

Chapter 17: **Mystery**

- Write down some 'I wonder' questions about this chapter and also thoughts about the book so far.
- What are your thoughts and ideas about what Toad and Stinger are doing on the mountain and why you think what you do?

'I brought you a picture of Durga,' says Praveen.

We're sitting in his tree; I slipped away after breakfast without anyone noticing. Dad was busy writing flyers to advertise for the position of a chef, while Grandma placed hanging flower baskets along the veranda as she waited for her rhododendron jam to cook.

Praveen's flock munch on the grass beneath us.

He passes me a colourful postcard of a warrior goddess with long dark hair, riding a tiger. She has eight arms, each hand carrying a weapon to destroy, or a tool to create. I stare at the picture. She doesn't look like a ghost at all. She looks strong and full of life.

'I like her,' I say.

'You can keep it,' he says. 'She reminds me of you in that picture.'

I smile.

'I've been thinking - about the curse on the mountain and how you could try and protect yourselves. One thing we could do is build a shrine to the Goddess Durga somewhere close by. To say thank you for allowing us to be up here, and to ask her to let your father run the hotel in peace. What do you think?'

'Can't hurt,' I say with a shrug.

Birds scatter from the tree into the sky and I jump.

Praveen raises a finger to his lips. 'Something's coming,' he whispers.

I sit still, listening to my heart pound in my ribcage. I hear the crunch of footsteps.

Dad.

I feel suddenly guilty that instead of helping Dad and Grandma in the hotel I'm sitting in the tree with a boy.

'Better go. Bye,' I whisper and wave at Praveen, preparing to climb down the trunk.

I pause with my foot in mid-air.

There's more than one set of footsteps.

I grip the tree to steady myself and peer down through the leaves.

Mr Bhat and Mr Anand are walking towards the cabin.

Something about the way they look around as they reach it gets my attention. Stinger checks over each of his shoulders, as if he's afraid of someone seeing him.

I glance at Praveen and see he's watching them too, his dark eyes thoughtful.

'What don't you want anyone to see?' I ask them under my breath.

Stinger unlocks the padlock. They step inside and the door swings shut behind them.

I stare after them. It's a very large padlock for a cabin.

I shimmy down the tree trunk.

'Where are you going?' hisses Praveen.

'I want to see something,' I reply, softly thudding to the ground. 'Keep a look out.'

I approach the cabin and, keeping my head mostly under the sill, try to peer through the dusty window next to the door. It's too filthy to see into.

There are thuds and muffled voices before footsteps head towards me. I step backwards as the door flings outwards. For a second, the door shields me from sight and I dive behind the side of the cabin. As the door opens a strange smell wafts into the air, a smell like rotting leaves.

They stride outside.

I'm hidden from sight among the bushes, but I can just see Stinger. He's staring out over the hills and humming to himself. I hear Toad close the padlock over the latch and as he begins to walk away, I peek around the side of the cabin and watch them leave. I see what they're carrying.

'Guns,' I whisper.