

PROLOGUE: China 1860

PEARL

A four-year-old's encounter with the devil is different from a grown-up's. If the confrontation is serious enough, the child will freeze and lock it in her mind's eye forever. The grown-up will scale mountains if needed, to put as much distance as he can between himself and the fiend.

Such was the case for the child riding on her father's back. Her arms wound tightly around his neck. Her legs wrapped around his waist. And her face was buried between his shoulder blades. The child had walked as far as her little legs would carry her. She hadn't cried even though she was hungry. She knew she was a good girl — her father had told her so. He was a thin, wiry farmer from *Kwantung* — China's southern most Province. She wondered if the three-inch gash on the side of his head still hurt. It had scabbed over but was still puffy.

Fearing detection, they slept during the day away from the hill paths. At night they walked south. She knew the direction because that is what her father had told her. After two sunrises (when they had finished the sweet rolls he had stuffed in his pockets) he picked her up and carried her on his back. She had noticed that, as they got farther from the village, other travellers emerged from hiding and were headed in the same direction. Mostly they were women with young children. But there were also men. After a long time — she couldn't tell how many days it was — they reached a river. A full moon glowed overhead. Her father told her that behind them was China. In front, only another day's walk was the city of *Heung Gong* — Hong Kong, the British colony. There they would be safe and the devils could not harm them. She was relieved but wondered how they would cross the river without a boat.

The grown-ups must have been thinking the same thing because they stood in a row on the riverbank speaking in urgent but hushed voices. Then some of the men snapped off tree branches and waded in. They used the sticks to gauge the water's depth.

The little girl didn't know how long this took because she fell asleep. Eventually, her father shook her awake and said that they had found a shallow enough crossing. He lifted her onto his back and waded into the moonlit water.

In her tiny world, the little girl was certain about two things. First, she could hear her father's heart beating against her ear. This gave her a sense of security. And second, she could feel the piece of jade in her pocket. She took it out. It felt cold in her palm. The stone was flat and oval shaped; larger than a quail's egg but smaller than a hen's. It reminded her of why they had fled their home.

Like most market days they were in the village not far from their small patch of farm. Her parents had set up their stall — a table with a cloth over it that reached to the ground. The little girl loved to hide under the table where she could spend all day playing with a straw horse her mother had made for her. From that womblike privacy she could peek through the folds of the tablecloth and see the wide world without being seen, hear without being heard. Her father sold vegetables and her mother took in sewing — that was what the cloth was for, to show samples of the stitching that she did by hand. Her mother was a small woman with a round face just like the little girl's. And they both had high cheekbones that were red with health. This made her mother appear younger than her twenty-two years because the red bandanna she always wore framed her lively almond-shaped eyes. Around her smooth neck was a matching scarf that was also self-made. These accessories made her mother the butt of jealous barbs in this village of hard-working farmers and their wives. But the little girl didn't care. She knew that her mother was someone special, someone she would like to be when she grew up and became a farmer's wife herself.

Horses' hooves, beating a rhythmic gallop, started in the distance, then quickly grew louder and thundered into the village. Through a slit in the tablecloth she saw the soldiers dismount. They were Chinese soldiers — too many to count. They were a slovenly bunch. Chinstraps loosened and shirts unbuttoned, they steered their mounts deliberately into the stalls. Caged poultry, eggs and cabbage spilled off tabletops. Bags

and jugs, plates and cups, wine and tea flew in large and small arcs through the air, smashing, rolling, and bouncing on the cobblestone. What was happening? These were Chinese soldiers. Why were they doing this to their own people?

Her mother crawled under the table on her belly. She was half inside the little girl's womblike tent when she tore off her red bandanna and hid it inside her tunic. Out of some invisible pocket her mother produced a jade stone and pressed it into the little girl's palm. "Be strong. Stay here — "

Her mother screamed and was dragged out from under the table by the ankles. The little girl started to shake. She looked at the jade, closed her tiny fingers over it and thrust it into her pocket. "Mama," she shouted and crawled out of her hiding place. Two Devils held her mother's arms. She kicked and yelled, tried to tear away. But she was too small and they were too strong.

"Bo Jue," her father screamed. The little girl turned when she heard her name. Two Devils held her father back. A third one aimed his rifle at him and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Again.

Click. The gun failed to fire. Her father struggled to free himself. The Devil raised his rifle and smashed the butt of it into the side of her father's head. His knees buckled. He crumbled to the ground.

"Get her," the Devils spat out a vulgar Chinese curse and ran at Bo Jue, who dived under the table and out the other side. The men pursued her but got stuck in the small space.

Everywhere she looked there was chaos — Devils in uniform stealing things, beating people, laughing. Bo Jue ran to where she had last seen her mother. A small mud hut at the end of the lane. Its entrance had no door, just a rectangular hole and beside that an open window. Bo Jue ran to the hut and looked in.

Two Devils pinned her mother against a wall. A third one slapped her across the face. She spat in his eye. He wiped off the spittle and said something in Chinese that Bo

Jue could not understand. But she knew it was frightening. She knew that her mother was in danger. She knew she had to do something, but what?

The face-slapping Devil reached out his hand and grabbed her mother's tunic. He tore it across her chest, exposing her breasts.

Bo Jue gasped. She felt a scream travel up from some place deep in her body. But just as she was about to yell: "Mama," a hand covered her mouth. She felt herself lifted off the ground and away from the sight of her mother's captivity. In the next moment her feet were allowed to touch the ground. Hands grabbed her shoulders and spun her around. It was her father. He held a finger up to his lips. Blood was dripping from a nasty wound on the side of his head. He picked her up in his arms and ran from the village.

That was four or five sunrises ago. Bo Jue looked at the stone in her hand. She knew that every time she touched it, she would see her mother.

When they reached the other bank, her father put her down on the ground and pointed south. Mist hovered like a white blanket over paddy fields that stretched to the horizon. "There," he said. "Do you see? Way in the distance?"

Bo Jue followed the line of her father's finger. She saw mist, sky, and birds. Her father saw their future.

PART ONE: Calcutta, 1841-1862

EMANUEL

His parents were Arabic-speaking Sephardic Jews from Basra in Iraq, and amongst the first families to settle in Calcutta. Like their contemporaries, they were successful merchants dealing in jewellery, tea, silk, and jute who, one day, were forced to pack up and leave Iraq. They dusted the sand off their sandals at the gates of great Muslim cities in the Middle East and headed south. They had run afoul of capricious Sharif who decreed that Jewish sojourners had overstayed their welcome. In other words, their businesses were too successful and an uncomfortable amount of money was owed to Jewish merchant bankers. A pall of déjà vu fell upon the Semite community. They fled in the night, days ahead of the hard smack of wooden heels and the deadly slicing of scimitars, and arrived in Bombay in the late 1790s. Sensing better opportunities, they headed east to Calcutta – a swampy enclave that the British had selected as the site on which to build a capital city and from where they would administer their colonial ambitions in India. Like their forefathers in Spain and Venice and, more recently in cities like Aleppo and Basra, the Jews in India had mastered the art of assimilation.

Just so, in Calcutta, the light-skinned Belilios family merged themselves into the mainstream. They adopted European dress and enrolled their sons in academies modeled after the English public school system. Proper English schoolmasters imported from the mother country cracked the whip. These reedy-looking teachers, itchy with prickly heat rashes under their heavy cotton clothes, bashed the sons of new money into shape for the good of the Empire.

At Emanuel's school, a boy's character was moulded in the boxing ring and on the cricket pitch. But for him, assimilation was not so easy. He was fat and awkward; cricket balls slipped through his hands like water through a sieve, and he was unable to defend himself against his smaller, more nimble opponents in the ring. Being thus tormented was

not new to the lad. Conversations at home during dinner were often focused on his older brother Aaron — "the handsome one" — who seemed never to set a foot wrong and monopolized Papa's attention. His Mama rarely spoke to her second born. She had never forgiven him for almost tearing her tiny frame in half at birth; when he had looked up at her with his pale blue eyes, she had turned away. Shortly after, she weaned him and gave him to Ayah Gita, her fourteen-year-old Hindu slave whose husband had disappeared, leaving her aching for a child of her own to raise.

They were a pair those two: the small, dark-skinned Indian girl with her black eyes, tiny nose and thin lips carrying a large child wrapped in cloth on her back. Ayah Gita loved the boy. She indulged his every whim, even giving him the fatty foods he devoured as a balm against his parents' lack of interest.

Of all the mockeries he had endured, none shaped his character more than what happened on the day he was summoned to the headmaster's office. He was fourteen. It all came to a head when a badly written limerick - passed from boy to boy during Latin class – had landed unintentionally on his desk.

*There once was a lad from Howrah
Who filled his pants with flowra.
Ayah washed it away,
Then the whore made him play,
The fiddle on her what-cha-ma-call'er!*

Each line felt like a stick of dynamite piled one on top of another. Insulting his beloved Ayah lit the spark.

Emanuel flew out of his seat, leapt on top of an adjoining desk, bounded across two aisles and reached the limerick makers. He grabbed the two poets, one in each arm, and wrestled them to the floor splintering desks on the way down. Students scattered. In his haste to intervene, the Latin master tripped and fell breaking his nose with a sickening crunch.

Emanuel punched one boy in the throat. Seeing this, the other poet ran out the door and down the hall, screaming “Help! Help!”

Emanuel did not give chase. He stood in the centre of the carnage and looked around him: desks akimbo, a teacher’s nose bloodied and his classmates cowering, terrified of his sudden and uncharacteristic rage.

An hour later, in the headmaster’s office, Mr. Stuart-Fox called a truce: “Please gentlemen, and I use that word advisedly, this must stop!” He referred to the heated debate raging between Raphael — Emanuel’s father — and the father of the boy Emanuel had punched in the throat.

The exchange between the two glowering fathers was not about what had transpired in the classroom. A roomful of people had witnessed the incident and the facts were indisputable. Nor was it about who had provoked the fracas and why. No, it was about pronouncing a suitable punishment for Emanuel’s outburst, which Mr. Stuart-Fox had described as “Not on.” Compounding the matter was the lack of a common language. Raphael spoke Arabic and very little English. His rival, a British bureaucrat who worked in the Writers Building issuing business licenses to merchants like Belilios, spoke English and no Arabic. Thus Mr. Stuart-Fox was forced to wave his white handkerchief with one hand and slam his palm down on his desk with the other when he called for the yelling to stop. “Thank you. Now if you will both resume your seats. Emanuel is the only one in this room who is fluent in both Arabic and English. He will serve.”

The two boys were seated against the wall. Emanuel’s knuckles were slightly red and his victim had a large purple bruise on the right side of his neck. The Latin master had fared far worse. He was lying on the couch nursing an inflamed and swollen snout.

Mr. Stuart-Fox signalled for Emanuel to step forward. “Translate please: There are two choices. Expulsion or six strokes of the cane.”

Emanuel hesitated.

“Well go on boy,” Mr. Stuart-Fox said. Guttural sounding phrases fell out of his student’s mouth.

Raphael looked at his son and said in Arabic: “This man is a shit. Every week I give him fifty rupees on top of the school fees to make sure you get good marks. And now he does this to me?”

“What is he saying?” Mr. Stuart-Fox asked.

“He says he is thinking about the choices.”

“Right from the start, he said fifty rupees and not a paise less. I took the offer immediately. We shook hands on it. His predecessor wanted a hundred rupees!”

“Translation?” Mr. Stuart-Fox demanded.

“My father requires a little more time.”

The Headmaster pulled back his shoulders and nodded.

“Emanuel, what should I do? It will be such a disgrace for you to be expelled. But I can’t bring myself to see you hurt. Tell me what I should do?”

Emanuel did not respond.

“Well, what did he say — look, I’m not going to keep asking!”

Emanuel cut him off: “My father choses caning.”

Raphael did not need the Arabic version. The British bureaucrat cleared his throat and looked away. The Latin master sat up, holding his nose with a bloodied handkerchief. Mr. Stuart-Fox said, “I see.”

“Six of the best” were administered immediately. Emanuel bent over and held the sides of the headmaster’s desk, exposing his buttocks. He grimaced with each stroke and looked straight into the eyes of the people in the room. “This,” he said to himself, “will be the last time anyone takes advantage of me.”

He saved his tears for later that night. Ayah Gita put salve on the welts that puffed up across his skin. Then she held him close. He felt comfort in her presence as he had always done — innocently and eagerly. But the sting of the cane did not compare with the hurt he harboured against a father who watched his humiliation and did nothing.

On the day he graduated Emanuel shook the dust off his boots at the gates of his school and walked briskly away. Graduation had not come soon enough. Now he wanted to get as far away as he could from his family’s grip. He had dreamed of this day. He had

done what his father had wanted. He had endured that wretched place for ten years. Now that he was eighteen, and a man, he figured it was time for *quid pro quo*.

As he headed towards Bow Bazaar, Ayah Gita kept pace as best she could. She trotted behind him, waving a fan at her master's back in a vain attempt to cool him down. She had seen him like this before – the blue eyes narrowed, his lips tightened into a thin line and his large body quivering with impatience.

At the warehouse, he ran up the stairs that led to the administration floor. When they saw the master's son, the throng of male clerks fell silent. They stepped out of his way and stared with open-mouthed surprise as the two-person cavalcade strode past. The spectacle of a short, round-bellied young white man dressed in a black European-styled suit and his Hindu servant in a sari waving her fan made someone laugh. Emanuel ignored the guffaw. He had more important things on his mind. Without knocking, he opened the door to his father's private office and entered.

"I want my inheritance," he said, jutting out his chin and speaking in Arabic, the language commonly used by the merchant class. The older man, dressed in a *thwab* – a traditional Arabic gown - and turban, looked up from his desk, put down his pen and said to his Parsi clerk:

"Shut the door."

Mr. Rustomjee nodded. He was swarthy, round-faced and dressed in *sudras* – a long muslin shirt. Cradling papers and a notebook in his arms, he walked towards the door. Ayah Gita stayed outside, closed her palms around her fan and touched them to her forehead. Then she crouched out of sight. The door made a soft click when it closed. Mr. Rustomjee released the knob, held his papers against his chest with one hand, folded the other behind his back and returned to standing beside his master.

"You gave Aaron his expectations," Emanuel said. "Now I want mine."

"To do what?" his father asked.

Emanuel hadn't thought that far. Sweat beaded on his forehead just like it used to before he entered the school's boxing ring. Raphael beckoned for his clerk to come closer and whispered into his ear. Mr. Rustomjee cocked an eyebrow and nodded.

"Follow Rustomjee. He will show you the ledgers. After you have read everything, come back to me. Tell me what interests you, then we'll see."

The ledgers contained lists of dates and commodities, each accompanied by its weight, purchase price and, sale price. The data unfolded for him like a novel. But unlike fiction, which Emanuel had never appreciated, his father's businesses were revealed in a narrative of facts free from messy emotional entanglements. He surprised himself by reading the information so easily. The ebb and flow of "getting and spending," of "late" and "soon," of "profits" and "losses," swept across the pages. They were as easy to spot as *bekti* flashing their silver fins near the surface of the water in the bends of the Hoogli. At school Emanuel had loathed mathematics. He had been bored memorizing historical dates and had struggled to apply logic to philosophic arguments. Those minutiae were insufferable wastes of time as far as he was concerned. Yet his mind was now dancing with numbers. He found himself calculating percentages and doing long division. He stored the results in the folds of his mind and retrieved them as easily as pulling a book off a shelf. Shifts in the pattern of where one commodity originated, where it ended up and why this was so, occupied his imagination. His curiosity was a gigantic maw hungry for information. So engrossed was he in the mysteries of the ledgers that he had not noticed the oil lamps Mr. Rustomjee had lit and placed on his table. Raphael had gone home at six. Shortly afterwards the activity in the warehouse below had whittled down to the occasional slam of something heavy. By eleven the only ones left were Ayah Gita, a middle-aged Parsi clerk and a fleshy young man in a hurry to make his way in the world.

"Sir is wanting some chai?" Mr. Rustomjee said in English. He had two steaming mugs in his hands. Without waiting for a reply, he placed one of them on the table in front of the young master. Emanuel looked up and rubbed his eyes. Mr. Rustomjee slurped his tea.

“What time is it?” Emanuel asked.

“Sir. It is just past one a.m.” Mr. Rustomjee said, nodding at the wall clock.

“No. That cannot be,” Emanuel said looking around.

The large outer office was vacant. Desks sat like small, silent boats floating on dark waters. Stillness had replaced the storm of activity he had witnessed hours before. Emanuel picked up the mug and sipped his tea.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Sir, it is my duty to be locking up the outer office and also the back office.”

“And I have kept you from doing so.”

“It is not a problem Sir,” he said, wagging his head.

“Have you worked here long?”

“Sir, almost all my life. Your father is being a great man.”

Emanuel did not agree but kept that opinion to himself.

“How so?” he asked.

“Please?” Mr. Rustomjee said, narrowing his eyebrows at the challenge.

“Take a seat, tell me why you admire him.”

Mr. Rustomjee remained standing. His eyes darted from side to side like a trapped cat. He cupped his hands around his mug of chai and composed his thoughts.

“Sir, it is like this. I am from Basra — Parsi. He is also from Basra but a Jew. The Muslim rulers there wanted everyone to be Mohammedan. We refused. We had to flee. My father worked for your father as a clerk. We were not rich like your family. When it came time to leave Basra, my father had to stay with my mother and with my brothers and sisters. I was the oldest. My father offered me to be your father’s clerk. For friendship, Sir took me into service. I am very lucky and Sir is kind hearted.”

It surprised Emanuel to hear of his father’s humanity.

“Will Sir be requiring more ledgers?”

“No,” Emanuel said, “You may remove them.”

Mr. Rustomjee nodded. He looked relieved that his day was finally over and that he was not being pressed for more personal information. He put down his mug, stacked

the ledgers in his arms and placed them back on the shelves. He closed the cupboard doors and took out a ring of keys.

“Will there be anything else Sir?”

“Yes,” Emanuel said, “Tell me about opium.”

Mr. Rustomjee stopped. “Ah,” he said, locking the cupboard doors. “Sir’s father was right. He said you would want to know.”

SEMAH

Just north of the playing fields of the Maidan — where Emanuel let countless cricket balls slip through his fingers — the Ezra family lived in a villa that resembled an English country estate. Only this one was larger. Like Raphael Belilios, Ibrahim Ezra was also part of the diaspora fleeing Iraq in the 1790s. He had made his fortune in Calcutta real estate by buying land and building houses. For all its ostentation (gargoyles and pink walls with green shutters) *la maison* Ibrahim was not out of place in this City of Palaces. Park Street and Chowringhee were lined with tall buildings festooned with Doric columns, balustrade verandas, French windows and more architectural flourishes than a Milanese palazzo. Behind the gates of walled-in compounds Venetian styled façades were as commonly seen as French Rococo curlicues on porticos. And surrounding these mansions, English botanists coaxed a riot of flora from the fecund soil.

Like Emanuel Belilios, Ibrahim Ezra's daughter Semah spent her childhood trying to live up to the standards imported by the British colonists. Instead of a public school education, Semah's preparations were readying her to become a proper wife. Mindful of her swarthy looks, dark hair and big brown eyes, her parents decided early on that Semah's skin must be protected from the sun at all costs, lest the harmful rays further darken her prospects of finding a husband. Dutifully, whenever she ventured outdoors, she put on arm-length gloves, European-style high-collared dresses, a wide-brimmed hat and a veil to shield her from the brutal sun. When Semah turned twelve she had a growth spurt that made her taller than her mother. Suddenly she was able to stand eyeball to eyeball with her father. It was imperative, they agreed, that if she was going to end up large and handsome — a euphemistic second cousin to petite and pretty — then she might at least be graceful. They hired of a battery of tutors who taught her comportment, music, singing, sewing, conversation, drawing and watercolour, and riding — side saddle of course — and any other skills that might temper her size *avec les accoutrements des*

élégances. Speech instructors lined up at the gate with promises to eradicate the guttural clatter of Arabic and to smooth out the tongue rolling of Hindi. The girl would pronounce the English language like the English. Obediently, Semah took to all of it like a flower to sunlight.

By the time she was fifteen, she had become quite the linguist. At the dining table she continued to speak Arabic with her parents and with the servants in the kitchen she still spoke Hindi — she had the common touch — while during her lessons she flitted like a shuttlecock between English and French depending on the tutor in residence.

Ibrahim and Sula beamed with fulfillment. Their strategy had worked. “Charming and accomplished” was how they had described their daughter on the day they announced her dowry at 10,000 Rupees. Furthermore, Ibrahim wanted Semah to be the first bride married at Calcutta’s new synagogue. Word spread quickly through the fledgling Jewish community in Calcutta and reached as far as Bombay.

While waiting for an eligible bachelor to present himself, Semah sat daily beside Sula and watched her mother run the large estate that had a retinue of servants, a garden to tend and stables to administer. From her mother’s day room, Semah was occasionally dispatched, like an ambassador, to bring reports back from the edges of the property.

For her own purposes, Semah sketched her environs on large sheets of paper that she pasted on a wall of her bedroom. The river, in blue, meandered along the left, or western border of the property while a vast nothingness in green, occupied the eastern extremity. Everything in between, the house with its many windows, the stables, the garden, the forest, were all meticulously rendered and coloured. Between the Hoogli River and the western wall she had noted “Bow Bazaar,” then underneath: “Most Jews live here.” Dates were written, in the Hebrew calendar: 24 Sh’vat when she had peered over the red brick wall that bordered the estate. 23 Iyyar when she rode her horse to the edge of the forest. There were also brief notes such as: “shabby” or “beautiful” or “needs work”.

She had access to every room except one – Ibrahim’s study. Sula explained that it was her Papa’s *sanctum sanctorum* and out of bounds. “Men need their own space,” her

mother explained cryptically then curled her lip and continued: “He smokes tobacco in there. I can’t abide the odour.” But this explanation did not satisfy Semah. She thought it unfair that she could not access a room filled with books that could enhance her knowledge of the world.

The following Wednesday afternoon Semah’s painting master sent word that he was feeling under the weather and cancelled the lesson. Semah’s tummy fluttered. Her mother was at her weekly visit to her family’s home and Ibrahim was at the office. An opportunity had presented itself and her hands turned cold with anticipation.

She watched the door of the library from the top of the stairs. She could hear herself breathing. Her eyes darted left and right. There was no one in sight. She made her move, tiptoed down the stairs, opened the door and slid inside.

Her eyes scanned the volumes. Some books were large, some were small, some were wide, and some were narrow. One thing was certain; they all seemed to be waiting for her to open them. She climbed a ladder to a walkway that gave access to the upper collections. From there she had an eagle-eye view of the cavernous room below: the table against the window, the rolling bar cart, the easy chair, a sofa she hadn’t noticed before, carpets with coloured designs, a large globe of the world and a collection of pipes beside a canister of tobacco.

There were voices outside the door.

The door opened. Her father entered followed by a woman she did not recognize. She watched him close the door, tear off his jacket and fling it aside. Meanwhile, the woman struggled with the stays at the back of her dress. Semah felt, intuitively, that her father and the stranger were doing something furtive. She was watching something that should not be happening. Her skin tingled and her feet turned to stone. Blood rushed from her face. Her knuckles turned white from gripping the handrail. She pressed her back against the shelves and felt wood against her spine. She willed her fingers to let go of the handrail. Using one hand, she covered her mouth to stifle the yelp that had been building in her throat and with the other she felt behind her back searching for the gap she knew

was between the shelves. Mercifully she found it and folded herself into the narrow cavity without taking her eyes off the scene below.

The woman yanked up her skirt and pulled down her drawers. Her father wriggled out of his suspenders and pushed down his trousers, exposing his bare bottom. Semah closed her eyes and covered her ears against the sounds of muffled grunts and rhythmic breathing.