



The moon gave off a silvery haze, barely highlighting the path ahead. Towards the north, the track led down to the centre of the village, leading into narrow lanes and gullies of one- and two-storey dwellings daubed in lime and fuchsia, with vines and creepers edging their green fingers across the walls. To the south lay open fields, rice paddies sweltering in the heat, long-standing grasses and ears of corn swathed in darkness; and freedom.

She stood for a moment and tried to get her bearings. Screams rang through her head. Screams and then laughter, one following the other. Accusations and exclamations. Memories flashed by. Her beloved. The muscles that rippled through his skin, the soft golden-brown hairs that covered his chest. She shivered as she recalled his gentle caress. His creamy clouded skin, so soft, so different from that of any other man she had ever seen. Hazel eyes that shone and sparkled with the promise of love. For ever . . .



She shuddered and moved on, heading south, fearful that her father was behind her. Maybe her brothers too – with their crimson-covered hands, cudgels swinging. She moved quickly despite the darkness, every step taken from memory – years of walking this same way, to take *roti* and *dhal* out to her father and her brothers as they toiled in the heat of the midday sun, ploughing and planting and tending and harvesting. Late-night trips before bed time that eventually became clandestine meetings with him...

Now, as she fled the wrath of her family, she recalled nothing of the warmth and love and joy that had formed her fifteen years on Earth. She felt only anger and fear. And deep inside, as some invisible hand forced her on, nestled just above the forming head of her unborn child, she felt a stabbing, cloying pain which threatened to sap the strength from her bones and the will from her heart. But she pushed on and on. And on...

The well sat alone in the middle of a disused square of land, surrounded on all sides by tall grasses and hemp plants. The stone from which it had been built three hundred years earlier appeared shiny and almost metallic under the moonlight. Everything round about sat in utter darkness yet the well stood out, as if it were an omen. She stood barely five paces from it, searching the night sky. Tears coursed their way down her cheeks as she tried and tried to make sense of what had happened. Why it had happened.



'Das Menhu', she implored her maker. 'Tell me why...?'

She noticed a bright star, directly above her. Above the well. It was him. She knew it. Already he was waiting, just as he had always promised, in those stolen moments among the long ears of corn, and out here at the very spot where she stood.

'If I go before you,' he'd whispered to her, caressing her soft, naked belly, 'then I will wait for you. Up there, in the sky.'

'How will I find you, *meri jaan*?' she'd replied.

He'd smiled, his eyes sparkling. 'You will find me up there, at night. The brightest of all the stars. Waiting for you.'

'But we have our whole lives ahead of us.'

'*Ti helh, meri jaan*,' he'd told her, kissing her gently on the lips.

Now she repeated his words to herself. *You are my life.*

*You are my life...*

And there he was, just as he had promised, above her head. High up in the Heavens. Awaiting her. She paused and considered how fate had played such a cruel trick on her, taking her heart away and leaving only a trace of him inside her. She held her belly and cried for her child. She looked up again, shedding more tears, an unstoppable flow now. He was still waiting.

*Meri jaan.*

She edged towards the well, sat on the wall and waited another moment or two. Long enough to tell



her child that she loved it. Long enough to tell her  
beloved that she was on her way. Long enough to try  
and make recompense with her maker.  
'*Meri maafi kaaro-ji*,' she cried. 'Forgive me, my Lord.'  
And then she fell . . .

**LEICESTER**

