

**THE SILVER ANKLET**

**By**

**Mahtab Narsimhan**

## Chapter 1: Hyenas!

The patch of sunlight at the edge of the forest had an odd look; dirty yellow and striped. Tara squinted hard and before her very eyes it moved, took shape, stood up: a yellow-eyed hyena! Glistening ropes of drool swung from its powerful jaws. It opened its mouth, revealing a jagged row of dirty teeth. It laughed.

“Ananth!” yelled Tara. She stumbled backward at the edge of the fairgrounds, not taking her eyes off the beast that hadn’t taken its eyes off her. She whirled round. “Come quick!”

Ananth dropped the ice-lollies he had just bought from a vendor and ran toward her. “What’s the matter?” he called out. “What happened?”

“Faster! Just look.” Tara was paralyzed by the vision. The hyena retreated into thick bushes at the edge of the forest till only its snout showed.

Tara turned to face Ananth. Turned back. It was gone.

“What ... happened ... Tara?” Ananth gasped for breath, his face streaming with sweat.

“Here,” said Tara. She jabbed the air with her finger. “I saw a huge hyena right here and it was staring at me. Oh God, Ananth, it was *massive*. It looked — I don’t know — hungry...”

Ananth stared at her for a moment, aghast, uncomprehending. Then he burst out laughing. “Good one, Tara. You’re kidding, right? That was brilliant!”

“Ananth, stop laughing. I’m serious. I saw the hyena as clearly as I see you. *Stop laughing, I said!*”

“That’s enough, Tara.” Ananth pulled her toward the fair. “Joke’s over.”

All around them the annual fair in the village of Ambala was at its peak of colour and noise. Along the periphery of the field, vendors hawked their wares: clothes, pots and pans, jewellery and handmade crafts. In the centre of the grounds the rides whizzed

around. The food stalls, selling everything from sweets and snacks to biryani, thronged with people.

“I’m not joking,” said Tara. She wanted to shake that smirk off his face. Why wouldn’t he believe her?

Ananth stopped near one of the stalls and pointed to the ground. Two damp patches littered with wooden sticks marked the spot where he had thrown the ice-lollies. “Couldn’t you have played your joke after we finished those? What a waste! You’re buying the next round.”

Tara resolutely looked away, refusing to answer him. Had she really imagined it? Was it just the midday heat that had made her see that horrible beast? Those searing yellow eyes and powerful jaws still made her pulse race. She shuddered, absolutely sure she hadn’t been dreaming and met Ananth’s gaze defiantly.

“Hyenas haven’t been seen in the Kalesar forest for years, Tara. If you had to pick an animal to yell about, you could have at least picked something like — I don’t know — maybe a wild boar? We have plenty of those ...”

“I know what I saw. You can say what you like.” She glared at Ananth. He may have been her brother, but at this moment she had not a gram of sisterly feeling toward him.

“*Didi*,” a voice cried. “Didi, Didi, I want some more money!” Tara’s anger melted away instantly at the sight of her younger brother, Suraj. He raced up to her and tugged at her sleeve, his best friend Rohan close behind.

“You can’t have spent your money *already*,” said Tara. “We’ve been here for just over an hour!”

Suraj nudged his friend.

“We did, Tara-didi,” Rohan said. “Please, just enough for another ride on the Ferris wheel. *Pleeease?*”

The wooden Ferris wheel, its giant spokes covered with red, blue, and green ribbons, whizzed through the air, holding screaming children in its many-cupped arms. Beside it, a battered merry-go-round with black and white horses bobbed up and down, slicing through

the cloud of heat and flies. Tinny Hindi music blared from a speaker mounted on its ragged canopy. Children stood impatiently in double lines, awaiting their turn.

Tara sighed. "All right, just one more ride and then both of you come straight back to me. If I'm not here, look for me. Understand?"

They nodded, arms outstretched, faces distorted with extra-wide grins. Tara pulled some coins from her pocket and picked out a rupee for each. A third person appeared alongside, arm outstretched.

"For me, too," said Layla, their stepsister.

Suraj shifted away slightly, his smile dimming.

"I don't have any more to spare," said Tara. The sight of Layla always reminded her of her evil stepmother, Kali. She tried not to snap at Layla.

"But you do, you do!" said Layla, her voice shrill. "I'll tell your mother you're being mean to me again."

Tara hesitated for a moment, then pulled out a coin from her pocket and slapped it on Layla's palm. Layla did not bother to thank her as she waddled after Suraj and Rohan.

"Come right back, Suraj, Rohan," Tara yelled after them. "I'll be waiting."

Layla stopped, turned around. "Don't worry, Tara. I'll look after them well." People passed by in front of her and she barely caught a glimpse of those mean black eyes that glittered in Layla's pudgy face. When Tara could see her again, Layla was already walking away.

That's precisely what I *am* worried about," muttered Tara when she saw her stepsister catch up with the boys. "I don't trust her. Not one bit."

"Oh forget about her, Tara," said Ananth. "What could happen to them in the mela on this fine, sunny day? It's time we had fun, too. What do you want to do first?"

"Let's walk around, take a look," said Tara. "I don't want to wander too far from here till Suraj and Rohan come back."

They strolled along the periphery of the fair. The Ferris wheel was still, hordes of children gathered at its base, waiting to climb on board. It was close enough. Suraj would

be fine. He was growing up so quickly. Still, after almost losing him once, she hated to let him out of her sight for even a short period of time.

“Just one second, Ananth.” Tara darted back to the Ferris wheel. An overweight boy with a smiling, round face was in charge. Tara leaned against the barrier and watched him for a minute; he seemed to be enjoying himself almost as much as the children.

“Hey!” she called out.

The boy glanced at her.

“Large crowd today, isn’t it?” said Tara.

The boy nodded, his cheeks jiggling, his eyes sparkling. “Lucky for us!” He unhitched the bar on a seat that rocked gently. Two girls sat there leaning back, clutching the sides tightly. He reached out with his strong arms. The girls shook their heads.

“Come on,” said the boy, smiling. “The others want a turn, too. Here grab my arms, I’ll show you something else that’s fun.”

The girls grasped his arms and clung on. The boy lifted them into the air simultaneously, swung them over the exit barrier and deposited them gently onto the ground. Squealing their thanks, they ran off.

Tara couldn’t help but smile at his ingenuity. Two boys got into the vacated seat, squirming to get comfortable as they wedged their feet against the footbar. “You’re doing a great job with these kids,” said Tara. “They really like you.”

The boy shrugged. “I love doing this, too.”

“My name’s Tara, and those two are my brother and his friend.” She pointed out Rohan and Suraj waiting in line. “Rohan’s in the yellow shirt and Suraj is wearing the white kurta-pajama. Keep an eye on them will you, please?”

“I’m Vayu,” said the boy. “No problem, I’ll watch out for them.” He swung two more children over the exit gate and helped another two into an empty seat.

Ananth had caught up to her. “Planning on telling every person at the fair to keep an eye on Suraj?” He addressed Vayu. “You got asked, too, right?”

Tara blushed and punched Ananth on the shoulder “Shut up.”

Vayu smiled at Ananth. “I really don’t mind. Are you coming back for them?”

“No, just tell them to look for us,” said Tara. “We won’t be too far from here. Probably near the performers in the centre of the field. And don’t let either of them back on the ride. I think they’ve both had enough.”

Vayu nodded. All the seats were full with a fresh lot of screaming children. Tara watched him secure the barrier once more, move the crowds waiting in line farther back, and sit on his high stool to start the ride.

“Happy now?” said Ananth. “Can we go do something interesting?”

Tara nodded absently, looking around her. “It’s really crowded this year. I’ve never seen so many people at the fair in a long time.”

“I heard the river’s not been too flooded this year,” said Ananth. “So many people are coming by boat from as far as Hissar. In fact, the waterway has more boats on it than ever before, and not just near the villages, either. It’s easier to get to the forest for hunting and gathering firewood by boat than on foot!”

Tara barely heard him. She glanced once more toward the trees at the edge of the fairgrounds. Something caught her eye, a dark shape within the deep shadows, as if someone was hiding and watching them. She dug her nails into Ananth’s arm. He winced.

“Ananth!” said Tara. “Did you see that? Something moved under that tree there.”

“What?” said Ananth. He gazed in the direction she was pointing. “Where?”

“There, near that tree.” Tara wagged her finger. “It’s not moving anymore. But look carefully and you might see it.”

“I don’t see anything,” said Ananth in a sharp voice. He looked away as he rubbed his arm.

“Something’s wrong.” Tara stared but could only see shadows once again. “You think it could be something like ... last time?” Her voice tapered off. Spoken aloud, the very thought seemed absurd, impossible. “Or then maybe the hyenas have returned ...”

“For God’s sake, Tara!” said Ananth. “*He’s* dead, remember? Just because you were right once, doesn’t mean there’s danger around you all the time. And I’ve told you before there are *no hyenas* in this part of the forest.”

“Stop yelling at me,” said Tara. “You’re not always right, either.”

But she had to admit he had a point. This was a normal day at a fair. What could possibly go wrong? Zarku was dead. *She* had been the one to reduce him to ashes. These had been sealed in an urn and she'd heard Lord Yama promise to bury it so that it would never be found. Ananth *was right* this time and yet ...why did she feel so uneasy?

"I'm sorry, Tara," said Ananth. "Let's not fight. I want to have fun today. Come on, already." He was looking about him as eagerly as Suraj had a few moments ago.

Should she tell him about the silver anklet she had taken to wearing these last few days? It was clasped securely around her ankle, hidden underneath her shalwar. It had belonged to Zarku's mother and had once saved her from his wrath. Whether it would work again, she did not know, but the solid weight of it gave her a modicum of comfort.

Fingers snapped in her face and she jerked out of her reverie.

"Wake up, Kumbhkaran," said Ananth. "Want me to win you something at the archery stall or do you plan on standing here indefinitely, waiting for Suraj to return?"

Tara opened her mouth. Ananth raised his hand. "No, don't bother to answer that. You're coming with me."

They had been through so much together, Ananth and she. They had vowed to be brother and sister even though they were unrelated by blood. Tara noticed that he still wore the ragged thread that she had tied on his wrist in lieu of a real rakhi when they had first met. Already he was a head taller than her with a mop of curly black hair and serious black eyes that often twinkled when he was teasing her.

"Is this just another ploy to show off?" asked Tara. She tried to sound annoyed, but his infectious smile made it difficult.

"Me, show off?" said Ananth. "Never!"

"Oh, all right, let's go," said Tara. She glanced at the Ferris wheel one last time and followed Ananth.

They waded into the fairgrounds, thick with wandering animals, people, and above all, the tantalizing aromas of food. The late afternoon sun burnished everything to gold and even the air seemed to sparkle.

Ananth pulled her through the crowds to the archery stall. Three brightly coloured plastic parakeets stood on perches some distance away from the counter. There was just one customer ahead of them and he was hopeless. Tara watched him miss all three tries and walk away, shoulders slumped, muttering under his breath. The stall owner turned his shrewd gaze on them.

“Try your luck and win a beautiful doll or bear,” he sang, waving his bony hand at the row of bright new toys on shelves in the tiny stall.

Ananth examined the two bows on the table.

“These are definitely rigged,” he whispered to Tara.

“How can you tell?” she whispered back.

“By the string. It’s too slack. The arrow can’t go far.”

“What are you looking at, young man?” said the owner. “Go on, win something for your girlfriend, don’t be shy,” he said. He picked up a bow and three arrows and handed them to Ananth. “Only one rupee!”

She’s my sister,” said Ananth. “And this bow is horrible. Do you have another one?”

“Hey!” said the owner. “Who are *you* to tell me that my bows are not good? If you can’t shoot, move on. Stop maligning my good name.” He glanced around quickly. A steady stream of people swept past his stall. No one stopped or even looked his way.

“A bad marksman always blames the bow,” said Tara softly. She leaned against the counter and smiled at Ananth. “Sure you can shoot?”

“A good marksman will get his target *in spite* of a bad bow,” said Ananth. “Watch closely and learn!”

Ananth picked up the bow and arrow and took aim. The arrow shot away from him and missed. Red-faced, he snuck a glance at Tara. “I wasn’t focusing,” he said.

“Ahhhh,” said Tara. She tried hard not to smile.

The owner smirked. “That happens to the best of us. Try again.”

Ananth raised the bow, fitted another arrow, took a deep breath and released it. It hit the mark. The parakeet keeled over and hung upside-down from its wooden perch. The



smile slid off the owner's face. Ananth took aim and shot the third arrow. The last parakeet fell over.

"Two out of three," yelled Ananth. "Yesss!"

"Not bad," said Tara. "Not bad at all."

"Very good, very good," said the owner. His sour expression belied his words.

Ananth dropped the bow on the counter. "So, what have I won?" he asked, rubbing his hands together.

The owner brought a bedraggled bear and a cheap doll from under the counter. "Since you didn't hit all three targets, this is your choice."

"No, thank you," said Tara. The moth-eaten specimens looked as if they had lived a harsh and pitiful life. She refused to touch them and instead pointed to the shelves. "Why can't we have one of those?"

"Only if all three arrows hit the mark. Sorry!" said the owner. He slid the toys back under the counter, seeming to dismiss them already.

"You *cheat*," said Ananth. "You rig the bows and then try to slime out of giving us our prize? I want my money back!"

"Shhhhh!" said the owner. "There's no need to yell."

"Oh, come on, Ananth, you've proved your point. And besides, I'm too old to play with dolls."

"Suraj would have liked the bear."

"Yes, well, he's not here yet, is he? Let's go!" said Tara.

"Consider yourself lucky," said Ananth. He shook his fist at the owner as Tara dragged him away. The visibly relieved man looked around for his next customer.

"Suraj is not back yet," said Tara. "Do you think he's finished with the ride? Why isn't he here already?"

"Tara, it's time he learned to be independent, so stop worrying."

"He's my baby brother and I will always worry," said Tara. She scanned the crowds. "With the fair so crowded this year, it'll be tough to find him if he wanders away. He gets distracted so easily. I hope he's all right."

“Suraj and Rohan are together,” said Ananth. “They’ll be just fine.”

“Mother and Father aren’t here today, so he’s my responsibility,” said Tara. “You know that, right?”

“You’re doing great so far,” said Ananth. “Stop behaving like an old woman.”

They passed a stall piled high with an array of rainbow-coloured sweets. “Want some mithai?” asked Ananth. “I’ll buy.”

Tara shook her head. “Not too hungry at the moment, but you go ahead.”

“Maybe later,” said Ananth. “Hey, let’s take a look at that.”

A crowd had gathered to watch a performance. They squeezed through to the front for a better look at the star attraction; a tall, wiry boy with close-cropped black hair and wearing patched, khaki shorts with a grayish-white shirt. Next to him was a wicker basket that could have housed a large dog. A young girl in a bright blue ghaghra-choli stood close by, gazing at the boy adoringly while he spoke.

“Come and see the greatest feat of all,” the boy warbled. “A boy in a basket.”

The crowd formed a tight circle around him. Tara and Ananth moved closer. As the crowd built up, the boy nodded. The little girl took the lid off the basket with a flourish.

“Look ladies and gentlemen, this is empty,” he said. The girl turned a full circle, showing them the basket. “In a few moments it will be full ...” He paused. “... with me!”

The crowd shifted and fidgeted. *How was he going to do that?* thought Tara. She couldn’t wait for him to get started. The girl set the basket on the ground, laid the lid next to it and moved away, grinning at the crowd. A string hung from the lid, which the boy tied to his right forefinger. Very slowly, he climbed in and sat down, legs folded against his body, parallel to his spine. His hands were wedged at his side, but his torso and head still stuck out of the basket.

“Ta-da!” he said, a cheeky smile on his face. He caught the little girl’s eye and winked. She closed both eyes in an answering wink.

The crowd snorted in disgust. “Anyone can do this,” a crusty old woman called out. “You call this a performance? You fraud! Wait till I come there. I’ll make a kebab out of you and then stuff you into the basket. The crowd can reward me instead.”

The boy sat there for a moment, quiet and confident. On that thin face, his shining eyes were the most prominent feature. Tara liked him instantly and refused to move, though the crowd, muttering and mumbling, had already started to unravel. There had to be more to this.

Calls of “fraud, liar, scoundrel” peppered the air.

“Wait!” the boy cried out. “I’m not finished.”

The crowd stopped and turned to face him again.

As they watched, he squirmed and shifted, sinking lower and lower. He rearranged his bones to fit into the small space, filling every inch of the basket. Soon his entire torso was inside, his legs and arms wrapped around it at weird angles. It seemed as if someone had stuffed body parts randomly into a basket. The crowd stood mesmerized. When the boy had everyone’s attention, he lowered his head into a small cavity that somehow still remained. The lid slid along the ground rapidly and Tara knew, somewhere in there, the boy was manipulating it. It snapped shut. Anyone walking past at this very moment would have seen a huge crowd staring at a basket!

Seconds later, clapping, whistling, and yelling erupted. A shower of coins hit the basket, which suddenly tipped over on its side. The lid flew open and the boy tumbled out; a grotesque caricature of a human crab. They watched, horrified, as he rearranged his limbs, standing tall once again. Another shower of coins landed around him.

“Shabash, wah-wah!” now filled the air.

“Thank you, thank you,” he said. He quickly gathered the coins and stuffed them into a little pouch tied around his waist, neatly hidden under his shirt. The little girl skipped around, nimbly picking up the coins and handing them to the boy.

Tara and Ananth walked up to him. “That was *amazing*,” she said. “How did you do it?”

“Oh, that.” The boy shrugged. “It’s nothing. I was born with flexible joints. The bad part is that I can’t do heavy work without an arm or a leg slipping out of its socket. Like this.”

He twisted his right arm sharply. It hung away from his body at an impossible angle. Aghast, Tara could only stare. Ananth was speechless.

“Put it back now!” she said. “Doesn’t it hurt?”

The boy pushed his arm back into the socket. It settled with audible crack. Tara shivered.

“I’m unique.” The boy winked. “Nah, it doesn’t hurt. I’ve learned to live with it.”

“That was just super, er —” said Ananth.

“Kabir,” he said. “You?”

“Ananth. And this is my sister, Tara. We’re from Morni.”

“Ramgarh,” said Kabir. “And this is my sister and wonderful helper, Sadia.”

Sadia stood beside Kabir and looked up at them shyly. Kabir pinched her cheek gently and she giggled.

“That’s a long way to travel, isn’t it?” said Tara.

“Uh-huh, but I don’t have a choice,” said Kabir. He slung the basket on his shoulder and took Sadia’s hand. “Fairs save my family from starving!”

“What d’ you mean?” said Tara.

“We don’t own land,” said Kabir, walking along with them. “Father has to beg for jobs. Not enough food to go round. So I need the fairs to earn some extra money.” He looked from one to the other. Tara stared into those grave black eyes that looked at her so directly. She had to smile. He was so open and likeable.

“We’ll see you around,” said Ananth.

Kabir nodded. “I’ll be performing some more today. Drop by again. Great crowd, isn’t it? We’re lucky. Normally there are half this many people. I’ll make good money today!”

“Yes!” said Ananth. “For the first time in three years the Ghaggar is navigable this time of year. People from Hissar and Bhiwani are coming in.”

“Good for us and good for the boatmen, too,” said Kabir. He flashed a warm smile. “I better be off. Bye.”

Sadia smiled and waved goodbye. Tara watched them melt into the crowd, hoping they would meet up again. The smells of food, sweaty people, animals, and fresh manure

swirled around them in a pungent cloud. For a moment the sunshine and gaiety filled Tara to the brim; the Ferris wheel imprinted against a blue, blue sky, the shrieks of the children flying through the air, safely ensconced in wooden seats. A day filled with the ordinary excitement of going to the fair. She was so glad she had come.

Someone bumped into her. She wheeled around. “Oops, sorry, Didi —” A small boy ran off. No one she knew.

That was all it took. The sunshine dimmed. The shouts of the children grated on her nerves. She searched the crowds again and again. Where was Suraj? He should have been here by now. He was in for a spanking for worrying her like this. Rohan, too.

“Let’s eat,” said Ananth. “I’m starving.” He made a beeline for the biryani stall just up ahead. Tara followed.

At the back of the tiny stall, large steel vessels were piled high with saffron and white rice, sprinkled liberally with nuts. A delicious fragrance of mutton cooked in yoghurt and spices perfumed the air.

“Two, please,” said Ananth.

Tara was about to protest that she wasn’t hungry, but it was too late. The vendor had already accepted payment and was measuring out the steaming biryani into dried banana-leaf cones. He handed them over, his eye already on the next customer in line. They sat under a banyan tree to enjoy their meal. Tara picked at her food while Ananth devoured his.

“If you’re not going to eat that, hand it over,” said Ananth. He burped loudly.

Tara handed over the food, glad to be rid of it. The normally tantalizing fragrance was making her sick. Suraj couldn’t still be waiting for a ride. What was keeping him? She shot a glance at Ananth, still engrossed in his meal. If she voiced her fears, he was bound to tease her yet again. *Just a little while longer*, she thought, *then I’ll start looking*. He was probably waiting in line for yet another turn or maybe he was at the merry-go-round.

They wandered through the stalls, examining the clothes and handicrafts on display. In the distance, they saw Kabir perform yet again, with his sister helping; a blur of bright blue between the onlookers. They passed a large stall piled high with silver vessels of every shape and size and Tara stopped for a moment. Soft, brown eyes stared back from the

hundreds of gleaming surfaces around her. She smoothed a wisp of hair that had escaped from her shoulder-length brown plait. Her nose-stud sparkled momentarily, catching the sun.

“If you’ve finished admiring yourself, maybe we can move to something more interesting — like that marble shop?” Ananth smirked and pulled her away. She made a wry face and followed.

The sun started to slip behind the trees and crickets heralded the approach of night. Long shadows crept between the stalls and across open spaces.

“I better go look for them, Ananth. It’s been far too long. God help Suraj if he’s gone off to do something else and forgotten about me. I had told that ... that Ferris wheel boy, whatisname, yes, Vayu, to remind him to come back to me.”

“It’s definitely been long enough,” said Ananth, frowning. “It’s not like them to disobey you.”

The words chilled Tara. Suraj might fuss, but in the end he almost always did as he was told. And Rohan mimicked Suraj.

“Hyena!” someone shrieked. “HELP!”

Tara’s heart almost stopped beating. “I was right.” She glared at Ananth. “*I was right!*”

They raced through the deepening dusk toward the towering hulks of trees that marked the forest’s edge. Toward the scream.