Indira was there when I needed her most.

I look across to the writing bureau which sits in the alcove opposite me, and can't help but think about what is concealed inside its locked drawer. It is a letter, and it runs over three hundred pages. It is written to my beloved son and tells the story of my life from the beginning. As the years passed, I began to worry that I would forget the details, that they would become blurred and grainy in my mind, like the reel of a silent black-and-white film. If, as I believe to this day, my son is alive and if he were ever returned to me, I wanted to be able to present him with the story of his mother and her enduring love for her lost child. And the reasons why she had had to leave him behind . . .

I began to write it when I was in middle age, believing then that I might be taken at any time. There it has sat for nearly fifty years, untouched and unread, because he never came to find me, and I still haven't found him.

Not even my daughter knows the story of my life before she arrived on the planet. Sometimes I feel guilty for never revealing the truth to her. But I believe it is enough that she has known my love when her brother was denied it.

I glance at the bureau, viewing in my mind's eye the yellowing pile of paper inside it. And I ask the gods to guide me. When I die, as surely I must soon, I would be horrified for it to fall into the wrong hands. I ponder for a few seconds on

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whether I should light a fire and ask Keva to place the papers onto it. But no, I shake my head. I can never bring myself to do that, just in case I do find him. There is still hope. After all, I've lived to a hundred; I may live to a hundred and ten.

But who to entrust it to, in the meantime, just in case . . . ?

I mentally scan my family members, taking them in generations. At each name, I listen for guidance. And it's on the name of one of my great-grandsons that I pause.

Ari Malik, the eldest child of my eldest grandson, Vivek. I chuckle slightly as the shiver runs up my spine – the signal I've had from those above who understand so much more than I ever can. Ari, the only member of my extended family to be blessed with blue eyes. Other than my beloved lost child.

I concentrate hard to bring to mind his details; with eleven great-grandchildren, I comfort myself, a person half my age would struggle to remember. And besides, they are spread out all over India these days, and I rarely see them.

Vivek, Ari's father, has been the most financially successful of my grandchildren. He was always clever, if a little dull. He is an engineer and has earned enough to provide his wife and three children with a very comfortable life. If my memory serves me, Ari was educated in England. He was always a bright little thing, though quite what he's been doing since he left school escapes me. Today, I decide, I will find out. I will watch him. And I'm sure I'll know whether my current instinct is correct.

With that settled, and feeling calmer now that a solution to my dilemma is perhaps at hand, I close my eyes and allow myself to doze.

'Where is he?!' Samina Malik whispered to her husband. 'He swore to me that he wouldn't be late for this,' she added, as she

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surveyed the other, fully present members of Anahita's extended family. They were clustered around the old lady in the elegant drawing room of her bungalow, plying her with presents and compliments.

'Don't panic, Samina,' Vivek comforted his wife, 'our son will be here.'

'He said he'd meet us at the station so we could come up the hill together as a family at ten o'clock . . . I swear, Vivek, that boy has no respect for his family, I—'

'Hush, pyari, he's a busy young man, and a good boy, too.'

'You think so?' questioned Samina. 'I'm not so sure. Every time I call his apartment, a different female voice answers. You know what Mumbai is like, full of Bollywood hussies and sharks,' she whispered, not wishing any other member of the family to overhear their conversation.

'Yes, and our son is twenty-five years old now and running his own business. He can take care of himself,' Vivek said.

'The staff are waiting for him to arrive so they can bring in the champagne and make the toast. Keva is concerned your grandmother will become too tired if we leave it much longer. If Ari's not here in the next ten minutes, I'll tell them to continue without him.'

'I told you, there will be no need for you to do that,' Vivek said, smiling broadly as Ari, his favourite son, entered the room. 'Your mother was in a panic, as always,' he told Ari, smiling as he clasped his son in a warm embrace.

'You promised to be there at the station. We waited an hour! Where were you?' Samina frowned at her handsome son but, as always, she knew it was a losing battle against the tide of his charm.

'Ma, forgive me.' Ari gave his mother a winning smile and

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took her hands in his. 'I was delayed, and I did try to call your cellphone. But, as usual, it was switched off.'

Ari and his father shared a smirk. Samina's inability to use her cellphone was a family joke.

'Anyway, I'm here now,' he said, looking around at the rest of his clan. 'Did I miss anything?'

'No, and your great-grandmother has been so busy greeting the rest of her family, let's hope she hasn't noticed your late arrival,' replied Vivek.

Ari turned and looked through the crowd of his own blood to the matriarch whose genes had spun invisible threads down through the generations. As he did so, he saw her bright, inquisitive eyes pinned on him.

'Ari! You have thought to join us at last.' She smiled. 'Come and kiss your great-grandmother.'

'She may be a hundred today, but your grandmother misses nothing,' Samina whispered to Vivek.

As Anahita opened her frail arms to Ari, the crowd of relations parted and all eyes in the room turned to him. Ari walked towards her and knelt in front of her, showing his respect with a deep *pranaam* and waiting for her blessing.

'Par-Nani, forgive me for being late. It's a long journey from Mumbai,' he explained.

As he looked up, he could see her eyes boring into him in the peculiar way they always did, as if she were assessing his soul.

'No matter,' she said as her shrunken, childlike fingers touched his cheek with the light brush of a butterfly wing. 'Although', she lowered her voice to a whisper so only he could hear, 'I always find it useful to check I have set my alarm to the correct time the night before.' She gave him a surreptitious

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wink, then indicated that he was to stand. ‘You and I will speak later. I can see Keva is eager to start the proceedings.’

‘Yes, Par-Nani, of course,’ said Ari, feeling a blush rising to his cheeks as he stood. ‘Happy birthday.’

As he walked back towards his parents, Ari wondered just how his great-grandmother could have known the exact reason why he was late today.

The day progressed as planned, with Vivek, as the eldest of Anahita’s grandchildren, making a moving speech about her remarkable life. As the champagne flowed, tongues loosened and the peculiar tension of a family gathered together after too long apart began to ease. The naturally competitive edge of the siblings blurred as they re-established their places in the family hierarchy, and the younger cousins lost their shyness and found common ground.

‘Look at your son!’ commented Muna, Anahita’s daughter, to Vivek. ‘His girl cousins are swooning all over him. It will be time for him to think of marriage soon,’ she added.

‘I doubt that’s how he sees it,’ grumbled Samina to her mother-in-law. ‘These days, young men seem to play the field into their thirties.’

‘You will not arrange anything for him, then?’ enquired Muna.

‘We will, of course, but I doubt he’ll agree.’ Vivek sighed. ‘Ari is of a new generation, the master of his own universe. He has his business and travels the world. Times have changed, Ma, and Samina and I must allow our children some choice in picking their husbands and wives.’

‘Really?’ Muna raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s very modern of you, Vivek. After all, you two haven’t done so badly together.’

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‘Yes, Ma,’ agreed Vivek, taking his wife’s hand. ‘You made a good choice for me.’ He smiled.

‘But we’re swimming against an impossible current,’ said Samina. ‘The young do as they wish these days, and make their own decisions.’ Wishing to change the subject, she glanced across to Anahita. ‘Your mother seems to be enjoying the day,’ she commented to Muna. ‘She really is a miracle, a wonder of nature.’

‘Yes,’ Muna sighed, ‘but I do worry about her up here in the hills with only Keva to care for her. It gets so cold in the winter and it can’t be good for her old bones. I’ve asked her many times to come and live with us in Guhagar so that we can watch over her. But, of course, she refuses. She says she feels closer to her spirits up here and, of course, her past too.’

‘Her *mysterious* past.’ Vivek raised an eyebrow. ‘Ma, do you think you’ll ever persuade her to tell you who your father was? I know he died before you were born, but the details have always seemed sketchy to me.’

‘It mattered when I was growing up, and I remember plaguing her with questions, but now,’ she shrugged, ‘if she wants to keep her secrets, she can. She could not have been a more loving parent to me and I don’t wish to upset her.’ As Muna glanced over and looked at her mother fondly, Anahita caught her eye and beckoned her daughter towards her.

‘Yes, Maaji, what is it?’ Muna joined her mother.

‘I’m a little tired now.’ Anahita smiled. ‘I wish to rest. And in one hour I want you to bring my great-grandson, Ari, to see me.’

‘Of course.’ Muna helped her mother to stand, and walked her through her relations. Keva, as ever hovering close by her

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mistress, stepped forward. 'My mother wishes to have a rest, Keva. Can you take her and settle her?'

'Of course, it has been a long day.'

Muna watched them leave the room and went back to join Vivek and his wife. 'She's taking a rest, but she's asked me if Ari will go and see her in one hour.'

'Really?' Vivek frowned. 'I wonder why?'

'Who knows the workings of my mother's mind?' Muna said, sighing.

'Well, I'd better tell him, I know he was talking about leaving soon. He has some business meeting in Mumbai first thing tomorrow morning.'

'Well, just for once, his family will come first,' said Samina firmly. 'I will go and find him.'

When Ari was told by his mother that his great-grandmother wished an audience with him in an hour's time, he was, as his father had predicted, not happy at all.

'I can't miss that plane,' he explained. 'You must understand, Ma, that I have a business to run.'

'Then I will ask your father to go and tell his grandmother that, on her hundredth birthday, her eldest great-grandchild could not spare the time to speak with her as she had requested.'

'But Ma—' Ari saw his mother's grim expression and sighed. 'Okay,' he nodded, 'I will stay. Excuse me, I must try and find a signal somewhere in this place to make a call and postpone the meeting.'

Samina watched her son as he walked away from her, staring intently at his cellphone. He'd been a determined child from the day he was born, and there was no doubt that she had indulged her first-born, as any mother did. He'd always

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been special, from the moment he'd opened his eyes and she'd stared at the blueness of them in shock. Vivek had teased her endlessly about them, questioning her fidelity. Until they'd visited Anahita and she'd announced that Muna's dead father had also been the owner of eyes of a similar colour.

Ari's skin was lighter than that of the rest of his siblings, and his startling looks had always attracted attention. With the amount of it he had received over his twenty-five years, there was no doubt he had an arrogance about him. But his saving grace had always been his sweetness of character. Out of all her children, Ari had always been the most loving towards her, at her side in an instant if there was a problem. Up until the time he'd taken off for Mumbai, announcing he was starting his own business . . .

Nowadays, the Ari who visited his family seemed harder, self-absorbed and, if she were being frank, Samina found she liked him less and less. Walking back towards her husband, she prayed it was a stage that would pass.

'My great-grandson may come in now,' Anahita announced, as Keva sat her up in bed and fluffed the pillows behind her head.

'Yes, madam. I will get him.'

'And I do not wish for us to be disturbed.'

'No, madam.'

'Good afternoon, Par-Nani,' said Ari as he walked briskly into the room a few seconds later. 'I hope you are feeling more rested now?'

'Yes,' Anahita indicated the chair. 'Please, Ari, sit down. And I apologise for disrupting your business plans tomorrow.'

'Really,' Ari felt the blood rushing to his cheeks for the

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second time that day, 'it's no problem at all.' He watched as she gazed at him with her penetrating eyes, and wondered how she seemed to be able to read his mind.

'Your father tells me you're living in Mumbai and that you now run a successful business.'

'Well, I wouldn't describe it as successful right now,' Ari said. 'But I'm working very hard to make it so in the future.'

'I can see that you're an ambitious young man. And I'm sure that one day your business will be as successful as you hope it will be.'

'Thank you, Par-Nani.'

Ari watched as his great-grandmother gave the ghost of a smile. 'Of course, it may not bring you the contentment you believe it will. There's more to life than work and riches. Still, that's for you to discover,' she added. 'Now, Ari, I have something I wish to give you. Please, open the writing bureau with this key, and take out the pile of paper you'll find inside it.'

Ari took the key from his grandmother's fingers, twisted it in the lock and removed an ageing manuscript from inside it.

'What is this?' he asked her.

'It is the story of your great-grandmother's life. I wrote it to keep a record for my lost son. Sadly, I've never found him.'

Ari watched as Anahita's eyes became watery. He'd heard some talk from his father years ago about the son who had died in infancy in England when his great-grandmother had been over there during the First World War. If his memory served him right, he thought she'd had to leave him behind when she returned to India. Apparently, Anahita had refused to believe that her son was dead.

'But I thought—'

'Yes, I'm sure you've been told I have his death certificate.'

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And I'm simply a sad and perhaps mad mother who is unable to accept her beloved son's passing.'

'I have heard of the story,' he admitted.

'I know what my family think, and what you almost certainly think too. But believe me, there are more things in heaven and earth than can be explained in a man-made document. There is a mother's heart, and her soul, which tells her things that cannot be ignored. And I will tell you now that my son is not dead.'

'Par-Nani, I believe you.'

'I understand that you do not, but I don't mind. However, it's partly my fault that my family don't believe me. I've never explained to them what happened all those years ago.'

'Why not?'

'Because . . .' Anahita gazed out of the window to her beloved mountains. She gave a slight shake of her head. 'It isn't right for me to tell you now. It's all in there.' She pointed a finger at the pages in Ari's hands. 'When the moment is right for you – and you will know when that is – perhaps you will read my story. And then, you will decide for yourself whether to investigate it.'

'I see,' said Ari, but he didn't.

'All I ask of you is that you share its contents with no one in our family until I die. It is my life I entrust to you, Ari. As you know,' Anahita paused, 'sadly, my time on this earth is running out.'

Ari stared at her, confused as to what his great-grandmother wished him to do. 'You want me to read this and then make investigations as to the whereabouts of your son?' he clarified.

'Yes.'

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‘But where would I start?’

‘In England, of course.’ Anahita stared at him. ‘You would retrace my footsteps. Everything you need to know you now hold in the palms of your hands. And besides, your father tells me you run some kind of computer company. You, of all people, have the webbing at your disposal.’

‘You mean the “Web”?’ Ari said with a smile.

‘Yes, so I’m sure it would take you a few seconds to find the place where it all began,’ Anahita concluded.

Ari followed his great-grandmother’s eye-line out to the mountains beyond the window. ‘It’s a beautiful view,’ he said, for want of something better to say.

‘Yes, and it’s why I stay here, even though my daughter disapproves. One day soon, I’ll travel upwards, way beyond those peaks, and I’ll be happy for it. I will see many people there whom I’ve mourned in my life. But of course, as it stands,’ Anahita’s gaze landed on her great-grandson once more, ‘not the one I wish to see most of all.’

‘How do you know he’s still alive?’

Anahita reverted her eyes to the skyline, then closed them wearily. ‘As I said, it’s all in my story.’

‘Of course.’ Ari knew he was dismissed. ‘So, I’ll let you rest, Par-Nani.’

Anahita nodded. Ari stood up, made a *pranaam*, then kissed his great-grandmother on each cheek.

‘Goodbye, and I’m sure I’ll see you soon,’ he commented as he walked towards the door.

‘Perhaps,’ she answered.

As Ari made to leave the room, he turned back suddenly on instinct. ‘Par-Nani, why me? Why not give this story to your daughter, or my father?’

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Anahita stared at him. 'Because, Ari, the story you hold in your hands might be my past, but it is also your future.'

Ari left the room feeling drained. Walking through the bungalow, he made for the coat rack by the front door, underneath which his briefcase sat. Stowing the yellowing pages inside it, he continued into the drawing room. His grandmother, Muna, approached him immediately.

'Why did she want to see you?' she asked him.

'Oh,' Ari replied airily, 'she doesn't believe her son is dead and wants me to go and investigate in England.' He raised his eyebrows for full effect.

'Not again!' Muna rolled her own eyes equally dramatically. 'Listen, I can show you the death certificate. Her son died when he was about three. Please, Ari,' Muna laid a hand on her grandson's shoulder, 'take no notice. She's been going on about this for years. Sadly, it's an old woman's fantasy, and certainly not worth wasting your precious time with. Take my word for it. I've listened to it for much longer than you. Now,' his grandmother smiled, 'come and have a last glass of champagne with your family.'

Ari sat on the last plane from Bagdogra back to Mumbai. He tried to concentrate on the figures in front of him, but Anahita's face kept floating into his vision. Surely his grandmother, Muna, was right when she said Anahita was deluded. And yet, there were things Anahita had said when they were alone – things she couldn't have known about him which had unsettled him. Perhaps there was something in her story . . . maybe he would take the time to glance through the manuscript when he arrived back home.

At Mumbai airport, even though it was past midnight,

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Bimbi was there at Arrivals to greet him. The rest of the night was spent pleasantly in his apartment overlooking the Arabian Sea, enjoying her slim young body.

The following morning, he was already late for his meeting, and as he packed his briefcase with the documents he needed, he removed the papers Anahita had given him.

One day I will have time to read it, he thought, as he shoved the manuscript into the bottom drawer of his desk and hurriedly left his apartment.

One year later

. . . I remember. In the still of the night, the merest hint of a breeze was a blessed relief from the interminable dry heat of Jaipur. Often, the other ladies and children of the zenana and I climb up to the rooftops of the Moon Palace . . .

And as I lie there gazing up at the stars, I hear the sweet, pure sound of the singing. And I know then that someone I love is being taken from the earth and gently cradled upwards . . .

I awake with a start, and find myself in my bedroom in Darjeeling, not on the palace rooftops in Jaipur. It was a dream, I try and comfort myself, disoriented, for the singing still continues in my ears. Yet I know for certain I am conscious.

I try to recover my senses and realise what this means: if I'm in the present, someone I love is dying at this moment. As my heart-rate increases, I close my eyes and scan my family, knowing that my second-sight will tell me who it is.

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For once, I come up with a blank. It is strange, I think, as the gods have never been wrong before.

But who . . . ?

I close my eyes and breathe deeply, calmly, listening intently.

And then I know. I know for certain what I'm being told.

My son . . . my beloved son. I know it is he who is finally being taken upwards.

My eyes fill with tears and I gaze out of my window, looking up to the heavens for comfort. But it's night and beyond my window is only blackness.

There's a gentle knock at my door and Keva enters, concern on her face.

'Madam. I heard you weeping. Are you ill?' she asks as she crosses the room and stares down at me, taking my pulse at the same time.

I shake my head silently, while she reaches for a handkerchief to dry the tears that have fallen down my face. 'No,' I comfort her, 'I'm not ill.'

'Then what is it? Did you have a nightmare?'

'No.' I look up at her, knowing she won't understand. 'My child has just died.'

Keva stares at me in horror. 'But how did you discover that Madam Muna is dead?'

'It is not my daughter, Keva, but my son. The one I left behind in England many years ago. He was eighty-one,' I murmur. 'At least he enjoyed a long life.'

Again, Keva looks at me in confusion, and puts a hand to my forehead to see if I have a fever. 'But, madam, your son died many years ago. I think that perhaps you were dreaming,' she says, as much to convince herself as me.

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‘Perhaps,’ I say, not wishing to alarm her. ‘But nonetheless, I would like you to make a note of the time and the date. It’s a moment I do not wish to forget. For, you see, my waiting is over.’ I smile kindly at her.

She does as I request, noting the time alongside the day and date on a piece of paper and handing it to me.

‘I’ll be fine now, you may leave me.’

‘Yes, madam,’ Keva replied, uncertainly. ‘Are you sure you’re not ill?’

‘I’m sure. Goodnight, Keva.’

When she leaves the room, I take a pen from my bedside table and write a short letter to accompany the time and date of my son’s death. I also pull out his death certificate from my bedside drawer. Tomorrow, I will ask Keva to put them in an envelope and address it to the solicitor who is charged with handling my affairs once I pass over. I have asked him to telephone me so I can give him instructions as to whom to send the envelope when I die.

Closing my eyes, I wish for sleep to come now, for I suddenly feel desperately alone here on earth. I realise that I’ve been waiting for this moment. Now that my son has left me, it is finally my turn to follow him . . .

Three days later, at the usual time in the morning, Keva knocked on her mistress’s door. Getting no initial response was normal, Madam Chavan often dozed late into the morning these days. Keva busied herself with the housekeeping for another half an hour. She returned to knock again, eliciting further silence from inside the room. Now, this *was* unusual, so Keva opened the door quietly and found that her mistress was still fast asleep. It was only after she had opened the curtains,

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chatting to her about nothing, as was her habit, that she realised Madam Chavan was not responding.

Ari's cellphone rang as he was driving in the chaotic Mumbai traffic. Seeing it was his father, whom he hadn't spoken to in weeks, he pressed the button on his phone to take the call on speaker.

'*Pitaji!*' he said brightly. 'How are you?'

'Hello, Ari, I am well, but—'

Ari could hear the sombre note in his father's voice.

'Yes?' he asked. 'What is it?'

'It is your great-grandmother, Anahita. I'm sorry to tell you that she died in the early hours of this morning.'

'Oh, Papa. I'm very sorry to hear that.'

'We all are. She was a wonderful woman and will be greatly missed.'

'Yes. At least she lived a long life,' Ari said in a consoling tone, as he steered round a taxi that had drawn to a sudden halt right in front of him.

'She did. We're holding the funeral in four days' time, to allow the family to gather for it. Your brother and sister are attending and everyone will be there. Including you, I hope.'

'Do you mean this Friday?' enquired Ari, his heart sinking.

'Yes, at midday. She'll be cremated at the *ghaat* in Darjeeling with family in attendance. We'll arrange a memorial service for her later, as there are many people who'll wish to attend and celebrate her life.'

'Papa,' Ari groaned, 'really, Friday's impossible for me. I have a prospective client flying over from the States to talk to me about my taking over his software contract. It would take

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the company from loss to profit overnight. With the best will in the world, I can't be in Darjeeling on Friday.'

There was silence on the other end of the line. 'Ari,' his father sighed eventually, 'even *I* know there are moments when business must take second place to one's family. Your mother would never forgive you, especially as Anahita made it obvious at her birthday celebrations last year that you were special to her.'

'I'm sorry, Papa,' Ari said firmly, 'but there's simply nothing I can do.'

'And that is your final word?'

'That is my final word.'

Ari heard the sound of the receiver at the other end slam down.

Ari was in a euphoric mood when he arrived home the following Friday night. The meeting with the Americans had gone so well that they'd shaken on the deal then and there. He was taking Bimbi out tonight to celebrate and had popped home to his apartment to shower and change first. He picked up a letter from his pigeon hole in the lobby and took the elevator to the sixteenth floor. Inside his apartment, he tore open the envelope as he walked into his bedroom, and read the contents of it.

*Khan & Chauhan Solicitors
Chowrasta Square
Darjeeling
West Bengal
India*

2 March 2001

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Dear Sir,

On the instructions of my client, Anahita Chavan, I have forwarded this envelope to you. As you may already know, Madam Chavan passed away a few days ago.

With kind regards and sympathy,

Devak Khan

Partner

Ari sat down on the bed, realising that, due to his excitement about the meeting and preparing his team for it, his great-grandmother's funeral that day had completely slipped his mind. He sighed heavily as he opened the envelope the solicitor had enclosed, doubting that his parents would ever forgive him for not even contacting them today.

'Well, so be it,' Ari told himself grimly, as he unfolded the piece of paper inside the envelope and read the letter attached to it.

My dearest Ari,

When you read this, I will have passed over. Enclosed are the details of my son Moh's death. The exact date and the time. And also, his original death certificate. As you will see, the dates do not correspond. This may not mean anything to you now, my dear boy, but in the future, if you do decide you wish to investigate what happened to him, both may be of relevance.

Meanwhile, until we meet again in another place, I send you my love. Always remember that we are never

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*truly the masters of our destiny. Use your ears
to listen and I know you will find guidance.*

*Your loving great-grandmother,
Anahita*

Ari sighed. He really wasn't in the mood for either his great-grandmother's hocus-pocus, or to think about how angry his parents currently were with him. He didn't want anything to dampen his good mood tonight.

Running the water in the shower, he flicked on the CD player by his bed and stood under the shower-head listening to the thumping music.

Dressing in one of his hand-tailored suits and a shirt, he turned off the music and was about to leave the bedroom when Anahita's letter caught his eye. On instinct, he refolded the pages back into the envelope and put it in the drawer with the yellowing manuscript.

*London,
Ten Years Later*



Rebecca Bradley pressed her face to the window as the plane descended towards London. The patchwork quilt of different hues of green shimmered as if with early morning dew on this beautiful summer's day. As the city of London began to appear beneath her, the sight of Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament reminded her of Toy Town, in comparison with the soaring skyscrapers of New York.

'Miss Bradley, we'll be taking you off the aircraft first,' the stewardess informed her.

'Thank you.' Rebecca managed a smile in return. She reached into her shoulder bag for the large pair of black sunglasses which she hoped would mask her exhaustion, although it was unlikely there would be photographers waiting to greet her. She'd needed to get out of New York fast, so she'd called up the airline and changed her original flight for an earlier one.

She felt a certain satisfaction that no one, not even her agent, or Jack, knew where she was. Jack had left her apartment that afternoon to catch his flight back to Los Angeles. She'd been unable to give him the answer he wanted, had told him she needed time to think.

Rebecca rifled further through her bag for the red velvet

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box and opened it. The ring he had given her was certainly substantial, if too ostentatious for her taste. But Jack liked doing things big, as befitted his status as one of the world's most famous and highest-paid film stars. And he could hardly present her with anything less, given that, if she said yes to his proposal, the ring would be pictured in newspapers and magazines around the world. Jack Heyward and Rebecca Bradley were Hollywood's hottest couple and the media couldn't get enough of them.

Rebecca closed the velvet box and numbly stared out of the window as the plane prepared to touch down. Since she and Jack had met a year ago on the set of a rom-com, she'd felt as if her life had been taken hostage by those who wanted to live vicariously through not only the films she starred in, but also her private life. The truth was – Rebecca bit her lip as the plane continued its descent – that the 'dream' relationship the world imagined the two of them had was just as much make-believe as her films.

Even Victor, her agent, was encouraging her in her relationship with Jack. He had told her countless times that it could only benefit the trajectory of her rising global star.

'There's nothing the public like better than a real Hollywood couple, honey,' he had said. 'Even if your film career takes a dive, they still wanna take photos of your kids playing in the park.'

Rebecca thought back to the amount of time she and Jack had actually spent together in the past year. He was based in Hollywood, she in New York, and often their hectic schedules had meant that they wouldn't see each other for weeks on end. And when they *were* together, they were hounded wherever they went. Even yesterday lunchtime, they had eaten in a little

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hole-in-the-wall Italian and had been besieged by customers wanting pictures and autographs. Jack had ended up taking her for a walk in Central Park to propose in peace and quiet. She only hoped no one had spotted them there . . .

The overwhelming claustrophobia she'd felt as they had taken a cab back to her SoHo apartment and Jack had pressed her for an answer had resulted in her sudden decision to take an earlier flight to England. Having the world scrutinise your every move, to be hounded on a daily basis by strangers who all felt that somehow they owned a part of you, was, Rebecca felt, unsustainable. The lack of privacy which came with conducting a high-profile relationship, let alone not being able to grab a bagel and latte from the local coffee shop without being mobbed, was slowly taking its toll.

Her doctor had prescribed Valium a few weeks ago, when she'd been door-stepped at her apartment block and had ended up locking herself in her bathroom, crouching on the floor and crying hysterically. The Valium had helped, but Rebecca knew it was a road to nowhere. The slippery path to dependency to enable her to cope with the pressure she lived under loomed before her. Just as Jack knew all too well.

He'd assured her in the first heady days of their romance that the cocaine he used was not a regular habit. He could take it or leave it. It simply helped him unwind. But as she'd come to know him better, Rebecca had discovered this wasn't an accurate assessment. He had become defensive and quarrelsome when she questioned his continual heavy usage and about the amount of alcohol he was drinking. As someone who didn't take drugs and very rarely drank, Rebecca loathed it when Jack was high.

At the beginning of their relationship she had thought that

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her life could not be any more perfect: a hugely successful career and a handsome, talented life-partner to share it with. But between the drugs, the absences and the slow unveiling of Jack's insecurity – which had culminated in a show of rage towards her when she'd been nominated for a Golden Globe six months before and he hadn't – the rose-tinted glasses had begun to turn grey.

The offer of a great part in a British film, *The Still of the Night*, set in the 1920s and focusing on an aristocratic English family, could not have come at a more opportune moment. Not only was it a move away from the lightweight parts she'd played so far, but it was also a huge honour to be chosen by Robert Hope, the acclaimed British director. Jack had even managed to put a downer on that, citing the fact that they needed her to be the Hollywood 'name' in the film to satisfy the money men. He had then proceeded to tell her that her biggest attribute would be looking great in the array of period costumes she'd wear, and that she shouldn't really get any ideas about her talent having won her the part.

'You're far too beautiful to be taken seriously, sweetheart,' he'd added as he'd slopped more vodka into his glass.

After the plane touched down at Heathrow and taxied to a halt, Rebecca undid her seatbelt as the lights came on in the aircraft.

'Are you ready, Miss Bradley?' asked the stewardess.

'Yes, thank you.'

'They should be no longer than a couple of minutes.'

Rebecca ran an urgent comb through her mane of long, dark hair and fixed it into a coil at the nape of her neck. Her 'Audrey Hepburn' look, Jack called it, and indeed the media constantly likened Rebecca to the iconic star. There was even some talk of remaking *Breakfast at Tiffany's* next year.

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She mustn't listen to him, mustn't let her self-confidence as an actress be broken by him. Jack's last two films had been flops and his star was not shining as brightly as it used to. The dreadful truth was that he was jealous of her success. She took a deep breath to calm herself. Whatever Jack had said to her, she was determined to prove that she was far more than a pretty face, and the meaty script gave her a real chance to do just that.

And at least, tucked away on location in a rural part of the English countryside, Rebecca hoped for some peace and space to think. Underneath all his problems, she knew there was a Jack she loved. But unless he was prepared to do something about his growing dependency, she knew she couldn't say yes to his proposal.

'We're taking you off the aircraft now, Miss Bradley,' said the dark-suited airline security officer who'd appeared at her side.

Rebecca donned her sunglasses and left the First Class cabin. Sitting in the VIP lounge waiting for her luggage to be collected, she reflected that it was a road to nowhere with Jack unless he admitted his problems. And perhaps, she mused, taking her cellphone from her bag and staring at the screen, that was exactly what she should tell him.

'Miss Bradley, your luggage is being taken to your car,' said the security guard. 'But I'm afraid there's a barrage of photographers waiting for you outside.'

'No!' She looked up at him in dismay. 'How many?'

'*Many*,' he confirmed. 'Don't worry, I'll see you safely through.'

He indicated that they should make a move and Rebecca stood up.

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‘I wasn’t expecting this,’ she commented as she walked with him towards Arrivals. ‘I took a different flight over here.’

‘Well, you’ve hit London on the morning your big news has broken. May I offer my congratulations?’

Rebecca stopped dead. ‘What “news”?’ she asked him bluntly.

‘Your . . . engagement to Jack Heyward, Miss Bradley.’

‘I— oh, Jesus,’ she muttered.

‘There’s a lovely photo of you in Central Park with Mr Heyward putting a ring on your finger. It’s on the front pages of most of our newspapers this morning. Right,’ he paused in front of the sliding doors, ‘are you ready?’

Behind her sunglasses, tears pricked Rebecca’s eyes and she nodded angrily.

‘Good, we’ll get you through as quickly as we can.’

As the car nosed its way out of Heathrow, Rebecca gazed helplessly at the photograph of her and Jack taking pride of place on the front of the *Daily Mail* and the headline:

JACK AND BECKS – IT’S OFFICIAL!

The grainy image was of Jack placing the ring on her finger in Central Park. She was gazing up at him with what *she* knew was an expression of panic, and what the journalist had described as delighted surprise. Worst of all, there was a comment from Jack, obviously given after he’d left her apartment yesterday afternoon. He had apparently confirmed that he’d asked Rebecca to marry him, but they were yet to name the date.

She reached with shaking hands into her bag and drew out her cellphone again. Seeing there were numerous messages

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from Jack, her manager and members of the press, she switched it off and returned it to her handbag. She couldn't cope with responding to any of them at present. She felt furious with Jack for making *any* comment on what had taken place in the park.

By tomorrow, the world's media would be speculating on who would design her wedding dress, where they would hold the ceremony and, probably, whether she was pregnant.

Rebecca closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She was twenty-nine years of age and, up until last night, the idea of marriage and kids had been but a fleeting thought, something that might happen in the future.

But Jack was pushing forty, had bedded most of his co-stars and, as he had told her, felt it was time to settle down. Whereas for her, it was only her second serious relationship, after many years of being with her childhood sweetheart. Her burgeoning career and eventual fame had destroyed that love story too.

'I'm afraid it's going to take a good few hours to get down to Devon, Miss Bradley,' said her friendly driver. 'My name is Graham, by the way, and you let me know if you need to stop for any reason on the way.'

'I will,' said Rebecca, feeling at this moment that she'd rather he drove her to a vast desert somewhere in Africa, some place where there were no photographers, newspapers or cell-phone signals.

'Pretty isolated where you're going, Miss Bradley,' commented Graham, mirroring her thoughts. 'Not a lot of bright lights and shops on Dartmoor,' he added. 'Magnificent old place you're filming in, mind you. Like going back to a totally different era. I didn't think anyone still lived in grand places like that any more. Anyway, the countryside makes a pleasant

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change for me, I can tell you. Normally I'm ferrying actors to the studios through the London traffic.'

His words comforted Rebecca somewhat. Perhaps the media would leave her alone if she was out in the middle of nowhere.

'Looks like we've got a bike on our tail, Miss Bradley,' said Graham, looking in his rear mirror and abruptly destroying her hopes of privacy. 'Don't worry, we'll lose him as soon as we're on the motorway.'

'Thank you,' said Rebecca, trying to calm her fraught nerves. She sank back into her seat, closed her eyes and did her best to try and sleep.

'We're nearly there, Miss Bradley.'

After four and a half hours in the car, dozing intermittently, Rebecca was feeling the disorientation of jet lag. She looked blearily out of the window. 'Where are we?' she asked as she gazed out at the rugged, empty moorland surrounding them.

'On Dartmoor. It looks pleasant today with the sun shining, but I bet it's pretty bleak in the winter. Excuse me,' Graham said as his phone rang, 'it's the production manager. I'll just pull over to take the call.'

As the driver answered his cellphone, Rebecca opened the door and stepped out onto the rough grass at the side of the narrow road. She breathed in deeply and smelt the sweet freshness of the air. There was a slight breeze blowing across the moorland, and in the distance she could see clumps of jagged rocks silhouetted against the uneven skyline. There was not a single human being to be seen for miles. 'Heaven!' she breathed, as Graham started up the engine and she climbed back in. 'It's so peaceful here,' she commented.

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‘Yes,’ he agreed, ‘but unfortunately, Miss Bradley, the production manager phoned to say there’s already a collection of photographers gathered outside the hotel the cast are staying in. They’re waiting for you to arrive. So he suggests I take you straight to Astbury Hall, where you’re filming.’

‘Okay.’ Rebecca bit her lip in further despair as they drove off.

‘Sorry, Miss Bradley,’ he offered sympathetically. ‘I’m always telling my kids that being a rich and famous movie star isn’t quite what it’s made out to be. It must be hard for you, especially at moments like this.’

His sympathy prompted a lump in Rebecca’s throat. ‘Sometimes.’

‘The good news is that whilst you’re filming, no one can get near you. The private land surrounding the house is a good few hundred acres, and it’s about half a mile or so from this entrance to the house itself.’

Rebecca saw that they had arrived at a pair of vast wrought-iron gates with a security guard on duty by them. Graham signalled to him and the guard opened the gates. Rebecca looked in wonder as they drove through parkland dotted with ancient oak, horse chestnut and beech trees on either side of the road.

Up ahead was a vast house, more of a palace, really, the kind she had only seen in books or on historical programmes on the television. A baroque confection of carved stone and fluted columns.

‘Wow,’ she breathed.

‘It’s pretty spectacular, isn’t it? Although I’d hate to think what the heating bills are like,’ Graham commented.

As they drove closer and Rebecca saw the vast marble

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fountain at the front of the house, she wished she knew enough correct architectural words to describe the beauty in front of her. The graceful symmetry of the building, with two elegant wings on either side of a crowning central dome, made her catch her breath. Sunlight was glinting from the perfectly proportioned panelled windows set like jewels along the entire front, the stonework between them interspersed with cherubs, urns and ciphers. Under the massive central portico, supported by four enormous columns, she glimpsed a magnificent double-fronted oak door.

‘Fit for a queen, eh?’ said Graham, as he skirted around the house to a courtyard at the side, which was filled with vans and lorries. A hubbub of people was carrying cameras, lights and cables inside through a door. ‘They’re hoping to be ready to start shooting tomorrow, so I’m told,’ Graham added, parking the car.

‘Thank you,’ said Rebecca as she climbed out of the car and the driver walked round to the boot to retrieve her case.

‘This all you brought with you, Miss Bradley? Film stars like you normally have a container full of luggage.’

‘I packed in a hurry,’ Rebecca admitted as she followed him across the courtyard towards the house.

‘Well, just remember, Miss Bradley, I’m on call for the whole of the shoot, so if there’s anywhere you need to go, you just tell me, okay? It’s been a pleasure to meet you.’

‘Ah, you made it!’ A lean young man strode towards them. He held out his hand to Rebecca. ‘Welcome to England, Miss Bradley. I’m Steve Campion, the production manager. I’m sorry to hear you’ve had to run the gauntlet of our appalling gutter press this morning. You’re safe from them here, at least.’

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‘Thank you. Do you know when I’ll be able to go to my hotel? I could use a shower and some sleep,’ said Rebecca.

‘Of course. We didn’t want to put you through another ordeal at the hotel after the airport this morning,’ said Steve. ‘So, for now, Lord Astbury has very kindly offered you a room here in the house to use until we find you alternative accommodation. As you may have noticed,’ Steve indicated the huge building, ‘he has a few going spare. Robert, the director, is very keen to start shooting tomorrow and didn’t want your concentration, or that of the other actors staying at the hotel, to be disturbed.’

‘I’m sorry to be the cause of all this trouble.’

‘Well, never mind, that’s what we get for having such a famous young actress in the film. Right, the housekeeper said to find her when you arrived and she’ll take you upstairs to your room. There’s a full cast-call in the drawing room at five p.m. tonight, so that gives you a few hours to sleep.’

‘Thank you,’ Rebecca repeated, not missing the timbre in Steve’s voice. She knew she’d already been labelled ‘trouble’, and was sure that the cast of talented British actors – none of whose fame or box-office power could currently match her own – would agree with him.

‘Wait there and I’ll go and find Mrs Trevathan,’ Steve said, leaving Rebecca to stand uncomfortably in the courtyard, watching the camera crew heave their equipment past her.

A minute later, a plump, middle-aged woman with greying curly hair and a rosy complexion bustled out of the door towards her.

‘Miss Rebecca?’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, of course it is, dear.’ The woman smiled broadly.

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‘I recognised you immediately. And let me tell you, you’re even more beautiful in real life. I’ve seen all your films and it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Mrs Trevathan, the housekeeper. Follow me, and I’ll take you up to your bedroom. It’s a long walk, I’m afraid. Graham will bring up your case later,’ she commented as Rebecca made to pick it up. ‘You can’t imagine how many miles I cover each day.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Rebecca, struggling to understand the woman’s thick Devon accent. ‘This house is totally amazing.’

‘Less amazing now there’s just me and some daily help here to care for it. I’m run ragged. Of course, many years ago, there were thirty of us working here full-time, but things are different now.’

‘Yes, I suppose they are,’ Rebecca agreed as Mrs Trevathan led her through a series of doors into a huge kitchen, where a woman in a nurse’s uniform was sitting drinking coffee at the table.

‘The servants’ stairs are the fastest way to the bedrooms from the kitchen,’ Mrs Trevathan said, as Rebecca followed her up a steep and narrow flight of steps. ‘I’ve put you in a nice room at the back of the house. It’s got a lovely view of the gardens and the moor beyond. You’re very lucky Lord Astbury agreed for you to use a room here. He doesn’t like house guests. Sad really, this house could once sleep forty comfortably, but those days are long gone.’

Finally, they emerged through another door onto a wide mezzanine landing. Rebecca gazed up in wonder at the magnificent domed cupola above her, then followed Mrs Trevathan along a wide, shadowy corridor.

‘You’re in here,’ she said, opening the door to a spacious, high-ceilinged room dominated by a large double bed. ‘I

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opened the windows to air it a while ago, so it's a little chilly. But better than the smell of damp. There's an electric fire you can use if you're cold.'

'Thank you. Where is the restroom?'

'You mean the bathroom, dear? It's two doors down to the left, on the other side of the corridor. I'm afraid we haven't quite run to en-suite facilities just yet. Now, I'll leave you to rest.'

'Would it be possible for me to have a glass of water?'

Mrs Trevathan paused on her way to the door, then turned round, her face sympathetic. 'Of course, you must be all in. Have you eaten anything?'

'No, I couldn't face breakfast on the plane.'

'Then how about I get you a nice pot of tea and some toast? You really are looking quite peaky.'

'That would be wonderful,' Rebecca thanked her, feeling suddenly dizzy and sitting down abruptly in an armchair placed by the empty fire grate.

'Right then, I'll be off to get it.' Mrs Trevathan gazed at her thoughtfully. 'You're only a slip of a thing underneath all that glamour, aren't you, dear? Now, you sort yourself out and I'll see you in a bit.'

Rebecca made her way along the corridor and after a number of false starts into a linen cupboard and another bedroom, found a large bathroom with an old-fashioned cast-iron tub sitting in the centre of it. A rusting metal chain dangled from the cistern above the toilet and, having drunk some water from the tap, she returned to her room. Walking over to the long windows, she gazed out over the view below. The garden beyond the wide terrace that flanked the rear of the house was obviously well tended. Flowering plants and shrubs grew along

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the borders in immaculate abundance and the cherry blossom trees were in bud, their pale pinkness softening the green of the central lawns. Beyond the box yew hedge which encircled the formal garden lay the moors, their ruggedness in direct contrast to the flat, manicured lawns below her. Kicking off her shoes, she climbed onto the bed, the mattress comfortably softened by years of wear.

When Mrs Trevathan knocked softly on the door ten minutes later and entered the room, she saw Rebecca was fast asleep. Putting the tray down on the table by the fireplace, she covered her gently with the bedspread and quietly left the room.