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The Sea Detective

Written by Mark Douglas-Home

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The Sea Detective

MARK DOUGLAS-HOME

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For Colette, Rebecca and Rory

To Arkhangelsk
N
Lofoten Islands
ATLANTIC OCEAN
NORWAY
Shetland
Bergen
Orkney
Oslo
UNITED KINGDOM
Inverness
North Sea
Edinburgh
London
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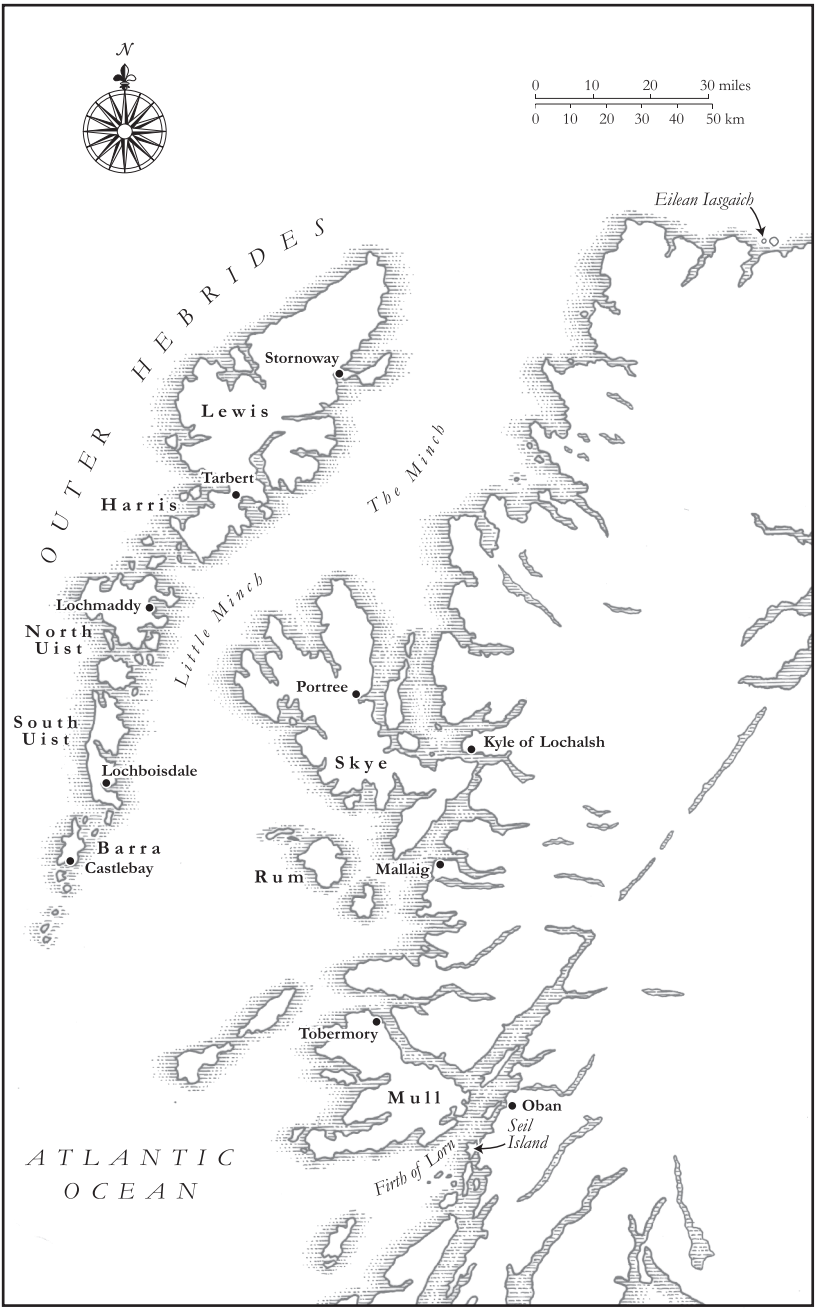
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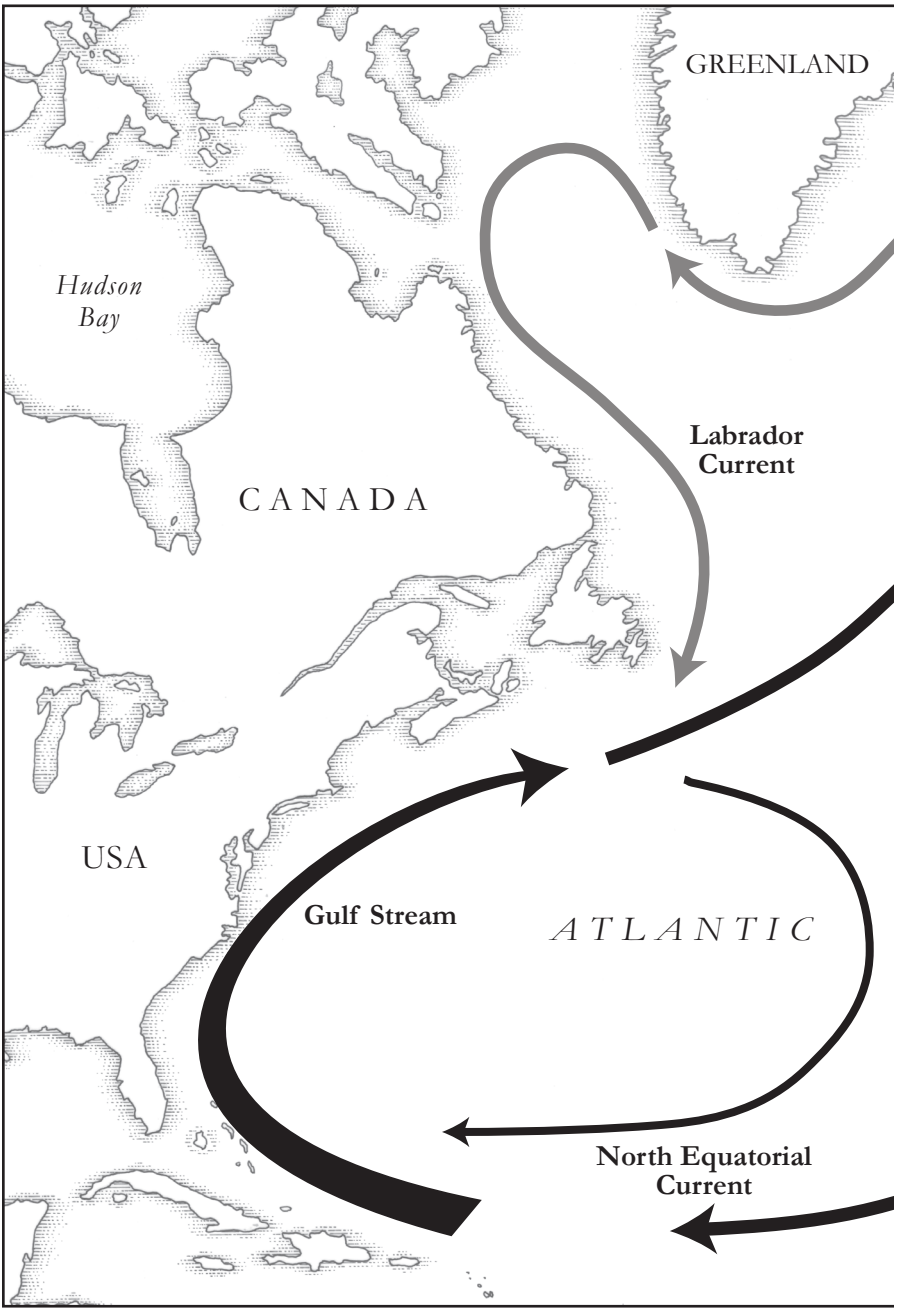
Little Minch
Portree
South Uist
Kyle of Lochalsh
Skye
Lochboisdale
Barra
Castlebay
Rum
Mallaig
Tobermory
Mull
Oban
Seil Island
Firth of Lorn
ATLANTIC OCEAN


GREENLAND
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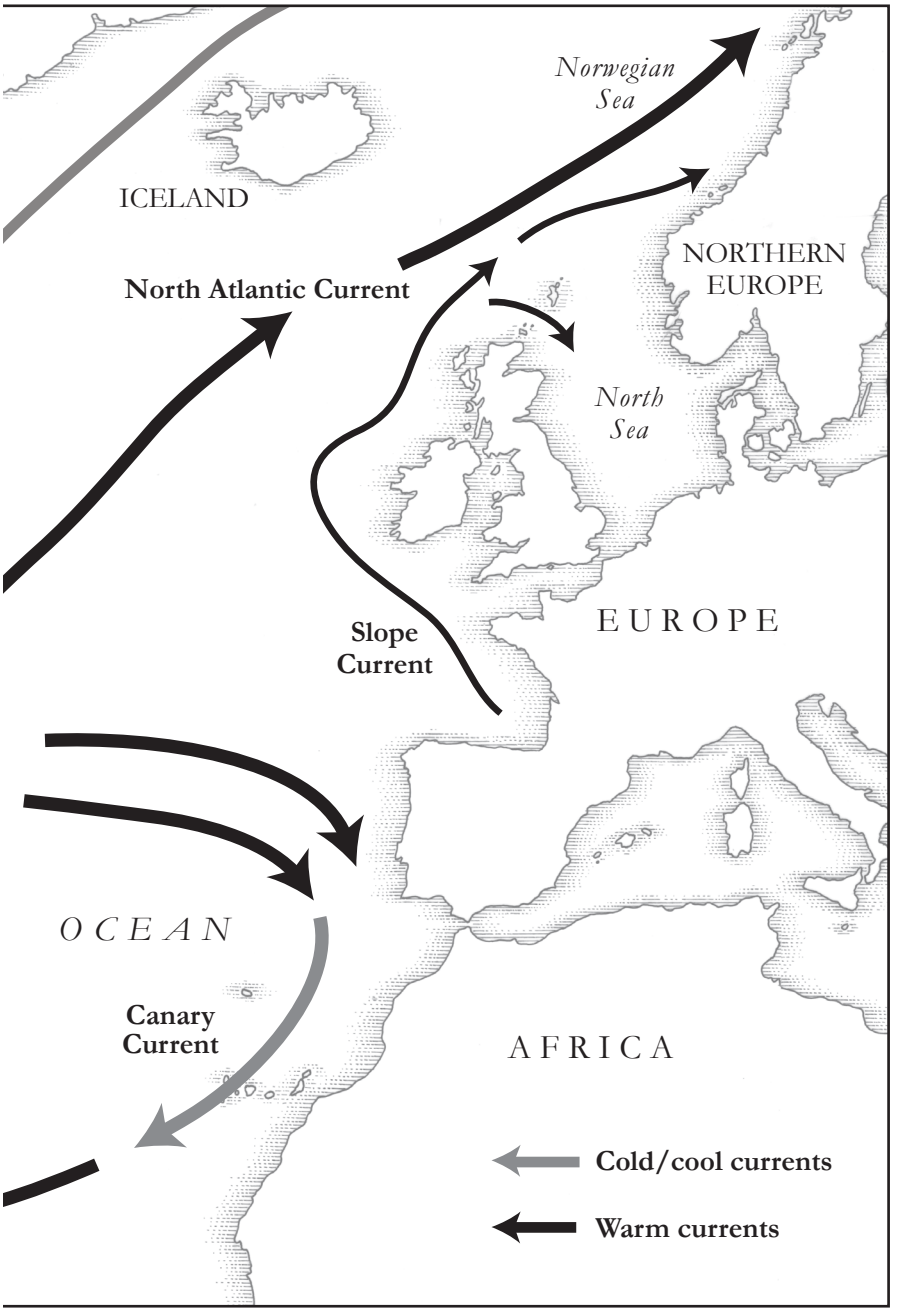
Labrador Current
CANADA
USA
Gulf Stream
ATLANTIC
North Equatorial Current


Norwegian Sea
ICELAND
NORTHERN EUROPE
North Atlantic Current
North Sea
EUROPE
Slope Current
OCEAN
Canary Current
AFRICA
Cold/cool currents
Warm currents

For this book I have invented an island off the north coast of Scotland, Eilean Iasgaich, and two settlements close by on the mainland. My reason was to avoid imposing a fictional story on a real island or communities which have rich histories of their own.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Toby Sherwin, Emeritus Professor of Oceanography at the Scottish Association for Marine Science, for his time and advice. If there are errors in any of the passages dealing with the movement of the sea they are mine alone.

My thanks also go to Maggie Hattersley of Maggie Pearlstine Associates, my agent, for all her support and guidance; to Colette, my wife, Rebecca and Rory, my children, for reading the drafts and for their suggestions and encouragement; and Emad Akhtar, my editor at Penguin.

I should also acknowledge the research of Anuja Agrawal in her book *Chaste Wives & Prostitute Sisters: Patriarchy and Prostitution among the Bedias of India*, which provided context and detail not available in the published journalism on the subject.

Prologue

The cold wind made the girl shiver. She flared her nostrils, inhaling with short bursts, sniffing for clues, trying to fix the smell. Was it the sea? Her heart began to beat faster. Was this the path to the sea? Was this the way home? She stopped struggling and trembled again, now with excitement.

The woman carrying her, scolding her, tightened her grip. One arm was clamped around the girl's back, the other behind her knees. The girl's tongue pushed at the rag in her mouth, trying to force it out, to gulp a lungful of fresh air, to test whether it tasted as it smelled, of freedom. She'd all but abandoned hope of that. She was young and time had passed slowly for her. Hadn't her father been right? 'Be obedient, Preeti, and be patient,' he'd said.

After the money had changed hands, her father had seen the sudden little-girl-lost panic in her eyes. 'He'll return you to us, Preeti, in a week or two. It's the custom,' he whispered to her, adding, 'when he tires of you.'

She'd said, 'What if he doesn't tire of me, Father?'

He'd given her an indulgent look, the one he sometimes gave to let her know the depth of his experience in these matters. 'He will.'

'Even a man who has paid sixty thousand rupees?'

Nobody had ever paid sixty thousand rupees for a girl

from her village. The previous record had been forty thousand.

'Particularly a man who has paid sixty thousand rupees . . .'

Preeti frowned. She did not understand. Hadn't her father said she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen? Hadn't the truck drivers stared at her with more longing and desire than at any of the other girls? 'Why, Father? Won't I still be beautiful?'

'Yes, Preeti, you will always be beautiful, but a man like this desires variety. He can afford to buy another beautiful girl and another after her.'

The woman stumbled on the path and Preeti clung to the coarse cloth of her jacket. Again the woman said something angry which Preeti did not understand. They were going downhill, the woman hurrying, Preeti feeling her urgency. Now they were on steps: the woman descending them sideways, quickly, one at a time. Preeti's feet banged against a railing, making the skin above her ankles rub painfully against the knot of the rope. She wriggled and the woman squeezed her tighter still. Then they were out of the wind and the woman's feet crunched on gravel. Ahead was the splashing of water washing against a shore. When Preeti had heard that sound the last time (how many weeks or months ago?) it had filled her with foreboding. Where was she being taken? Why was she tied, gagged and blindfolded? Why had this rich man paid so much for her only to treat her this way?

Now the lapping water thrilled her. When the woman put her down, Preeti felt the rough wood underneath her

and the sway of a boat rocking. Wasn't this the boat that had brought her here? Wasn't she going home?

Her head filled with a kaleidoscope of colours, faces and scents: the pinks, reds and greens of saris, the happy dirty faces of her younger sisters Nita and Meena, the woodsmoke, the hens scratching in the dirt, the grit and dust from the Jaipur road, the sound of trucks stopping and starting, the smell of diesel in the hot air, men bargaining over girls.

She had vivid flashes of memory: her mother sitting outside their hut, singing and cooking over a fire of tamarind branches; her mother's raindrop tears when Preeti, in her pink sari and jewellery, was taken to the roadside; her mother wrapping her arms round Preeti and saying, out of the hearing of her waiting father, 'Forgive me,' and Preeti saying proudly, hiding her fear, 'There is nothing to forgive. I am a Bedia girl and this is what Bedia girls do.'

Sitting in this boat, she made a promise. As soon as she returned home she would take her father aside and ask if she could buy presents for her mother with some of her deflowering money. It was the custom for all of it to be spent on a feast. But wasn't sixty thousand rupees more than enough for the biggest feast the village had ever had?

How she'd dreamed of the celebration.

Whenever she'd been with a man she'd thought of nothing else, her head brimming with its brilliance and noise. She would wear gold jewellery and with her father's permission she would buy her mother a dark pink sari of Mysore silk as well as cotton saris for everyday wear, a new cooking pot and a mattress for her bed.

The boat buffeting against a wave suddenly interrupted the girl's dreaming. She wished the woman would take off the blindfold. She wanted to see the ship that would return her to her family. It would be waiting in deeper water, as it had when she'd been taken ashore. Would she again be locked in an airless cabin? There would be no need on the return journey, Preeti thought. Whoever had bought her no longer had a reason for shutting her away from other men. She wasn't a virgin any more. Preeti had a better understanding of these things now.

When the car had slowed at the roadside in her village – shiny black bodywork, blackened windows – a flutter of satisfaction had travelled through her small frame. No car like that had ever stopped for a girl from her village before. She remembered how the truck drivers had ceased their bad-tempered haggling and had stared sullenly at the car, knowing this beautiful girl would not be theirs, not then, maybe never if she went to work in New Delhi or Mumbai. They had heard stories of exotic girls like that who earned many tens of thousands of rupees for their families every year. Preeti had watched as the car window slid open a few centimetres. Her father had approached it uncertainly and spoken through the gap, stooping to it in deference.

When he returned to her side, she'd asked, 'Was he handsome, and clean?' Her father shook his head and smiled like someone who had just been blessed. 'A man who spends sixty thousand rupees on a girl will be clean.'

'Sixty thousand rupees,' she'd gasped, and her father's smile broadened into the widest grin.

'Did you see him, Father? Was he handsome?'

'A man who spends sixty thousand rupees on a girl doesn't drive his own car.'

That was something she didn't understand. Why would a man have a Mercedes if he didn't drive it himself? She didn't want to show disrespect for her father so, when she was in the car, she said to the driver, 'Are you the man who has paid for me?'

He guffawed at the idea. 'Where would I be able to find one hundred and twenty thousand rupees?'

'But you only gave my father sixty thousand rupees.' (Preeti considered 'only' a surprising word in such a context.)

'I did, and soon I will give another girl's father sixty thousand rupees. It is another man's money. I am just his driver.'

Preeti fell silent, in jealous pique. Was there another Bedia girl so beautiful she could be worth sixty thousand rupees also? Hadn't her father told her she was the most beautiful girl ever born to Bedia parents?

No more than ten minutes later the car stopped at another village and the driver lowered the front passenger door window a few centimetres, as he had done for Preeti's father.

The driver passed a roll of money through the gap to a large man with a round face and white, even teeth – Preeti's mother had taught her that good teeth in a man were a sign of wealth and breeding. Then the car door opened and a girl in a green sari got in and sat on the tan leather seat beside Preeti. She was tall and beautiful with thick lustrous dark hair, wide eyes and full lipstick-red

lips. She was crying. Preeti's jealousy drained from her. She clasped the girl's hand and asked her name.

'Basanti,' the girl replied.

'How old are you, Basanti?'

'I am fourteen.' Her wet eyes stared at Preeti. They were pleading for help.

Basanti was one year older than Preeti.

'Are you the oldest child?'

'No, I am the youngest of my family.'

Now Preeti understood her tears. Whereas Preeti, being the oldest girl, had been prepared for the *dhanda*, the sex trade, Basanti had not – not yet. Something unexpected must have happened in her family. Basanti's tears were for the marriage she would never have and for the husband she would never have, for her new life as a *dhandewali*, a prostitute.

Preeti hugged her.

The journey took many hours and Preeti held on to Basanti all the way. At one point Basanti fell asleep on Preeti's lap. The younger girl stroked the elder's hair, marvelling at why a man would need two such girls and which he would find more appealing. Basanti was long and slender, with narrow hips, an elegant neck and wide eyes. Preeti was small and graceful like a dancer, with pronounced cheekbones and a finely drawn mouth.

Preeti thought she had never seen a girl as beautiful as Basanti.

After they had been driving for what seemed like half the night, Preeti tired of the headlights of approaching cars and trucks. She asked the driver, 'Are we nearly there?'

He replied kindly, 'Try to sleep and the journey will be quicker.'

Preeti said she could not, but she closed her eyes and, later, awoke with a start when the driver braked sharply before turning into a back street.

He heard her stir. 'We have arrived,' he said, stopping outside a warehouse with metal bars on windows blacked out with paint. 'We are in Mumbai.'

'Is this where the man who bought us lives?' Preeti asked. Basanti had woken too and tightened her grip on Preeti's hand.

The driver shook his head and let the girls out. They preceded him up some stairs to a door with a grille built into it where another man, wearing a white suit, white shoes and sunglasses, was waiting for them.

'Is this the man?' Basanti whispered to Preeti.

'I think so.'

Neither of them had seen such expensive clothes before. This man looked as though he could afford one hundred and twenty thousand rupees for two girls.

Preeti and Basanti were taken along a corridor to a room which had a single bed and a chair. It was lit by an overhead light and the blind was covering the window. A woman with a pockmarked face was sitting on the chair waiting for them. She stood up as Preeti and Basanti came into the room, said something Preeti didn't understand to the man in the white suit. After he'd closed the door, she held their hands: Preeti's right in her left, Basanti's left in her right, and regarded them appreciatively. 'Beautiful girls,' she said in their dialect and beamed with pleasure. Preeti and Basanti smiled

too, though they were uneasy at feeling the rough calluses on her hands. Afterwards, she helped Preeti and Basanti out of their clothes, telling them, 'You must wash . . .'

But she saw the worry on the girls' faces and didn't continue her sentence.

'Is the man in the white suit the one who has paid for Basanti and me?' Preeti asked.

The woman said nothing.

When they were naked they felt shy with each other.

Basanti touched Preeti's arm and whispered, 'Sixty thousand rupees is too little for a girl as beautiful as you.'

Preeti replied, 'And for you . . .'

'We are worth seventy thousand rupees each,' Basanti said.

'More . . . eighty thousand, ninety thousand, one hundred thousand.'

Then Preeti talked of the hundreds of thousands of rupees she and Basanti would make for their families from the *dhanda*, of the rich men they would still be attracting many years from now. Would any Bedia daughters ever have earnings like theirs?

The woman left the room, shaking her head at these girls who thought only of money, and returned with some water in a bowl. She washed them down, first Preeti, then Basanti, turning them round as she did so. Preeti splashed Basanti and the girls laughed nervously together because they were fearful of what would happen next. The woman went out of the room a second time before bringing food, pav bhaji, and new clothes, Western clothes; blue jeans, T-shirts and a choice of gold or silver pumps.

While they ate and dressed, the woman told stories about Bedia women and their warrior blood, how brave they were, how the *dhanda* was noble work for girls as beautiful as them. She knew from experience that Bedia girls liked these lies. Weren't they told them by their good-for-nothing fathers who were descended from bandits, robbers and thieves?

'Have you ever been on a plane before?' the woman asked.

Preeti and Basanti shook their heads.

'Or a boat?'

They shook them again and giggled.

'The men who have bought you live a long way away. You will travel to them when they have paid for you.'

'Haven't we been paid for?' Preeti asked. She had seen the money. What did this woman mean?

The woman didn't answer but Basanti inquired, 'Has more than one man paid for Preeti and me?'

'Yes, more than one.'

'Not the man here, the man in the white suit?'

The woman hesitated. '. . . No.'

'Where are these men? Are they here?'

'They were watching you when you were washing and changing your clothes.'

Preeti said, 'There was no one watching us. The door was closed.' She looked at the window to satisfy herself the blind was still drawn. It was.

The woman pointed to the corner of the room where the ceiling met the wall. A camera was suspended there. 'The men were watching you a long way away and bidding for you.'

Preeti and Basanti exchanged worried glances and hugged each other.

Basanti said, 'Where were these men?'

'In other countries . . .'

'Are we going to Dubai to see these men? It's another country, isn't it?' Preeti asked. Then to Basanti: 'I've heard my father mention it.'

The woman shrugged. 'Yes, Dubai . . .' But because of the quickness of her reply neither girl believed her.

'What is happening to us, Basanti?' Preeti asked. Basanti was crying again.

After they had dressed, the man in the white suit opened the door and waited by it. The woman hugged them, saying, 'There, my pretty Bedia girls,' and led them along the corridor to the door with the grille and down the stair to the car where the driver was waiting.

They drove to an airfield outside Mumbai.

Half a dozen other girls were there, not Bedia, but girls like Basanti and Preeti, who would never marry because their virginity was being sold, whose destiny was to earn money for their families in the *dhanda*. They were led to a plane with a white fuselage and twin propellers. Preeti and Basanti shared a seat at the back and when it took off, engines screaming, Preeti willed herself not to cry. Didn't she have to be strong for Basanti?

It landed after an hour, perhaps two. Preeti had lost track of time. Now every second had enough worry for a minute; every minute enough fear for an hour.

Preeti and Basanti were the last off. They climbed into the back of a black van parked beside the aircraft's wing and saw the frightened faces of the other girls who were

already inside. Preeti said a prayer, aloud. Two of the girls began whimpering. Another retched at the smell of aviation fuel. Then the doors slammed shut, imprisoning them in pitch darkness. The whimpering became anguished cries. The retching girl vomited, filling the van with its stink. Preeti said another prayer, silently, and held Basanti tight to her.

Soon the van stopped and the doors opened. Preeti saw they were on a quay in a dockyard. A large ship was beside them and a man in dark glasses and blue overalls was shouting at them to get out. Preeti and Basanti were first up the gangway. Two men took them down metal stairs, along a narrow passageway to a rusted door which opened on to a small cabin with no window or porthole. It had one bed, a toilet and a shower.

They never saw the other girls again.

Their food was brought to them once a day by a man who wore a hood. He was their only visitor, from the first day of their journey to the last.

How many days were they on the ship? Long before they were taken off, Basanti thought it had been about two months. Preeti wasn't sure. It could have been more, or less, who could tell? After that, Basanti scratched the wall every time the man brought their food. One evening he told them not to sleep, to pack up their few belongings and be ready to go ashore. Basanti counted the scratches on the wall. There were twenty-seven.

They were blindfolded before they left their room. No light seeped through to their eyes when they were out on deck. 'Is it night?' Basanti asked Preeti.

'I think so.'

The cold was what struck them. Where were they? What country had they been brought to? They were taken to the side of the ship where Basanti was guided to a ladder. She cried out, letting Preeti know what was happening to her. All Preeti heard was Basanti's terror. Then there was a shout from below – a man's voice – and a crewman nudged Preeti to follow Basanti. He lifted her on to the ladder and held her until she'd found a foothold. Her hands gripped the metal sides as she began to descend. She trembled so much she feared she would fall, but after a dozen steps rough hands grabbed at her from below.

Her wrists and ankles were secured with rope. One person tied her, another held her. A cloth was forced in her mouth, after which Preeti was put to sit with Basanti and the two girls pressed against each other for warmth and reassurance. Preeti choked on the dry gag in her small mouth. She swallowed until her throat was raw. Then an engine roared, the boat's sideways rocking stopped and the breeze dried the nauseous slick from Preeti's face.

Twenty minutes later the boat bumped gently against a pier.

Basanti was taken ashore first, then Preeti. Preeti could tell a woman carried her because she was held across her torso, against her slack breasts. The woman said nothing. The only sound was the lapping of the sea and the crunch of feet on gravel. They climbed what seemed to be steps and suddenly Preeti was taken indoors. Now the only sound was the woman's feet echoing off the floor. Where was Basanti? When the woman untied her and took off

her blindfold and gag Preeti saw she was in a bedroom without any windows. The woman, who was wearing waterproofs and a balaclava with slits for her eyes, opened a door to show Preeti the bathroom. She said, 'You'll like it here, pet. I know you will.' Then she left.

Preeti cried for Basanti, sweet, frightened Basanti, and for herself.

Later the first man came to her. He was short, fat, pallid and wore a mouse mask. His voice was kindly and he took Preeti to the bathroom and washed her all over with special soap before carrying her to the bed and turning out the light. She heard him take off his clothes and then she felt the bed sinking under his weight and his face pressing against hers as he kissed her. He had taken off his mask.

She lay still, as her father had told her, forcing herself not to flinch when it hurt.

After he'd finished, he fell asleep, snoring, and she went to the bathroom to wash the bitter smell of his sweat from her and the trail of blood from the inside of her thighs. That was the first occasion she had filled her head with the swirls and sounds of the party she would have when she returned to her village. How many more times had it filled her head? A hundred, two hundred: she lost count.

Sometimes the men stayed a night. Sometimes the same man returned night after night. Some men stayed for an hour or two and never came back. Sometimes nobody came for days. It was after one of these times that the woman entered her room, wearing her balaclava, which was usual, but shouting at Preeti, which was not.

She stuffed her few clothes into a bag and tied and blindfolded Preeti, hurting her in her hurry.

Something's wrong, Preeti thought.

Then she smelled the sea, heard the crunch of the woman's feet on the gravel and dared to believe she was going home. What more proof did she need than this boat? Wasn't it the boat which had brought her ashore?

Once it was in deep water, the woman moved in the stern. She was coming towards Preeti. Her boots thudded on the planks and the boat rocked from side to side. She untied the rope at Preeti's legs, then the one binding her arms, and pulled the cloth from her mouth. Preeti gulped the salt air. It tasted of freedom, sweet freedom.

When the woman took off the blindfold Preeti stared around her. It was dark. The only light was the white fluorescence on the waves rippling past the boat. Where was the ship? Where was freedom?

The woman put her arms under Preeti's legs and around her back. She was lifting her. 'Goodbye, pet,' she said. Then Preeti was falling and splashing into the sea. The shock of submersion and the cold of the water made her gasp, silencing her cry of fear. When she came back to the surface, choking and retching, the noise of the boat's engine was already fading. Preeti screamed but her voice was lost in the vastness of the ocean and in the sharp wind. She cried for her mother, her father and Basanti. She begged to see her sisters again. One of them would be sold for the *dhanda* if Preeti did not return. Please, no.

She began to sink, gulping water into her lungs. Her throat and windpipe burned. Her chest felt as if it would

burst. She lunged again for the surface, taking one more frantic breath before dipping back under the waves.

Now she was playing kabaddi. She was running and running, sprinting for the line where her team-mates were calling for her, cheering her on, urging her to go faster. The opposing team was chasing close behind but she was fast. She had twenty paces remaining. Could she cross the line without taking another breath? One more step. One more step. One more step. Was she there? She had to breathe.

She gasped for air but cold seawater rushed in, swamping her tired lungs.