Chapter 1

1938

Sant Baba was a tall man, his large head completely shaved and framed by wing-like ears with lobes stretched low by huge steel earrings. His eyebrows were mobile, going up and down collectively or individually as the hazel eyes they adorned fixed themselves on the supplicant before him, the usually mobile face relaxing into a mask-like inscrutability, questioning, probing, and seeking the truth. No one lied, boasted, beseeched, or bothered the monk. Such was his effect.

His left hand held the gnarled staff with a brass ring encircling the bottom end that made the staff ring like a bell as he struck it on the cobbled street, announcing his presence, and his right hand extended the begging bowl forward for alms. Housewives scurried into their homes or hovels and rushed forth with a roti, a cup of flour, or a rock of *jaggery.* Besides the flowing saffron robe he wore, two cotton pouches hung on either side of him, their belts crossed across his barrel chest like bandoliers. He threw the flour into one pouch and the *jaggery* into the other, allowing only the cooked roti into the bowl, and he bellowed a blessing.

The only other ornament the barefoot giant had was a string of worry beads, rubbed shiny by years of passing

through his rough fingers. He walked the entire village, not missing a street, a turn, a gate, or a courtyard. He called everyone by name, even the children—particularly the children. If they answered his question properly and had it confirmed by the mother or father, he rewarded them with a piece of the *jaggery,* a treat for the child. As such, he was usually followed by a squadron of children as he made his way through the village. Even though a Hindu, he accepted alms from the Muslims and the lower castes, including the untouchables. He joked with and picked on his benefactors, occasionally berating an odious or rude one. His voice thundered and made the addicted, the drunk, or the wife beater cringe and shrink into himself. Sometimes he lectured a particularly harsh mother-in-law and comforted her victim with soothing blessings. He could quell a simmering or escalating feud by banging his staff onto the ground and growling a curse at the combatants. It had an instant effect, and he had done it for the forty-odd years that he had lived as a monk in the communal woods a few hundred yards from the village. There he had served his guru tirelessly and now taught the ways of the mendicant to a couple of novices. He rebuilt his frail hut after each monsoon and bolstered it with another layer of insulating mud to pass the cold of winter.

He made no claims to holiness or enlightenment. He preached even less, mediated disputes, and counseled the troubled. He practiced the ancient art of healing through herbs and potions, both for his fellow humans and their cattle.

He was venerated by the entire village—by the Sikhs, the Hindus, and the Muslims as well as the odd Buddhist or Christian. He embraced them all. He was a living icon, the glue that held the community together.

It came as a shock when he did not come to the village for alms for several days. Soon it was whispered that he was laying deathly sick in his hut. Speculation rose sky high since only his disciples were allowed in, and they said little.

A sort of panic spread through the village, and people began to perform short pilgrimages to his hut, desperate for a sight of him or news of his well being.

A group of monks arrived and camped outside the hut in a vigil. These monks were apparently fellow disciples of his guru and thus of a brotherhood with the stricken monk. Each morning they begged alms in the village. A sense of doom descended on the community, the monks represented a bereaving party, only prior to a death. The villagers asked them in hushed whispers of their beloved monk. They in turn smiled beatifically and pointed to the sky. "Only Rama knows," one said. The other invoked Shiva, and so on it continued for a month.

Others turned up for a day only to return to their *deras* by nightfall. Families in the village sent for relatives, daughters who now lived a married life in other villages, or cities to come for a final benediction of the dying *Guruji*. A committee was formed to consult with the clutch of visiting monks and gurus for advice on how to honor the man after his passing. Women sat watch in groups. Children played but were subdued. It was as if the laughter and joy had been stolen from the village. So great had the influence been of the gentle giant.

In the courtyard of the *Chura*, the *Charmen's* clan, a different sense of anticipation was rising. Punna, the prettiest of the clan's wives, was pregnant again after having given birth to two daughters. "Perhaps this one will be a boy," intoned her garrulous and domineering mother-in-law, starting to be defanged by age, and white circles beginning

to line her irises, the first sign of impending cataracts and insidious blindness. She guarded the entrance to the street for they could not afford a gate, and the pariah dogs and ferial cats were ever vigilant to pounce on an unguarded basket of roti. The *peepal* tree that shaded the courtyard was also a residence to crows, a thieving airborne menace to the poverty-stricken clan.

"You should pray to the monk," advised another crone squatting next to her with her walking stick at the ready to strike at any stray animal or bird that dared sneak by.

"I do, I do," cried the grandmother. "Prayers alone cannot suffice. One also needs to be able to afford alms."

The crone nodded, aware that the monk had given more to the children of the courtyard than the adults had in return to him.

"Pledge a sacrifice, perhaps a fast."

"If the gods so wish, I pledge my life," raising her hands to the sky and sighing. She suddenly lashed out at a mangy dog trying to take a flying dodge past her into the courtyard. "Get out, you filthy cur!" both women now shouted, and a well-placed strike at the animal's hind sent him scurrying off down the street.

"No sister," the crone protested, "the gods give you a long life to enjoy many grandsons."

And they got back to the business at hand.

The novices begged for butter or ghee, oils and pieces of hard, dried wood, and baskets of cow patties. They were preparing for a cremation, and the village deluged them their generosity. Plans came together in whispered discussions. The villagers dug holes to build temporary cooking pits for the funeral was to be followed by prayers, a fire worship ceremony, and a feast of sweet rice cooked with dried fruits and sultanas in saffron-infused water and white sugar. The

headman gave a kilo of cloves to make the rice fragrant, and another family gave a bag of cardamoms. All activity came to a halt except for the necessary tasks of feeding the cattle and milking them. Most women and girls of age started fasts after long baths of purification and wore white, the color of mourning. A pall settled over the area.

One night, the pariah dogs set off a wail of howling, a sure sign of impending death, sending shivers down every spine. When the next dawn broke, the sound of a conch blown by a novice announced the inevitable: The monk had entered the *SatSagar*, the sea of truth, and now his soul swam to its other shore for salvation.

For a while, chaos reigned as people came off their cots, threw on a chador or a shawl, splashed water on their faces, and stepped onto their streets. The line of mourners stretched from the ring road all the way over the round dunes past the village pond and onto the orchard part of the woods where the monks lived. Their chanting now filled the air, and soon it was fragrant from the butter tossed onto the fire in front of the hut. The *pooja* ceremony had begun. The villagers, hands folded in respect, bowed their heads and sat down wherever they could, the men separate from the women. When one started to keen, a senior monk shouted "Quiet!"

Sant Baba had long abandoned his ties to the worldly ways, and his death did not warrant weeping and wailing. A holy man was not bereaved in the usual manner a man of the world would be. A holy man was honored with prayer, ritualistic customs, and ceremonies of purification; and those too by his fellow monks, above all his disciples, both of whom were preparing his still warm body for a ritual bathing before being wrapped in his saffron robes to be placed on the funerary pier. By midmorning, the woods were alive with crowds, which had now arrived from nearby

villages and hamlets, and the air was thick with the acrid smell of wood fires.

The body lay, tightly wrapped from top to toe, on a wooden frame in front of the hut. One by one the people walked by, hands folded and heads bowed, some silent, others whispering prayers but most moist eyed. When all the Brahmins, *Jats*, the middle castes, the Muslim G*ujjars*, and the C*hamars* (shoemakers) had filed past, the C*hura* clan was allowed to pay its respects to a man who had treated them as equals. They shuffled by in silence except for Punna, who gave out a visceral shriek at the sight of the suddenly diminished looking remains. Immediately hushed by her elders, she was helped away and collapsed at the foot of a mango tree and whimpered long into the day and long past the rites.

After satisfying himself that all the necessary rituals had been observed, the senior monk nodded and the novices lifted the frame, *arthi*, and gently set it down on the funerary pier constructed of carefully piled wood, cow patties, and kindling. Then they lathered the body with oil and tins of clarified butter, *ghee*. A ceremonial blowing of the conch shells was followed by incantations, and the older disciple performing the duties of a son lit the pier and bashed in the skull with the point of a stick to prevent it from exploding during the cremation. The flames quickly rose and soon engulfed the entire pier and the body. The air grew thick with the sickly smell of burning flesh and fat, the throaty incantations of the monks, and the whimpers of Punna and the odd, uncontrolled keen of a woman or two overcome by emotion. An attendant expertly tended the fire, making sure it burned hot and long so that it would leave no evidence except for teeth or very small bones of the expired monk.

Then the monks turned on the hut, taking it apart with

their hands and throwing any flammable portion or part of it onto the pier, assuring that no worldly evidence remained of Sant Baba.

The villagers all filed over to the fire pits where the sweet rice and tea had been made and sat down in rows to receive the funerary feast. By the next day's dawn, even the pile of ashes had been gathered, the base of the hut swept away. The monks began one final round for alms; going door-to-door they received generous amounts from the upper classes. Then they walked into the courtyard of the *Churas* and the *Chamars* and those of the less fortunate and distributed the flour, the *jaggery*, and pieces of cloth they had gathered. Keeping only a day's supply of cooked food, they filed out of the village and onto separate paths, not stopping to help the older disciple who was now busy building a shelter for the night in the same woods he had shared as home with Sant Baba for the last ten or more years. He would stay, but only if his mind settled and calmed. If not, he too would start on a journey.

One week later, the headman tallied the pledges of money and informed the village that enough had been raised to build a *Samadhi* in memory of Sant Baba. It would stand on the site of the hut. He gave the task of constructing it to the bricklayer clan. Soon after, bricks arrived on the backs of a line of mules and cement was delivered by cart from the town six miles away. Foundations were dug, and the noisy job of building the edifice started. Volunteers pitched in, and it was finished in five days. After allowing it to dry, workers applied several coats of whitewash. The disciple performed circumambulation around the *Samadhi*, purified it with incense, and blew his conch shell to let his deceased guru know of its completion. Then he fasted for three days and meditated, seeking guidance from the departed spirit.

On the fourth day, he entered the courtyard of the *Chura* clan and called out for Punna. She lay exhausted and delirious with happiness on her cot, holding her newborn son, and at the sound of her name, she lifted herself up. But she did not get up and step outside the door, afraid that bad spirits could attach themselves to the newborn. Her mother-in-law had already raced over to the monk and invoked a blessing. "I have come to give a gift from my guru to the newborn," the monk said as he smiled.

"A gift, and for my grandson!" The old woman was dumb with amazement. Nothing like this had ever happened before: a monk bearing a gift for a *Chura* baby.

"Yes," the monk explained patiently as the rest of the clan gathered around him. "It was given to my care by my guru and I must give it only to the mother."

They ushered him into Punna's one-room hovel, and he squatted beside her bed. He waved the following away from the doorway, as their huddling at it blocked the only source of light.

"May the blessings of the gods and all the goddesses be upon the child," he said placing his hand in benediction on its head. Then, seeing Punna's puzzled reaction, he continued.

"My Guru knew that you would be blessed with a boy, Punna, and he knew that the child will be special. So he gave me one of the beads from his *mala* as an amulet for the boy." He put the ancient and shiny bead onto her outstretched hand. "Make sure he always wears it around his neck so that the *Param Atma* will recognize him and always protect him."

Punna bowed her head as tears filled her eyes and began flowing down her drawn cheeks.

"Do not cry, oh lucky mother of this blessed baby," the

monk admonished. "All your dreams will be fulfilled by this child. Just make sure he turns to good deeds only."

And with that said, he rose, and without acknowledging anyone, he marched out of the hovel and the courtyard and onto a path leading away from the village, the woods, and the *Samadhi* honoring his Guru.

Chapter 2

She named her son Karam. The father, Ruldu, and the extended clan deferred to her wishes. The Sant Baba had personally blessed the child with the gift of his only known and existing worldly possession, the prayer bead. It now rested on his tiny chest, necklaced by a strong, black thread.

After the requisite forty days of rest and recuperation indoors, Punna stepped out and let the boy be carried in the eager arms of his many kin, including some only a year or few older. He had large brown eyes and a mess of thick, wavy hair, his skin just like his mother's: fairer than most. His grandmother then guided the clan to pray and give thanksgiving at the Sant Baba Samadhi, and thus it became his parent's only place of reverence and worship. Ruldu took it upon himself to sweep the grounds around it and keep the main high tomb clean of bird droppings, leaves, and the other detritus of nature. Punna pledged a yearly coat of whitewash and a monthly distribution of sweet *Prasad* to the courtyard's children. As *Churas*, no other caste would accept food or drink from their hands or off their utensils. They were the lowest of the low of all castes. As the village C*harmen* and women, they swept the streets, cleared the open drains, cleaned the courtyards of the *Jats* of dung and dust, and carried it in baskets weaved with mulberry branches. Each family was indentured or contracted its services for an entire year or lifetimes to certain families

and served them each and every day of the year, no matter the weather or occasion. Sunday, or a day of rest, was unknown, and the unlettered clan depended on the honesty and generosity of those they served.

They were paid in kind, rarely in coin. At the end of each harvest, they, along with other service castes including the carpenters and blacksmiths, collected their per diems in grain, *jaggery*, lentils, pulses, peanuts, and cotton. If the family enjoyed the ownership of a skeletal cow or buffalo in hay or straw, a share of the cow patties was also an inevitable reward for those who swept, removed, and thumped the dung into shape to be dried in the sun and stacked high in neat piles that encircled the village along with the manure piles. Additionally, they visited the homes of their employers each evening to collect leftovers that often included buttermilk, and on occasion, after some persuasion, some clarified butter, a glass of milk, or sweetmeats left over from a celebration.

Their diet was of grain, more grain, a dab of beans or lentils, and the occasional vegetable. Within the courtyard they had set aside a corner to raise some onions, garlic and herbs, and the occasional vine of bitter melon or green gourds. As untouchables, they were not expected to adhere to a vegetarian diet, and men of the clan hunted for wild boar, rabbits, and fowl in the public lands and *nullahs*. Sometimes they traveled to the swamplands of the Sutlej River to hunt deer, bringing along a bloodhound or two raised especially for this purpose. This high-quality protein supplemented their miserable diet—that is, if a *Jat* or person of means did not first buy or simply swat the kill from their hands. Their mighty protests sometimes resulted in the barter of oils or fresh vegetables, and sometimes moonshine.

They had secret and quiet romantic relations with

their benefactors. They were furtive and took place under the cloak of darkness or depths of a lush field of corn or sugarcane high enough to hide a man or a woman standing on tiptoe.

Punna had resisted all who pursued her, as many did for her fairness of skin and striking beauty and build, in particular when she had first come to the village as the young, nubile bride of a pimply faced teenager. That was when she had caught the attention and received the protection of Sant Baba. On one occasion, when she had hurried into the woods to relieve herself, she was set upon by a group of waiting louts, and her screams had attracted the holy man to the location of her misfortune. Before any damage was done, Sant Baba had driven off the men with several swings of his stout staff. He had accompanied her back to the courtyard and berated her mother-in-law, then proceeded to shame the attackers individually in their homes. Since then she had been shunned by the men of the village, at least for the purpose of satisfying a primal urge. Ruldu was faint with relief. He had little resources to protect his attractive wife, as did the clan at large, short of abandoning the village of their ancestors and stepping into the unknown and even less protection.

Now Punna and her son were doubly blessed, and she prayed, scraping her forehead to the gods for the soul of her benefactor and protector. She made pledges of undying devotion and worship.

In 1938, the year of Karam's birth, the village of Noorian was one of a thousand like it in the state of greater Punjab in British-ruled India. Settled centuries earlier, the village fanned out from a central, ancient well and common circle via five main streets into a crow's nest of jumbled side streets, crowded on either side by high mud walls of large and small courtyards and abodes of extended clans of *Jat* Sikhs and

Muslim *Gujjars*, the landed castes. Sprinkled in were the much smaller and tighter courtyards of the subservient castes of the artisans: carpenters, blacksmiths, bricklayers, goldsmiths, and the subcastes of *jeurs*, *nais*, and *marasis*. The highborn Brahmins occupied the central plaza, their shops on the main floors and residences on the second. The untouchables, the *Chamars* and *Churas*, shared one long street that ended with the *Chura* courtyards. All streets had open drains on either side that collectively drained into the village pond that occupied an area of several acres surrounded by shade trees with what can be called a beach separating the water from the plant. It was on this piece of sandy soil that the young men gathered to play *kabbadi*, wrestle, or lift heavy, wooden clubs called *mughdars* to build muscles and endurance. Early morning and an hour or two before sundown the shepherds brought their collective herds of cattle, goats, and sheep for watering and would let the buffaloes wallow in the shallows to cool off.

Noorian boasted a landmass of 3,000 acres, and about a quarter was common land left fallow for shrub and grass to grow for the substantial number of livestock. A tenth of the common was a wood including an orchard of various fruit trees planted by Sant Baba and his predecessor monks. They had dug their own narrow well and tended the orchard and its many bushes of berries and herbs only they knew the uses of. The monks were known to grow some plants that they consumed or smoked to ease their bodies during long sessions of meditation or yogic asana or to help clear their minds of worldly thoughts and temptation. They were reluctant to share these secret potions with the general public and only made these available to fellow monks or mendicants who often visited to exchange ideas or wisdom. Among the villagers, the Muslim castes and some of the lesser ones

smoked tobacco or chewed it in various forms. Mostly men indulged in this, but the women used snuff, and its use was tolerated among some of the Sikh families. The adventurous distilled, consumed, and sold moonshine despite its illegality and the threat of police raids and long sentences in jail.

The landowners planted wheat, pulses, and sugarcane for the winter and cotton, maize, millet, and peanuts as summer crops besides vegetables and the odd row of perennials like limes, lemons, and oranges. Mango trees were popular as was the *beri* tree, both for its fruit and wood. The land was mostly flat, allowing for irrigation from wells dug and owned by individual families or clans. The undulating acreage was only tilled during the monsoon season as the winter rains were often unpredictable and no one wasted precious seed. The families kept what they needed for themselves and their subservient castes per diems and took the surplus loaded on carts hauled by oxen or camel to the nearest market towns of Samrala or Jogpore. There they sold it at prices set by the merchants that were arbitrary and often outrageously low, but the farmers had little choice for they lacked the storage, skill, and resources to hoard the grain and wait for prices to rise. Often the driving force was their indebtedness to these very merchants and the criminally high interest rates they charged. Often the unlettered farmer paid a larger sum of interest than the borrowed amount. This kept the rural population poorer than the urban and less in control of its destiny. The finished goods like clothing came at exorbitant prices and most made do with homespun. Fashion was an unknown commodity and indulgences few and far between harvests. Most families bought the very barest of necessities of salt, spices, and medicine, and books for the boys who could afford school. Most girls were kept illiterate and married off at an early age to avoid any possibility of scandal. All these

unions were arranged by the clan while the brides and grooms were barely toddlers. Once promised, the union rarely was not consummated—only in cases of death or disability or a natural calamity.

Yet such conservative and hidebound people were at heart the biggest romantics. Their literature and lore was full of songs and tales of requited and unrequited love often ending in pain and tragedy, mainly death by murder or vendetta.

Legendary love stories were written of lovers along the shores of each of the five major rivers of the Punjab, and wistful parents often named their children after the protagonists in these heroic tales. It was not unusual to have a Sikh wedding party employ a troupe of gifted Muslims for entertainment as they were regarded as better musicians, dancers, and storytellers and entertainers. Once or twice a year, an itinerant storyteller would stop at the village and regale the populace each evening with mythical tales via word and prose, and sometimes a troupe of acrobatic *bajigars* would perform their fantastic contortions, jumps, and athletic feats. At least twice a year the village was invaded by *ghadiwallahs* or gypsies who swept through like locusts, trading for scrap and offering repairs to metal or sharpening knives and scissors in return for a kilo of grain. Courtyards went into a state of caution lest the fast-talking and nimble-fingered visitors robbed them of anything. And surely tales were told of objects missing and never found, whether true or manufactured, to cover self-deception.

Noorian and one hundred and seven such villages and hamlets were governed by the first layer of officialdom, the *Tehsil* of Samrala. They sat in a round colonial building, the *Tehsildar,* both magistrate and administrator of the territory. The *Tehsil* had judicial as well as executive powers. It was also the seat of the superintendent of police, and the station was

a walled warren of offices and jail cells opening into a large courtyard. The tall iron gate was guarded all day, every day by an armed sentry. The constables under the command of an inspector, several sub-inspectors, and sergeants patrolled the area, covering scores of square miles on foot, bicycles, and horseback. Only the *Tehsildar* and the superintendent of police had motorized conveyances that were frequently under repair. Both gentlemen were of Indian origin and college graduates, scions of prominent Punjabi families of wealth and privilege. Both had attended institutes in Lahore, the state capital, to learn the art of administration and the law and jurisprudence. Recipients of lavish gifts, money, and entertainment, they in turn passed a percentage of the take up the ladder to their superiors seated at the District of Ludhiana: the commissioner and the senior superintendent of police, and in turn the governor of the province and the inspector-general in the state capital of Lahore. The Indian bureaucrats had a careful system of letting their colonial and ostensibly pristine commanders and superiors of British lineage gain from their squeezing of the populace.

Graft, bribery, influence, and office all came together in the administration and policing of the vast province that was the breadbasket of India. Once the crown jewel of the sub-continent, it continued to supply both food to the country and fodder in the form of soldiers to the colonial masters' other colonies. *Jat* Sikhs and Muslims were much in demand as the Royal Indian Army's rank and file. These were the only fighters to have subdued Afghanistan for the British, and they were feared locally and abroad.

The village was administered by a headman, the *Sarpanch,* and *Lambardars* who collected the taxes from landowners and filed them at the *Tehsil*. These were positions of prestige and power. The *lambardai* was hereditary, and its origin lay

in the old system of rajas and continued uninterrupted by the cunning British. These bureaucrats were the tentacles of the Raj: junior and full-time, administered by *Patwaris* and *Kanugos*, trained in the surveying of land and registration of deeds, wills, births and deaths and the issuance of documents attesting to same. They had notary powers to attest and affix official seals and swear testimony. Needy supplicants first sought out and pleaded with these minor officials and thus ever so slowly moved their cases and appeals up the ladder for final judgments that took years to get and exacted a cost that decimated a family's holdings and morale. Many proud and well-to-do families were thus impoverished by the system if they dared fall prey to it through the act of murder or some crime of passion, a simple challenge of authority, or nonpayment of taxes and tithes due.

The *Churas* were so lowly and so outside the system (as they were too poor to be squeezed) that they were left alone. No *Lanbardhars* came to their courtyard to collect seasonal taxes, and no *Patwari* or *Kanugo* came to be kowtowed to. *Churas* were in demand, though, for certain administrative tasks that only men of their ilk would perform, such as hangings and the secret slaughter of buffaloes for meat. The British loved their beef, and in the Punjab it was the water buffalo that provided the red meat; the *Churas* were the butchers.

Punna's father was such a *Chura*. She hailed from the city of Ludhiana, and he was the hangman at the District Jail. When not in demand for a hanging, he painted houses and mansions to support his family, and they lived within a growing community of Christians adjacent to the Brown Memorial Hospital. Although constantly invited and cajoled, the family had refrained from conversion, seeing little benefit from it. Many in the Christian community were from lower

castes and generally shunned by the other three major religions, and they were often seen and treated as traitors, toadies of the British and missionaries from Europe and America. They were coddled until converted, then ignored. Her father, a quiet and introverted man, shied away from the pastors and the priests. His was a gruesome profession, and he allowed it to eat away at him through drink and loneliness, but it had one beneficial effect: no one bothered him or his family.

People crossed the street to avoid him and rarely made eye contact. Fewer ever spoke to him. Yet the families of the condemned men sought him out and proffered gifts of liquor, cloth, grain and sugar, even coin, urging him to make the final moments of their loved ones swifter and painless; to tie the noose in his special way that death came instantly and there was no suffering and twitching of the body in spasms of agony. He kept his promise, then drowned his sorrows in the moonshine so amply supplied by the relatives, or the bottle of rum traditionally given him by the superintendent of the jail as part payment for the deed. He supplied the convict a good-sized lump of opium to swallow a few hours before the hanging, thus assuring a compliant and sedated subject. He was fast and efficient and often applauded by the rest of the prison population for his dispassionate undertaking. In his later years, he would receive a pension of five rupees a month, the same amount as veterans of the Second World War: a pittance.

He had betrothed his only child to the *Chura* clan in Noorian for no other family wanted him or his in the city. Thus Punna, a city dweller, ended up in the hell of a hovel in the village. But she had a caring and loving husband, in fact an infatuated partner, eager as a rabbit to mate once or twice a day, and it was this constant botheration that turned her off

from love, romance, and sex.

Cognizant of her father's work and the effect of karma, she was convinced he would reenter life as a lowly creature and begin the cycle thus punished, and a long cycle it would be. But convinced that if she did good deeds, she could earn enough positive karma to cancel his negative, she prayed and performed cleansing rituals and sacrifices of fasting and self denial. She gave up any form of jewelry and self-embellishment through tattoos or chewing nuts that colored her mouth and lips a seductive red or combing and oiling her hair into braids tied with ribbons or colorful strings, enhancing their sinuous sway as she would walk, swinging her hips for maximum effect. She knew all the wiles of women and the art of seduction but refused it all to benefit the man she loved the most: her father.

This made her different from her caste sisters. They had accepted their miserable lot and sought relief from it in secret affairs and the receipt of gifts and goods from their lovers. They would stuff themselves with sweetmeats during the rendezvous and squirrel away the treats for later consumption, occasionally sharing the booty as an innocent manna with their families. As much as Punna had been and was pursued, on occasion tempted by the masculinity of the few she felt attracted to, she never took that step into the inevitable. She never allowed her gaze to be held by the admirer, a sure sign of interest and assent. As such, her family suffered wants and shortages. They ate plain *roti* and pushed it down their gullets with copious amounts of water instead of extra servings of *dhal*, *saag*, or vegetables allowed to be picked out of the admirer's field, added, of course, to extra dollops of ghee or pickles or sweets.

The husband, though, had accepted the cuckolding and its rewards. It was everyone's dirty secret, unspoken and

unacknowledged, but it was a reality just the same. The higher born worked the lower born in more ways than one.

Punna's parents finally made the trek to see their new grandson. At the sight of them she burst out in tears of joy and fell into their arms. The three of them hugged and wept, but because this was a happy occasion, the baby was soon cooing in his grandmother's lap. "Looks like you," she told Punna matter-of-factly, remembering her at the same age.

"He looks like his father," crowed the paternal grandmother, busy pawing through the gifts of cloth and sweetmeats they had brought, neatly dividing up the largesse for distribution to immediate kin. She particularly liked the fact that there was a five-yard length of sturdy cloth that was for her and a shawl for the colds of winter, but there was no jewelry, not even a silver trinket. But for their daughter there were three full suits, a silver locket and bangles, a bagful of knick knacks, and for Ruldu a suit and a turban. There was even a pair of the newfangled rubber sandals. She had suspected that the hangman, Bola, was better off than he let on, and who else did he have, except his daughter and her family, to shower gifts on? Even the girls got clothes and sandals. The grandmother's own husband had passed away recently from consumption and too much hookah smoking, coughing his lungs out in great gobs of foul-looking and smelling phlegm tinged with blood. Only Sant Baba's potions had given him respite from his spasms of coughing and the awful pain. In the end, they gave him tea laced with opium to ease his suffering and found him dead a few hours after peacefully falling asleep on a cot under the *peepal* tree. Bola and his wife had met their obligations of supporting their daughter and son-in-law with the expenses of the aftermath. Death extracted a severe bout of giving to assuage the gods

and tradition. Births were cheaper to celebrate and more welcome.

The elders of the clan gathered around the visitors, and that evening, the young went to gather the daily evening meal from the homes of the *Jats*. Punna made fresh *roti* and cooked a stew of onions and bitter melons for her parents. They would be served the best available food and drink. As they separated into their own group, Bola pulled two bottles of 90 proof, double-distilled moonshine and a large can of pickled boar from a sack, and seeing this bounty, the men, their spirits lifted, fired up the hookah, lined up the glasses, and called for a bucket of cool water to be drawn from the well immediately. Younger ones, not yet called upon to join them in the feast, scrambled to obey and then lingered over the seated benefactors of the evening's main event. Before long, the elders were in various stages of inebriation and slapping each other's shoulders in great shows of camaraderie, congratulating Ruldu on his new son, Karam. The usually reticent grandfather had a broad smile on his pock-marked face and forgot the arduous twenty-mile bicycle ride with his wife on the back seat and the bundle somehow balanced over the handles.

The younger ones began helping themselves to the leftovers, and nary a drop of liquor escaped their eager lips. The pickled boar, cured with a mixture of at least forty herbs and spices, would remain as one of their most memorable tastes.

And later, as the courtyard hummed with sounds of celebration, laughter, and bonhomie, Punna told her mother, "I pledged that father would put a coat of whitewash on Sant Baba's *Samadhi*."

"It will benefit his karma if he does it," was the matter-of-fact reply.

Chapter 3

The world suffered a great spasm as Karam turned one year old. The Second Great War started in Europe and catastrophe of unimaginable suffering started to befall most of Southeast Asia as Japan began to exert its imperial ambitions. In Noorian, little changed except for the opportunities this offered the young men. They could be soldiers and embark on foreign adventures rather than do backbreaking field labor, and a few dozen enlisted at the recruitment office in Ludhiana. The primary benefit of this flight of eager young men from the village was the reward of an elementary school. It was donated to the village in recognition of having supplied the largest number of soldiers for the defense of the Empire.

Around the same time, the ailing watchman of the village passed away. This post was traditionally held by a *Chura*. Having no male issue to inherit the position allowed Bola to call in a favor of the jailor who had the ear of the *Tehsildar* in Samrala. Thus Ruldu escaped the fate of sweeping dust and dung for the rest of his life. Appointed the new watchman, he was sent to the district for a month of training, basically that of the village constable. He lived with his in-laws for a month and there developed a taste of city life. Relieved of the physical labor and poor diet, he put on several pounds and reappeared in Noorian almost unrecognizable to his very wife. He was well groomed; he essentially now bathed with real soap and therefore smelled

better, and he cleaned his teeth daily, his breath freshened with a twig of the *neem* tree. He wore a government-issued *kurta/pyjama* and moccasins. A smartly tied white turban completed the image of a substantial man wielding some authority, especially projected by the shiny staff, studded with brass top to bottom, he held casually in the crook of his right arm. Watching him walk into the courtyard so regally caused Punna to almost swoon with pride while her mother-in-law put her arthritis to a lie, racing effortlessly to be the first to embrace her suddenly rather handsome son. She almost trampled her granddaughters underfoot, so eager she was. Soon the girls had climbed their father's sides, and he carried them with his mother hanging from his neck over to Punna to bend over and gaze into his grinning son's face.

"Thank you, Sant Baba, thank you," she intoned, tears of joy running down her cheeks. The appointment meant that she too did not have to do the work of a charwoman. Her husband would now enjoy a salary paid regularly at the *Tehsil* and additional payment from supplicants he would accompany there, seeking documents, registrations, favors, forgiveness, and release from fines and penalties. Plus being a member of the local government would entail some palm greasing.

When he told her, after a hectic bout of lovemaking, that her father had agreed to give them sufficient money to build a proper brick and cement house on their tiny plot of land currently occupied by the fetid, dark, and dingy hovel they inhabited, she almost passed out from joy. Gathering her family, she marched them for a thanksgiving at the Samadhi and was amazed to find the older disciple building a hut in the grove. They bent to touch his feet and receive benediction. "What brought you back, Babaji?" they asked.

"It is the first anniversary of Guruji's death, and I must

perform *pooja* for his soul," he replied. Then he gave them a list of requirements.

Thus as the first task of the watchman of the village, who also acted as the messenger of news akin to a town crier, Ruldu toured the streets announcing the ceremonies and calling for donations and volunteers. More to please him than in remembrance, a majority of the populace that had helped build the Samadhi pledged their support. So began a yearly ritual by the disciple to perform *pooja* in memory of Sant Baba to keep his legacy alive.

The world around them in turmoil, the villagers engaged with alacrity in the collective task of celebrating at the Samadhi. Families had lived cheek to jowl for centuries. Events beyond their control, invasions, forcible conversions, ancient customs, and faiths had insidiously cut and divided them into subcultures and clans with multi-tiered loyalties to beliefs and men who resided in faraway places and pulled strings that affected their simple lives. Lately, earnest men—in groups and individuals—had begun to visit the village, urging Muslims against Sikhs and vice versa. The Hindus aligned with the Sikhs. There were major decisions being made in London and New Delhi. Gandhi and the Congress party and the Muslim League were at odds over the future of a divided and diverse subcontinent, extracting promises of independence from a cynical colonial power now engaged in a super struggle for its own survival. Such forces were at play, and such innocents were to be sacrificed for the greater good.

The fear and foreboding began to bring some people together. But others were suspicious, and with minds poisoned by the retelling of past injustices, they started sharpening the tools of revenge. It was happening across the Punjab and right across the vastness of the Raj, particularly

in the urban centers where literacy was becoming a tool of division and the newly read easy converts. They had yet to learn to decipher the propaganda and its falsehoods, and fundamentalists wedded to a particular cause ran amok. As the war progressed and Europe began to reveal the ugliness of man's injustice to man—the stories of the Japanese atrocities told by fearful and incoherently frothing survivors—the populace began to expect the inevitable, creating a sense of apocalypse.

Yet it brought out generosities of spirit and sisterhood in the women of the village. Her newly raised status got Punna the position of assistant midwife to a *Gujjar* woman who had delivered every child in the village for the last twenty years, including her son Karam. Initially all she did was clean the area and get rid of the soiled dressings and such, but slowly she was instructed in palpation, massage, and manipulation of the uterus and the life within, to ease a child's entry into the world with a mother still left capable of nourishing it. Knowing when to stop the exertion and effort and let nature take its toll, even though it happened only in rare cases, a still birth left her drained and depressed, having worked with and known the expectant mother, particularly if she left behind a brood. At these times Punna would find escape and solace in prayer and the ritualistic cleansings, incantations, and meditation. She had learned much from the celebration at the Samadhi. The disciple had a slower mannerism, easy to follow and understand if one paid attention.

Punna gained confidence and an aura of competence.

Soon she was sought out and invited and let into the homes and bedrooms of the highborn to attend to their womanly problems. Over the next two years she received basic training by the disciple of botanicals, poultices, and preparations concerning celestial order, the alignment of the

stars, and the auspicious or inauspicious signs. Her mind was a sponge, absorbing knowledge, technique, and touch. She learned to control her words, expression, and mood, as well as her posture. She did all this in order to give comfort, to ease suffering, to enhance the occasion of childbirth and to increase the experience. In her soothing words, her gentle touch, and her reasoned acts, the women found succor. Soon she was allowed independence by her guru, the *Gujjar Dai*.

Each night before she put him to sleep, Punna rocked her son, sang to him, and hugged and kissed him. She made him stand out among his clan by dressing and grooming him with care while crooning encouragements, calling him her prince and a lion cub. The boy fixed her with patient and long looks and responded to her mothering and patience with growing intelligence. As their lot improved by the building of the new abode with a brick floor and abundant light, he seemed to mature beyond his years. The rest of the children, including her daughters, ran around in the dust and detritus of the courtyard. Yet Karam avoided being soiled and covered by a swarm of flies setting on the face to feast off the runny nose and giddy, unwashed eyes. He learnt to ask for a trip to a corner to be relieved, and he washed off and redressed properly. He gave no indications of his heritage as a *Chura*. He was uncomfortable and literally intolerant of the filth that lay beyond the doorstep of his home. He was as neat and clean as the house his mother kept.

The local school was now up to eight grades, having recently added three more classrooms. A new headmaster, by the name of Shrikant Sharma, arrived to run the school. He was accompanied by his wife, who was pregnant and toting another toddler. The headman assured them the rental of appropriate rooms. The classrooms soon filled with students from surrounding villages and hamlets who

could afford the fee and books necessary for attendance. It also became the local post office, and Mr. Sharma served as the postmaster. There he handled the sale of stamps, the registration of special mail, and the delivery to individual households of their letters and information about money orders sent to them by someone in the army or those who had emigrated to serve British interests in Burma, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the East African colonies of Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika, as well as Malaysia and the farther reaches of Canada and America. The village boasted emigrants in all those locales serving as constables, carpenters, shopkeepers, and civil servants enforcing the rules of the British Empire. Without these foot soldiers, Britain's reach and power would evaporate. For every Englishman serving his royalty in the colonies, he had the support of fifty or more so-called coolies from India.

One of the oldest such emigrants was Inder Singh Pardesi, who was a prominent, altruistic Sikh that had climbed the ladder to become an influential civil servant posted in Nairobi. He could issue a letter of guarantee, and anyone from his village would receive entry to these colonies. Once there, they prospered as civil servants, small businessmen, artisans, or policemen. They helped conquer and dominate the Dark Continent, cutting railway lines into the interior, building quarters for the rulers, and supplying the roles of a middle class between the rulers and the ruled, thus becoming the resented ones by the natives. They were the bridge between the populace and its standoffish aristocracy, and what an aristocracy it was, containing the crud of British society sentenced to serve the throne in the colonies. Only the most accomplished, trusted, and proven occupied the real posts of power. They were the governors and commissioners who doled out the largesse to the lesser

of their breed and maintained the patina of power, exercised through the use of colonial soldiers and servants willing to lay their lives down for their masters.

Thus began the slow changes in awareness and awakening for those in the village interested beyond its borders. The majority were in the survival mode that the certainty and immediacy of natural need caused. If there was the lack of work or if there was not enough fuel for the cooking fire, then hunger was assured. They worried of disease or disability and unforeseen calamities: the needs of the cattle to be watered, grazed or fed grain or hay, water, if the rains failed or fell too torrentially, not only flooding the field but wrecking the flimsy homes of the poor, held together by sticks supporting layers of mud mixed with dung and straw. They were only moments away from disaster that could strike without notice or warning, and they could only fight with prayer or the help of the gods, thus the amulets around their necks, the holy tattoos, and the *toonas* that hung over the doors and the almost maniacal adherence to superstitions. It was a vast chiasm from this level of ignorance to any enlightenment that science and discovery was bringing to the outside world and only now slowly trickling into Noorian. The best and brightest were being drawn to lands far away. There was news of some Brahmins, who should know better, crossing oceans to travel to England, endangering their souls' salvation in the afterlife, having attained the highest status available to a human in this.

Headmaster Sharma, a Brahmin by birth but a socialist in belief, set to bring about the one revolution that would most benefit the populace: education. He began to harangue parents to start sending their children—including the daughters—to school, if only for a few grades, so they could acquire the basic skills of reading and arithmetic. In

two years, the first and second grades were coeducational. Children of every caste were represented in them, and during the morning and early afternoon the courtyards and streets were empty of aimless urchins running or playing in the dust. Rather, they were seated in neat rows on grounds of a still-unfinished school, reciting the alphabets of Urdu and Punjabi and the basic tables. And when he secured the transfer to the village of two women teachers, the headman offered an empty *haveli* as the nascent primary school for girls, resulting in a sudden surge in the registration. Parents who were against the mixing of the sexes (at least in their sights and supervision) were content and tolerant of allowing their daughter a few years of study and were aware that at their age they were too tender to be put to work of any value. The village now had another educated man move to Noorian, the husband of a daughter of landowning parents with no other issue. This man could practice some modern medicine as he was trained in a dispensary and had an official certificate to prove it. He was also a great admirer of what Lenin had done in the vast land of Russia and how the peasants there now boasted an industrial empire, great military power, and above all, a rapidly literate public.

The first telegram informing a father of his son's death in the war was a rude awakening. Some of these fathers had fought in the First Great War, and one or two had been injured, but this was the only such death of one of their own. Soon the family was visited by a small party of dignitaries from the officialdoms in Samrala and Ludhiana, which included an older officer, a Sikh with a chest full of crests and medals. They gifted the widow a sewing machine, a framed portrait of the deceased, and a British flag, and then pledged to name one of the schools after him. She was also assured of support in the form of a pension for life: a guarantee of

scholarships and support for her only child, a boy too small to know what the whole fuss was about. At a ceremony of *Sanskar* for the fallen Sikh, they returned to extol him as a martyr and urged others to enlist. Surprisingly, others did. Another dozen men went to serve.

Others served a different master now: the dream of an independent India. They followed two different paths: one invoked Gandhi and nonviolence in its protests and boycotts, and the other was a more urgent and violent movement led by fierce men like Lala Lajpat Rai, willingly throwing their bodies against the well-armed police and protectors of the Raj. No one from Noorian was captured or convicted or suffered a jail term, but a *Chura* of a neighboring village gained notoriety for his brave battles. He was often bloodied, beaten, and dragged off to jail to be tortured, but he was of a different make. He never spilled the names of his cohorts through teeth now loosened by the blows struck by interrogators long into the night. Even Punna's father was amazed at the punishment the man could endure and not bend. Chandu Das was quickly turning into a local legend. "Just make sure you do not put me in the position of having to hang you," said Bola to him while standing outside his cell. Bola was in charge of feeding the prisoner for they were of the same caste.

"I am not afraid of death," Chandu Das replied, "and I will not blame you for carrying out your duty."

"You are a brave man," Bola, the hangman said, duly impressed by the sincerity. If anybody could smell fear, he could, for he had seen big, blustery killers soil themselves at the sight of the gallows. "Try to stay alive."

He had already calculated that Chandu Das had the qualities of leadership, and his desperately trampled caste was going to need a bull like him if and when India got

its independence. Although Gandhi already had come out in strong support of the untouchables, calling them the "children of God" and thus bestowing a moral status on their plight, it was going to take men of Chandu Das's ilk to carve something out of it. Bola decided to curry favor by having his wife cook meals for Chandu Das during his sojourns at the jail. This the politician truly appreciated for he was a huge man in height and heft and was famous for having brought down a *neelgai buch* weighing three hundred pounds, having latched onto its antlers and twisting and turning its neck until it snapped. Then he pulled the carcass out of the muddy swamp for a mile or so. "When the time comes, Bola, I want you in my camp," Chandu Das told him. "Men like you are going to be necessary for what we are going to have to do to get justice."

He had already seen the effect the mere appearance of the hangman in the hallway had on the rest of the prisoners; some actually trembled if he as much as looked at them. "Can you imagine having Bola beside me when I ask the bloody pundits for a legislative seat?" he thought with merriment. It eased the pain and bruising he had had to endure earlier from a particularly harsh interrogator. Chandu Das had already inquired of the man's background. He knew that one day he would repay the abuse in ways only he could devise, none of them pleasant or merciful.

And now the Sant Baba Samadhi had less visitors and support because the village Sikhs, mostly *Jats,* had decided to build a tomb in memory of their *Shaheed*, the soldier fallen in battle. Before long, donations started to arrive from the emigrants, other villages, and organizations, and instead of just a tomb, a temple rose for the first time in Noorian. The village until then had not had a place of worship for any of its faiths. The Muslims began to talk of the need for

a mosque, as most men lost the day from work each Friday walking to one three miles away in a village largely inhabited by men of their faith and rich in land and cattle. Punna doubled her efforts to take care of the Samadhi, and it began to be known as the *Chura's* Samadhi, the village dividing into distinctive groups asserting fealty to their beliefs and faith. The Hindus, too few in numbers, gave for the temple and reluctantly for the modest mosque. Most of the Muslims had, like Sikhs, converted from Hinduism and continued the practice of honoring the Brahmin's position in the pantheon of castes.

Soon, the Great War ended with the defeat of the Germans and the Italians, the Japanese brought to their knees by the atomic bomb. Noorian remained largely ignorant of the Holocaust in Europe and the genocides in the rest of Asia. The soldiers returned on furloughs, and the village celebrated wedding after wedding and the festivities turned their attention away from the calamity coming their way: independence, division, and a rending apart of their village and their province, all done to satisfy the demands of men in positions of power unable to share the thought of a united country that gives its citizens a chance to enjoy its fruits together. In an all or nothing struggle, India was torn into three distinct and parochial entities: largely Hindu India in the middle, and a West and an East Pakistan flanking either side. Pakistan was of course for the Muslims.