

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

TWO DAYS AFTER I'd been to Lahore I was in the courtyard, filling the brass lotahs with water in the late afternoon. There were no more patients at the infirmary, and I had decided to scrub down the verandahs.

I looked up at the pounding of horse's hoofs on the hard-packed yard. A young man, his head bare, jumped down from a sweat-lathered horse and ran to me.

'Much bad,' he said, in halting English, panting, his face twisted in distress, 'much hurt. The baba . . . no come out. Lalasa . . . please, come. Help Lalasa,' he cried out, his hands together in front of him in supplication.

'You're Lalasa's husband?' I asked in Hindi, and he nodded, a flicker of relief crossing his face at his language.

'I am Balin,' he said. 'Come, please. She asked that I bring the Mem; she said you and the Mem will know what to do.'

My mother had come from the house. 'When did the pains start?' she asked in English. 'How long has she been in labour?' She made a sound of annoyance when Balin stared at her, blinking as he tried to understand, and I translated.

'Yesterday, early morning,' Balin said, still panting, licking his dry lips. His tongue was furred with grey.

'But . . .' My mother stared at him. 'It's almost evening. Lalasa has been in labour all this time – almost two days, and you're only now coming for my help? Why?' She pushed past him.

Again, Balin couldn't understand most of her words, but her anger was clear. 'My mother, she says this is normal,' he tried to explain to me. 'She says it isn't the husband's business.'

'Didn't you call anyone – a midwife, or your sisters, or Lalasa's mother?' I demanded. 'Why didn't you get someone – even your own mother – to help her?'

The man shook his head. 'My mother says we must leave her, for it's only through pain that one learns strength. My mother says she will catch the baby when he comes, but Lalasa must be strong, like her, and do it alone. But Lalasa started screaming, screaming, and I couldn't listen any longer. I couldn't listen.' His eyes filled with tears, and even though I was furious at him, I knew he was exhausted and afraid, and had tried to do the right thing, caught between his obedience to his mother and his concern for his wife. 'My sisters won't disobey our mother. But I can't listen any longer,' he repeated. 'I can't let her suffer so greatly. I asked her, asked Lalasa, what can I do, and she cried go to the mission house. And so I came. You'll help her?'

'Lord have mercy,' my mother said, muttering something else under her breath I couldn't hear. 'Hurry, Pree, go ahead with him on the horse. Do what you can until I can get there.'

'I haven't ever—' I started, not knowing what it was I should do, but she interrupted.

'I have to take the cart. I don't know where your father or Kai are. Tell this fellow to hook up Marta for me, and run to the infirmary and get the bag. Bring scissors, lots of clean flannel and muslin, a needle and thread, and disinfectant.'

All I could think of was Lalasa, but in that moment I was relieved at my mother's clearness this day, her decisiveness and authority.

Balin did as I told him, and I got what my mother asked

and ran back outside with the carpet bag as Balin was helping my mother climb into the cart. ‘Tell me where to go once I get to the village,’ she said, and I translated Balin’s directions.

Then she slapped the reins on Marta’s dusty back, urging her into an ungainly gallop.

I bunched up my skirt and Balin lifted me on to the bare back of the horse before swinging up behind me. The journey – the horse galloping the whole way – took a short time, but it felt endless.

When Balin pulled the horse up in front of a small house built of pukka, I heard Lalasa’s scream before we even reached the courtyard. Balin leapt off the horse, not waiting for me, and I ran after him. Four young women silently crouched together at one side of the courtyard – his sisters or Lalasa’s friends. An older woman – obviously his mother – rose from a carpet beneath a feathery tamarind, shouting at Balin in anger, waving her hands in the air, but we both ignored her and ran through the house to the room he shared with Lalasa.

I stopped at the door as Balin went to Lalasa’s side, stroking her forehead and whispering to her. She was panting, and even from the doorway I could see that she was unnaturally bloated, her bare legs, so lithesome in the past, now thick, the ankles indistinguishable from the calf. I saw the pale, shiny line of the scar on her shin. Lalasa’s eyes went to me, and then rolled up, her mouth opening, and I rushed to her. As the next scream tore from her, I saw that her mouth was bleeding, ripped at the corners. Her knees were bent and her thighs trembled violently, and then her whole body was taken over by a convulsive spasm. Her scream died away as her body shook and trembled, finally slowing. Lalasa’s irises returned, and she blinked as if confused. I wiped the blood from her lips; they had a lavender hue now.

‘Pree?’ she said, and I tried to smile, but my mouth

wouldn't work. She gripped my hand, although weakly. 'Pree,' she said again. 'You came.'

'My mother's coming as well; she'll be here any moment. She'll know what to do, Lalasa. She'll help you.' I spoke convincingly, but feared there would be little my mother would be able to do. If Lalasa had been in labour this long . . . and she was too small; her body was too small. 'Balin, fetch hot water,' I told him, knowing it was unimportant, but I wanted him to do something, to make it seem that we were helping Lalasa in some way.

I stayed with her through the next convulsions, unable to do anything but stroke her forehead and whisper encouragement to her when she was conscious. Balin brought the water in a basin and paced up and down the room. Finally my mother arrived, rolling up her sleeves, and, glancing over her shoulder at Lalasa, plunged her hands into the waiting water, scrubbing them. Then she came to the bed and smiled at Lalasa.

'Your son shows his strength,' she said in her halting Hindi, but her smile faded as she watched Lalasa's eyes roll up again. As her body convulsed my mother looked at me. 'It's probably septicaemia,' she said. 'Her body has gone into shock. Take Balin outside.'

I did as she told me, instructing Balin to wait with his mother until we called for him. The old woman wouldn't look at me, muttering under her breath as she chewed her betel.

I went back inside. Lalasa's body still laboured and convulsed; her eyes were open, but she no longer screamed. She made no sound at all, except for the grunting that came from her involuntarily.

'Is there nothing we can do?' I cried, crouching beside Lalasa's charpoy and looking up at my mother.

'The head is right here,' she said, bending over Lalasa, her

hand between the girl's legs. 'I can feel it. But she has no more strength to push the baby out. It slips back between each pain.'

'Can't you pull it out?' I asked, angry at my ignorance, at not knowing what to do, how to help Lalasa. I knew the internal female anatomy from the medical books, and I had seen a man reach inside a bellowing cow with both hands, and then his arms, right up to his shoulders, digging and tugging, finally pulling out two long, narrow legs, followed by the calf's head before the rest of its body slithered out. I knew a woman wasn't made the same way as a cow, of course, but . . . 'If it's so close,' I ended, my voice faint. 'Isn't there some way to get it out?'

My mother's lips tightened, and then she opened her carpetbag and pulled out a small, sharp knife. She instructed me to hold it over the flame of the lamp that burned in the corner. I did, handing it back to her. 'Help me sit on the edge of the charpoy,' she said, and I held her arm while she painfully settled on the low bed with a suppressed moan. I looked away as she pushed Lalasa's limp legs apart and bent between them.

I didn't want to think of the knife cutting into Lalasa's soft, secret flesh.

At a sudden exclamation from my mother I turned. 'Come. Come now and help me,' she said, and I went to the end of the charpoy and saw, in the mess of bloody fluid, my mother's hands wrapped around a tiny head, also bloody, and moulded into a peak. Her fingers working into Lalasa's cut edges, she manoeuvred out one rounded shoulder, and then the other, and, much like the calf, the rest of the body emerged in one great rush. In spite of the blood – Lalasa's blood – covering the child, I could see it was a girl. As my mother held the baby with one hand she grabbed a piece of flannel and briskly cleaned out the tiny nose and mouth. The

child made small mewling sounds, and my mother, spreading her own thighs so that her skirt made a hammock, motioned for me to throw another piece of flannel over her skirt, and then set the baby there.

At the sounds, Lalasa's mother-in-law appeared, peering over my mother's shoulder, and as soon as my mother had cut the thick cord and tied a thread around it near the baby's navel, the old woman rather brusquely took the now-crying baby, loosely wrapping her in the flannel, from my mother's lap. The child was still covered in Lalasa's blood.

As the woman carried the baby out of the room, my mother concentrated on Lalasa, pressing her ear to the girl's chest and rubbing her small hands between her own. She kept putting more and more flannel under Lalasa, but still the crimson spread.

'Prop up the bottom of the charpoy,' my mother said, and I did as I was told, placing large circles of the dried dung stacked against one wall to be used as fuel, under the end legs. As I did so, there was a thump, and I saw the china head of Lalasa's doll, fallen from where it had been wedged between the wall and the bed.

I tried not to think about Lalasa holding the old doll as she struggled to bring her own child into the world. 'How can she be cold in this heat, Mother? She's shaking.'

'It's the shock. Cover her and keep her warm while I wash my hands, Pree. Here, help me up.'

After I hauled my mother from the edge of the charpoy I tucked two sheets around Lalasa's small body, and as I did so, she suddenly stiffened. Her eyes rolled back into her head and her body jerked in rhythmic spasms similar to what she'd experienced before the baby was born.

'She's doing it again,' I cried out. 'Why is she having a fit even now?'

My mother shoved me out of the way, pushing a folded

piece of flannel into Lalasa's mouth. Her small white teeth clamped on it. After what seemed an eternity, the jerking stopped, and the girl's body relaxed and finally grew still. My mother bathed Lalasa's face with a damp cloth, murmuring to her. 'You're all right now, Lalasa. You're all right.'

Finally Lalasa's eyes focused, and I kneeled beside the charpoy so she could see me.

'Lalasa,' I said. 'It's over. The baby . . . the baby is here.'

'My child,' she said, her voice little more than a sigh. 'A son?'

My mother put her hand on my shoulder, and I looked up at her. She smiled down at Lalasa, although it was more of a forced grimace. 'Yes, Lalasa. It's a boy, a strong, handsome boy,' she said, in her stilted Hindi.

I sat back on my heels.

'Can you hear his cry?' my mother asked. 'Listen.'

I realised then that the baby was indeed howling, its voice loud and demanding from the courtyard, and I tried to smile at Lalasa.

Her eyelids flickered, and a faint smile came to her white lips. 'I hear him. My husband will be proud. Now my mother-in-law will find me worthy.'

'Yes, dear,' my mother said in the English Lalasa couldn't understand. 'You did well. You gave your husband a son.' She picked up her bag.

I took Lalasa's hand, but it was limp and cold. 'Lalasa?' I whispered, leaning closer. But it didn't appear that she could see or hear me. Her eyes fixed on the window on the opposite wall. A long, soft breath came from her partly opened lips, and then no more sound.

'Lalasa?' I said, again, my voice louder, but I knew it would do no good. I knew the look of death. The girl child had killed her. 'Mother!' I cried.

My mother moved in front of me, pushing me out of the

way and placing her fingertips on the girl's neck. She shook her head, her lips moving as I assumed she prayed. She gently put her hand over Lalasa's face, and when she removed it, Lalasa's eyes were closed.

I heard whimpering; I realised it was from my own throat.

'Prepare warm water, scented with elixir of roses,' my mother said. 'Get the elixir from my bag.'

I heard her, but couldn't do as she asked. My body was frozen, as still as Lalasa's. My mother shook my arm, her fingers squeezing it as she had squeezed my shoulder when she told Lalasa her baby was a boy. 'Prepare the water so that we can bathe her before her family sees her.' She turned back to Lalasa and pulled the thin sheet up and over her face. Lalasa's features were so small that her nose and chin barely made a rise in the thin fabric.

'Lalasa,' I whispered, and putting my hands into the Hindu *namaste*, lowered my head over them. I wanted to cry, for the pain in my throat was overpowering, my eyes stinging. And yet I couldn't. Then I rose and did as my mother asked, stirring a few drops of the elixir into a copper bowl of warmed water. I moved as if something heavy held my body and my mind with a massive, deadening force, as if it weren't me at all that stirred and mixed, but someone I watched.

I slowly handed the bowl to my mother and stood back – still with that strange, underwater sense of being in a deep, confusing dream – as she uncovered parts of Lalasa's body – a leg, an arm, her torso – bending over her and washing each exposed part and then replacing the sheet again.

'You brush her hair,' my mother said then, when she had finished with the cloth and rosewater.

I shook my head. I didn't want to touch Lalasa; I didn't want to think of her like this. I wanted to think of her as I had known her when she'd come to the infirmary with her

mother: skipping nimbly through the yard, trying to coax Jassie to follow us as we ran to the fields, smothering her little sister's cheeks with kisses; her mother calling her *beti* – daughter – with such affection. She and I giggling as we hid in the high canes, pretending we were desirable *ranis*.

I could only imagine the anxious beauty of her face as Balin lifted the wedding veil last year, or her shy pleasure at telling him, a few months later, about the son she knew she carried.

I didn't want to remember her as a limp, torn body, an expressionless face. I pulled the doll from under the charpoy and lifted the sheet and put the doll into the crook of Lalasa's arm.

At a sound I turned, and saw Balin standing in the doorway. His face was naked with shock. He backed away, and then turned and left, and I realised, as I took the bowl from my mother, that the baby had stopped crying. There was no sound but the far-off lowing of a bull, the sharp squawk of a crow. My mother's hand touched my elbow.

'Come. We'll leave her to her family to prepare her further for her final journey.'

I looked at her. 'Why did you lie? About the baby?'

My mother briefly closed her eyes. 'You know as well as I that it would do no good for her to believe she died for a girl,' she said, her voice hard. 'Why not let her believe, in her last moments on earth, that her death was worth something?'

At that moment I saw something in my mother, something that showed so rarely that I wanted to breathe it in, draw it inside my body. I wanted to remember her always like this, caring enough to break one of the commandments out of kindness.

I followed her from the room, stopping at the doorway one last time to look back at Lalasa's still form. In the courtyard her mother-in-law sat on her carpet with her back

against the tamarack. Balin was nowhere to be seen. Nor was the baby.

My mother slowly crossed the yard, her heavy bag dragging one arm lower than the other. She limped even more than usual. I took the bag from her, and when relieved of its weight she squeezed her hand tightly with the other as if to restore its circulation. As we passed Lalasa's mother-in-law, I stopped.

'Where is the baby?' I asked her, my voice low. I had never before seen this woman, but I hated her, hated that she could have let her daughter-in-law suffer for so long. 'I would like to see her.'

My mother kept walking.

'She is of no consequence,' the old woman answered, and my mother stopped and looked back at me. Something in the way her mouth suddenly pulled to one side made a prickle of anxiety run down my spine.

I turned my head in all directions, looking around the quiet courtyard. 'But where is she?' For some reason my voice came out with an uncharacteristic breathiness. 'I want to see her. I want to—'

'There is no baby,' the woman said, expressionless. She put an almond between her back teeth and cracked it. 'My daughter-in-law gave birth to a stone.'

'A stone? What are you talking about?'

'A useless girl, a stone. The same. She's dead.'

I gasped, and at the same time heard a sound from my mother, no more than a sudden inward take of air through her nose. 'Dead? But . . . no. I saw her.' My voice rose. 'How could she be dead? She cried, and waved her arms and legs. She—'

'She's dead,' the woman repeated, now picking the meat from its shell. 'My son has taken her body to be left for the jackals. In this way he will be ensured of the birth of future

sons with a new wife.' She popped the nut into her mouth and chewed slowly, staring at me.

I blinked and opened my mouth, but it was as if my voice was a prisoner of my throat, which had closed. My tongue was suddenly too large, too dry, sticking to the roof of my mouth. I looked at my mother. Her face, for one frightening moment, looked as dead as Lalasa's.

'Come, Pree. We'll go home,' she said, and went out on to the road in front of the house, where the cart waited. I watched the slump of my mother's shoulders as she limped away from me. I heard another nut crack, and with that sound I jerked, and found my voice.

'No!' I cried, running after my mother. 'No. The baby didn't die. She didn't. You saw her. You know,' I said, pulling on her arm.

My mother stopped again, looking down at my hand on her arm. 'It's the heathen way. What can we expect? So many gods, and yet at times they appear godless. They worship everything but life itself.' Her words were venomous, but her voice was quiet, hoarse with weariness. 'And perhaps it's better for her. For the baby. An unwanted girl, her mother dead . . . it's better,' she repeated. 'She would have had a life unfit for living.'

I stood in the road, looking around me as if for an answer. I knew then that Lalasa's heartless mother-in-law had killed the baby. How? By pinching her mouth and nose? By placing her hard, gnarled fingers around the dainty throat? I closed my eyes at the image. And then I opened them, thinking of Balin, with his kind, weak face. He must have allowed it; in this, as it appeared to be in all matters, he had allowed his mother to hold the power, to dictate his own actions.

I heard the creak of wood as my mother climbed into the cart.

I stood there, looking around as if confused, searching for

something I'd lost. And then I saw, in a field with the sun sinking orange over it, a figure – a man – walking towards a thicket of trees. I could only see his back, but it was stooped, and he walked with a lurching sway, as if newly crippled. I knew with certainty it was Balin.

Without a second's hesitation I tried to run towards the field, after Balin, thinking that somehow the old woman had not carried out her vile act, that the baby was still alive, and I could convince him not to leave her for the jackals. I would take her, I would keep her safe . . . but my legs wouldn't work. They felt as if filled with liquid, formless – was it the shock of what I had just experienced? – and instead of running in the easy stride I always had, I stumbled, sprawling face forward into the dust. I hit my nose so hard that bright lights burst with the shocking pain. I lay there for a second, stunned, then slowly pushed myself into a sitting position. A man walked by, leading a donkey with a huge pile of straw tied on to its back. He looked at me with mild curiosity, but didn't stop. Blood, scarlet as Lalasa's, dripped on to my skirt; I tasted copper. I got to my feet, pinching my nose with my fingers to staunch the flow, wincing at the pain as I looked to where I'd seen Balin. He was no longer visible.

'Come, Pree,' my mother called from behind me. 'There's nothing more to be done here.'

I stood alone in the road while the sky was bathed in vivid orange. Then slowly, my legs still trembling, I walked to the cart and awkwardly pulled myself in. My mother handed me a wad of clean flannel. I held it to my nose as we rumbled home.

There truly was nothing more to be done.