

Ah ko chahie ek umr asar hone tak,  
Kawn jeta hai teri zulf ke sur hone tak?

--Mirza Ghalib, Delhi, 1797 - 1869

A sigh needs a lifetime to assail,  
Who lives long enough for your charms to prevail?

## The Azadi Trilogy

### Book I

#### Doctor Margaret's Sea Chest

#### Prologue

The full moon hung like a lantern, as if held by an invisible force, in a cloudless sky. We galloped on a treeless plateau that sloped down to the glittering waters of a wide river. From the numerous smouldering pyres, visible along the *ghats*<sup>\*</sup>, I believed it to be the mighty Ganges. The river flowed endlessly, until it seemed to drain into the star studded heaven to deposit the ashes of the departed. Although I had gazed at the flickering stars countless times before, there seemed to be something strange about them that night. Was it the weird pattern they had formed themselves in, or their unusual brightness? I could not resolve just then. In the hot night-air, sweat poured down my face and body, drenching my light cotton tunic and riding breeches.

The rider ahead of me, clad simply in a white wrap, charged with speed, waving frantically at me to keep up, as I fell behind. Was it not for the simple fact that the rider rode side-saddle and had long blonde hair that shone in the moonlight, I would have taken her for a man. Her horsemanship was flawless; in the bright moon-glow, her mount jumped over dry gullies and manoeuvred around large boulders without breaking stride.

Tall mountains loomed ahead and clusters of leafy trees cast long shadows. Apart from the clatter of hooves, the unmistakable albeit faint sound of cannon fire reverberated like distant thunder claps from the far side of the mountains. I leaned down to check if my musket was still

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\* A Glossary of non-English words is at the end of the book.

in its saddle holster, for I feared that the Godiva-like maiden, rushing headlong forward, was surely leading me into battle. While I remembered that a rebellion had broken out across the land, whether we would fight for the Indian revolutionaries or on the British side, I knew not. Suddenly, the silhouette of another rider on the crest of a small hill could be seen moving briskly towards the heights on a white charger. Something about the horse and rider looked odd, almost eerie. The rider appeared to be slumped in the saddle, head on the horse's mane and arms wrapped around the creature's neck. The colt ran hard, as if led by an instinctive force to a specific destination.

“Hurry up. We have to save the Rani!” The blonde figure up ahead shouted to me, pointing toward the injured rider.

A Rani? It was only then I noted the other rider's colourful garb, like that of an Indian queen. However, she looked injured, almost lifeless. Her long dark hair flowed down the pale horse's neck that looked streaked with blood. I continued my efforts to keep up with the two pairs ahead as they galloped across the now steeply rising land, dotted with increasing amounts of vegetation.

“Why? Why do we have to assist her,” I hollered back.

“Look at the stars.”

I stared up at the sky again to see what my mysterious leader wanted me to observe. It was then I perceived the strange formations of the planets and the stars. The outer planets: Uranus, Neptune, Pluto and others had formed themselves around the moon into a Yod—a major configuration, also referred to as an Eye-of-the-God or the Finger-of-Fate. I had heard that this configuration of planets in the form of sextiles and quincunxes was extremely rare. The formations occurred only once a millennium or so and were thought to have major dynamic influences on the persons they shone upon. These people then became the chosen ones, who

would go on to perform miraculous deeds.

I wondered if we were being followed. I stood up in the stirrups and glanced back. Sure enough, some distance away in the valley, a contingent of riders was visible. From their glinting helmets and their rigid riding formation, they were definitely British cavalry.

We galloped on, following the Rani's horse. Finally, it seemed that our mysterious destination loomed up ahead. On the remote mountain slope in a small dell, virtually hidden by the surrounding ridges and trees, moonbeam shone on some sandstone pyramid-like domes, likely those of a temple. It looked to be a perfect secluded spot to hide from the enemy.

The blonde woman was again getting far ahead of me. I heard her shout once more, "Come along, before it is too late. The Rani of Jhansi is India's last hope for freedom."

"How can we serve her? There are only two of us. The whole British army is behind that mountain," I yelled back.

"Kali will assist us. Don't you see the goddess flying over the mountain top?"

I peered intensely towards the peak. For a while, other than the treetops, I could not see much. Then suddenly, as if by magic, she appeared on the horizon. It was the four-armed lady, riding a tiger. She held a sword in one hand and in the others what looked to be: a trident, a severed head and a cup dripping with blood. She wore a skirt made of human arms and a garland of white human skulls that glowed in the moonlight. She looked down at us with fiery red eyes, which flamed from her dark blue face. It was the mother-goddess. Kali.

My labouring steed's mouth foamed, yet in an attempt to get a last burst of energy out of him and to get closer to the two exotic women and Kali, I spurred hard. The creature neighed aloud and stumbled onto his front quarters. I was thrown from the saddle and tumbled on the dusty ground, my ears ringing.

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The loud ringing in my ears was from my bedside alarm clock. Once again, I had awakened to find the bed-sheets wet with perspiration. It was another of the recurring nightmares that had tormented me ever since I had arrived in Delhi from the United States. The mysterious Godiva look-alike met me in different locations.

The clock read six a.m., which suggested it was time for me to roll out of bed, shave, shower and get ready for another busy day at the Hospital. Or, so I had thought.

## Chapter 1

### A Fascinating Discovery

*1965 May: Delhi, India*

The busy day ahead was on my mind, as I switched off the Volkswagen Beetle's engine in the *Doctors Only* parking area of the Lady Dufferin Hospital. However, I had no idea that it would launch the most intriguing chapter of my life on the Indian sub-continent.

Despite having been back in India for nearly a year, as an American visiting doctor from Johns Hopkins University Hospital, I had not yet re-acclimatised to the intense heat of that part of the world. As I stepped out of the car, the humid air greeted me, hinting at the start of the long hot Delhi summer. Emerging from the concrete parking lot into the bright sunlight, I walked through the Hospital's scenic garden, returning the *namestes* and *salaams* of the *chokidars* and the *maalis*. Fountains spewed sparkling streams of water and sprinklers showered the plants, trying to make up for Nature's broken promises of rain. Eye-catching beds of oleander, hibiscus and roses, filled with colourful flowers in reds, yellows and purples, dotted the paths. They danced in the gentle breeze, as if in merriment, straining to drink drops of the passing sprinkled water.

The Lady Dufferin's red sandstone two-story imposing structure, created in the flamboyant Mughal style, looked more like a nawab's palace than a hospital. My wristwatch showed it was close to eight o'clock. Being aware that the main lobby would be thronged with

patients and visitors, I walked briskly on the paths among the manicured lawns and entered the Hospital through the back door. I made my way, through the labyrinthine of antiseptic smelling passages, towards my office.

On the central corridor, I spotted Premila, our Surgery Unit's nurse, rushing towards me waving a slip of paper.

“Doctor Sharif!”

I waited for her and she handed me a message slip, breathless from her scamper. Before leaving, she smiled and bid me a *namaste*—with the palms together and a slight nod of her head. I thanked her and returned the greeting.

The note was from my Chief, Doctor Rao. It read, in his scribbled handwriting:

*Wallidad, could you please see me, first thing in the morning.*

In my office, I called the head nurse to hold my patients for a while. I hung my beige suit's jacket in the wardrobe and changed into a white doctor's coat. Stepping to the mirror to comb back my dark wavy hair, which due to the humid conditions had a tendency to slide over my forehead, I could not help noticing how the Indian sun had tanned my face to a copper tone. This transformation made me look once again like a native son of the land I had left, as a teenager, nearly eighteen years ago. While striding across to the other end of the surgery wing, my personal thoughts were on my impending return home to Baltimore.

Opening the polished mahogany door, with *Doctor S. RAO - Chief of Surgery*, engraved on a shiny brass plate, I wondered what could be so important that Doctor Rao wanted to see me immediately? Normally, I did not see him until after my morning duties. Nurse Premila walked through the waiting room into his office to announce my arrival. Doctor Rao himself came to the door, dressed in a white shirt, dark trousers and a thin red tie. He greeted me in a loud voice.

“Doctor Walli, how are you?”

Smiling, I nodded and asked about his health. He was a slim, tall person with the dark brown complexion of those from the central Indian provinces. Shaking my hand, he put his other hand on my shoulder and led me into his office. He gestured at me to sit in his visitor's alcove by the bay windows that presented a picturesque view of the garden, while he went to his desk and shuffled some papers apparently looking for something.

“What's up, Doctor Rao?” I asked, sitting down on the tan leather sofa. I noted a book with the title, *Lara's Story*, printed in gold embossed letters along the spine, lying on the mahogany coffee table among some magazines. The title intrigued me. A Russian novel? However, knowing his love for literature I gave it no further thought. He sat down on the opposite sofa, and must have noted my impatience, when I gestured a no thank you in a response to his offer of coffee. He came right to the purpose of calling me in.

“It's a matter of returning a sea chest to its owner.”

I consider myself a person not easily fazed, at most times, but this apparent mention of someone's luggage, baffled me. “A sea chest, you say?” I finally asked, not sure if I heard right.

“Yes, indeed, an old sea chest. A large trunk, belonging to a lady doctor,” he said and glancing at the slip in his hand, continued, “named Margaret Wallace. We understand she was one of the first lady medical workers at, St. Stanley's. I heard they initially requested Florence Nightingale to join them, but she was busy in the Crimea then, and Doctor Margaret was sent in her stead. But she probably wasn't British, because the label on the trunk shows the address of the American Mission in Futtehghurh.” He paused, likely wondering if I was getting impatient with this story. When I was noncommittal, he came to the point and asked, “Would it be possible for you to locate her family? I mean when you return to America, and return her trunk to them?”

“Yes, I suppose so. But why am I being asked to take this chest back to her folks?” I inquired respectfully, suppressing my urge to ask more directly that what any of this had to do with me.

“Well you see, Doctor Sharif, this is not an ordinary trunk. It has been here in our Hospital's storage for quite a while, and prior to that was at some other hospital, likely at the one in Jhansi, for a long time.”

“She worked at St. Stanley's! Wouldn't that be in the mid 1800s?” My raised voice betrayed my disbelief. All types of possibilities swam in my head concerning the owner and the personal possessions the trunk might contain. A female doctor? What could have possessed her to go into a profession so stubbornly guarded by men in those days, and then to come all the way to India? Furthermore, his mention of *Jhansi* rang a bell in my mind, but could not place it just then.

I heard Doctor Rao saying, “Yes, the Custodian believes that it has been here at least since 1857. As no one claimed it, the coffer lay locked away, forgotten, in a storage room.

This additional information astonished me. I blurted, “1857! Then she must have been here at the time of the Great Muti... err... Rebellion!” I swiftly checked myself from saying ‘Mutiny,’ for I knew most Indian patriots are rather sensitive about that word and prefer to call that historic event, India's First War of Independence. Although in practice, most historians referred to it as a Rebellion. I implored, “Again, Doctor Rao, why is it *me* who has to take this trunk back to America?”

“Lady Dufferin's Board of Directors, whose meeting I attended yesterday, consider that you are the most appropriate person to return the trunk to the descendants of its owner. We feel, being originally from this part of the world, and having been, shall we say ‘naturalized’ in



America,” he smiled and added, “you could be trusted with this important task. And I dare say a somewhat sensitive mission.”

“Why, thank you. I am glad to hear the Directors have so much confidence in me. Nevertheless, I’m not promising anything. I’ll have to think about it.”

“Yes, certainly. Take your time. However, we need to know soon.” Doctor Rao crossed his legs. “By the way, Walli, weren't some of your close family, unfortunately, caught up in the 1857 Rebellion?”

“Yes, according to some of the stories my grandmother has told me. My grandfather served under the last Mughal king in Delhi and later in the Rani of Jhansi’s cavalry. How about you Doctor Rao? Weren’t your family also involved in the conflict?”

“Yes, regrettably so,” he replied and then asked quickly, as if wanting to change the subject, “How is your grandmother?”

“She’s over eighty now, and keeping well. Thank you.” I knew Doctor Rao’s family was originally from Jhansi and as my grandfather had been there, during 1857-1858, I was hoping to learn a bit more about that kingdom. It then came to me. What a coincidence, I thought, of having seen the Rani in my dream just the night before. However, on earlier occasions whenever I asked him about his family background, he was elusive. I got the feeling that Doctor Rao did not wish to speak much about them or Jhansi. Hence, I did not press for details.

“By the way, Walli, please keep this crucial information to yourself, at least until we have delivered the trunk to your or someone else’s home in America, and the owner's descendants are located.”

“Why the secrecy, doctor? Is someone else after the sea chest?”

“No. But just a precaution,” he smiled. I noted he put the tips of his fingers together in his

typical manner he used when he did not wish to go into details. “To keep the inquisitive and the bounty hunter types away. I'm glad to hear that you will consider assisting us. Let's discuss this further over lunch, shall we? ”

Getting up from the sofa, I nodded and left for my office.

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I spent the rest of the morning getting through my usual hectic schedule as the Hospital's Gastroenterological Specialist for gall bladder and other internal organ problems. In addition, I was learning more about tropical diseases like cholera and malaria. Hence, I did not get a clear moment to further reflect upon the strange, yet seemingly important task, the Chief Surgeon had called upon me to undertake. The usual queue of patients filled the anteroom. Examining them took up the entire morning.

I met Doctor Rao again for lunch in the cafeteria. We sat at a corner table. A turbaned bearer came over and took our orders. Doctor Rao, a vegetarian, selected only meatless dishes: rice, vegetable curry and *masala-dosa*. I ordered a couple of pieces of my favourite *tandoori* chicken, lentil curry and naan bread. The waiter brought over, our drink orders of *lassi*. We sipped the refreshing beverage from copper tumblers with intricate engravings around the edges. After a bit of small talk, about our immediate families and general matters, we discussed the intriguing issue of the fascinating discovery—the sea chest. Doctor Rao enlightened me with more details. We spoke at some length, until our food order and shortly thereafter other colleagues arrived to join us at our table. We were drawn into chatting with them and got busy eating.

After lunch, I hurried off to perform two major gall bladder cholecystectomies, planned for the afternoon. At that time, we were improving the Laparoscopic technique—first tried on

humans by a Swedish doctor in the early 1900s—it involved minimizing the extent of the incisions in patients' abdomens. Compared to the standard major surgical procedure, the cases benefited considerably from this new process, as they typically went home the very same or the next day after the operation. The interns were keen to get as much experience in this practice as possible, during my scheduled short one-year stay at the Hospital. As a result, in those last days of my tenure, I was swamped with requests for guidance and training in this method.

That afternoon, with all the pressures of work, I nearly forgot about the sea chest. However, later, back in my office, the request from Doctor Rao returned to my thoughts. Goodness! What was I to do with the trunk, I am being handing over? I should at least see it before it is shipped to my home.

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When the late afternoon sun stretched its lazy golden fingers through my second floor office windowpanes, signalling the end of the day, I sighed in relief and walked out on to the balcony for some fresh air. This higher vantage point revealed the real artistic symmetry of the garden below. The typical Mughal *charbagh*, with lawns bisected and quartered by watercourses and fountains, presented a soothing sight to weary eyes. The garden ended at a boundary wall with bougainvillea vines tumbling over the barrier, bearing their exquisite red, yellow and purple flowers. Beyond lay the vibrant city.

The sounds of the city traffic, like screams from the centuries-old civilization it had cradled, reverberated to me. In the distance the metropolis, bursting with people, vehicles, minarets and skyscrapers—an intermingling of old and modern buildings—shone in the evening sun's rays. On one side lay Old Delhi, the city built by previous rulers, the Mughals. On the other side stood the city Sir Edwin Lutyens designed, New Delhi—the city constructed by the

subsequent occupiers. I often wondered how a time traveller from the past empires, which flourished here for centuries, would react upon witnessing the fascinating mixture of ancient and modern architecture that the capital now comprised. I peered into the distance to locate the circular Connaught Place, where my uncle, Arif Sharif, still ran his jewellery boutique. He and my grandmother were among the last surviving Delhi residents from the old generations of Mughal families. They had endured through the numerous wars with the Afghans, Persians, Sikhs, Indian Rajahs, the British, and lastly the civilian riots during the days following the 1947 Independence and Partition of India.

It occurred to me that, as day must turn to evening and evening has to give a way to darkness, all civilizations have to eventually transform themselves into distinct entities. The lengthening sundown shadows falling from high rise buildings, domes of the mosques and tall trees, presented a picture of Delhi at sunset, the same one which perhaps inspired historians to call the last days of the Mughal Empire, prior to 1857, the Twilight Era.

From the last of the Mughals, my thoughts turned to Doctor Margaret's sea chest. Good heavens, it was lying here for over a hundred years! Why did she not return to retrieve it? Where was she from? Where did she go?

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That evening, on the drive back to my apartment, the meeting with Doctor Rao popped into my mind again and replayed like a scratchy old homemade movie. Driving through the hectic rush hour required skills, learned only on Delhi roads. One needed to manoeuvre through not just the traffic, but also the mass of pedestrians. They spilled over from the sidewalk, dodged vehicles and crossed the streets as if out for a walk in the Shalimar Gardens. Bicyclists weaved in and around the moving cars, buses, taxis, and rickshaws. The beeping air horns sounded like

trumpeting elephants in a stampede, each trying to overtake the other. The scene reminded me of an often-repeated saying, "The right of way belongs to the bigger vehicle."

While overtaking an overcrowded bus, with passengers hanging on for dear life from doors and even poised on the rear bumpers, I could not help thinking about the efforts, that humans beings have to make and our reliance on each other for a helping hand, to survive in this world. It was then Doctor Rao's voice came back to me, requesting me to help find the lady doctor's relatives and return her trunk to them. Agreeing to the assignment, I had thought would be a morally right thing to do, as a symbolic act of appreciation for my term at the historic hospital. The Lady Dufferin Hospital was established during the Raj and named after its patron, the wife of a British viceroy. However, there appeared to be another, possibly mystical, reason. This trunk, it seemed to me, was like one of the last remaining vestiges of the presence of the British in India. Chronologists usually ascribe the beginning of the British domination to have been in 1757. That year Robert Clive, leading the East India Company's forces, had routed the French out of their settlement at the south Indian town, Chandernagore. Then, at Plassey, he defeated the army of Siraj-ud-daulah, the Nawab of Bengal. Although, those battles did not last long, the events that followed had everlasting consequences for both nations, and indeed the whole world.

It was with these worldly thoughts in mind that returning the sea chest seemed so important, something I believed Lady Dufferin herself asked me to do, through her regal gaze, from the portrait done in rich, red, blue and touches of yellow oils that hung in the Hospital's lobby. The painting had confronted me again, at noon on my way to the cafeteria. Lady Dufferin's eyes arrested me on the spot, as if reminding me of the Hospital's benevolent history. "You owe it to this tenacious lady doctor, one of the first to come to India. Restore her sea chest

to her family. Help her soul to rest in peace,” the portrait seemed to command.

Evading another taxi coming towards my car, I recalled some scraps of the conversation Doctor Rao and I had held in a low voice over lunch.

He said, “Walli, there’s another reason I believe you are suited for this undertaking.” He ignored my blank stare and carried on, “I think your lovely wife might be able to assist us in finding Doctor Margaret’s family. I remember meeting Alexandra at the Christmas reception last year, when she was over for the holidays. If I recall correctly, she’d mentioned she was originally from Canada?”

“Yes. We met while I was studying at University of Toronto. But, why do you believe she could help?”

Doctor Rao smiled. “Although the trunk’s label indicates that Margaret was from somewhere in the United States, I sense she was more likely from Canada.”

That information puzzled me. “Why Canada?” I blurted.

Doctor Rao took a sip of his drink, smiled and said, “Let me show you something.” He pulled out from his jacket’s pocket an envelope. Inserting two fingers inside the packet, he pulled out a small card with a cellophane paper covering and placed it on the table in front of me. “It is from one of my nephew’s collection.”

I stared at the card. It was the kind that stamps collectors use to display their valuable sets. Through the transparent paper, three similar stamps were visible. They showed a faded image, on a blue background, of a young Queen Victoria, with pursed lips and large expressive eyes, wearing a jewelled crown, a necklace and matching pendulum earrings. An oval frame had *Canada Postage Twelve Pence* written around the picture. From photographs I had seen, the Queen’s portrait seemed to be one of her earliest ones, probably done in 1837, the year of her

accession to the Throne. I picked the card up and examined it closely. The stamps looked genuine as they had post marks, which although smudged read 1856. I gulped and looked at Doctor Rao in disbelief; he by then had taken on a Sherlock Holmes type of gaze. "These seem to be the very first issued Canadian stamps. Where did your nephew get them?"

"Oh, they have been in our family possession for a while. My nephew says they were given to him by his grandfather who believes they were found on an envelope in an old English novel."

"Does he have the envelope?" I asked.

"No, unfortunately not. Someone steamed the stamps out and discarded it."

"And this was in Jhansi?"

"Yes, in Jhansi. So you see Walli, this information should make it easier for you and your wife to locate the inheritors of the trunk."

"How can you be so sure that these stamps came from a letter addressed to Margaret?"

"I am not positive of course. But, there are rumours in our family circles that Doctor Margaret had lent that book to one of our relatives," he said and concluded with a final, "It's a good possibility that she was from Canada."

I was impressed, for this was the first time he had confided at least this much about his family. Nevertheless, it was obvious that he did not wish to divulge any further details. I simply said, "You know doctor, Canada is a very vast country."

"Yes, but it has hardly the population we have here in India!" I kept silent and he persisted, "And on the other hand, your own family connections here in Delhi could help you. Surely your grandfather must have known her."

I must admit that I was intrigued by the extraordinary possibility that Grandfather had

actually met this lady. Having married and settled in North America, I was not in good terms with my parents. In fact, I had not seen them for a long time. Hence, since no one had told me about him, Grandfather's life had been a mystery to me. I had wished, for a long time, to learn more about his role in the Revolution.

Upon further coaxing from Doctor Rao, to accept the assignment, I remembered finally saying, as if moved by an invisible supernatural force. "Okay, I will see what I can do, Doctor. I will have to speak to my wife first, though. Returning the trunk to Doctor Margaret's family could be an impossible task. Don't be surprised if you receive a shipping slip that it's sent back here." I said.

He laughed. Just then, some colleagues joined us at the table and Doctor Rao quickly put the historical stamps back in his pocket. It did puzzle me, a bit, that he did not wish to show them to the others. I put that his usual enigmatic nature.

While turning the car into the driveway of the Delhi Intercontinental Apartments, I made a mental note to call Alexandra the next morning around 6 a.m. Considering the time difference, it would still be the previous evening in Baltimore, a convenient time for her. After her usual extended day, she should be home from her Law Office.

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"Hi dear, how are you?" Alexandra's voice sounded cheery as soon as she spoke in the telephone. The long distance operator would have mentioned the call was from Delhi.

"Pretty good, honey, and how about you?" I tried to be as lively as possible, to prepare her for the important news I wanted to share. After the usual pleasantries and asking about our families and jobs, I came to the point. "Listen, dear, a trunk will arrive in a few weeks, via an international shipper. Please accept it and have it stored away in the basement, unopened."



“My, is it full of all the gifts you are bringing for us?” she teased.

“There might be some presents in there, but not for us. The trunk doesn't belong to me.”

“Oh! Whose is it then?” she asked in a surprised tone, over the static on the telephone line.

“Hon, you won't believe this. It belongs to an American or, Doctor Rao thinks, a Canadian lady doctor.” I gave her the particulars and told her what I was being asked to do.

“But why can't they return it themselves?” was her obvious question. I could picture her twirling her blonde hair between her fingers, which she did whenever she was a bit confused.

“It's a long story. Looks like they lost track of her during the 1857 war. She simply disappeared.”

Alexandra persisted, “But haven't they tried to locate her family?”

“I believe they have. Doctor Rao tells me they made several attempts through the normal government channels, the Missionary Societies who they believe originally sponsored her, and even the Red Cross, but to no avail. All those attempts led to dead ends with no record of Doctor Margaret or her family's whereabouts.”

“Hmm... wonder what makes them think you'll succeed,” Alexandra murmured, obviously bemused at this surprising piece of news. I imagined her—with her lovely blue eyes shining, one hand around her chin, and her face in a quizzical look—in deep thought. After a bit of silence she asked, “So, what is inside this trunk?”

It was an opening for me to give her the other part of the extraordinary news. “You won't believe this, darling, but we don't know! Actually, no one knows.”

“What! Why's that? Haven't they opened the trunk yet?”

I tried to remain as composed as possible, before replying, “No. The trunk has not been

opened, as far as I know, possibly ever since she packed it.”

Alexandra's fervent question was, “But why on earth not?”

“Well you see, dear, it has to do with some of the religious customs and traditions in this part of the world. You already know they do not like to touch strangers, preferring to greet one another from a distance. I am not very knowledgeable on this subject, but several groups here believe in the sacredness of the spirit of the deceased person; they consider that a part of the person's soul remains in any possessions left behind. I don't know, but it seems they think it would be an extreme disrespect to Doctor Margaret's spirit to allow her trunk to be opened, and her items in there touched and fondled freely, by anyone other than her immediate family members or descendents. It would be as if they had violated the sanctity of the trunk.”

I tried to further explain these spiritual sanctum concepts in the rather long-winded manner I often adopted when explaining the intricacies of Indian culture to North Americans. However, from a lack of response, I seemingly had little success.

“My, my, this is heavy spiritual stuff. So am I to understand that we aren't supposed to open this coffer; only to locate Doctor Margaret's family and deliver it to their doorsteps?”

“Yes. Those are the directives.”

“If you ask me, it sounds like some sort of a cover-up,” she said, talking like a lawyer, that she was.

I said, like a simpleton, “No, no. I don't think its anything like that. It looks to me the Hospital is merely trying to live up to their responsibility by delivering the possessions of a notable doctor, safely and properly to her relatives,” and added with a chuckle, “Her being American you know.” She laughed at that deduction.

“So, whatever became of Doctor Margaret? Did she die there?” Alexandra asked,

sounding inquisitive.

I tried to respond to her question, based on what I'd learned from Doctor Rao so far.

“Well, that is also a complete conundrum. I gather there are several theories on her whereabouts after she left St. Stanley's Hospital here in 1856, just before the war. They believe she received a request from the Rani of Jhansi to treat one of the princes, who apparently was seriously ill. The last time anyone saw the doctor in Delhi was a glimpse of her in a carriage, escorted by some of the Rani's *sowars* heading towards Jhansi, you know, the city a few hundred miles south of here. Then the Rebellion erupted, and while everyone knows what happened to the rebels, no one knows what occurred to her.”

“Aren't there any street legends on whatever happened to the Rani and the good doctor?”

Alexandra asked sounding fascinated.

“Doctor Rao told me the bazaar rumours. Apparently, several Russian military men were attached to the Rani's forces, in an advisory capacity. Some believe their real motive for being there was to instigate the Rebellion—”

Alexandra interrupted excitedly, “Well it sounds like they were saved by the Russians!”

“It is possible, but we still don't know what became of her and who or where her surviving family is—”

Alexandra again interjected. “Wait a minute. Didn't your grandfather also serve in the Rani's army? Wouldn't he have known something about Margaret?”

“Yes. Possibly. I am going to see Grandmother soon. I will ask her.”

Alexandra paused for a moment. She seemed to have become interested in this story, when she said, “I suppose I could ask some of my cousins in Russia if they ever heard of an Indian Rani being helped by an American doctor and Russian officers. You know, gossip travels

like the wind, especially in St. Petersburg and Moscow circles.”

I wondered aloud about Doctor Margaret's possible Russian connection. “But, why would she have asked the Russians for assistance? Couldn't she have merely gone over to the British side? Why wouldn't they have supported her?”

“She could have. For all you know, she might have come back to North America.”

Alexandra speculated.

“It's a good possibility, and that's what the Hospital believes. However, Doctor Rao's thinking is, based on those old stamps, she returned to Canada. So, dear, can you also please ask the Toronto side of your family to see if they could discover any descendants of a Doctor Margaret Wallace in Ontario, or anywhere in Canada?”

“I'll see what I can do.” Her voice took on the same firm tone it did whenever she committed herself to a major undertaking.

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One morning, a few days later, while driving out from my apartment building's driveway onto the street, I noted a dark-blue sedan parked on the curb. From its distinctive huge chrome-plated front bumper and the miniature racing-hound motif on the hood, I recognised it to be a Russian Volga. The driver was reading a newspaper, but it looked as if he used it more to veil his face. Driving by, I managed a side glimpse. He had a sunburned face, short blond crew cut hair and unmistakable Slavic features. I had a gut feeling that he was a Russian.

I drove towards the Hospital, taking care to avoid the usual slew of buses, taxis, rickshaws and other rush hour traffic, all striving to overtake each other and me. I noticed the blue Volga again in the rear view mirror, through the twin oval back windows, of my VW Beetle. It remained there every time I looked, all the way to work. The driver did not attempt to

pass and kept a respectable distance. When I turned into the Hospital's entrance, the sedan did not follow me in.

After parking my Beetle, I waited in the garden and looked towards the road and the Hospital's both entrances, to locate the car or the driver. I couldn't observe either. Thinking it was just an odd coincidence, I continued on to my office.

That afternoon, over lunch with Doctor Rao, I mentioned this curious incident of the dark-blue Volga following me right up to the Hospital. I remarked in jest, "Looks like, the Russians are after me, Doctor Sahib."

While he seemed to look concerned, he just laughed it off. "Oh, Walli! It appears you are reading too many of those Cold War espionage novels!"

"But, sir, could it have to do with my acquiring that old trunk?" I asked. "You did say someone else might be interested in it?"

"No, no. That's not possible. The trunk is safe with us. We have security guards here all the time. Don't worry about that car. It was probably there just picking up some other Europeans, foreign embassy staff perhaps, staying in your apartment building."

While this opinion was plausible, as there indeed were other Europeans residing in my building, I was still curious about the sea chest. I asked, "So, Doctor Rao, when can I see this precious trunk?"

"Of course. I think you should have a look before we ship it. I will ask Mila to arrange it."

We finished lunch and went on our separate ways. However, that afternoon, while I was on the balcony for some fresh air and gazed towards the City, the morning's events came back to my mind. I recalled the earlier conversation with Alexandra and remembered telling her about

the rumoured involvement of Russian secret agents in the 1857 Rebellion. Alarm bells rang in my head. Good heavens, was the KGB aware of this trunk's existence? Did they listen in on my overseas call to Alexandra? What could be in the trunk that is so significant to the Russians, after all this time?

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That evening, I had just returned from a good workout in the hotel's gym, on the machines and boxing and karate exercises routines, and sat in my apartment's small living room, reading a newspaper and enjoying some jazz music on the Voice of America broadcast. The doorbell rang. Turning the radio down, I walked over and opened the door to find an attractive blonde woman, wearing a blue jacket and short skirt, standing in the hallway. She held a book in her hands and some more volumes stuck out from a canvas bag at her feet.

She gave me a dazzling smile and said, "Hello Doctor Sharif, my name is Katya." We shook hands.

"You like to buy this book? Only 500 Rupees," she said in an unmistakable Russian accent, holding the book towards to me.

While I was trying to recover from the surprise of seeing her, the sight of the book and its title, *Lara's Story*, staggered me. I was a copy of the same one I had seen lying on Doctor Rao's office coffee table, a few days ago. I leaned on the doorknob for support and stared at the hardback for a moment and then at her. Her deep blue eyes looked steadfastly at me. Finally, having regained composure I took the book and opened the door wider. "Okay, I might be interested. Would you like to come in?"

She looked back and nodded at a beige suited heavysset man, wearing a straw fedora with its brim bent over his eyes, standing at the end of the corridor. He nodded in return, turned and

proceeded down the staircase.

“Thank you.” She said to me and picking up her satchel walked in.

As she passed me, I noticed her slim athletic figure, but a few wrinkles in her face betrayed her age, which I put to be closer to fifty. I motioned her toward the sofa. She sat down and attempted to smooth the skirt over her shapely knees.

“Can I get you some tea or coffee ... a drink perhaps?” I asked, sitting down on the chair opposite the sofa.

“No, thank you. Me okay.”

“So, what’s this book about? Did you write it?” I asked leafing through the pages, while trying to remember where I had heard, or read in a novel, a character named Lara.

“It’s Russian story.”

Then it suddenly came to me. “Oh, do you mean the lady in Boris Pasternack’s novel?”

“No, no. He don’t write the real account of our people. I write the true story here.”

“Really! I enjoyed *Doctor Zhivago*. Is this book similar?”

“No. It tell story of my grandmother.”

“So, this one, is a biography. Hmm... might be interesting. Okay, I’ll buy it. I see that you got it published here.” I said looking at the Delhi publisher’s name at the bottom of the first page below the title and author’s name, Yekaterina Barinowska.”

“Yes. They translate it for me.”

“Interesting. So, do you live here? How long have you been in India?”

“For two years. I working at the Soviet Embassy.”

The mention of the Soviet Embassy immediately rang warning bells in my head. I could not help but stare at her. Doing my best to remain calm, said, “I believe you have been to see my

boss Doctor Rao. Haven't you?"

She did not look surprised at all. She nodded and her hair that she had done up in a chignon shook with her head.

"Has it something to do with Doctor Margaret's trunk?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"So, why don't you tell me the real reason for coming to see me? "

"Okay, I tell you. We hear that your Hospital find that lady's box. My boss call Moscow and they say we must get it from the Hospital."

"But, why? Why does your government want this old trunk?"

"They not tell. But say, they want it. So, I go see your Doctor Rao. He buy my book, but say Hospital directors do not want to give us the suitcase. They say it must go to the family of Margarita. Now my boss say to me to see you. Ask if you can help us get it. We give you good money for your job. You interested?"

"So that's why you are having me followed?"

Katya nodded.

"How much is your boss willing to pay?"

"We make you rich. How about 500 thousand dollars?"

"Half a million! Hmm..." I mused. "Well, Katya, I'll have to think about it. I can't decide right now." I said getting up.

"Okay Doctor Sharif. Tell me soon, please." She fished in her handbag and pulled out a card. She got up and after pushing her tight skirt down, handed me the card. I took out my wallet and paid her for the book.

After she had left, I sat for a long time sipping a glass of red wine and contemplated the



amazing turn of events. Half a million dollars! I mulled over what I could do with them? It would fetch a nice size property and set me up in private practice in Florida. Alexandra and I had been wanting to move down to the warmer climate there.

My thoughts were diverted again towards that mysterious lady, Doctor Margaret. I wondered what could be so important in her sea chest? Was she the one I was seeing in those nightmares? In one dream, she had visited me in my office, at the Hospital. While I sat engrossed in a report, she glided in silently and placed on my desk three leather-bound volumes of what looked to be journals or diaries.

A melodious voice whispered to me, "Doctor Sharif, I'd like you to read these." I looked up, but before I had a chance to speak, the bare footed white sari clad figure, with long blond hair that flowed down to her waist, sailed out of the room just as softly as she had come in. While her perfume, that smelled like incense, lingered, I opened the first volume titled: *My Life in America*, and started to read what appeared to be a memoir.