



Kamala Briscoe dashed down the corridor, the carpeted floor of first class soft beneath bare feet. On this night of gusting wind the ship knifed through the sea with only sails billowing, the constant pounding of steam engines quiet for now. She headed for the flicker of the bracketed oil lamp at the base of the stairway.

"Am I a child again?" she whispered. "Running from his wrath?" She had donned Mother's sari and now lifted it ankle high to scurry up the steps. This everyday, gauzy red cotton still carried the scent of jasmine, but Kamala needed more than Mother's perfume. She needed the strength of that quiet yet formidable woman, needed her skill to make bull-headed Simon Briscoe see reason.

She stepped out onto a deck washed by the full moon's light. It had waned and grown again on this voyage. Had she thought it wouldn't? It didn't care what games were played on earth. Since the ship set sail from Ceylon, Kamala had tried every day to make Father understand. This new idea of marrying her to a stranger was worse than any of his other schemes. Kamala stepped to the railing. The moon's reflection wavered with every roll of the sea. The ship sliced across its face and she winced as if it had sliced across her own. She inhaled deeply, needing cleansing breaths before another talk with Father. Behind the ship trailed a churning, moonlight-catching froth. If she yielded to Father, her life would be like that froth. Nothing lasting. Nothing to show she'd ever lived.

She closed her eyes to picture Mother. Graceful Sitara from a land of cool mountain lakes and scorching lowlands. A land of many-armed goddesses, dancing gods, tigers and elephants. Long ago, Mother had also been forced on a sea-voyage by Simon Briscoe, from the Malabar coast to cinnamon-scented Ceylon. Had she a choice? Kamala didn't know, but sensed Mother would now say, "Kamala, my lotus blossom, escape his plotting. Be free."

When they docked in this new place, this California, she might somehow slip away. Thanks to Mother's insistence on education, she'd read of California, of the gold strike twenty years past. But they were bound for a place far from the gold fields, a town with the melodic name of *La Ciudad de Los Angeles*. Was it truly a city of angels, a place of goodness? The nation had just fought and settled a war with itself to free slaves. But not likely to free daughters from bullying fathers. She lifted her face to the sky and smirked at the moon. Did it taunt her? She lifted the scarlet cotton up over her hair and across her face below her eyes, anchoring it with her teeth for an instant, nestling into the caressing folds, taking comfort from her mother's scent, lingering still after ten years. She let the wind take the sari and tangle her hair as she turned to lean her crossed arms on the rail and stare across the moonlit sea. She missed the land

of her childhood, the scent of white ginger and cinnamon, but could not sink into the past. She must be vigilant, change Father's mind or break free of him.

Above her head, sails filled and popped, billowing as the wind changed. Perhaps her life would change as well. The rigging creaked, she stared down into the rolling sea, but finally went below.

She slept fitfully and just before sunrise turned to the table bolted to the wall by her bunk. She lit a small lantern and positioned it by a wooden box holding all she had left of Mother's things. Lifting the lid freed the scent of sandalwood and jasmine, like opening a door to

the past. She gently grasped and folded back the rice paper wrapping. It crackled like a fire on a cool night, and beneath it shimmered a length of emerald-green silk embroidered with golden threads. Kamala scooped her palms beneath the silk and lifted it, light as mist. This sari had floated around Mother as she glided from room to room to fill the house with her scent, filling the house with light and love.

Kamala buried her face in the silk and breathed in its musk, letting it caress her as it did years past when she was a child and Mother clasped her close and murmured soft Hindi words. Father had forbidden Kamala to learn her mother's tongue, forbidden her mother to speak it, as if he were ashamed of who she was though he professed to love her. Sitara spoke as she pleased, however, and Kamala learned the words expressing the depth of Mother's love and hopes for her.

The silk slithered and fell into a glittering pool of green and gold. Did she truly sense Mother's presence, or only wish it so? No matter. She



wriggled into a saffron-colored velvet *choli*. Cropped, with short sleeves and rounded neckline, it left her midriff bare and fit like another skin.

Kamala stepped into a pair of voluminous, green silk trousers, tied the waistband and grasped the sari's glittering hem to cast it like a fisherman's net. It fluttered, coming to rest on the table to drape along the floor. She gathered it to her and tucked it into the waist at her left hip and wrapped it around twice before pleating and tucking in the *pallu* so the folds fell as they should. She brought the sari up and across her breasts, under one arm and up again to cover her unbound hair, as Mother taught her so long ago.

Inside a velvet box lay gold circlets. She chose two and bent to clasp one around each ankle. Tiny silver bells studded the gold, chiming as she moved. She pushed her hands through pearl and emerald-studded bracelets and spied Mother's pearls. Mother had said this would be hers when she married. Kamala had been excited then, but of course had known nothing of either pearls or marriage. She clasped the three-strand necklace around her throat.

The pearls, cool against her skin, took her body's warmth as pearls do, luminescent in the lamplight. Mother once said the moon was a pearl as well as a lotus bud, a pretty sentiment to tell a child, but in the years since, Kamala had gained a woman's awareness of many things, including the birth of pearls. Formed from a grain of sand chafing the soft center of an oyster, a pearl was born of suffering. Sitara called it beautiful. Had she meant suffering was beautiful? Kamala did not think so.

She shook away the question and took a pot of kohl to the mirror over the washstand and outlined her lashes, lifting the hem of the sari, hiding all but her eyes. They caught the flickering lamplight, almond-shaped, tilted at the outer corners, the color of mahogany. Lighter than Mother's, but dark enough. She took a breath, let it go and slipped into the corridor. Silk sighed along her thighs. The anklets chimed faintly like temple bells from far away. She might be in Mother's world, an India she had never seen and likely never would.

Unfettered by clothing she usually wore in Father's presence—binding corsets, pinching belts, high collars, and tight, confining shoes—her hips now swayed as if dancing and the sari whispered as it slid across her shoulders. This was freedom. The thought quickened her breath and by the time she reached Father's door, she was panting as if she'd run the distance.

Balanced on the balls of her feet, she paused. Would Father be pleased at her dressing like the woman he insisted he loved? Would it soften his heart so they might speak calmly, so she might show him how his scheme would give her only misery? She tapped at his door.

"What?" His voice rumbled, thick with illness and irritation. He gave a half-strangled cough and cleared his throat. "What is it?"

Kamala opened the door to a room lit by one hanging, flickering lamp, swaying with the rolling ship. Suits and boots, collars and cravats spilled from a steamer trunk and nearly hid the man slumped at a table.

He lifted his face and squinted. "Dear—dear God," he said slowly from a slack-lipped mouth. He stirred, but slumped back down on a stool, his eyes wide. A ledger and pen clattered to the floor. An ink pot tipped and spilled across the wooden field desk, its many slots and pigeon-holes stuffed with papers. "Sitara?" he whispered.

"You've come for me?" He tipped the bottle upright with trembling fingers, staring sidelong from under bushy brows. "But your scowl—no, I can't bear that. Why are you angry?"

"Not Sitara, Father. It's Kamala." She eased into the cabin, turned up the lamp and slipped the silk from over her head, draping it across one arm.

His sun-creased face paled, every crevice now cut deeper around thin lips. Had she ever seen him so bewildered? He looked like a man who'd been shown a precious thing and had it snatched away. When had his graying hair thinned so? He slouched and hung his head, suddenly old.

But he shook himself, thrusting fingers into his hair, mussing it into a halo. His loosened tie hung from a collar dangling from one button. A jacket puddled on the floor, his vest gaped open and his hands shook as he pawed, searching the pockets for some forgotten item.

He'd always bullied her, yet was the center of her world. She knew no other, after all. Seeing him like this confused her. How could she fight a man so weak? Pity might take her strength and let him win. She moved closer.

"I hoped she'd come for me." He smirked and shook his head. "Death in a green silk sari." He propped his elbows on the table, head between his hands.

"Only me, Father. I wore her things to feel her strength, to find words she might say, to reason with you. I thought to please you, wearing this."

"Seeing her, even her ghost, would surely please me."

She reached to touch his shoulder.

He jerked back. "You're nothing like your mother, girl. Never could be."

Kamala froze and turned slightly away. Longing for his approval, she had always suffered from its absence. But this night, anger slithered in and coiled, ready to strike.

He stood, his shoulders back, chin high, judging her. "You're fair of form, hair and eyes are dark like hers, but

Mother once said the moon was a pearl as well as a lotus bud, a pretty sentiment to tell a child, but in the years since, Kamala had gained a woman's awareness of many things, including the birth of pearls.

your complexion is more sunset than full night." He shook his head. "The blood you got from me dilutes hers. Too much of me in you, girl." He sighed.

Recklessness flowed into her. "I'm like you? Then like you, I will not do as I'm told. I will not marry this stranger you have chosen for me. I will never marry." Her smile held no warmth. "Yes, I must indeed be like you. Marriage? You hid my mother like a dirty secret." Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "Your concubine, your whore."

He struck the desk with his fist and stumbled toward her, face ashen and eyes blazing. "Who called her that, by God? I'll . . ."

"You'll what? I've heard it all my life." She lifted her chin. "So, like you, marriage means nothing to me." She sneered. "I am only the bastard child. I know . . ."

"You know nothing! I loved her. I saved her. I took her . . ."

"Yes, Father. You took her like you do everything you want. But now she's gone. All you have is me."

"Your mother wanted you to be safe. I promised to keep you safe. I had planned to keep you by me, my solace in old age, and arrange for some kind of inheritance, but I don't have time now. Death comes too soon. The doctor says—well, I'm not ready and can't leave you alone. Though you're grown, you're innocent. If I left you unprotected, Sitara would haunt my dreams."

The whine creeping into his voice disgusted her. "You seem well enough."

His mouth turned down, eyes dulled. "I took a bad turn before we left, Kamala. My heart."

"You're playing for sympathy."

He sighed. "Sadly, no, child."

"Child? As you said, I'm no child."

A fit of coughing seized him, lips fading to blue. He spat into a handkerchief, balled it up and thrust it away. "Not in years, but you've been raised like an orchid. The world is too cold for orchids, girl. The man who weds you will get the plantations: cotton in India, tea and cinnamon in Ceylon. Sugar in the islands, too."

"Leave it all to me, then. Wealth is protection enough."

He shook his head impatiently. "You'll need a man to take the reins and make sure you want for nothing."

"The *man* will want for nothing. I will *have* nothing. I want to go into the world. I want to do something that matters."

He chuckled. "Matters? What can one puny half-caste woman do in this world?" He pinched her chin between thumb and first finger, making her look at him. "If you'd been a son? No, not even then." His hand fell to her throat and he reverently touched the pearls. When she wrenched away his fingers hooked them. The strings snapped and pearls cascaded, clicking and scattering across the floor.

Kamala backed up, her spine against the wall.

"Your mother prized those," he whispered. "I had it made for her, perfectly matched pearls."

"And like everything you touch, they're broken."

He roared and slammed a fist into the wall near her head. His mottled face contorted, his glistening eyes bulged. "You'll do as I say!" He sucked blood from torn knuckles.

She only flinched. "If I refuse? Will you beat me, starve me, lock me away?"

"See? You are unsuited for independence, given as you are to melodrama." His eyes clouded, but he only moved his hands through the air like he could erase all she'd said, then kneaded his left arm and winced.

"I will give you melodrama. Did you think Mother loved you?" Kamala raised her eyebrows and smiled. "She believed bearing me was her destiny. She told me so. She had to believe something to bear life with you. She called you a storm, wind pushing her along destiny's path. She played a game to survive, but I will not. I won't let my life and Mother's mean nothing." She fled the room, trembling and furious.

He stumbled after her, gave a strangled shout and fell. She didn't stop, didn't turn, slammed the door and didn't care.

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Kamala found him later that day lying where he fell, eyes now wide, but only clouded glass, seeing nothing. Ashen and cold, he was past reason, past everything. Still weeks from harbor, she agreed to burial at sea. Corseted and veiled, she refused to shed a tear.

Weeks later they docked at San Pedro harbor. She had picked up every pearl from his cabin floor. They and her mother's jewels were her only wealth. She would go to her Aunt Elinore's school as her father had arranged. There she would sort out some kind of future.

She approached a wagon near the dock. A slab-sided horse was hitched to it, its skin scabrous. The man perched on the wagon seat didn't look much better. The horse twitched one ear. The man didn't move at all. "Excuse me. I wish to hire this wagon."

The man opened his eyes. "If you ain't wanting to go too far, or ain't got too much to haul, I'm your man." He squinted at Kamala and wiped his bulbous nose.

"Myself and a trunk." Kamala nodded to where luggage had been piled.

"Then go fetch it. I drive, I don't load." He dropped his chin and closed his eyes.

She dragged the trunk to the wagon, tried to wrestle it up. The man watched, seemingly amused, but finally sighed and helped her. "Now, where you fixing to go?"

"Nearly into town, I think. Along this road." She read the street name from a letter she'd found in Father's papers.

He jerked back on reins he'd just gripped. "Hold on. You got that right?"

She looked again and nodded.

"Ain't nothing much there." He peered into her face. "You ain't a—naw, too high-toned, though you be foreign. I don't think you want to be going down that street, missy."

"My aunt's house is there. She has a school."

He laughed. "I imagine there's a lesson or two to be learned right enough."

The hot, dry air of this horrid place made it so she could barely breathe. Nothing made sense. But she stiffened her spine and squared her shoulders. "Take me there," she said quietly.

"Well, yes, ma'am. This horse sure enough knows the way. Sure hope you know what you're getting into."

He stopped in front of a white building's ornately carved door. The wood had baked in harsh sunlight and showed more cracks than paint. Kamala pushed it gently. It swung wide. The driver didn't knock, just hauled her trunk inside and kept going up some stairs. "I believe I'll find a drink," he said. "Need to settle the dust."

Kamala blinked in the dim light, for the air seemed star-lit, shimmering. Dizzy, she feared she would faint, so dropped into a chair and took some breaths. She glanced around a spacious room furnished with wooden tables and chairs tucked beneath them, all worn, none matching.

A gaunt, horse-faced woman dressed in black burst through a side door, eyes flashing, apron flapping. She yelled as she came. "Go away! There is no work here, no rooms. Go back where you came from. Oh, why do you all come here? I can't help you all."

Was the woman mad? "I'm here to see Elinore Johnson."

The woman stopped. "I am she." She stared down at Kamala. "How does every desperate girl in California know my name?"

"I'm Kamala Briscoe. Simon Briscoe's daughter. I've just arrived and . . ."

The woman paled and eased onto a ladder-backed chair. "Simon's girl? But how, why?" She twisted about, eyes wide, one hand at her mouth. "Is Simon here?"

Kamala took a breath, leaned close to murmur the news of her father's death. While her aunt sat stunned, Kamala stood. Her thirst had become nearly unbearable. In a kitchen she found a pitcher and gulped down two cups of tepid water. She smelled cooked beef and onions and breathed it in as if the smell alone might feed her.

Out the window was a strip of white sand. A beach? But no sea. Greenish scum trickled down the middle of that road of sand. Along the edges, trees with yellow-green leaves shouldered against taller ones shedding wisps of what looked like spider webs. She imagined the sand was a river bed. Such strangeness. Sun, but no water and little breeze. Nothing like home.

Her thirst eased, she returned to find her aunt crumpled at the table, her head on crossed arms. A sideboard against one wall held steaming crockery. Neither invited nor forbidden, she helped herself to beans and a kind of flat bread, like *naan*, and appreciated the similarity. "Where did that driver go, Aunt Elinore?" Kamala said after finishing the food and feeling stronger.

Elinore lifted her gaze to the ceiling. Thumping and low laughter rumbled. She winced.

"He's upstairs? But why? Does he live here?"

"No men *live* here."

"I don't . . ." Kamala sat back. "This is—you mean. It's a—Oh. Then I should go? But where?" She barked a laugh. "Well, I wanted to be free, to go out into the world. Free to go, free to stay. Now more lost than free, I think." Kamala blinked away tears blurring the room. "But what happened? Why didn't you ask Father for help?"

"And wither beneath his scorn? He had no patience for failure."

"But he wouldn't have let you run this—this kind of—boarding house. He would have helped you."

Elinore managed a tremulous smile. "Surely you knew him better than that, my dear. Wouldn't he have enjoyed

owning that much more of my soul?"

She stood and made her way to the sideboard, bringing out bottles and a tray of mis-matched glasses. "They'd

all better come down and eat soon. This will sour quickly in the heat." She came back to the table with a bottle and two glasses. "Let's drink to his passing. I always wished I could love him, but . . ." She smirked. "A great man, in his mind anyway." She drank, but Kamala shook her head.

Elinore shrugged and scowled at a burst of coarse male laughter and a playful shriek from upstairs. She fumbled for the bottle.

"Father said you ran a school. He was glad to support you. He planned to marry me to a man you wrote about. You said you knew him well. A teacher, Father said."

Elinore bowed her head. "Fiction, my dear. Simon had written, fussing about finding you a husband, but he never mentioned he was ill. I pretended I knew someone suited for an educated woman. Like most of my letters to him, harmless fiction. I never imagined he'd bring you here."

"But the school, how did it fail?"

"The poor have no money and don't educate their daughters if they did."

"Let's drink to his passing. I always wished I could love him, but . . ." She smirked. "A great man, in his mind anyway." She drank, but Kamala shook her head.

The rich send theirs to convents in Mexico City or finishing schools back east, according to their cultural inclinations." She had begun speaking carefully, but slurred the words.

"And Mr. Johnson?"

"After he died so selfishly, leaving me alone, I rented out the rooms. Gradually they were filled by a certain type of woman." She blinked toward the door. "Men will be coming in soon, Kamala. Rough types. You'd best sit over in the corner out of the way. And for heaven's sake, have a drink. Your world has crumbled. I know how that feels. Drinking helps. Well, sometimes. For there is nothing ahead for you but misery."

"Do you own the house?"

"Why?" Elinore squinted suspiciously.

"I'm trying to think of how to help."

"Yes, I own it outright. But what can I do with it? The girls living here, working here, I can do nothing with or for them. I have managed to teach one to read, but what good will that do her, I wonder?"

"So we give up on them, on ourselves?"

"Ah, a crusader. You'll be cleaning out the bayside cribs next."

Kamala scowled.

"Dark, dirty holes in the wall where Chinese girls are deposited after they're sold."

"Sold? Didn't your country fight a war to free slaves?"

"So it is said, my dear, but these little girls are stolen or lured away from another country, told there'll be work, husbands." She wriggled her fingers. "No matter how they come, there's no escape."

"This is known? No one does anything?"

"No one wants the poor little wretches."

"But they are human. They have worth. My mother always said women are strong. They can even hold a man up when he falters, show him the path to his own dreams as well as hers."

"Is that what she did for your father?" Elinore smirked and took another drink.

"I imagine she must have tried."

"If that's what she taught you, I both pity and envy you. I once burned as brightly, but long ago, I have flickered out."

Weeks passed and Kamala helped her aunt as she could, fending off men who believed her an addition to the women working the place. She put aside thoughts of leaving, but never surrendered her desire to do more. She still had a few pearls, and one night ventured out and bartered for a girl, took her from a smoke-filled building by the docks and brought her home. "I wish I could speak to her. I think she said her name is Lian."

"She knows she's in a better place. That's all the language she needs, I imagine."

"Still a brothel, though."

Elinore scowled.

"We can't afford to be delicate, Auntie. What am I to do with her? The man I bought her from believed I was procuring her for my own bawdy house. I gave him two pearls. Next time I'll offer only one."

"Next time?" Elinore shrieked. "You can't do this again. You're lucky to escape being chained to a wall yourself."

"They're only children, Aunt Elinore. You should have seen them."

"I don't need to. We can't do anything. Money always finds its way into dirty hands and reform flickers out."

"I must do more. I will." Kamala daubed salve on the ring of torn flesh around the little girl's ankle. The girl rolled to her side, brought

her knees up and snuggled clenched hands beneath her chin, wrists together, like she'd grown used to being shackled. Kamala watched and wiped away tears. She would rescue more.

The next day a gray-haired man stood uneasily just inside the door. "Miss Briscoe?" He ducked his head. "I'm the sheriff. I heard Mrs. Johnson had her some help." He swallowed and blushed. "She set me straight about what you plan on doing, I mean how it's not coming from evil intentions."

"I would welcome your help, sir."

"Oh, no, ma'am. I can't be taking on such a battle." He smiled. "My brother in San Francisco works as a body-guard for a lady there. He says it's an awful fight. The flesh-peddlers call her the white devil. She runs him a merry chase. As slight as she's built, she chops right through a door with a hatchet if needful. He's seen her do it, seen her rip away wood with her bare hands to get to a captive girl."

"A hatchet? Good idea. But what does she do with them?" Kamala shrugged. "That's what I can't decide. Can we send them home?"

"No, ma'am. They'd not be welcome. Ruined, you know."

"Ruined? And who ruins them?"

He twitched and ran one finger around a tight collar. "That lady in San Francisco runs a place where she teaches the girls, finds them respectable work, but we have no such place. This town is growing fast and my job is keeping the peace. I can't go dockside and stir up trouble where none exists. It ain't like they're stealing girls off the streets here. Their own people even sell 'em."

"No matter who sells them, it does not make it right."

"Well, I wanted to give a kind of warning." He turned red before shrugging and edging out the door.

Two nights later Kamala slipped out to seek Lian's sister. They'd managed to stay together until Kamala took Lian. Another old man happily took her pearl while the smoke from the cubicles she searched put dreams in her head. She kept on. Behind one blanketed doorway the air was less smoky, but fetid, like rotting

mushrooms. Dirty rags were piled on a cot. She turned to leave, but the pile stirred and she froze. A skeletal hand lashed out. The rags hissed and a girl raised her face into flickering candlelight. "No touch," she whispered. "No coin, no touch."

"No one will touch you with or without a coin. Never again. I'm taking you away."

The child scrambled back to press into the corner.

"We'll go to Lian. Is she your sister? Lian?"

Slowly the girl climbed to her knees and lifted one hand, her eyes closed. Kamala edged close. The girl sagged into her like an armful of bones and skin, only a tiny spark left to make it human. Matted black hair fell across a face bruised along one sharply angled cheekbone.

"I'm taking you now. Don't be afraid."

Tears trickled from closed eyes. "Lian?"

Pity battled with impatience. "Yes. But we must go now!"

"Too late." She shook her foot, rattling the chain holding her to the wall.

Kamala jerked at the bolt. It held. She'd brought a hatchet like the formidable woman in San Francisco, and drew it from the deep pocket of her dress. She struck at the crumbling adobe, over and over until able to jerk the chain free. She handed it to Lian's sister. "Here. Your freedom. Take it."

They burst from the room and no one stopped them. Kamala wondered if she were still dreaming. She lifted the girl when she fell and half-dragged her down dark alleys until within sight of Elinore's house. Huddled in a dirty wrapper, gripping three feet of chain, the girl looked too pitiful to be real. Kamala set her on her feet and

nudged her. "Go on," she whispered. "Run. I'm with you."

For sixty years, Kamala carried on her crusade. With her last breath she asked, "Did anything I do really matter?" A young woman pressed her hand, smiled and nodded, for that very year, 1928, she had graduated from Stanford University. Evil men had lured that woman's grandmother to California. The promises of a better life were lies and like so many, she was enslaved. Yet the tale is told of a wild-eyed woman tearing the grandmother's chains from a wall. Reunited with her sister, the Chinese woman married a good man and bore a daughter who had daughters of her own, one achieving the rare educational feat in 1928.

By helping to free women, Kamala fulfilled her destiny. Like the lotus, she waited, dormant, before blooming. Like the pearl, she chafed against whatever surrounded her until something beautiful came forth, holding to the conviction that someday the world might understand a simple truth. Women, after all, hold up half the sky.

BONNIE HOBBS draws from her father's passion for history and her mother's love of romance and mystery.

She writes about struggle and triumph, love and loss in the lives of women of the American frontier.

