

## Chapter 12

'It's magical!' I say, wondering how many other people have seen it.

'This was the first tree I ever climbed,' he says. There's a rustle above us. 'I'd like you to meet someone.' He makes a clicking noise with his tongue. A baby grey langur climbs down from the top branches. Its arms wrap around Praveen's neck before turning its head to look at me.

'Meet Bandar,' says Praveen, scratching the monkey's head with one finger.

'What are you? Some kind of animal whisperer?' I ask, secretly impressed.

Praveen laughs. 'She was stolen by a neighbouring troop, but she got away. I saw the whole thing. I'm hoping her mother will pass through again soon and collect her. In the meantime, I feed her every morning and most evenings.'

'Hi Bandar,' I say.

'It means monkey in Hindi,' he says.

'I wish I knew Hindi,' I say. 'Dad and Grandma never taught me.'

'I can teach you,' Praveen replies. 'If you want?'

I nod.

'Start with the names of animals, all right? You already know *bhalu*.'

'Bear,' I say. 'That one's easy. And now I know monkey - *bandar*.'

He looks towards the sun. It's already low in the sky.

'My cousin's looking after the goats today, but I have to help put them away for the night in the village. Want to help?'

I nod. 'I'd better tell Dad first.'

We climb down and start walking back to the hotel.

'Why does no one come up here?' I ask. 'Apart from you.'

'What do you mean?' he asks.

'The mountain. Why are people scared to come up here?'

'I don't know,' he says, but he looks at the ground as he says it.

'Look,' I say, stopping in the path and turning to him. 'Whatever it is, you can tell me. I can see you're not saying something and I'm sick of people keeping things from me.'

'Okay,' he says, startled by my outburst. 'If you must know, it's because the mountain is haunted by the Goddess Durga.'

I stare at him, taken aback by his matter of fact tone. 'Are you kidding? I don't believe in ghost stories like that.' It's true, I don't; if ghosts were real, then Mum would have haunted me by now.

'Well, this one's true,' he says calmly. 'The first people who came up here in 1905 tried to build a school. They cleared a big area of trees