Race
To
Win
By Loveleen Kacker
Illustrated by Ankur Mitra

Children's BookTrust, New Delhi
*Race to Win* won Second Prize in the category Fiction in the Competition for Writers of Children’s Books organized by Children’s Book Trust. The other titles by the author published by CBT are *Hunt for the Jewels* and *The Bastar Rebellion* and short stories 'Who Is King?’ and 'A Talking Parrot' in *Kaleidoscope*. 
It was five thirty in the morning and already the day was bright and shiny I pressed my knees against the silvery flanks of Chandi and bent low, my face almost brushing her flying mane. I was late. I had ridden down to the lake very early in the morning because I wanted to see the sun rise from beneath the shining waters of the lake. It was such a wonderful sight that I forgot everything—time and space. When I regained my senses, it was too late.

"Go, Chandi," I urged the silver mare, "go on faster, faster!" The young mare flew over the ground lightly and effortlessly. I was almost there. I could see the sloping red roof of the main House and the cluster of fruit trees behind which were the stables. "Come on, Chandi," I whispered again in her ears.

We were galloping downhill at a spanking pace when I noticed, rather late, a pile of old, worn out tyres blocking the path. Chandi lost her head. "Easy, Chandi, easy," I whispered and immediately tried to restrain her. But she did not listen. Her head down, ears flattened and mane lifted in the wind, she galloped straight at the pile of tyres. Now she was almost flying.
I tugged at the reins and dug in my heels to stop her but there was no reaction. She was a horse possessed.

Panic crept up my throat and I wanted to scream. My hands were hurting from pulling the reins in. The pile of tyres was almost upon us now and I closed my eyes in fright. I was going to break a leg today.

I felt I was flying! Chandi soared over the tyres. Then, things went wrong. Fear and excitement made me open my eyes to look around and then I realized I was slipping. Chandi did not quite make the most perfect landing. And, in seconds, I went flying unceremoniously into a vegetable patch and Chandi skidded to a halt some feet away.

"You, crazy horse!" I shouted in anger mixed with fear. "You could have killed me!"

Chandi harrumphed in reply and bent her head, nosing for the ripe tomatoes.

"Sara! Are you all right?" It was Fazlu, my friend, who came running to help me get up.

"Hi, Fazlu! Yes, I think so," I got up gingerly, brushing my torn jeans and dusting off the leaves and muck that stuck to it.

Then Fazlu noticed Chandi.

"Chandi? The silver-grey mare!" He turned to stare accusingly at me, "You were riding Chandi?"

"Yes," I said shortly, examining my grazed palms in dismay.

"But she is Uncle Hari’s prized race horse! He will kill you!"

I knew Uncle Hari would kill me. Chandi was the most expensive thoroughbred in H.H. Farm and Uncle Hari had a desire to enter her in the Pune races.
But it was not easy to handle Chandi. She was ill-tempered and disobedient. Only Raffu Miyan seemed to be able to control her.

"Does Uncle Hari or Raffu Miyan know you've taken Chandi out?" asked Fazlu.

"Of course not," I retorted. "What a thought! If only Chandi would behave herself and listen! I could ride her in the Pune races and in the Subcontinent Race and win."

"You? You're a girl!" Fazlu laughed.

"So what if I'm a girl? I'm small and thin, but I'm the best rider in the world!"

"World?"


"Country?"

"Okay, State. I'm the best rider in the State."

"If you say so."

"What do you mean, 'if you say so'? Uncle Hari himself says that there is no rider on the farm like me, not even Raffu Miyan who is a brute."

"That he is. I wonder why he works in a farm. He doesn't seem to enjoy it," agreed Fazlu.

"Sara!" someone shouted from across the field. "What are you doing here? Uncle Hari and the doctor are looking for you."

"You're done for," said Fazlu, rubbing his hands in glee. "Uncle Hari will put you in jail."

"Only if Papa doesn't kill me first." I was terrified now. Chandi was worth lakhs and Papa was responsible for her welfare and health. My father, Dr. Prabhu Singh, was the farm's resident vet and had been there for ages. He was a good vet and people from
miles around consulted him for any ailment that their pets or other animals suffered from. Even the vet of Taj Farm consulted Papa despite the rivalry between Taj Farm and H.H. Farm.

"Hurry, Sara," said Fazlu.

I picked up Chandi’s reins and ran.

As I neared the barn, excited voices hit me. I could hear Papa’s measured tones and Uncle Hari’s angry notes.

"What’s happening?" I asked.

"I don’t know, but, Sara, I have a suggestion. You go and find out what’s the matter. I’ll take Chandi from the rear of the house and stable her," said Fazlu.

"Maybe nobody has noticed her absence."

"Thanks, Fazlu." I flashed him a warm smile. "Give her a rub too."

"I will."

Still picking leaves out of my hair I strolled into the middle of a highly agitated group. Everyone was speaking at the same time.

"Papa! Uncle Hari! What happened?" I asked.

"Sara, where have you been? You weren’t in your room," Papa stared at me questioningly.

"I...I...went out," I stammered, with a big lump in my throat. I was unable to lie to Papa. Luckily his attention got diverted.

"Sara, don’t you know what happened?" asked Uncle Hari.

"No."

"I’ve been robbed! Robbers came and stole all my vegetables and fruits. There’s nothing left to take to the market now."
"All tomatoes... Two fields of brinjals and green peppers...lemons...mangoes...even the mint and spinach! What they didn't take they destroyed... Wanton destruction..." Uncle Hari spoke as if in a delirium.

"What!" I shouted. "Someone stole our vegetables!"

"And the fruits. Now I have nothing to sell for many days," said Uncle Hari.

"Oh, my God! And nobody heard anything?"

I asked.

"No."

"The dogs?" I enquired.

"The dogs? These dogs?" Uncle Hari looked at Soloman and Sheba in disgust. "These two cover their heads with blankets and sleep day in, day out!"

"That's not true," Nima, the cook, patted them affectionately.

"And you, Nima," Uncle Hari pointed an accusing finger at the cook, "you are responsible for making these two dogs so lazy. You feed them biryani, rogan josh (a kind of mutton preparation) and mithai (sweetmeats)!"

"I wish I were a dog!" came the involuntary cry from Om, the stable boy. "These dogs have better lives than us."

"It makes them lazy and dim-witted!" retorted Uncle Hari in anger. "From today they will get cold water and dry bread!"

"It's a good idea," said Papa. "They need to go on a diet."

"Poor dears," I exclaimed, "they'll starve to death."

"Wait a minute," said Papa. "Soloman and Sheba stay indoors and sleep like the dead, but what about Shera?"
"Yeah, where’s Shera?" asked Fazlu.

"Shera! Shera! Come on, Shera!" Uncle Hari started calling out in a frenzy.

Shera was the handsomest and most alert dog that I had ever seen. He was a fifteen-year-old Alsatian and faster than the three-year-old Labradors—Soloman and Sheba. We searched the barns, the hay lofts, the stables and were about to go across to the poultry and milking sheds, when Fazlu gave a shout, "Uncle Hari! Doctor Uncle! Sara! Om! Come here quickly!"

"Where are you, Fazlu? And why are you shouting?" the stern voice of Raffu Miyan sounded angry.

"Here. Come quickly."

"Crazy boy..." began Raffu Miyan in anger but we didn’t wait.

"He’s in the mango grove, Papa," I said as I ran towards it. Papa and Uncle Hari were close on my trail.

"Look," said Fazlu, in an agonized voice, "they killed Shera!"
In all the hullabaloo of the day Papa forgot to ask me where I had been so early in the morning, which was really lucky for me. Uncle Hari and Aunt Tara had a harrowing time with the police who were totally clueless about the identity of the persons who could have stolen the vegetables and fruits and killed Shera.

"This is the second time someone stole my produce," Uncle Hari told the police. "And you still don't know anything."

"There are a lot of footprints and tyre marks," said Inspector Saxena, scratching his head. "But no real clues."

"Can't you match the tyre marks?" I asked.

"No, I can't," retorted Inspector Saxena. "Old Willy's jeeps are very common in Bhopal. Every old Bhopali family has at least one of them."

"Shouldn't you go and inspect them to see which one has mud encrusted around it?" demanded Fazlu.

"Perhaps you should begin with Taj Farm," said Raffu Miyan, staring at Fazlu. "Everyone in Bhopal knows Taj Farm grows the worst vegetables and breeds the slowest horses."
"You can inspect Taj Farm/" retorted Fazlu. "And you can check our godowns and sheds. Just because our horse won the Subcontinent Race you are jealous."

"You, little puppy!" Raffu Miyan got up in anger. "Don't call me names!" shouted Fazlu.

"Raffu Miyan!" Papa caught Raffu Miyan's hand before he could whack Fazlu, "leave the boy alone. You have no business accusing Taj Farm of the theft without any evidence."

"I agree," said Uncle Hari. He ruffled Fazlu's hair. "This time I'm going to win the Subcontinent Race. I've got the finest, fastest horse in the whole Asia."

"Right now we need to worry about who stole our produce and killed Shera," Papa cut Uncle Hari short.

"Poor Shera," I said, tears gathering in my eyes. Shera had been old and practically blind but he had a strong sense of smell and had been wonderfully alert.

"Sara, why don't you and Fazlu select a burial place for Shera and make preparations?" Uncle Hari gave me and Fazlu a push.

"I hate Raffu Miyan," said Fazlu, angrily, as I literally dragged him away

"What has he got against me?"

"It's not you, Fazlu," I tried to comfort him. "It's your uncle, Taj-ud-din, whom he hates."

Raffu Miyan used to look after the Taj Farm stables owned by Taj-ud-din. No one knew what transpired between Taj-ud-din and Raffu Miyan that made them bitter enemies. Raffu Miyan quit Taj Farm and joined H.H. Farm.

"I know but I don't understand why Raffu Miyan hates me?" said Fazlu, rather sadly.
We had reached the woods where the stable boys had carefully wrapped up Shera’s body in a gunny sack. We decided to bury Shera beneath an old guava tree. We helped in the digging. It was tiring work. Losing a faithful dog like Shera had upset the entire staff.

"Did your father scold you for taking Chandi for a ride?" whispered Fazlu.

"No, he didn’t know."

"Lucky."

"Yeah."

After Shera was laid to rest I went home for lunch. I had been born on H.H. Farm and had not known any other home.

"What’s for lunch?" I asked, sniffing.

"Well, my dear, I really had no time to cook today and I thought an omelette with bread and cheese would make a tasty nutritious lunch."

"No, Papa." I sat down with a thump. "I’m really hungry and I don’t want bread and eggs."

"It’s very tasty bread, brown and crisply toasted."

"I get bread and Soloman and Sheba get biryani. It’s not fair. I’m going to the House."

"No, Sara!" called Papa, but I was gone.

My mother had died when I was born and Papa had been both mother and father to me. But, unfortunately, he never learned to cook anything. At best he could make an omelette and heat a tin of soup. So I never missed a chance to have my meals at the House where Uncle Hari and Aunt Tara, the owners of H.H. Farm, lived. The House had no name. It was just the House.

"Mmm," my nose twitched at the delicious smell coming from the kitchen.
"Come in, Sara," called Aunt Tara. "Today we are having paneer parathas. I hope you are hungry."

I was hungry! I ate four parathas before I realized that there were lightly fried vegetables and a big bowl of fresh curd too. But I was stuffed by then.

"Uncle Hari," I said, "why would someone steal our fruit and vegetables? It's not as though they are very valuable."

"They are valuable to us," said Aunt Tara.

"Both of you are right. In real terms the value of the fruit and vegetables isn't much. But we need every penny for the stables. Running a farm is no joke. I need a cold storage and a pasteurizing plant to take care of the eggs and the milk, the butter and the cheese. As it is, I lose money because milk and milk products go bad if they are not handled properly."

"But, Uncle Hari..."

"The horses are expensive," continued Uncle Hari, ignoring my call. "They eat a great deal, need a number of hands to groom and exercise them, yet they bring in no money unless they win races."

"But, Uncle Hari..."

"I know, I know. They do win occasional races and sometimes I am able to sell a horse at a good price, but it still costs more than I earn to run the farm."

"But, Uncle Hari..."

"And now there are no vegetables for at least a week."

"And Shera has gone too," Aunt Tara’s eyes filled with tears.

Not having got any answer to my question, I slipped out of my chair and made for the stables.
It was quiet everywhere. The horses were lazily swishing flies or dozing in fits and starts. The stables were large and airy and smelled of clean hay and peat. The warm air and the heavy lunch made me sleepy too.

"Hey Sara, wake up, sleepy head."

"It's you," I blinked at Fazlu. "Go away. I want to sleep."

"You've been sleeping for more than one hour. It's time to get up."

"Liar! I've not been sleeping for one hour."

"You have. And, though I tried to prevent it, while asleep you swallowed two flies."

"Youuu! Wait till I catch you." I ran after him.

I caught him and thrashed him till he cried 'surrender'. Then I went to Chandi's stall to give her a nice rub. Fazlu sat on an upturned bucket, well out of Chandi's way, and chewed on a straw.

"She's beautiful," I remarked, stroking Chandi's neck.

"She's crazy," Fazlu commented.

"Harrumph!" snorted Chandi.

"She dislikes being insulted," I said. "And if you understood horse language, you would know that was an insult."

"Hmm. But I tell you, Sara, she's one of the most perfect horses I've ever seen. She's racing material provided she improves her temper and submits to discipline. I believe she could win the Subcontinent Race. She is the only one who can beat Hawa, Uncle Taj's race horse."

"I know," I said. "There is still time. I will train Chandi and I will race her. Together Chandi and I will
win the Subcontinent Race for Uncle Hari and his financial problems will be over forever."
"Dreamer!" teased Fazlu.
"Dreams are the stuff of reality. I'll make my dream come true."
"We'll see. But, right now, the actual problem is Uncle Hari's midnight intruder and the present money crunch. Do you think he will actually sell the horses?"
I drew in a sharp breath, laden with anxiety. 'Would Uncle Hari sell the horses? And, most important of all, would he sell Chandi and give up the idea of winning the Subcontinent Race?' the very thought hurt me. "We have to help Uncle Hari," I said.
"I agree," said Fazlu promptly. "But how?"
"I have an idea."
"What?"
"How about riding lessons?"
"Riding lessons?"
"Yeah, riding lessons. Kids from Bhopal could be taught how to ride for a fee."
"Good idea!"
"And you, Raffu Miyan and I could teach. The horses will get exercise and we will be happy working with the horses."
"It's an excellent idea, Sara, and no one can object. It's a good way to spend the summer holiday."
"I'll speak to Uncle Hari about this proposal early tomorrow," I promised. "I better go now. Bye."
I went to bed early that night because I wanted to catch Uncle Hari in the morning and convince him to let Fazlu and I start a riding school.
Something woke me up in the dead of night. I sat up instantly and looked around, wondering what it was that had disturbed me. Everything seemed normal. Then I heard it. It was a whining, scratching sound. "Soloman, Sheba?" I called and I got a whine in return.

Quickly I got out of bed and opened the door. Both the dogs were there. "What is it?" I asked. "What’s the matter?" Soloman caught my pyjama and pulled it with his teeth. "You want me to come with you?" I felt as if Soloman actually nodded! "Okay, fine. Let me wear my shoes."

I followed the dogs out of the house through the kitchen door. As usual Papa had left it unlocked. He always said even a robber would leave our house in disgust for there was nothing to steal, not even a TV. The dogs broke into a run now and made for the stables. I ran after them. And then I smelled it and even heard it. Fire! The crackle of fire!

"Fire!" I screamed and ran to the stables. The horses were neighing and snorting in fear. I opened the main stable door. The air smelt of burning cinders. The smell was strong but I could see no fire.
"What's happened? What's burning?"

"Raffu Miyan!" I turned to the stable manager in relief. "There's a fire somewhere. I don't know where."

"I know where it is."

"Where?"

"In the barn."

"Oh, my God! The barn contains all the hay and oats and feed for the chickens."

I screamed for Papa and Uncle Hari while the dogs went totally berserk. Someone called the fire department. Within no time there were people everywhere. Now I could see the hungry yellow flames. The scene was totally unbelievable. Despite the powerful jets of water spewed by the two fire engines and the entire farm's staff gathering water from the nearby lake to fight the fire, the barn burned down completely. Luckily the stables didn't catch fire and the horses were safe. The corn and chicken were in a shed, some distance away. But the feed for the animal was gone. Uncle Hari bought feed when it was cheap and hay when the market was glutted. Now almost six months' supply was lost, burnt to cinders.

"Uncle Hari," I crept into his lap.

"My child," he held me close. His face and hands were black with soot and his grey hair was flecked with ash. His eyes were red with fatigue and lack of sleep. "It was sheer luck you woke up."

"Soloman and Sheba woke me," I said, patting the dogs on the head.

"Good dogs," said Aunt Tara.

"Yeah. If you hadn't called the fire engines the stables would have caught fire and that..."
"But I didn't call the fire engines," I said.
"Then who did?"
"I think Raffu Miyan did," I said. "He was there. He knew where the fire was."
"Is that so? Then why didn't he raise an alarm?" asked Uncle Hari.
"Yes, it's strange," said Papa. "We all woke up when you and the dogs screamed and barked."

Dawn lighted up the sky by now and one by one the exhausted farm workers sank to the ground around Uncle Hari and Papa who sat on camp chairs and brooded. Aunt Tara and some other ladies came around with kettles of strong, sweet tea and packets of glucose biscuits. Then someone brought sweet buns and, for a while, everyone concentrated on eating and drinking.

"I think I'll go and check the horses," said Papa, keeping his mug aside and dusting his pants. He turned to the grooms, "It would be a good idea to start early on the rub-downs and exercises. It will calm down the horses."

A chorus of 'yes, doctor' followed, and one by one, the staff began to move towards the stables.
"Coming, Sara?" Papa called to me.
"Yes, Papa, in a minute," I replied.

The weary look on Uncle Hari's face worried me. I thought I should see him to the House before I went to the stables. On arrival at the House, Aunt Tara insisted that I drink a glass of milk and wash my face and hands before leaving.

"Uncle Hari," I called, but got no response.
Uncle Hari stood at the window of the dining room, staring at the smoking pile of ash and rubble of the
barn. The air was still acrid with smoke and the sour smell of burnt wood and leather was all around. Uncle Hari was a tall, lean man with a full head of white hair and a clipped white moustache. He was a military man and it showed in his carriage and bearing.

I knew he was upset not only by what had happened but also by what might have happened had the fire spread to the stables.

"Uncle Hari," I repeated. "Don't worry everything will be all right."

"The horses will have to go," he spoke softly, almost to himself.

"What?"

"Huh," he turned to look at me, as though surprised to see me there.

"What did you say, Uncle Hari?"

"Sara, the horses will have to go."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't keep so many horses. I don't have money to rebuild the barn or to buy feed. I have to sell the horses."

"All of them?"

"Maybe not all, my dear," he sighed deeply and looked at Aunt Tara. "You think I could have a cup of tea? I really need to relax."

"Don't worry, it's just a run of bad luck." Saying this Aunt Tara moved out.

"Uncle Hari, do you think the fire was an accident?" I asked.

Uncle Hari turned to me. There was a strange look in his eyes. "It was not an accident, my dear. Someone lit that fire. But how did you know?"
"But who?" I ignored the question.
"That's what I want to find out. Someone is out to ruin me. But why?"
"I'll find out, Uncle Hari," I declared.
Uncle Hari tweaked my plaits and smiled. "You want to play detective, huh? Well, go ahead, only don't get yourself into trouble."
"I won't," I promised and turned to go. Then I remembered. "Uncle Hari, if Fazlu and I can raise some money, then you won't have to sell the horses."
"But how will you kids raise so much money?"
"We could give riding lessons. You don't have to bring a trainer from Pune for training Chandi. I'll train her myself to run the races. And," I was so excited I was repeating myself, "I'll race Chandi in the Subcontinent Race! You won't even need a jockey! I'm small and light and I'll take good care of her. I'll stop eating chocolates and cream biscuits so that I lose some more weight and..."
"You really are a good girl, Sara," said Uncle Hari, "but how can you offer riding lessons, train Chandi, practise to become a jockey, and race Chandi in the Subcontinent Race? It's a rather tall order for a fourteen-year-old girl, don't you think?"
"No! I can do it! So what if I'm a girl? I can be the first girl jockey in the country."
"Heard her?" Uncle Hari laughed, taking the mug of tea that Aunt Tara held out to him.
"It's easy. I've worked it out. First thing is to get up early and train Chandi..."
"Chandi is not like other horses. She has a hard mouth and is bad-tempered. She refuses to jump if it
doesn't suit her and she kicks and bites. What's more she has been known to throw off her rider!

"I know all that Uncle Hari, but I'm convinced that Chandi behaves like this because she has not been handled properly by Raffu Miyan. He's too rough with her, she needs gentler handling."

"Sara, Raffu Miyan is the best trainer in north India. I get requests from everyone to send him. There's no better expert on race horses than him."

"Uncle Hari, at least think about what I've said. I'm sure I can manage Chandi and win the Subcontinent Race. It will fetch you ten lakhs of rupees and your financial problem will be over forever!"

"It's a nice dream."

"It's not a dream, Uncle Hari. I can do it. Give me a chance, please," I pleaded.

"Go, Sara. I'm tired."

"But..."

"Sara, go, please." Aunt Tara caught my arm and walked me to the door.

"Please, Aunt Tara, can't you persuade him to give me one chance. Please, Aunt Tara. I know I can do it."

Aunt Tara looked at me and then nodded. "I'll try my best to convince him because I think it's the only chance we have to save H.H. Farm. If the Subcontinent Race is won then we are safe."

"Thank you, Aunt Tara."
I knew that in order to ride a horse to victory, one needed to establish a rapport with the horse. I decided to go to the stables with the idea of doing just that. I wore a T-shirt and let my hair fall in two ponytails over my shoulders. I put on a corduroy trousers, the ones with the almost frayed seat. Papa said if I wore it for one long ride, I would return with no seat in my pants. I refused to even smile at such a poor joke. I was dying to get a leather patch fixed on the seat of my pants as well as the knees of my pants. I had got that idea after watching the cowboys in Western movies. I entered into the stable with a determined air.

Chandi was in her stall and looking upon the world with a jaundiced eye. She turned that eye upon me now, harrumphed in anger and kicked her legs. I put my hand close to her nose to pet her. But she bared her teeth and neighed sharply. And then I saw it. Her mouth was bleeding!

"Chandi!" I cried. "You, poor dear, what happened?"
"Harrumph!" she warned me to keep away.
"What has happened to you?" tears gathered at the corners of my eyes. I douched them away. "Who has
done this to you? Wait, I'll get Uncle Hari." I ran to the stable door, then turned back, scared of leaving her alone in the stable. She was in great pain.

"Sara!" It was Om.

"Thank God, you're here, Om." I grasped his arm and dragged him up to Chandi, "Look at Chandi. She is bleeding from the mouth."

"It's the bit."

"Bit? What kind of bit did you use on her?"

"I didn't. It was Raffu Miyan. He used a steel one."

"Jointed?"

"Could be. That's why she's bleeding."

"But why? Why use a steel, hard jointed bit for a thoroughbred like her! He may have damaged her mouth forever."

"Raffu Miyan took her riding in the morning. Maybe he changed the bit and..." Suddenly Om started and looked to the left, "Here he comes."

"Raffu Miyan," I confronted him, "Chandi is bleeding from the mouth."

"Nah! She's okay," said Raffu Miyan casually.

"You are callous and...and..." as usual I started stammering because I was upset.

"Sara, I know my job," Raffu Miyan spoke harshly.

"Raffu Miyan, you hurt Chandi."

"Hurt Chandi? What do you mean?"

"She's bleeding!" my voice was edgy.

"It's nothing. The bit is new and a little sharp. It has cut her tongue. I'll have the bit filed."

"But..."

"Relax, Sara. She'll be okay in a jiffy." He turned and left the stable.
I gasped at the audacity of the statement. The nerve of the man! I felt the blood boil inside me and I was nearly crying with rage.

"What a brute!" exclaimed Om. "Don't worry Sara. We'll clean her wound and find another bit."

"I'm going to tell Uncle Hari about this."

"Tell Uncle Hari what?" asked Fazlu, walking inside the stable. "What happened to Chandi?"

I told Fazlu what had happened and he snorted with anger. "Maybe now you understand why Uncle Taj wants nothing to do with Raffu Miyan. He may have the reputation of being a great trainer of race horses but he is not a lover of horses..."

"Or any other animal for that matter," added Om.

"Absolutely right," said Fazlu. "He is bad-tempered and insensitive."

"And he is very impatient too. If Chandi is a second late for the exercise, he hits her with whatever he has on hand. He uses fear to train the horses," said Om.

"Fear and pain!" I said in horror. "Get some clean water, Om, while I fetch some ice from the House. She would be glad to suck some ice."

"Get some jaggery too," called Fazlu.

Chandi did not suck any ice, but she drank cold water and that seemed to make her feel better. We cleaned her up and comforted her. Then I decided to work in the stables. I spent the morning cleaning out Chandi's stall. I led her outside and gave her a long rope. But she hardly strayed away. Instead she seemed inquisitive about my actions and spent time eating soft mush and looking at me with rising interest. I was convinced she was beginning to like me.
At H.H. Farm the stables were loose boxes made of wood. No wonder everyone at the farm had been horrified at the mention of the word 'fire'. Uncle Hari discouraged the use of metal in the stables. "They become hot in the summer!" he said, "and can even hurt the horses." Most of the boxes were large enough to allow the horses to lie down and the roof was high and sloping. It rained a lot in Bhopal during the monsoon but the stables at H.H. Farm remained relatively dry. Only once did water enter the stables. That was when it had rained over fifteen inches in forty-eight hours and the level of the lake rose dangerously. The entire farm was a foot under water and the horses had to be moved to higher ground for safety.

At H.H. Farm there were drains crossing the floor and stable hands almost constantly swept dung and drained waste out and thus kept the stables clean. The door of Chandi’s stall was low enough for her to look out and strong enough to withstand her kicks. In some stalls that were big, two to three horses were stabled together, but Chandi lived in a solitary splendour. She was too ill-tempered and finicky to tolerate others.

Fazlu and I took two forks and began to muck out the old straw from Chandi’s box. Then we pitched in forkfuls of fresh fragrant straw on the floor. When we had sufficient straw inside we went down on our hands and knees to spread it around and stack it higher on the sides to make a comfortable bed for Chandi. The high point of this exercise was when Chandi poked her head inside and licked a few strands from my head! It gave me the fright of my life and Fazlu roared so
much with laughter that he developed hiccoughs! Chandi, startled by the laughter and hiccoughs, poked her head around again and harrumphed so hard that Fazlu fell back into the straw bed, causing more laughter and fun.

"I didn't know mucking around a stable was so much fun," came a harsh comment.

"Raffu Miyan!" I sat up, all laughter forgotten. "Uncle Hari has decided that I will ride Chandi in the Subcontinent Race and I'm going to train her," I said with as much dignity as I could muster. "So kindly leave Chandi alone. She's my responsibility."

"What nonsense!" barked Raffu Miyan. "Girls don't train or ride race horses."

"They do."

"Don't talk back, you chit of a girl, or I'll spank you," Raffu Miyan's face was red with anger.

"She's right," said Fazlu. "And you don't talk like this to her." The boy had not one cowardly bone in him.

"Why, you puppy!" Raffu Miyan had a very rough day and he could take only so much backchat from us. He lifted his hand and whacked Fazlu hard on the cheek. Fazlu cried out in pain and reeled under the force of the blow.

"Leave him alone!" I shouted and lunged at Raffu Miyan. With one hand I caught his shirt and ripped off the first button before he sent me flying into the hay with no more effort than that required for swatting a fly.

"O-o-o-f!" I gasped as I fell heavily.

"Don't mess about with me, girl," snarled Raffu Miyan and walked out.

27
"The guy is a bully," said Fazlu, rushing to help me.
"Are you hurt, Sara?"
"Sara, what happened?" asked Om, rushing in.
"You're hurt?"
"No, I'm not hurt, just a little shocked. What has happened to Raffu Miyan? He wasn't like this."
"Yes, he was. Uncle Taj always hated him."
"Put Chandi back into her box, Om. I...I'll just come back."
"Take your time."
"You're sure you're okay, Sara?"
"Don't worry, Fazlu."

I went straight to the House and marched into the kitchen. I had to tell Uncle Hari and Aunt Tara what happened. To my shock I found Raffu Miyan sitting with Uncle Hari and stirring a mug of steaming coffee before him.

"You! What are you doing here?" I said in anger.
"Sara, is that the way to speak to your elders?" Aunt Tara reproved.

"And I hear that you and Fazlu were very rude to Raffu Miyan," asked Uncle Hari. For the first time I noticed that Uncle Hari's face was red and hard.

"Uncle Hari," I began explaining in an agitated voice, "we weren't rude to Raffu Miyan, it's Raffu Miyan who pushed me and Fazlu. He pushed me so hard that I fell down..."

"Sara, you must have done something to provoke him," said Uncle Hari, looking alternately at the floor and then at me. There was a strange glint in his eyes.

"I didn't!" I cried indignantly "It was he..."

"That's enough, Sara. I already have more problems
than I can handle. I would appreciate it if you did not cause more trouble."

"But, Uncle Hari, what did I do?"
"I don't know what you did but I do know what you should do."
"What?"
"Apologize to Raffu Miyan."
"Apologize! It's he who should apologize to me!"
"Sara..." began Aunt Tara.
"No, I won't apologize. I did nothing wrong!"
"Sara, if you want to ride Chandi, you will apologize immediately to Raffu Miyan," Uncle Hari's face was red with anger, but even as he compressed his lips, a high-pitched giggle seemed to escape.

The room was filled with silence. I stood there, eyes filled with tears and staring at Uncle Hari, who refused to look at me. He seemed to be watching an ant on the floor. Soft as a butterfly's flutter, I felt Aunt Tara's hand steal into mine.

"Say it, Sara," whispered Aunt Tara.
"I'm sorry," I mumbled and turned and ran away from the House.
"Sara, are you sleeping?"
I buried my tear-stained face deeper into the pillow and clenched my fists. Papa stroked my hair and patted my hand. He always felt awkward when I cried. He didn't know how to deal with it.
"Sara, Uncle Hari and Aunt Tara were here. They said you could train Chandi..."
"I want to ride her in the Subcontinent Race!"
I burst out.
"Hari said he would find out about that. Raffu Miyan said that the rules allowed only male jockeys to take part in the race."
"That's not fair!"
"Maybe. Hari will find out more. But before he puts your name down for the race, you have to show him that you are capable of riding Chandi to victory," reasoned Papa. "You understand that you have to prove yourself, don't you?"
Reluctantly, I nodded.
"Then get up and start working. Both you and Chandi have to be in top condition and in total understanding of each other. It may not be easy."
I sat up in bed and looked with tear-filled eyes at Papa. "I really want to enter the race and win it."

"I know, sweetheart. I'll help you as much as I can."

I hugged Papa. I felt better. I was sure Uncle Hari and Raffu Miyan didn't mean to be bad to me.

Papa patted me on the head and spoke, "By the way, Sara, Hari asked me to remind you of the riding classes."

"Yeah. Fazlu and I thought we could raise money for the farm by giving riding lessons."

"It's a good idea. Rope in the stable boys who can be of help."

Later that evening Fazlu and I sat on the living room floor of my house making the posters, advertising the riding lessons. We planned to go around Bhopal the next day to put up the posters. We had got the posters printed after designing them on the computer but I thought they looked a bit bare. Therefore we sat on the floor and filled them with colourful flowers.

"Sara, Fazlu," Aunt Tara walked in, "hot chocolate for the two of you and tea and biscuits for the boys." She exclaimed, "My, my! This is a hardworking set of people."

The boys were Om, Shambhu, Rocky and Nima. They were the best stable hands that we had. Nima even cooked in the House occasionally. They were also good riders and now, with the support from Raffu Miyan highly unlikely, I needed help from every good hand on the farm.

The time was past ten in the night and all of us were glad to have some hot refreshment. Aunt Tara had also brought a box of laddoos, which we finished in a jiffy.
"Where's Doctor Saheb?" asked Aunt Tara. "He would like some tea, I'm sure."
"He's in his clinic," I replied.
"He's operating on one of the cows," said Nima, who also helped Papa in the clinic.
"What happened?" asked Aunt Tara.
"She's an old cow and she's going to have a calf." He shook his head sadly, "I think this is going to be her last baby. She didn't look very good to me."
"You should have helped Papa, Nima," I said.
"Doctor Saheb asked me to go. He said it wouldn't take long."
"It has taken quite long," said Aunt Tara. "Had he taken his dinner?"
"No," I put down my cup. "I'll go and find out what's keeping him."
"Wait, Sara, I'll come with you," called Fazlu.
"No, all of you finish the work. I will be back in a minute." Saying this I hurried out of the room.

The clinic and surgery were between the House and the stables. I opened the door and tripped down the driveway towards the stables, fumbling in the darkness that hung all around. It was a completely unnerving experience. Roads and lanes, which I had taken a thousand times before, became suddenly unfamiliar. Trees assumed fiendish shapes and the distance seemed endless. Sounds got magnified and turned scary. As I walked the gravel crunched and creaked frighteningly. Unable to stand the noise, I moved to the soft grass on the sides, telling myself all the while that I was a fool to let my own footsteps give me a fright.
I could see the lights of the clinic now. Obviously Papa had not finished his work yet. I quickened my pace and had just opened my mouth to call him when I heard the sound of footsteps behind me. Was it Fazlu? I turned around and froze. In the dim light coming from the clinic, I saw four full-grown men who stood ten feet behind me. And they wore handkerchiefs around their faces to mask their identities.

"Paappaa!" I screamed.

The four men stopped with a jerk and peered at me in the dark, trying to make out who screamed.

"Who's there?"
"We've been seen!"
"I told you it was early"

I was too scared and screamed for Papa again, bending down, instinctively. I picked up a stick from the ground and ran straight at the four of them, shouting as I did, "Thugs! Thieves! Paapaa!"

"Go, go," shouted one of them. They turned and ran and vanished in the dark.

"Robbers!" I shouted. "They're here again."

The stable hands and Fazlu also came out hearing the commotion. When they learnt about the intruders, they too ran in the direction I had taken, shouting, "Thieves! Follow them."

Suddenly the headlights of a jeep shone directly at the group chasing the intruders and, accelerating the engine, the driver drove straight at them. For about ten absolutely petrified seconds it seemed as though the jeep would run straight into Om, Fazlu and Nima who stood like statues, staring unbelievingly at the yellow globes of the jeep’s headlights.
At the last minute, the driver turned the wheel and, with a screech of tyres, the jeep roared down the road towards the farm's gate. The faces of the three boys looked pale and shaken. Aunt Tara, who had witnessed the whole thing, swayed on her feet, hands on her mouth. Rocky, Shambhu and I ran to catch her.

"Oh, my God!" I panted. "Are you all right?"

"What's happening?" cried Aunt Tara. "Who were those people?"

"Did you note the number of the jeep?"

"They could have killed you."

"Call the police."

"It was the Willy's jeep again!" Everybody seemed to be speaking simultaneously.

"Someone should have noted the number of the jeep," I insisted.

"Stop repeating that like a parrot," retorted Fazlu. "If it was so important, why didn't you do it."

"Why are you so touchy? I was only trying to be helpful."

"Because I almost got killed!" shouted Fazlu.

"That wasn't my fault," I protested. Just then I saw Uncle Hari approaching. "There's Uncle Hari."

"I think this place is jinxed. Some evil spirit doesn't want it to prosper so things keep going wrong," Rocky, the youngest of the stable boys, wiped his face nervously as he spoke.

"No spirit is troubling us," said Uncle Hari. "It's rivalry, pure and simple. I think I need to go to the town tomorrow and meet a few friends," he said. "Sara and Fazlu, are you not planning to put up posters in the town?"
"Yes, Uncle, at the Jahannuma Hotel and in New Market," I replied.

"Good, I'll come along with you then. After you finish your work we will drop into the hotel for a cup of coffee for me and ice cream sodas for both of you."

"With jam tarts."

"All right. Now go to bed, everyone," Uncle Hari turned away to leave.

"But, Sir, what if they come back?" stammered Nima.

"Who? The ghosts?" laughed Om.

"Don't laugh, Om," said Shambhu. "There is something going on here. The other day I got up in the middle of the night and I swear, I heard Shera howl."

"You're crazy," said Fazlu. "Shera died a week ago."

"I know. That's why I said something strange is going on at the farm."

"Go to sleep, Shambhu," said Uncle Hari. "I think the ghosts have been scared away with all the noise that we've made."

"Where's Papa?" I asked, suddenly struck by the thought that everyone had responded to my shouts except Papa.

"Yes, where's Doctor Saheb?" asked Uncle Hari, stopping in his tracks.

"He was in the clinic," I said.

"Strange! He should have heard all the noise and confusion and come out."

"Let's go and see," I said and ran towards the clinic, followed by the others.

I burst into the clinic and found that it was empty. "Papa!" I called, baring into the examination room. I was on the verge of breaking down.
"Doctor Saheb!" called Aunt Tara, looking here and there.
"Doctor Prabhu!" called Uncle Hari.
"He’s here!" came Aunt Tara’s voice.
"Where?"
"In the animal ward."
"Animal ward? What is he doing there?" I ran to the rear.
"Sleeping."
"He can’t sleep through so much noise," said Uncle Hari.
"Papa, wake up, Papa," I shook him gently. He was sleeping!
"What?" Papa woke with a start. "I was sleeping."
"Are you all right?"
"Yeah, what happened?"
"I think Doctor Prabhu is over worked," announced Aunt Tara. "And he is too thin. He doesn’t eat enough. From today Doctor Prabhu and Sara will eat in the House."
"Goodie!" I exhaled in relief. "At least we will get proper food."
"He’s not tired," said Shambhu. "It’s some Shaitan. It has got to him too."
"Shut up, Shambhu," retorted Fazlu.

We all trooped to our respective quarters for some rest. All the fear and excitement had worn us out.
By the time Uncle Hari, Fazlu and I entered the coffee shop of Jahannuma Hotel, it was almost twelve thirty in the afternoon and we were exhausted and tired. Altogether we had put up thirty posters in various parts of the city.

"I'm dead tired," said Uncle Hari, running his fingers through his hair.

"I'm hungry," said Fazlu, staring longingly at the display of baked goodies.

"I'm thirsty," I said, wiping the perspiration from my brow.

"Your order, Sir?" enquired the polite waiter.

"Coffee, hot, strong and sweet," said Uncle Hari.

"Chicken sandwiches, fish fingers and jam tarts," said Fazlu.

"Ice cream sodas and chocolate doughnuts," I said. I think the waiter was a little dazed by the order, but he didn't show it. "Is that all?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not sure," I said. "But it's definitely a beginning."

"Yeah," said Fazlu. "We'll definitely need more stuff. Like those walnut muffins and cocktail pizzas."
"That's not food, kids," interrupted Uncle Hari. "We'll need biryani and kebab. I want some Lucknawi *tunda* kebab. They'll do fine."

"Add some Bhopali *phirni* too," I said.

"That sounds wonderful," boomed a loud and deep voice nearby.

"Taj-ud-din!" said Uncle Hari standing up and extending his hand.

"Hello," he shook hands with Uncle Hari. "Trim like a soldier, fit as a fiddle! Very good, indeed." He turned to me. "So this is the Doctor's daughter. Very pretty. And Fazlu Miyan too. I should have known that where there is even the whiff of good food, Fazlu Miyan is there. Ha, ha, ha."

"Sit down, Taj-ud-din," said Uncle Hari.

"Certainly."

Taj-ud-din was a huge man with broad shoulders and solid hands. He sat down and lit a cigar. His face and head often gave the appearance of floating above a cloud of smoke, which was most disconcerting for the person who saw such an apparition for the first time. It seemed as though the head moved without a body! In contrast to Taj-ud-din's larger-than-life size, Uncle Hari appeared dapper and sophisticated. Uncle Hari's grey hair was neatly set, whereas Taj-ud-din's shock of dark hair, with a smattering of grey, was dry and carelessly combed. Uncle Hari wore grey corduroy trousers and a lemon-yellow T-shirt, whereas Taj-ud-din could only conceal his bulk in a loose *pathani salwar* and a long shirt.

"Shall I bring the food you ordered, Sir?" the waiter asked politely.
"You mean you are still standing here?" Taj-ud-din twisted his bulk to blow smoke into the waiter's face. "Get everything."
"Yes, and quickly," I added.
"We're hungry," Fazlu rolled his eyes.
"Of course, Sir."
"Did he mean, 'Yes, Sir, you look starved'?" asked Uncle Hari.
"I look starved! Not at all," Taj-ud-din rocked with laughter at the very thought of looking starved.

In fifteen minutes, the table was groaning under the weight of all the food we had ordered. Fazlu went after the food with both hands and mouth. He probably wished he could eat with the elbows too, the greedy pig! I began with the biryani and tunda kebabs. They were irresistible. Taj-ud-din surprisingly was a finicky eater, pecking at his food like a bird. Fazlu and I concentrated only on the food. It was priority number one.

"You are quiet, Colonel," said Taj-ud-din. "Perhaps you are worried."
"Yes, I am worried."
"I heard about the theft of vegetables and the fire at your place. Was there a lot of damage?"
"Yes. The barn and everything it contained are gone. Fruits and vegetables gone. My dog dead. And..." Uncle Hari paused, dropped his fork and stared at Taj-ud-din.
"What?" Taj-ud-din was not a man to be easily intimidated. He opened his round eyes wide, till they almost protruded from their sockets. With a toothpick he picked his teeth delicately.
"And I had some visitors last night too in a Willy's jeep. I wonder who is taking so much undue interest in H.H. Farm, and why!" Uncle Hari continued to stare at Taj-ud-din, who looked perturbed.

"Surprises me too. It's hardly a paying farm."

"You have no idea who's interested in destroying H.H. Farm?" asked Uncle Hari.

"No."

"Ah! Don't you own three Willy's jeeps?" Uncle Hari peered at Taj-ud-din.

"I do indeed. Is it against the law?" Taj-ud-din smiled.

"It could be one of your jeeps."

"It is possible, Colonel, but not probable. I have no interest in destroying you."

"What about the chest of gold and jewels that's supposed to be on my land, Taj-ud-din, I think you might be more than interested in that."

Taj-ud-din's round eyes narrowed to slits and his facial muscles tightened. For a split second his upper lip lifted in a snarl that transformed his entire face. I realized from Fazlu's expression that Taj-ud-din was angry, very angry. Then the genial mask was back and the fat face split in a huge smile.

"Hee, hee! Ha, ha! Ho, ho! This is the best lunch I've had in ages," Taj-ud-din slapped his knee and laughed louder. But he didn't deny anything.

For a while the lunch went on smoothly with Fazlu and I squabbling over the last tart with a luscious topping of strawberries, kiwi fruit and fresh cream. Uncle Hari resolved the matter by slicing the tart neatly down the centre and telling us to take one half each.
Unfortunately, I got the kiwi fruit portion though I wanted the one with the strawberry. Fazlu refused to swap despite my entreaties. So I sulked while Fazlu ate his share of the tart, crumb by tiny crumb, to heighten my misery as much as possible. I was furious with him. "You didn't answer me, Taj-ud-din," Uncle Hari demanded a reply.

"Huh? About what?"

"The fact that you are looking for the buried chest of gold and jewels."

"Bah! Old wives' tale."

"Not really an old wives' tale, I think. There have been innumerable cases of people finding the proverbial pot of gold. Remember that rogue Aggarwal, he found a brass-pot of gold coins while ploughing his fields."

"I know," said Taj-ud-din irritably. "But I'm not here to discuss some cock and bull story about buried treasure. I'm here to bail you out if you are interested."

"What do you mean?"

"I could buy your horses."

"Buy my horses?" Uncle Hari asked in disbelief. A shock of his normally neat hair fell across his forehead and his eyeballs seemed to disappear.

"Yes. And I'll buy Chandi too. Any price you say."

"Buy Chandi? Are you crazy!" Uncle Hari's face burned with anger.

"I'm willing to pay a good price for her. What do you say to five lakhs?" Taj-ud-din smiled profusely.

"You scoundrel! You want to buy Chandi because you are afraid she will beat Hawa and win the Subcontinent Race!"
"Don't get agitated, Colonel, I can pay you more..." Taj-ud-din said magnanimously.

"Will you please leave?" Uncle Hari stood ramrod straight, pointing a finger at Taj-ud-din. "I'm sorry I broke bread with you," Uncle Hari was so angry he lost his dapper look.

"Pride will get you nowhere, Colonel. Your farm is hardly paying you anything. You will be reduced to begging on the street if you don't reduce expenses..."

"I asked you to leave!"

"I can give you six lakhs for Chandi..."

"Get out!" Uncle Hari's voice rose in a scream that sounded to me as a giggle.

"As you wish," Taj-ud-din's cheek twitched. "I will reduce you to penury. I will win the Subcontinent Race. I will destroy H.H. Farm. I will..." He suddenly turned and hauled Fazlu out of his chair. "And, as for you, I don't ever want to see you near H.H. Farm again. Understood?"

"But, Uncle..." Fazlu protested.

"Come," Taj-ud-din commanded.

"Leave him..." I got up to prevent Fazlu from leaving.

"Sit down, Sara." Uncle Hari put an arm around my shoulders and pressed me down. Taj-ud-din stomped out of the room, dragging a reluctant Fazlu behind him.

Only then did I notice the silence in the restaurant. Everyone was watching us. I sank into my seat trying not to look embarrassed. Uncle Hari sat down too and drank a glass of cold water. He didn't look angry anymore. He looked funny, almost happy. He giggled again. A shock of hair fell across his forehead.
"Uncle..." I began.
"Shhh!"
"What..."
"Shhh, quiet. I’m thinking."
I sat quiet as a mouse while Uncle Hari paid the bill. Two waiters swiftly cleared the table. Then, seeing that we still didn’t show signs of leaving, they brought glasses of cold water. Uncle Hari and I drank more cold water. After a long time Uncle Hari took a deep breath and cleaned his glasses.
"You know, Sara, we have been challenged. Whether Taj-ud-din is behind the attacks on my farm, I cannot say. But one thing is definite, Taj-ud-din is desperate to get Chandi. He fears Chandi. She is swifter than Hawa. Now you, Raffu Miyan and I have to get Chandi ready for the Subcontinent Race. We have to win it."
"Uncle, Raffu Miyan used the wrong bit on Chandi and hurt her," I tried to convince Uncle. I didn’t want Raffu Miyan to be associated with Chandi’s training.
"Must be a mistake. Raffu Miyan is the best trainer. I’m going to ask him to set you and Chandi on a training schedule. You will race Chandi and you will win."
"Uncle Hari! I don’t like Raffu Miyan."
"Sara! Leave Raffu Miyan alone. He has my confidence, and I will hear nothing against him."
"But..." I began to protest.
"Stop, Sara."
"Colonel, it’s time to go." It was Raffu Miyan! He suddenly clutched Uncle Hari and herded him away, leaving me staring after them.
"Horses are like children. Train them well and they'll be good all their lives," said Uncle Hari. "Okay, Om, saddle her up for Sara."

"Oh, Uncle Hari!" My eyes lit up like two stars on sighting Om leading Chandi. Chandi's silver mane fell silkily to one side. She was beautiful!

"We need to build up her stamina, Sara," said Papa. "It's good you're not too heavy. I wish you luck."

"Come on, Sara, ups-a-daisy!"

With a light foot on Om's open palm, I lifted myself on to Chandi's back. The horse shied up a bit, as though resenting my weight. But I bent over Chandi's neck and whispered in her ear, "Come on, sweetheart. We're friends and we are a team. You and I will together win the race. Come, let's go."

"Slowly, at first, Sara," called Uncle Hari.

But Chandi, the thoroughbred Arab steed, had a superb gallop. She had speed, stamina and strength and she only needed training and an improved temperament. She hadn't been out for two whole days and was extremely fresh and raring to go. I tried to hold her back, to slow her down, but it was no use. She
hated curbs and she certainly hated to be told what to do. 'Today is the first day and maybe I can give her a free rein. But she must learn soon who's the master, or mistress in this case,' I thought.

Chandi flew over the lightly undulating ground and I could feel the wind on my face and neck. My ponytails flew behind me and I felt deeply elated. This was freedom. This was life! Chandi and I were like an extension of one another. She held her head high and her huge black eyes were all over the place as she raced on. Finally, reaching the taller set of six hills that formed the backdrop to H.H. Farm, Chandi slowed to a trot and allowed herself to be guided along a narrow path up the steep hill. She seemed relaxed and I relaxed with her.

Halfway up the hill I dismounted and allowed Chandi to breathe easy. She was out of breath and her heart was racing. I ran a hand along Chandi's silky neck and sweating flanks to reassure her. The mare seemed to quiver with a nervous tension. I took out the red apples that I had brought along and let Chandi crunch them up one after the other. She enjoyed the sweet, rich apple juice.

"Aren't you a beauty, Chandi? Swift as the wind and smooth as silk, you have the eye of the eagle. You and I as a team shall beat every other competitor. No horse can equal you ever, Chandi."

Chandi listened to my words of affection and pawed the earth. Was it my suspicion or was there really a wild gleam in her eyes? I mounted her again and we trotted back to the stable where I spent almost an hour, rubbing her down and giving her food and water. For the rest of the week I worked Chandi on a fitness
regimen that I built up very slowly I didn’t want any strained or sprained muscles. By the end of the week we were riding for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. I tried to keep the trotting time less initially so that Chandi’s muscles didn’t tire but grew strong and healthy. I also kept her off the hard surface of the road so that her legs were not in any way injured. In any case, the race course in Pune was natural dirt and there was no need to drive her on the hard, metallic surface of the road. As yet I didn’t dare to canter her, leave alone race her.

At the end of the first week, just when I was beginning to feel confident about Chandi, things began to go wrong. Intent upon training for the race, I had forgotten about Raffu Miyan, and about the losses to the farm. I got the first hint of trouble when I found no chana (gram) or gur (jaggery) for Chandi. When I questioned Om I was told that there wasn’t any in the farm.

"Well, then go and buy some," I told Om.

"I can’t, Raffu Miyan hasn’t sanctioned its purchase."

"Sanction! What sanction? I’m talking about chana and gur for Chandi."

"Listen, Sara," Om threw up his hands, "why don’t you speak to Raffu Miyan?"

"I am going to," I said determinedly. "If I am to race Chandi and train her to win the Subcontinent Race, then I need everyone’s support, including that of Raffu Miyan. And Chandi needs quality food for the rigorous training which she undergoes."

But I was cheated out of a confrontation with Raffu Miyan. When I reached the House, Aunt Tara
told me that Raffu Miyan was in bed nursing a cold. Uncle Hari had gone to Bhopal to get provisions, including gur and chana. And finally, that a number of kids and their parents had come from the town in response to the posters that Fazlu and I had put up about riding lessons. They were still waiting, and she had no idea what to tell them.

"Don’t worry, Aunt Tara, I’ll go and talk to these people," I said.

"Thank you, my dear. They are waiting in the portico where Kiki (the parrot) is driving them crazy," said Aunt Tara.

"Oh, my God!" I exclaimed. "She must be ticking them off!"

"You bet. I just heard her telling them, 'Go home, nerds!'"

"Good heavens!" I laughed. "Where did she learn that?"

"Either from you or Fazlu."

"That reminds me, Aunt Tara, can you ask Fazlu to come over?"

"I’ve already rung him up."

I hurried to the portico, snatching Kiki’s green cloth cover on the way. It wouldn’t do to have her turning away potential customers. But I need not have worried. The kids and their parents were having a hilarious time laughing at Kiki. They loved her.

"Naughty, Sara!" Kiki called the moment she spotted me. "Feed Kiki! Feed Kiki!"

"I’ll feed Kiki when it’s time and not before that," I muttered. "Good night, Kiki," I said triumphantly, as I covered the cage with the green cloth.
"Hey, don't do that. We want to talk to her. She is great fun," a few people protested.

"Stop," I put an end to the chorus of protests. "There's work to do. I assume you've come for the riding lessons and not to converse with a demented parrot. Here are the forms that you need to fill up giving details about yourself, riding experience and what you expect from these classes. You need to sign a declaration absolving us of any responsibility in case of accidents and promising not to harm the horses. And, you have to pay three months' fees in advance," I looked around at the dazed faces. "Any questions?"

There were a million questions, it seemed, but luckily Fazlu and Om arrived and we managed to answer everyone and give them the forms. When they finally settled down to fill the forms, Fazlu and I slipped inside for cold coffee and mathri (an Indian snack). Aunt Tara had already sent Nima twice to tell us to come and eat something.

"At least twenty kids want to learn riding," I said with satisfaction.

"Yes, and with three months' advance payment, we should be able to collect a sizeable amount," said Fazlu.

"Maybe then your Uncle Hari won't have to sell some horses," said Aunt Tara, coming in with a tray.

"Yes," I muttered, suddenly remembering that awful possibility.

"How's the dairy and poultry farm doing?" I asked Aunt Tara. "We must be making some money there?"

"Touch wood," said Aunt Tara. "Yes, the situation has eased a little. That's why Hari has gone to purchase animal feed. But there is still no money for construction
and for maintenance of so many horses. Some horses will have to go."

"We still have no clue who is trying to harm H.H. Farm?" asked Fazlu.

"That’s true. Remember, Fazlu, we decided to find the culprit. I think it’s time to start. Shall we begin patrolling from tonight?" I said. "What do you think, Fazlu?"

"You want me to patrol the farm with you at night?"

"Yes."

"You’re crazy."

"Thank you. I knew you would agree with me. Now..."

"Wait a minute, what is Uncle Taj going to say?"

"That you should help poor Sara in her hour of need."

"I see. That’s what Uncle Taj is going to say?"

"Of course. And he will also say take your bike so that you don't tire out," I smiled sweetly.

"Hmm. And what does Sara say?"

"Sara says help me finish the forms and collect the money. Then go and sleep. I'll meet you outside my house at ten in the night."

"Okay, I will do," Fazlu smiled.

"Come on, then."

We collected the forms and gave everyone the schedule for the riding lessons, beginning the following Monday. Twenty-four students had registered. My plan seemed to be on the road to success.

"Now we need to decide on the horses and the stable boys," I said with satisfaction. I leaned back on my chair, tilting it at a dangerous angle.
"We better select the older and safer nags, Sara," said Fazlu. "None of these jokers has ever ridden before."
"I know," I laughed. "We don't want a toss-up now, do we?"
"Oye, Om, Rocky, come here," called Fazlu, "and help us make the lists."
"Don't you want a ride, Sara?" asked Rocky. "Shall I saddle Chandi?"
"Thanks, Rocky, but I will do it myself. Has Uncle Hari come back?"
"Not yet."
"Okay then, I'm off."
"So am I," said Fazlu.  
"See you at ten sharp."
"Ten sharp. It's a deal."

We gave the thumbs up sign to each other and left. I strode back to the stables where Chandi greeted me with delight. It was a joy to feel her cold nose nudging at my hand to see if I had something for her. I had a packet of glucose biscuits and you should have seen the way she gobbled them! Chandi and I had a good run after which I went home to rest and sleep a little, if possible.

Chandi had almost lost all her edginess and had accepted me as her mistress. She seemed to understand what was expected of her and recognized the slight pressures of my knee and hand. And, boy, was she swift! All that was now required was the build up of stamina so that I could train her for short and heart-stopping bursts of speed. She had it in her. She just needed practice and motivation.
"Oooo-oh!"

I was sitting in the drawing room with Papa and packing a backpack with essential items like torches, rope, a whistle, drinking water, chewing gum and chocolate biscuits. Just in case we felt really hungry, I added a packet of cream crackers and cheese slices.

"Oooo-oh!"

"Are you sure you’re doing the right thing, Sara?" asked Papa, pushing his glasses up to his forehead.

"What do you mean, Papa?"

"I mean training Chandi in the day and staying up at nights to catch robbers. Don’t you think..."

"Oooo-oh!"

"Is that an owl?" asked Papa, perturbed by the sound coming at a regular interval.

"Oooo-oh!"

"Oh, my God, that’s Fazlu!" I exclaimed and ran to open the door.

"Fazlu," said Papa severely as Fazlu entered, "what do you mean by making such peculiar noises?"

"That’s my owl call, Uncle. Don’t you think I sound authentic?"
"You sound like an idiot!" said Papa. "In fact, I don't think the two of you should be playing detectives. You should be in bed, fast asleep, conserving your energy."

"We have to find out who is out to harm H.H. Farm."

"I suppose so," Papa sighed. "But take the dogs and, mind you, no unnecessary risks."

"Dogs? You mean Soloman and Sheba?"

"I'll look after Sara," said Fazlu, gallantly trying to puff out his meagre chest.

"Yeah sure," I laughed, "more than likely I'll be looking after you." I turned to the two huge, jet-black Labradors, "Come on, Soloman and Sheba." Immediately the two dogs disappeared beneath the couch.

"Uncle, you want us to take these two with us?" laughed Fazlu.

"The cowards!" I exclaimed half angry, half amused. I got down on my hands and knees and pulled them out. Sheba licked my hand while Soloman growled in protest. "Shut up!" I said, "and behave yourself. Cowardly hulks that you are, come on."

"Woof!" barked the dogs.

"I'm glad we understand each other," I said crossly.

"Bye, Papa, and don't worry about us."

"Sara, Fazlu, don't take unnecessary risks."

"We won't."

Fazlu and I wore jeans and shirts with long sleeves. Bhopal's mosquitoes are really huge and lethal. One has to do everything to protect oneself. We rubbed some mosquito repellent cream over our faces, necks and hands, the only exposed parts of our bodies. On
our heads we wore baseball caps because, so Fazlu said, mosquitoes were capable of getting inside the hair and drawing blood from the scalp.

H.H. Farm was large. It had huge patches of vegetables, fruit orchards and corn fields. By the time we completed one round of its periphery, it was close to midnight and we were both thirsty and exhausted. We were close to the staff quarters and sat down on overturned tins of paints. I rubbed the aching muscles of my neck.

"What's the time, Fazlu?" I asked.
"Five minutes to twelve."
"Heavens, we have six more hours of patrolling," I sighed. My heart sank at the prospect. It was going to be an endless night. "If we took two hours to complete one round, how many rounds will we complete in six hours?" I asked.
"Three."
"Three," I echoed. "You mean we have to walk round the farm three more times?"
"Yes."
"I can't do it."
"What do you mean?"
"I mean I can't do it."
"What do you mean?" repeated Fazlu.
"Maybe I can manage one more round before I die of exhaustion, not more than that."
"I'm sleepy," complained Fazlu. "I'll die."
"So?"
"We should have brought one more thing," I said. "What?" asked Fazlu with a quizzical look on his face.
"A walkman. We could have listened to music."
"You can sing," suggested Fazlu.
"Idiot!"
"Why do you call me an idiot?"
"If we sing won't we be alerting the fellows whom we've come to catch?"
"I suppose so," Fazlu opened his backpack, took out a can of iced tea and snapped it open. "Incidentally whom have we come to catch?"
"Nobody knows."
"Then whom are we going to catch?"
"We'll catch the fellows who lurk around suspiciously," I said as brightly as I could.
"Frankly speaking, I don't think we can see anyone lurking around, suspiciously or otherwise, in this darkness," said Fazlu.
"Fazlu, I think there's someone there."
"Where? I can't see anything."
"I saw something move in the undergrowth."
"Must be a snake."
"Snake?" I shrieked.
"Don't scream, silly, you'll scare away the lurkers," said Fazlu angrily.
"Do you think it's a snake, Fazlu?"
"Yes, it's a rattler."
"A rattler!" I wished I could lift both my legs off the ground.
"You really are a silly billy, Sara. There are no rattlers in India. There are only cobras."
"C...C...Cobras," I croaked.
"I'm joking, Sara, relax." Fazlu got up and dusted the seat of his pants. "Come on, let's go."
We started on a second round of the farm. It was pitch-dark and I seemed to be losing courage. Was it my imagination, or was the night darker than it ever was. The wind rustled through the leaves and branches of the trees and let out the most peculiar sighing noises. Suddenly I felt there was a great deal of scurrying underfoot. Was it always there or had this activity begun only recently? I seemed to be seeing cobras and scorpions everywhere. After a few minutes of struggling with my fear of the dark, I felt I couldn't take it anymore. I let out a tiny scream and clutched Fazlu's arm. He patted my hand reassuringly.

"Fazlu," I said in a quavering voice, "can you hear something?" my heart was thudding loudly.
"What? I can't hear anything."
"Quiet. Speak softly," I warned him.

We stopped and strained our ears. We were quiet as mice. Everything seemed normal. I had just opened my mouth to release the tension, when I heard it. It was a faint thudding sound. It went 'thuk, thuk, thuk' and then stopped. In a second Fazlu and I were standing close, clutching each other for support. Someone was there. Fazlu had dropped his torch and it had rolled a little way. Everything was pitch-dark and nothing was visible. I thought I could see blobs of red, like the eyes of a tiger, gleaming in the dark.

"Fazlu," I quavered, "I can see something."

Fazlu cleared his throat, "It's probably a ghost," he said.
"What?" I almost screamed.
"The ghost of a woodcutter. He's still cutting wood. Listen, 'thuk, thuk, thuk'."
"Fazlu, you nut," I laughed shakily, "woodcutter indeed." But the noise continued. It would stop for a while and then continue again, almost like the woodcutter taking rest.

"Fazlu, someone's in the stable," my voice trembled. "Let's go and see," said Fazlu bravely.

We picked up the torch but did not switch it on. If someone was there, we didn't want him to see us. Then we began walking towards the stables.

"Sara, where are the dogs?"

"The cowards! They have disappeared."

We were behind the stables and the noise was much louder now. We could even hear voices. "I say, Fazlu, the noise is not from the stable. It's from the barn, the barn which burnt down."

"But nothing is there except debris and ashes and rubbish, all soaking wet and filthy."

"Let's see, quietly now," I suggested.

Clinging to the stable wall, we edged on till we reached the corner of the building. From there we peered. In front lay the bare field. The barn had been reduced to ashes. But now we could see some people. There were three persons with shovels and they were digging amidst the muck! On one side was a lantern, the weak yellow light from which made the men appear like huge yellow demons.

"What can they find in the ashes? And who are they?" said Fazlu.

Every little while one of the men would stop digging and rest. He would either drink from a bottle or smoke a bidi or just stretch his limbs to ease the aching muscles. We were totally foxed by the scene. In the
dead of the night what were they looking for? Just then a fourth person came upon the group. He said something to the others that started an argument. We could hear the raised voices but couldn’t make out what was being said.

"Hey!" suddenly Fazlu’s voice rang out.

"What are you doing?" I squeaked.

"Where’s Inspector Saxena?" shouted Fazlu in a deep voice and then answered his own question in a changed voice, "He’s coming."

There was a crash as the lantern fell and shattered. Almost instantly, the diggers melted in the night.

"Fazlu, you idiot," I cried. "Why did you do that?"

“To get rid of them."

“But, now, we’ll never know who they were or what they were digging for."

“I never thought of that," Fazlu sounded contrite. "I’m sorry."

"Saying sorry will get us nowhere. Let’s go and see if we can find any clues."

We found nothing except a broken lantern.
Sometimes help comes from the most unexpected quarters. For me it came in the form of Bandung. Bandung suddenly materialized in my path when I was riding Chandi hard over the slightly wet and spongy soil along the lake. Chandi hated the terrain and showed her displeasure by shying at unexpected sounds, baring her teeth and rearing up whenever her feet got wet. Still I had managed to calm her down and we were moving along fairly steadily when, behind a clump of bushes and weeds, we suddenly came across a group of boys, sitting on high wooden platforms, with fishing rods dangling in the lake.

"Wow!" one of them whistled.

"It's a silver horse, with a memsahib!"

"A memsahib with ponytails. Wow!"

And, then, one of them threw a stone at us. I saw it arch high against the sparkling waters of the lake and, fool that I was, I couldn't avoid it. The stone hit Chandi on the face a little above her flaring black nostrils and immediately she lost control over herself. She stopped, almost in mid stride. The sudden stop threw me forward over her neck. I clung to her mane in utter
desperation shouting at her to relax, but Chandi twisted her head around and showed me her bared teeth, flaring nostrils and reddened eyes.

"Chandi!" I screamed.

Chandi was beyond hearing. She didn't like being hit by stone and she showed her displeasure. She shook herself and began to buck hard and arch her back and kick her legs. Somehow I managed to cling on.

"Whoa, Chandi! Whoa!"

Chandi lost her temper and in a swift, furious move she kicked her rear legs, and immediately thereafter rear ed up, neighing furiously. My hold on her mane slipped and before I knew it, I hit the ground hard, the air shaken out of my lungs with a big whoosh. And Chandi was off like the wind. I could only stare helplessly after her.

"Can I help you catch the horse?" the rather sarcastic question came from my left, and through watering, dusty eyes I beheld a darkish boy on a huge brown horse.

"Oh, yes!" I croaked. I had to ensure Chandi's safety.

"Okay," said the boy and rode off in a cloud of dust, leaving me lying in the dirt with a bunch of yokels grinning at me.

"Are you boys demented?" I yelled at them in anger.

"Help me up."

"Okay, Ma'am."

Four pairs of willing hands helped me up and dusted me down a little too enthusiastically.

"Are you hurt? No broken bones, I hope?"

"No, I'm okay," I said a trifler shakily. "Where's that boy who was riding a horse?"
"The brown one? Or the white one? Ha, ha!"
"The brown one, obviously," I was getting angry
"As far as I can see the brown horse and the white horse have both disappeared," said one cheeky fellow, "leaving behind a two-legged horse. Ha, ha!"
"Yeah, a horse with two tails," said another and gave a tug to my pony tails.
"You...u...u.....!" I shouted and swung my right hand in a wide arc, hoping to land a solid whack on his cheek, but it went all wrong. The situation became ugly.
The boy caught my arm and twisted it painfully.
"Leave me alone, you roadside loafers!" I screamed.
"Madam, you haven't seen roadside loafers," the boy holding my arm twisted it a little more.
"Aaah!" I screamed. "You're hurting me." I cast my mind around wildly, wondering how to get out of the situation, when suddenly I was free.

With thundering hoofs, the boy with the brown horse, astride, came back and kicked the fellow who was holding my arm. My tormenter went flying to the ground and I barely saved myself from another fall.
"So? Three brave boys harassing a girl!" the boy on the horse wheeled around and leaned over the neck of the brown horse to stare at the boys. "Not very brave of you, I must say." Not one of the boys uttered a word. He then turned to me with raised eyebrows, "I presume you can ride. Hop on behind me."
"Where's my horse?" I asked as I swung myself up.
"In my house."
"Your house? Where's your house? And why did you take Chandi to your house? Is she hurt? I'll kill you if ever a hair of her head is touched."
"Wah, what a girl! She either asks questions or she hands out threats left, right and centre. Madam, why can't you say a civilized 'thank you'?"
"Thank you? Why should I say thank you?"
"Because I saved you and your horse."
"I suppose so," I muttered. "Where are we going?"
"Another question!"
"But I don't live there," I protested, as he turned off the road into a side lane.
"I do," he answered.
"But I don't want to go to your house," I protested. "I don't know you."
"Does that mean you don't want your horse?"
"Of course, I do!"
"Then stop asking questions," he said severely.
"I don't..." I began and then fell silent. This was the wrong time to argue with this stranger specially since he had helped me and, hopefully, Chandi too. Suddenly I realized that he was a good rider and that he was managing the huge brown gelding with the mere flick of his fingers and a slight press of his knees. He had a light seat. Curiosity overcame anger and I wanted to know more about him.
"What's your name? And where have you come from? I know all the people who ride in and around Bhopal."
"Questions, questions and more questions. I haven't met a girl who asks so many questions."
"What's wrong in asking questions?"
"See, another question," he laughed.
'I'm going to settle scores with him,' I thought even as I seethed in anger from within. 'He is opinionated as..."
thinks no end of himself. I would teach him a lesson.'

Just then he turned into a long, tree-lined avenue in the shadow of the hill where the Museum of Man was situated.

"Is this your house?" I asked, struck by the beauty of the meandering lane that led to a white, painted English bungalow with green doors and windows.

"Yes, it is my house."

I looked around with pleasure wondering whose house it was and why I had never noticed it before. Then it struck me and I blurted out, "My God! It's the haunted house! You bought the haunted house! Why did you do that?"

"Because it's a beautiful house," he said, as we dismounted.

A horde of yapping dogs appeared from somewhere and surrounded the boy who, now that he had dismounted, I could see was taller than me and could be about sixteen years old. Then I noticed it—he had a ponytail. I didn't know whether I liked it or not, but I couldn't help asking, "Why do you have a ponytail?"

"I haven't asked you why you have two ponytails," he said. "Sambha, get the white horse," He called out.

"Sambha?" I asked. "Like in the movie Sholay?"

"Oh, God," he threw up his hands, "do you always ask questions?"

"You just asked one too," I pointed out.

"Must be infectious," he replied. "Here comes your horse."

'Chandi!' I cried and ran to her. I ran my hands over her flanks and legs and patted her nose. I sighed with relief and then irritation surfaced again. "Is that the
way to behave, Chandi? When are you going to learn to curb your temper and behave like a lady?"
"My God, she questions even the horse!" my benefactor shook his head. "Sambha, give Chandi a rub and some oats while we have something to eat. You are too young for tea or coffee, so I suppose you'll have milk," he said.
"I'm fourteen and am old enough to have coffee," I retorted.
"Good. Coffee and something to eat," he called out.
"Not until you tell me your name," I said.
"Okay, that's fair. My name is Bandung and I wear my hair in a ponytail because I like it," he announced.
"Bandung? What kind of name is that?" I demanded.
"What's your name?" he countered.
"Sara Singh."
"What kind of name is Sara?"
"It's a good name," I said, defensively.
"So is Bandung."
"Wait a minute," I protested. "That's not a person's name, that's the name of a place. It's in Indonesia."
"Here comes the coffee."
"I'm not going to have coffee until you tell me your real name, where you've come from and who taught you to ride," I crossed my hands across my chest and stared at him.
"Sambha!" he called out. "Tell this young lady my name."
"Bandung Sinha."
"Where have I come from?"
"Bandung, Indonesia."
"Final question, where did I learn riding?"
"In your mother's womb."
"Mother's womb..." I began in anger.
"Wait," Bandung held up one hand, "let Sambha finish."

"Bandung's mother was an ace rider," said Sambha.
"Now, will you have coffee and cake?" asked Bandung. I made no reply, just stared at him and Bandung threw up his hands, "You mean you have more questions?"

"No, I'll have the coffee. I like it milky and sweet."

The next morning, at five thirty, I was in the stable saddling Chandi for an early morning run when I felt a tap on the shoulder.

"Good morning, Sara Singh."
"Good morning," I smiled at him. He wore brown corduroy trousers, a white T-shirt and, of course, at the back of his head he had the ridiculous ponytail.

"Can I ride with you?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Sara," came a loud voice from behind. It was Raffu Miyan. "You can't take Chandi out."

"Why?"

"Because..." Raffu Miyan's voice died down and faded away. His face turned ashen as he stared at something to my left.

"Wh..." I turned around to find that it was Eandung, a surprised Bandung. Bandung and Raffu Miyan stared at each other as though they couldn't believe their eyes. I whirled back to Raffu Miyan but was surprised to find that he had disappeared! "He looked like he had seen a ghost," I said.

66
"He has seen a ghost," said Bandung Sinha, when we stopped and dismounted after a hard ride.

"Are you a ghost?" I said sarcastically.

"No, but I look much like a ghost whom he knew."

"Who's that?"

"My father."

"Your father? You look like your father's ghost?"

"That man has some connection with my father's murder, and I look so much like him that the shock showed on his face."

"What?" I cried. "Raffu Miyan killed your father? How do you know that?"

"Because," Bandung's face reddened with anger. "I saw him drag my father's dead body when I was barely four years old. No one believed me, and he went scot free," Bandung's face twisted with anguish.

"Raffu Miyan! I don't believe it. He's been living here for...forever. How could he have killed your father?"

"What did you say? Raffu Miyan?" said Bandung slowly. "Is that his name? In Indonesia he called himself Selamat Mori."
"Selamat Mori? This is getting weird." I turned to stare at Bandung who had hidden his face in his hands, "I’m not sure I believe this."

"Why should you?" he removed his hands and I was shocked to see that he was weeping. "It’s not your problem."

"Bandung...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that, it’s just that one day you appear from nowhere and now this story about Raffu Miyan who, incidently, is making my life miserable and..." I stopped.

"And what?"

"And he has some hold over Uncle Hari."

"Uncle Hari?"

"Uncle Hari, owner of H.H. Farm, where my father is the vet and where I stay and plan to race Chandi in the Subcontinent Race," I was breathless at the end of this commentary.

"I want to know if I help you win the Subcontinent Race, will you help me?"

"How?"

"By finding out Mori’s game plan. I am sure he is up to no good here. We can discover his game plan and we can also find some clues, something that will link Selamat Mori with my father’s murder," Bandung scratched his nose. "Will you help me?"

"Huh, of course."

"Sara!" called Fazlu. "I’ve been looking all over for you. Have you forgotten that the riding lessons begin today?" he asked with dismay.

"Hi, Fazlu. You’re right, I had forgotten," I clutched my head. "And I’ve been so busy talking to Bandung, I haven’t even completed my riding."
"Bandung? What are you talking?" asked Fazlu walking up.
"I'm Bandung and I'm Sara's friend," said Bandung.
"Yeah, since when? I'm Sara's friend. From birth, in fact." Fazlu faced Bandung, hands on hips. I realized with a shock that Fazlu was jealous. "Sara can't be friends with a creature with a ponytail, believe me."
"That's rude, Fazlu," I said. "Meet my friend, Bandung. And Bandung, this is Fazlu."
"Glad to meet you, Fazlu," said Bandung, smiling at Fazlu.
"I don't think I can return that compliment," said Fazlu through clenched teeth.
"Fazlu!" I warned.
"No, I mean it. I hate ponytails."
"Bandung, I must tell you that Fazlu is somehow related to Raffu Miyan."
"Then I can't be friends with him either," said Bandung, crossing his arms across his chest. Within minutes my two friends were staring at each other, eyeball to eyeball, exchanging hate messages.
"Fazlu, Bandung...don't do this, please. Both of you are my friends and I need you," I said looking from one to the other helplessly.
"Who's your real friend? That's what I want to know," said Fazlu.
"Fazlu is my oldest..."
"And best," said Fazlu tersely.
"Okay, Fazlu is my oldest and best friend and Bandung is my newest but also my best friend. And as far as Fazlu's relationship with Raffu Miyan is concerned, it's really only in name. Raffu Miyan hates
Fazlu and Fazlu is equally interested in setting Raffu Miyan right and solving the problems of H.H. Farm," I took a deep breath. "Now, will you two shake hands and be friends?"

"I suppose so," muttered Fazlu and stuck out his hand.

"Let's have chai and pakoras at the dhaba (roadside eating house) there," said Bandung, grinning from ear to ear, while I sighed with relief.

"Let's go," I said and added, as an aside to Fazlu, "I'm beginning to like his ponytail." If looks could kill, then the look that Fazlu gave me would have felled me outright. I linked one hand with each of them and dragged them to the dhaba.

The dhabawallah's shack was right beneath a spreading neem tree, halfway up the hill. We got a lovely view of the huge Bhopal lake. The blue of the sky was reflected in the lake and a cool breeze fanned our faces. I sat at the wooden table and stared at the lake. It was the lake and the wind that distinguished Bhopal from other towns. It was good to be with friends. We enjoyed pakoras with spicy chutney and drank strong sweet tea by the gallon.

"Hmm, so, what's the plan of action?" I asked.

"I spent one night chasing phantoms and I'm not going to ruin my sleep chasing Raffu Miyan," said Fazlu defiantly.

"We are not going to chase Raffu Miyan, we are only going to follow him," I said.

"And you think he is going to let you do that? If he sees either me or you anywhere near him or his house, he is going to raise hell," said Fazlu.
"And Uncle Hari will kill me."
"Not only will he kill you, he will also throw you out of the farm, and poor Uncle Singh will be out of job."
"You're right."
"But I can't understand why we are following Raffu Miyan?" said Fazlu.
"I thought we were trying to find out who's harming H.H. Farm and why."
"I am convinced that this man you call Raffu Miyan has something to do with it," said Bandung. "I call him Selamat Mori and I know that the Indonesian police want him. Believe me, he is a killer."
"Suppose we go to Inspector Saxena," I said. "We could tell him what Bandung has told us about his father and about Raffu Miyan's dubious identity."
"But we have no proof," said Bandung.
"Why don't we go to Fazlu's uncle, Taj-ud-din, and ask him? He was Raffu Miyan's previous employer, he might know something about him," I turned to Bandung.
"Good idea."
"Let's go."

We mounted our horses and rode over to Taj Farm. From the moment we clip-clopped on the brick-laid road, that started right at the huge wrought iron gate and continued up to the main house, I felt that I had entered another world. Here I found order, discipline and professional expertise. No overgrown hedges or untrimmed fruit trees, no broken down shabby sheds or unpainted store houses. Here lawns were mowed and even creepers climbed in an orderly fashion. But what really struck me were the automatic milking
sheds. I looked around in amazement. Grooms for the horses wore smart green overalls with Taj Farm embroidered on the shoulder, while those who worked with the cows and poultry wore blue overalls. The horses had healthy, glossy coats and the stables smelled of saddle soap and hoof oil. The entire farm had an eucalyptus fragrance which probably came from the line of eucalyptus trees bordering the lake drive.

As we neared the house I was further impressed by the lace-edged scalloped white curtains fluttering in the windows and the highly polished brass knobs and panels on the main door. Six golden Labradors flopped around the wooden floor of the huge verandah. They broke into a volley of welcome barks.

"What lovely dogs!" I exclaimed. "What are their names?"

"Brown, Fawn, Tan, Khaki, Bhura and Sienna," said Fazlu.

"What!"

"Now don't say what lovely names," said Fazlu. "There's Uncle Taj."

"Where?"

"There," he pointed a finger to the yard where stable boys were walking the horses round and round. The horses were thoroughbreds in every way. "And that's Hawa," Fazlu pointed to a dark brown, almost black horse with a beautiful face, dancing steps and tossing tail.

"He's gorgeous!" I exclaimed.

"And he's swifter than Chandi," said Fazlu.

"No, he is not," I retorted. "Chandi's got stronger and longer legs. She'll beat him."
"We'll see," teased Fazlu.
"You will," I promised.

"Hey, you kids, hello, hello, hello!" the deep voice of Taj-ud-din boomed almost as though he spoke through a megaphone. He wore a pristine white pathani sal war kurta, that probably gave his bulk more comfort than the waist-pinching trousers did. "I have guests for breakfast. Karim Miyan, oye, Karim Miyan, breakfast in the patio."

"Yes, Sir," came a voice from some Netherworld.

"And who's this young man?" asked Taj-ud-din, looking closely at Bandung.

"This is Bandung Sinha."

"Ha ha, ho ho, ha, ha! I like that, I like the name and I like the ponytail. Come, come, come, Sara, Fazlu and Bandung, I bet you are hungry."

When I saw the elaborate breakfast, I really regretted the pakoras that we had eaten. Taj-ud-din had laid out a breakfast fit to warm the cockles of any Englishman's heart. I had already had enough carbohydrates, so I wisely chose the kebab and chicken legs. Bandung and Fazlu attacked the food like starving refugees from Somalia, and for the first time, I was witness to the totally awesome quantity of food that the two boys could tuck in. Taj-ud-din, despite his bulk, was a finicky eater. All he had was a bowl of curd.

"You know, Uncle," said Fazlu, "H.H. Farm again had intruders the night before last."

"I see," Taj-ud-din reached for the coffee. "And what has your detective team discovered?"

"I believe they were digging for the buried treasure," I said, my eyes on Taj-ud-din. Neither his hand nor his
mouth faltered as he drank. Of course Taj-ud-din was the most likely person to be accused of villainy because of the rivalry between the two farms, but somehow I liked him. He was like a solid patriarch looking after everyone's interest.

"You could be right," remarked Taj-ud-din nonchallantly.

"Uncle," said Fazlu in a low voice, "is Raffu Miyan your brother?"

"No, no, no."

"But..." I began.

"He says he's your brother," said Fazlu.

"He's my wife's brother, a distant cousin, really. When the pancakes stopped coming free, he left," Taj-ud-din looked at Fazlu and Fazlu to me. "Come on, you kids worry too much."

"Sir, has Raffu Miyan ever been to Indonesia?" Bandung spoke for the first time.

"Indonesia? Not as far as I know," he laughed loudly. "But, then, who knows? Maybe he did. Ha, ha!" This time he failed to repeat his laugh three times as he normally did.

"Maybe he did," I repeated softly and pushed back my chair. "It's time we went home. Thank you for the grand breakfast."

"Come again. Bye, bye, bye."
"What's this story about the buried treasure?" asked Bandung lazily.

Bandung, Fazlu and I had worked off the massive breakfast by teaching the rudiments of riding to the kids who had come in for riding lessons. We were all sprawled out exhausted on the untidy front porch of the house. I lay on the ancient wrought iron jhoola (swing), eyes closed, swinging slowly. Bandung lay on his back on the divan with Soloman and Sheba on either side. The truant dogs had found a fervent dog lover in Bandung and they basked in his unreserved admiration. Fazlu had curled up inside the huge cane chair. His half-open mouth suggested that he was on the verge of dropping off into a deep sleep.

"Naughty Sara! Naughty girl!" called Kiki.
"Shut up, Kiki," I called sleepily.
"Hey, what's this buried treasure?" Bandung asked again.
"The story runs like this. The Rajah of Bhopal possessed plenty of gold and precious jewellery."
I heard Papa’s voice. "Papa!" I opened my eyes and smiled at him. "When did you come?"
"Just now," he smiled back. "Well, the Rajah had a great deal of jewellery, precious gems and gold coins. The king of England, it was said, needed money, more than the Rajah had voluntarily agreed to give. Orders had come from London to acquire as much wealth as was possible from the rulers. The rulers quickly stacked away their wealth. The rulers of Bhopal owned the area which now forms H.H. Farm and Taj Farm. They buried their treasure in a field which was the site of a number of ancient wells. The treasure was probably dropped into one of the wells and the well filled up with dirt. The entire field was ploughed and planted. Nobody knows for certain but many a greedy man has been trying to locate it."

"Wow!" said Bandung. "And, Doctor Uncle, do you think it exists?"

"It’s possible. Such things have been known to happen. Before the English established banks in India, the wealthy used to keep their money in secret built-in walls and lofts and even beneath the floor."

"And this treasure, if it exists, is on H.H. Farm?" I asked.

"As per the calculations, it’s probably here rather than on Taj Farm," Papa stood up and stretched. "I had a tiring night. One of the cows had a difficult delivery."

"A calf!" I sat up. "I want to see it."

"Tomorrow, maybe," said Papa. "How’s the training coming along, Sara? Is Chandi behaving herself?"

"Yes, Papa. And Bandung is an ace rider. He’s going to help me."

"Good. But I need you and Fazlu to help me in the stables in the evening. A couple of horses are sick and
I suspect it might be colic due to worm larvae. I've given them pain relievers but I'll have to administer medicine and induce them to evacuate the worms with their bowel movement."

"Oh, by the way, where is Raffu Miyan, Papa? I haven't seen him the entire day?" I asked.

"Colonel Hari said he had gone to Delhi. See you, children."

That piece of news certainly woke all of us up. Bandung was sure that Raffu Miyan had run away and that he had lost forever the only lead that he ever had of bringing his father's murderer to book. I again insisted that we should go to the police, while Fazlu thought that the two of us worried too much and that it was good riddance of bad rubbish.

"Sara, where does Raffu Miyan live?" asked Bandung.

"Here."

"I mean which room or apartment? As far as I can see there are only two houses, Uncle Hari's and yours."

"No, there are a few more at the rear for the staff. But Raffu Miyan lives in the House."

"Why?"

"I suppose Uncle Hari wants him to." I realized, as I said this, that I had never really thought about it.

"A master and his servant cannot be friends."

"Master and servant?" I echoed. "They don't act like master and servant."

"Is he a paid employee?"

"I think so."

"Is your father a paid employee?"

"I think so."
"Sara, you dumbo, do you know anything for sure?"
"I know that Raffu Miyan has a set of rooms in the west side of the House with a separate entrance to himself."
"That's good news," said Bandung.
"Why?"
"Because we are going to break into Raffu Miyan's apartment and look around for clues."
"Clues?"
"Clues to link Raffu Miyan with Indonesia."
"What about H.H. Farm?"
"Maybe we will find clues to link him to what's been happening here too," said Bandung.
"Do you think the barn was burnt down by the people who were looking for the treasure?" I asked.
"Maybe."
"Fazlu, is Uncle Taj very keen to find the treasure?"
"You know, Sara, I have not heard Uncle Taj ever mention the treasure in all the years that I've been there. It's funny but I've heard the treasure, or its whereabouts, discussed more at H.H. Farm rather than at Taj Farm."
"What does that mean, Fazlu?" I demanded.
"I don't know. I just said what struck me," Fazlu shrugged his shoulders. I stared at him in puzzlement.
"Forget the stupid treasure," said Bandung. "I'm going home and I'll come back at night after ten o'clock. We'll survey Raffu Miyan's apartment."
"You mean we'll break in?" I asked.
"Yes, we'll break in. We really need to know more about Raffu Miyan. He's not a law-abiding character," said Bandung.
"From what I've seen, Bandung Sinha, you don't sound like a very law-abiding character either," said Fazlu getting up.

"I'll see you at ten," Bandung just grinned at Fazlu.

"Better come to my window and call," I said, "I don't want Papa to know and, besides, don't forget that after that night's digging episode, Inspector Saxena and the police are patrolling the farm every night."

In the evening, Papa and I cooked dinner. Suddenly Papa decided I needed proper nourishment. He sent Om for vegetables—tomatoes, lettuce and cucumber—and made a tasty salad with an Italian olive oil dressing. Then he produced the gem that had filled the house with its mouth-watering aroma—a roasted chicken stuffed with rice.

"Papa!" I was speechless at the sight of this culinary wonder. "Tell me, truthfully, did you cook this?"

"I cannot lie to my daughter," said Papa. "No, I didn't cook it. I picked it up from Eat More and popped it into the oven."

"Oh, Papa," I laughed, "let's eat. It smells delicious." Halfway through the meal, I asked Papa the question that had been troubling me, "Papa, how much does Uncle Hari pay you?"

"What?" Papa frowned.

"How much does Uncle Hari pay you? I mean, are you his employee?"

"Yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, yes, Colonel Hari does pay me for services rendered, and no, I'm not really an employee because I'm part owner. I have a stake in the farm."
"I didn't know that." I was surprised. Papa was an unassuming man with very few wants. I gave Papa a kiss and left.

In my room, while I waited for the boys to show up, I renewed my resolve to win the race. It was really important that H.H. Farm was saved from ruin. A smattering of pebbles hit my window and I peered out. Bandung stood there. I quickly switched off the lights, climbed a stool and jumped out. It was a five-feet drop, but I landed unhurt.

"How do you propose to get back?" asked Bandung.
"Climb the stool and jump inside."
"What stool?"
I slapped my head. How stupid of me! The stool was inside. "I'll worry about it later."

"Let's go," said Fazlu, joining us.
Raffu Miyan's apartment was on the west side of the House. It faced the grove of fruit trees and the area was dark and dense. Nothing was visible. I switched on the torch and shaded it with my hands. Fazlu led, I followed and Bandung formed the rear. We reached the apartment. Two steps led up to a small verandah. Two doors were set at the back of the verandah. The torch lit up a heavy lock hanging on one of the doors.
"This lock cannot be tampered with," said Fazlu.
"It's huge and solid."

We tried the other door. It was bolted from inside.
"Is there a window or something?" asked Bandung.
"There's one, but it's set rather high and it's closed."
"Break it," suggested Bandung.
"No, you'll wake up Uncle Hari and Aunt Tara. Think of something else," I said.

80
"Is there a crowbar or something?" asked Bandung. "Or even a stick?"

"Here, try this," Fazlu gave Bandung a stick. Bandung fitted the stick in a tiny gap between the window and the frame and all three of us put our strength behind it. The window popped open and banged against the opposite wall.

"You idiot!" I said. "Hide."

We ran for cover with beating hearts and crouched behind some bushes. No one appeared. It seemed as if uncle and aunt had probably taken sleeping pills with their night's glass of milk. We crept back to the House and, after a great deal of arguments in whispers, Bandung went down on his hands and knees so that Fazlu and I climbed on his back one after the other and jumped inside.

It took us quite some time to pull Bandung inside. Finally all three of us were inside. All this exercise left me exhausted.

"Come on, let's look around," said Fazlu.

"Yeah, don't sit around," said Bandung.

Suddenly there was a commotion all around, and the lights came on. We found Uncle Hari, Aunt Tara and Raffu Miyan standing and staring at us.

"Sara! Fazlu!" exclaimed Aunt Tara, "what are you doing here?"

"We thought there were thieves," said Raffu Miyan.

"Sara, what are you doing here?" asked Uncle Hari, his tone ominous.

"We, Bandung and Fazlu...we..." I looked around for support and stopped short. Fazlu stood behind me but he was the only one. Bandung had disappeared!
"Bandung?" I looked around in amazement.
"Where's Bandung?" asked Fazlu equally amazed.
"Now where's Bandung?" said Raffu Miyan. "The question is, who's Bandung?"
"Never heard of Bandung," said Uncle Hari.
"It's a place," said Aunt Tara, "in Indonesia."
"Don't be silly, Tara, if it's a place in Indonesia, how can it come here?" Uncle Hari stared hard at me. "I'm waiting for an explanation, Sara."
"Uncle..." my voice trailed off.

Time ticked by. I couldn't say anything. Besides I was wondering where Bandung had gone. How could he have just disappeared?
"I'm waiting, Sara," said Uncle Hari.
"It's this boy Fazlu," said Raffu Miyan. "He is the source of all mischief. He spies for Taj-ud-din. And everyone knows Taj-ud-din is a thief."
"He's your brother-in-law," burst out Fazlu. "How can you talk of him like that?"
"Brother-in-law be damned," snarled Raffu Miyan. "He's a liar and a cheat. He cheated me out of money and property."
"What money and property?" asked Fazlu.
"Taj Farm was mine. He used deceit to get the property registered in his name and then threw me out of the house. I want to see him begging in the st..."
"That's enough, Raffu," said Uncle Hari. "As for you two, go home. I will see you in the morning."
Fazlu and I quietly went out through the door and pretended to walk away. However as soon as the door closed, we stopped and stared at each other.
"Where's Bandung?"
"Do you think he could have jumped out of the window and run away?" I asked.
"I don't, think so," said Fazlu. "There was hardly any time. We had barely got inside when the lights came on."
"Do you think Raffu Miyan kidnapped him?" I asked. "Don't forget that Bandung suspects him of killing his father."
"I don't know."
"Beside, how could he have done that?"
"I don't know."
"What do we do now?" I stared at Fazlu.
"I don't know."
"Fazlu," I said in exasperation, "don't keep saying, 'I don't know'."
"It's true, I don't know." He thought for a while and then spoke, "Actually there is nothing we can do now except go home."
"But Bandung?"
"We'll go to his house in the morning after you have finished the training session with Chandi. Maybe, he's gone home."
"And if he's not there?"
"Then we'll look for him," said Fazlu. "I'll see you near Bandung's house at seven thirty in the morning, Sara."
"Okay."
I didn't know how to get back into my house. There was no Bandung to help me and the five-feet-high window seemed unreachable.
Just when I thought I would have to spend the night in the open, Om appeared and I sought his help.
"What are you doing here, Om?" I asked him, grateful for the fact that he didn't ask me why I needed to climb the window to enter my house.
"Something is wrong at the House," Om scratched his head.
"What do you mean?"
"You know, Hari Saheb and Raffu Miyan were fighting."
"Fighting? What do you mean by that?"
"They were shouting at each other loudly. Neither of them was listening to the other, just shouting and screaming. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but both were very angry. Then Hari Saheb slapped Raffu Miyan twice, very hard."
"Oh, my God!" I was shocked. "When did this happen?"
"In the afternoon. Raffu Miyan really went mad, absolutely crazy. He started abusing Hari Saheb and pushing him and hitting him."
"Didn't you help Uncle Hari?"
"I wanted to, but I was scared. It was as though Hari Saheb was afraid of Raffu Miyan."
"I too have the same opinion. Uncle Hari seems beholden to Raffu Miyan in some way."
"There's more."
"What?"
"Finally Raffu Miyan pushed Hari Saheb so hard that he fell down. Then Raffu Miyan took out a pistol from his pocket..."
"A pistol? Are you sure, Om?"
"Yes. He took out a pistol and said something to Hari Saheb. Then a funny thing happened. Hari Saheb's behaviour changed. He sat down and started crying."
"Crying? Uncle Hari?"
"Yes, crying and holding Raffu's feet."
"Are you sure you are not making this up, Om?"
"I swear, Sara, I'm telling the truth."
"I believe you, Om. Nobody can make up a story like this." I yawned. "But I don't understand why Uncle Hari is afraid of Raffu Miyan. I better go to bed. Om, will you come with me in the morning?"
"Of course. Six o'clock in the stables?"
I climbed on to his bent back, held the edge of the window and heaved myself up into my room.

Chandi was in excellent condition by now. She was cantering along excellently on both tarred and kachcha (muddy) roads. Her muscles rippled smoothly beneath her satiny skin and she showed confidence while moving fast. It was time to get her into practice for short bursts of speed at a gallop. I still wanted her canter to be absolutely first class so that the high degree of fitness would prevent any injuries, but Om felt she was ready for a gallop. I wished Bandung had been
there, but since he wasn’t, I raced Chandi for her first gallop. It was fantastic. Chandi flew like the wind, almost as though it required no effort. At the end of the gallop I slowed her to a normal trot to give her time to recover. Both of us were thrilled at what she could achieve. I dismounted and fed her gur by the fistful. She really deserved it. It wasn't long now. Chandi and I made a winning team.

"Chandi is great," said Om. "The two of you are in tune. You should win the race."

"Thanks. I'm happy too. There's precisely one month left for the Subcontinent Race. I need to win it."

"For Hari Saheb?" Om's tone made me pause. Om shook his head, "There's something wrong in the House, I can sense it."

"When I win the race everything will be all right," I said.

"Will it?"

"Of course, it will," I said. I sighted Fazlu outside Bandung's house and quickly dismounted. "Om, give me your horse. I want you to ride Chandi back and ask Nima to rub her down and feed and water her. But you come back. We might need your help."

"Okay. I'll take only ten minutes to come back."

I quickly told Fazlu about the quarrel between Uncle Hari and Raffu Miyan.

"I always knew Raffu Miyan was a bad character," he said. "But who could have imagined that he carried a pistol. Have you ever seen it?"

"No," I replied.

"Could it be Uncle Hari's pistol?" he asked.

"Maybe, but I've never seen a pistol in the House."
We walked up to the white and green house. The house had been freshly painted so it hardly looked like the haunted house. We rang the bell but no one answered. I called for Sambha, the man who had served us coffee on my last visit, but there was no reply. I peered inside the window.

"Someone will be in the stables," I said. We walked to the stable but found it empty. "Strange," I said, "where's Bandung's brown horse?"

"Maybe he rode it over last night."

"But then someone should have found it in the farm," I said. "But Om said nothing."

"Let’s go around the house."

We circled the house knocking on doors and peering into windows. No one was around. It was as though everyone had just disappeared, disintegrated. An eerie silence prevailed. I could feel fear mounting inside me. Where was Bandung? And where were the servants, the grooms. There had been quite a few people here the day I had come. Everyone could not have disappeared into thin air.

"What should we do?" Fazlu and I faced each other in consternation.

"Let's go to the police," said Fazlu.

"You think Raffu Miyan kidnapped Bandung?"

"Raffu Miyan is capable of anything."

"Where could he have hidden Bandung?"

"Maybe he killed him."

"Don't scare me, Fazlu."

"Look, if Raffu Miyan is Selamat Mori and he killed Bandung's father, then what’s there to stop him from killing Bandung?"
"He even hit Uncle Hari," I said.
"Maybe, Uncle Hari knows that Raffu Miyan is a murderer and, that's why he keeps a pistol handy," said Fazlu.
"If Uncle Hari knows all this why didn't he report the matter to the police?" I asked reasonably.
"Maybe, Raffu Miyan is blackmailing him and threatening him," said Fazlu. "Maybe, Uncle Hari too has a secret."
"Like what?"
"Maybe, he's a drug smuggler," said Fazlu.
"Fazlu, I know what career you should choose when you grow up," I said.
"What?"
"Writer of horror movies," I said, crossly. "Now, if you agree to give your imagination a rest, maybe we can think of what to do."
"What?"
"Let us break into this house and see," I said.
The sudden sound of someone clapping his hands made us whirl around. Raffu Miyan stood there. "If Fazlu becomes the writer of horror movies you, my dear Sara, will surely end in the electric chair. There is the natural streak of a criminal in you too."
"Raffu Miyan, enough of your tricks," I said in anger.
"Where is Bandung?"
"You mean, Rupak Sinha, son of Amar Nath Sinha, the rubber magnate of Indonesia."
"So Bandung was right... You killed his father."
"You're crazy, Raffu..."
"Leave Bandung before the police come and put you behind bars."
"You, murderer!" I shouted.
"Very dramatic," said another voice and I gasped in relief to see Uncle Hari.
"Uncle Hari, you have to help us. Raffu Miyan..."
But suddenly my voice died down. Uncle Hari was holding a pistol, its barrel pointed at me. I looked at Uncle Hari in shock. Why was Uncle Hari threatening me? Uncle Hari walked towards me, holding the pistol aimed at me. There was no mistaking his intention. His eyes were wild. His neatly combed silver grey hair was in disarray and one untidy lock fell across his forehead, giving him a totally demented look. His lower lip twitched and he giggled.
"Raffu Miyan is not the murderer," Uncle Hari spoke in a strange high-pitched voice that was almost feminine. "It’s me. I killed Amar Nath Sinha and I would have killed his son, the stupid puppy too, if it hadn't been for you two stupid kids," Uncle Hari gritted his teeth and then giggled again.
"But all is not lost. I can still kill him and I can also kill you two," he giggled.
Uncle Hari and Raffu Miyan marched Fazlu and myself to a room in the centre of a house which had no windows. Here we found Bandung on the floor, neatly trussed up like a chicken. His ankles were tied, his hands bound behind his back. A thick towel was twisted cruelly around his mouth. It partially covered his nose too. The moment I saw him I ran to loosen the knots around his face.

BANG!

Uncle Hari fired. The bullet passed inches away from Bandung’s head. I screamed and fell back, almost blubbering with fright. Fazlu, kicked by Raffu Miyan, also fell on the floor beside me. Uncle Hari gave another of his high-pitched, feminine giggles, so weird and demented that it seemed to freeze the blood around my heart.

"You like to play games, eh? I like them too. Will you play cards with me, Sara?" his pistol was still aimed at me.

"N...No!"

"Why not?" Uncle Hari’s voice changed its timbre. "I like playing with you," he giggled.
Fazlu and I were terrified and staring at Uncle Hari open-mouthed. Fear rose from somewhere deep within. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that my kind Uncle Hari could turn into a demented ogre, a crazy killer. It couldn't be true.

"Uncle Hari," I pleaded, "it's me, Sara..."

"I know, I know, Sara. But I hate that puppy Sinha. He came and ruined everything. Now I have to kill everyone," he giggled again.

"Colonel," said Raffu Miyan, "tie up Sara and Fazlu and let's go. There's work to be done in the farm."

"Yes, and the treasure..."

"Shhh, Colonel/" said Raffu Miyan warningly.

"I know, I know."

"And it's time for your medicine, Colonel. Take it quickly so that we can go back to the farm."

"Okay."

"Sara, Fazlu, where are you?" just then a voice came from outside.

"It's Om," I said.

"Om," Uncle Hari looked scared for the first time.

"What's he doing here?"

"Take your medicine, Colonel," said Raffu Miyan. "There's work to be done."

Uncle Hari obediently pushed up the sleeve of his shirt.

Raffu Miyan took a syringe from his pocket. "Keep them covered," he ordered Uncle Hari.

"Maybe, I can kill Om too," Uncle Hari giggled while Raffu Miyan gave him the injection, keeping an eye on us. As soon as the medicine entered his veins, a change came over Uncle Hari. The mad look went out of his
eyes and his back straightened subtly. He lifted a hand and smoothed his hair. The lines of his face vanished and his entire demeanour changed. He was the loveable Uncle Hari once again. Almost instantly my fear also ebbed and I felt my heart beat slower.

"Uncle Hari..." I began.
"Shut up," snarled Uncle Hari.
"Come on," said Raffu Miyan, laughingly when he noticed how frightened I was by Uncle Hari's voice.
"First tie up Sara and Fazlu," Uncle Hari smiled normally but lethally. "I can't worry about these two." He leaned back against the wall, pulled out and lit a cheroot and blew fragrant smoke all over the room. "I'm sorry to tie you up, Sara, but I have no choice. You should have minded your own business."
"Sara, Fazlu," came Om's voice from outside.
"This crow also needs its throat slit," Uncle Hari's face looked vicious, and his lower lip twitched.
I stared at Fazlu in fright. Raffu Miyan pulled my arms back roughly and I let out a cry of pain.
"Raffu, please don't hurt Sara," said Uncle Hari involuntarily.
"Uncle Hari," I blurted out, immediately breaking into tears, "you are my Uncle Hari, you are not a...a bad person. It's this R...Raffu Miyan."
"My dear, Raffu is like a new born lamb in front of me," said Uncle Hari.
"Even Taj-ud-din is like a new born lamb in front of you," laughed Raffu Miyan.
"Oh, forget Taj-ud-din. It's this stupid boy who roused my anger," Uncle Hari kicked Bandung really viciously with his booted foot.
"Stop!" I cried.
"This stupid boy," he kicked Bandung again, "ruined everything. I would have got the treasure and had Taj-ud-din arrested for stealing and trespassing, and lived happily ever after."
"Oh, my God," cried Fazlu suddenly. "Don't you see, Sara, he's been stealing his own vegetables! He even burnt down his own barn! He was only playing the poor man, whereas all along he intended to blame Uncle Taj. What a diabolical mind!"
"I don't believe this," I stared in consternation at Uncle Hari.
"Sara!" came Om's voice.
"Be quick, Raffu, and drive that fool, Om, away from here before he starts looking too closely."
"Okay"
"Let's go quickly"
"All done," said Raffu Miyan, finally sealing my mouth too. "Come on."
"Tonight we get hold of the treasure and tonight we burn down this house too." Three pairs of eyes registered absolute panic. "You probably don't know but this house used to belong to Raffu Miyan. We will burn it down and we will plant evidence in such a manner that this fool of an Inspector Saxena will be finally convinced that Taj-ud-din burnt it down looking for the treasure," said Uncle Hari excitedly.
We were shell-shocked to hear these revelations.
"Then we will live happily ever after," laughed Raffu Miyan.
"Of course, Doctor Singh will cry for his dear daughter and so will Tara," Uncle Hari gave another
of his high-pitched giggles and, without any warning, suddenly stubbed out his cigarette on my bare arm. I wailed and screamed silently, almost choking on the cloth that held my mouth. Tears poured down my face and the faces of both the boys. "I'll cry too with the good doctor for his darling daughter," Uncle Hari added.

"Come on, Colonel," Raffu Miyan pulled his arm and took him away.

There was pin-drop silence. The pain around the burnt spot was so intense that I felt I could not bear it at all. My chest convulsed in silent sobs as I curled in a foetal position. Bandung and Fazlu squirmed close to me trying to comfort me but with mouths gagged and arms and legs tied, they could do nothing to help me. I don't know how long I lay there on the floor. Severe pain and emotional exhaustion made me lose track of time. Maybe we all passed out because when I finally became aware of my surroundings, I felt, along with pain in my arm and wrists and ankles, hunger and thirst.

After a while, I felt something poking in my legs. I twisted around painfully to find that Bandung was rolling his eyes wildly at me. 'Was he sick?' I wondered. I raised my eyebrows. He nudged my feet again and did all kinds of acrobatics with his eyes and eyebrows. I wiggled my eyebrows back, unable to understand what he was saying and too exhausted to make any more effort. In a minute I found Fazlu doing the same. He too nudged my feet and wiggled his eyebrows. I frowned at them and looked down at my feet. And, then it struck me—my feet were not tied! I could move!
It took me full ten minutes to get into a standing position. I could see the smiles in the boys’ eyes when I finally stood up. I was thrilled too but all this manoeuvering had set my arm throbbing again. Ignoring the pain, I nodded at the boys and moved to the kitchen to look for a knife or a pair of scissors, anything that would help to cut the bonds on my wrists. I opened the drawers first with my tied wrists and then turned around and peered inside. It was time consuming and I could find no sharp instrument to cut my bonds. I could not locate anything.

"Sara! Fazlu!" echoed a familiar voice.

It was Om! He had not given up. He had come back to look for us. I ran to the window and, with my back to it, I began hitting out with tied hands to get his attention. But he had gone around the corner of the house. In frustration, I hit the pane hard. The pane shattered, I cut my hands but Om heard the noise. He came back.
Half an hour later we were huddled in Om’s room along with Rocky and Nima. Bandung attended to my cuts and bruises with skill while Fazlu fed me. I basked in all the attention though I welcomed the two aspirins that helped to ease the pain the most. Bandung felt that my cuts needed no stitches. After eating the simple fare that Om provided, we got together to work out a plan to defeat the enemy. I insisted that we should go to Papa and tell him everything. He would support us and go with us to the police. And then we would romp home.

"You mean, we will romp to the psychiatric wing of the hospital," said Fazlu.

"What do you mean?"

"Fazlu is right," said Rocky. "Doctor Saheb will think there’s something wrong with you and give you medicine."

"But why?" I protested.

"Because he is Colonel Hari’s partner," said Fazlu.

"And from what you’ve told me, you’ve lived here since birth. If Doctor Uncle has never suspected the Colonel’s sanity or known anything about his
background, how will he suddenly accept the fact that Colonel Hari is a villain?" said Bandung reasonably
  "But he burnt me," I cried.
  "I know, but Doctor Uncle doesn't."
  "If Om, Rocky and Nima believe us, why not Papa?"
I argued.
  "Because they had already become suspicious."
  "I still feel..."
  "Sara, try to understand, we must have proof."
  "What proof can we have against him?" I spread out
my hands helplessly and looked at the group. No one
had an answer.
  "I have an idea," said Fazlu suddenly.
  "What?" I asked
  "The treasure," said Fazlu. "Don't you remember,
Sara, Uncle Hari said..."
  "Don't call him Uncle Hari," I said vehemently.
  "Okay, I won't call him Uncle Hari, I'll call him
Colonel Hari. Colonel Hari mentioned that he was close
to locating the treasure. Where is this treasure that they
have located? If we get to know something then we can
catch him red-handed."
  "Fazlu, remember the fellows who were digging in
burnt debris of the barn?" I asked.
  "Yeah."
  "Could it be buried there?" I asked.
  "You know what, Sara?" said Fazlu.
  "What?"
  "I think that's a red herring."
  "What's a red herring?"
  "A red herring is something planted to divert
attention," explained Fazlu.
"What do you mean?"
"Probably the burning of the barn and the digging there was only meant to divert attention from the truth?"
"What truth, Fazlu?" I asked.
"I get what Fazlu is saying," Bandung sat up. The barn’s burning or the digging or the stealing of vegetables were smokescreens. They were meant to divert attention from the truth."
"If so, what’s the truth?" I repeated.
"I don't know," said Fazlu dejectedly.
Just then Nima who had been sitting quietly and listening to everyone, suddenly spoke. "I have seen the Colonel dig the floor of his house."
"What do you mean, Nima?"
"There is a room in the House that is always locked. Even the Memsahib doesn’t go there. But Colonel Saheb and Raffu Miyan go there at night and dig."
"At night, is it?"
"To maintain secrecy," said Nima. "They have taken out the marble slabs and stacked them against the wall. Now they are digging the floor."
"How do you know?"
"I’ve seen him at work."
"But you say the door is kept locked?"
"It is. But I peeped through the keyhole. And one day Raffu asked me to get coffee and food inside. On that occasion I went in and saw."
"What about the dirt? How big is the hole?"
"Do they use shovels?"
"How is it that nobody has heard any noise?" we put our queries one after the other.
"Not many people are allowed into the House and Memsahib cooks food herself," said Nima.
"But, Nima, I've gone a million times to the House," I said. "I've seen nothing."
"True, but you don't sleep there and you don't go there in the night," said Nima. "Whereas I help in the kitchen. Often I spend the night there, so I know."
"How long has this been going on?"
"A couple of months."
"This means that Uncle Hari has got a definite clue about the treasure and he is using a red herring to divert attention," said Fazlu.
"And he has another purpose. If he can convince the police that Taj-ud-din is behind everything, then maybe Raffu can get back into Taj Farm which he claims as his property."
"I can't understand why the colonel killed my father?" said Bandung.
"He is obviously a bad person," I said. "He killed your father in Indonesia and then ran to India. With that money he bought H.H. Farm. Now he has got wind of the treasure and hopes to find it and also have Taj-ud-din arrested or something."
"Yes, two like-minded criminals have got together. Unfortunately for them Sara and I played detectives. And while they were dealing with us, Bandung arrived and recognized Raffu Miyan," said Fazlu.
"Incidently, how is it that you didn't recognize Colonel Hari, Bandung?" I asked.
"I don't know. Maybe he was disguised and had a different name," said Bandung. "Like Raffu called himself Selamat Mori."
"Now what do we do?" I asked.
"We wait till midnight and then raid the House and catch them," said Fazlu.
"Om, Rocky and Nima should go to work to avoid suspicion," I said.
"They will discover our absence and suspect Om," said Fazlu.
"But they won't know for sure," said Bandung.
"At midnight, we will go to the House," I said, "and at twelve thirty, Rocky will get both Papa and the police."
"Excellent thinking," said Fazlu. "Can you do it, Rocky?"
"I...I think so."
"Good. Now go, we will sleep for a while."
As decided, we reached the House at midnight. All of us were armed. We carried sticks, axes and shovels. The House was pitch-dark and silent. We had decided to climb in through the window of Raffu Miyan's room. We got in without any hassle. Signalling each other to be quiet, we tiptoed behind Nima who led us to the central lounge. There he pointed to a door and quietly we gathered outside the door, ready to rush in together.
"Okay, one, two..." whispered Bandung.
Just then there came a shout behind us and a flood of lights. "See, Doctor, Sara and friends armed with axes and other weapons," Uncle Hari stood there, dapper as he spoke with sadness in his voice. "What have I done to deserve this?"
"Sara!" Papa was shocked. "I didn't believe Hari when he said that you people were planning to kill him."
"Kill him..."
"He’s a murderer. He killed my father."
"And tried to kill us."
"He hurt me. Look, Papa."
"Stop, stop lying," shouted Papa.
"Selamat, Hari, I'll kill you!" Bandung let out a cry and leaped at Uncle Hari. He caught him around the neck and shrieked, "You killed my father. I've lived for this moment for years. My mother committed suicide. I hate you, I'll kill you."

Suddenly a shot rang out and Bandung shrieked and fell to the ground. We were all stunned and before anyone could rush to Bandung or even react, a high-pitched feminine giggle rang through the room. Colonel Hari stood clutching the smoking pistol in his hand!

"I killed Amar Nath Sinha. I should have killed the puppy too."

"Hari!" Papa was shocked. The rest of us were paralysed with terror.

"I killed Amar Nath Sinha. It was very funny. He bled so much. It was like a blood bath. I like killing," he lifted the pistol and pointed it again at Bandung who had been hit in the thigh. "Bleed, bleed." He pulled the trigger!

Just as he pulled the trigger, Fazlu who had been grappling with Raffu Miyan, accidently pushed him. Raffu Miyan came in line of the shot and caught the bullet in his stomach. There were shrieks and screams and fist fights all over. Into this scene of chaos, Inspector Saxena arrived with a posse of policemen.
Epilogue

When the police searched Raffu Miyan's house for his alleged hand in Amar Nath Sinha's murder, they discovered his personal diary which spilled the beans. Colonel Hari and Raffu Miyan were Amar Nath's employees in Indonesia. Amar Nath had a rubber business and he also dealt in antiques. Hari had managed to lay his hands on a precious antique and sold it to an American Gallery for a million dollars. He placed a replica, but was caught by Amar Nath; who threatened to hand him over to the police. In desperation, Hari killed Amar Nath. Raffu caught Hari in the act. Hari then connived with Raffu in siphoning away Amar Nath's money.

The duo came to India. They heard about the Rajah's buried treasure on the H.H. Farm and in the hope of unearthing it bought the farm. After a strenuous and persistent exercise of about six months Raffu and Hari managed to locate the treasure, which they retrieved during several sessions. They hid this treasure in a room in the House which was kept locked. Raffu, who was jealous of his brother-in-law, Taj-ud-din, forced Hari to create the smokescreen to cast doubts on Taj's character.

Bandung stayed on in Bhopal and moved into the haunted house. He trained me ably and I rode Chandi to victory at the Subcontinent Race. Raffu Miyan succumbed to his injuries. Uncle Hari was declared insane and sent to the mental hospital. Papa and I stayed on at the H.H. Farm. Chandi and I won many titles at major races.
Sara's dream of riding Chandi in the Subcontinent horse race gets a jolt when thefts and fire hit H.H. Farm, jointly owned by Colonel Hari and her father. The needle of suspicion falls on Taj-ud-din, the owner of Taj Farm, who, Colonel Hari thinks, is after H.H. Farm where the Rajah's treasure is believed to be buried.

Sara, Fazlu and Bandung go treasure hunting on the trails of the miscreants. And what do the trio unearth!