

## CHAPTER ONE

The last thing I remember is pricking my finger.

It is the middle of the night. The air is thick and I am covered with beads of perspiration. I awaken abruptly, only to choke on the musky odor of incense. Someone has called out to me. Someone had drawn me out of my steadfast sleep. With bare feet and loose hair, I am consumed by an unknown yearning. It cries out to me; it calls my name...Laila...and I must follow.

At first the sound is weak, like the annoying buzz of a fly, but as I get closer I hear it grow stronger and more rhythmic. The pounding of my heart leads me to a forgotten corridor, a hallway in which there seems no end. My mind implores me to turn back, but my heart will not follow. I listen at every door. Finally, there is but one room left. A hum comes from inside, steady...methodical...purposeful.

Slowly, I open the door to find a fair-haired woman dressed in a delicate, white sari shimmering in the moonlight—too beautiful to be a servant or a seamstress. I feel that I know her. I look more closely. Her hair is pulled back into a bun and shines golden in the moonlight and her face—though not unkind—is focused on her task. The woman concentrates on the wheel that spins, round and round. I am hypnotized by its motion. Sensing my presence, she stops and looks up from her task.

As she looks up, I can tell that she has been waiting for me. She invites me closer. I approach apprehensively until I sit before the contraption, and without a word of instruction I know what to do. Much to my glee, the wheel spins for me. Instinctively, I become a master of the spinning device. I look up in triumph. The woman is speaking, but not to me. It is not the praise I feel I am owed. Her voice is low; her words muddled and undecipherable. The more I listen, the more this murmur resembles a chant—a spell of some sort. She wears a look of triumph.

My vision becomes blurred and then comes the dizziness and a comforting blanket of darkness. Engulfed in blackness, I am aware of what lies on the other side. I can feel the growth, the vines, the shrubs, and the foliage. The growth covers everything in sight, like a cocoon in which I lie like a dormant seed. As it grows, they speak to me. They tell me I will be safe here. I understand now that I am asleep.