

The Indian Princess of Broomhill House

Ivy 1982

Have you ever heard the story of Captain Henry McNeil and the Indian princess? It's a tale spun from half-truths, one that sprouted in the telling, like the ivy clambering over Broomhill House before me. I curl my crisscrossed palm around the metal of the skeleton key. It's cold. Colder even than the brumal breeze stirring the ornamental trees. Yew and sycamore rustle around the house, except for the ancient oak which leans into the roof like a lover's awkward caress.

When I left, I took the key with me and told no one, as I'd promised. It was only upon rereading my diaries that I remembered the intricate brass key with the silhouette of an *Elephas maximus*. Sita said elephants were symbols of strength, so perhaps Zsófia meant something when he chose that animal.

Sita wasn't a princess. She was our ayah. A nurturing presence from my earliest memories. To my young and supple mind, she was a figure of grace and kindness, her cocoa eyes brimming with stories untold. Father, with a whimsical flourish, adorned her in silk saris, rustling with every fold and flutter. They draped over her, mimicking the petals of an exotic flower; vibrant against the grey backdrop of Scotland.

The year 1902 marked our return to a land of mist and mystery in the storybooks. In reality, a cold draughty mansion without electricity or central heating awaited us. Coming to Scotland felt more like an adventure to Antarctica than a fairy realm or Neverland.

The Captain brought our ayah home as his bride. I wanted to be her – an ayah. That magical word surely meaning sorceress. She was our Sita, our secret keeper. She taught me the art of listening to the wind as it wrapped around the tiled roof. When the clock struck midnight, we whispered secrets into the night in our shared language, and I, tucked under my quilt, believed it all. *Haan*, I did. Sita was the true heart of Broomhill House. Made apparent the night she vanished.

My eighty-seven-year-old self yearns for her courage still as I clutch the key tighter in my palm. Before leaving the other house I'd slid it onto my gold necklace for safekeeping. My mind's on firmer ground on the estate. When I'm away from Broomhill, the details slip through the cracks. Sometimes gradually. Sometimes entirely. Until I'm not sure where exactly I might

end up. Usually I find myself in a place where I struggle to recall the faces, the voices, the moments that once seemed so vivid. I must return to the house to evoke their memories.

The key begins to feel warm in my palm. It's time to find out what the key opens while I have my wits about me.

The sun breaks through the grey sky overhead, touching the heavy brass knocker. As I stand there, unable to take my first step, a Purple Sunbird flashes across an upstairs window.