



Chapter Two
Noah
Sunday, 9th September 1832



"I travel on a road that has no end. I have nothing but the air I breathe, the sea, the clouds and my dreams. The country lanes are my book, my inheritance and my legacy. I am at one with fur and fowl. Each day I see beauty and magic and take none for granted. At the end of every day, I have the sunset, the lights in the sky and sweet sleep."

These words were spoken by my ancestor Juan Lautari. They were passed down from Dadro to Chickno, from father to son, generation to generation. Juan was the first of my family to live in this beautiful country. He rode along hot dusty roads on his steadfast donkey from Spain, through France and across the sea to Cornwall. He stayed a while in Devon, and then rode into Wales, where he was welcomed by farmers and villagers. He met many of our kind, and took on a new name for his new life. John Harper. Year by year he travelled the mountains and valleys and knew them like they were old friends. And so our family tree spread its roots around the counties of England and Wales.

There are many people that dislike us and chase us away in fear and anger, so we move on. Others believe we have powers of magic and seek us out. Our lives are simple and happy. Each day at sunrise we chop wood and gather crops. We live off the land, and look for work. One day is never the same as the other. The nights are warm and colourful, in front of a big fire. We play the fiddle and guitar, and dance and sing. Life is good. I thank God for it.

But enough of the History lesson for I have good news. I, Noah Harper, the most charming, loveable and honest young chavo you could meet; have news to melt your heart. I am to become engaged to a girl of our tribe in Devon. I am very happy as she is pretty and joyful and strong. We will make beautiful children together, especially if they have my magnificent looks.

This year, at the beginning of September, we started to pack the wagons for our long passage down through Wales to Devon. I was very eager to depart. I wanted to see my girl, my cariad, Clementina again. I would give her the present my family had carefully chosen for our engagement ceremony, our *Pliashka*. I knew she would be anxious to see me, as all the boys in Devon have the bodies and teeth of donkeys. I have written a song for her, and my Uncle Elijah will play it to her on his guitar, while I coo to her like a dove. It will make her both laugh with joy and cry with tears at the same time. I have great style for a young chavo of eighteen years.

On the day we were to set forth, my grandmother, the most respected Baba Sal, became thoughtful and asked to be left in peace. I paced up and down waiting. I checked the crates of chickens were tied to the wagons correctly and that the goats and donkeys were fed and

watered and well tethered. I am a warm, charming, loveable and honest young chavo, but not patient.

Baba Sal is wise and can sense the feelings of the earth and predict great events. She is a descendant of the Kalderasha, a mysterious tribe with powers to ward off evil and protect our kind. We are close, Baba Sal and me. I am her most favoured grandchild, of course, as I remind her of all her esteemed ancestors.

After five hours Baba Sal came out of her tent, and told us of a change of route. We were to go east from Machynlleth to Shrewsbury and beyond, until we found a sign. I was disappointed, but not angry, as we must respect her understanding and knowledge.

So we left Machynlleth on a sultry day in September, at Harvest time. Everyone was happy, and we sang as the sun shone. The chickens clucked in their cages, content as they ate their corn.

We arrived in Shrewsbury, a fine town. I would like have searched its streets and walked along the wide river, but Baba Sal led us on. After a mile or two she told us to turn at small lane that was narrow with many twists and turns. We stopped at a small iron bridge by a brook, to let the animals drink the clear water. The bridge was new and built by a famous Gaje, Thomas Telford. It was very fine, but I am sure we could have made a much more magnificent one if we had a mind.

In the late afternoon we passed a grand old timber manor house and shortly after this Baba Sal asked us to stop. The farm nearby was ancient and looked out over flat fields onto Caer Caradoc and the Stretton hills.

The farmer was friendly and told us we could pitch our tents behind the barns, and use them if the weather turned nasty. We could pick his crops, apples, blackberries, cabbages, cauliflowers, onions, and potatoes. We could keep what we needed for our own use, but not sell them on. We could chop the trees, and pile the logs into his barn for fuel for the winter, and use what we needed for our on fires. My Dadro, Uncle Elijah and my elder brother Isaac, were very pleased. Baba Sal had brought us to a good place.

When we turned the wagons into the fields behind the barn, I saw at once why Baba Sal had brought us here. As if in a magnificent painting by an English Gaje, in a frame of green fields and old oak trees, stood The Wrekin.

The Wrekin, a great hill, a place where folk tales grew, a timeless place of great spirits, magic and hope, looked down on our camp. It stood proud in the distance, the outline looking like a volcano, perfect in shape. I have seen many drawings and paintings of volcanoes; so I know what I am talking about. I am very clever, but I am sure that you know this to be true by now.

Baba Sal must have known of its place in this county, and its powers. I was sure that that was the reason we were here. We unpacked our tents, and set to work making the camp. Night drew in and a hearty stew was made. We sat around the big fire and played on our guitars and fiddles and the girls danced, until it was time to sleep.

I sleep apart from the others with my dog, Cobweb, because my family considers it unclean to have a dog too near the camp. I look after her and make sure she is clean and bathed. I feed her and brush her, and in return she loves me with a loyalty above any other.

We worked for Farmer Davies with pleasure, and the days were good. Sundays were our day of rest, and we did not work the land or chop wood. We are Kale, and praise God for the goodness he shows us.



On our first Sunday in Pitchford, the camp was quiet and drowsy, so I stole away for a walk with Cobweb by my side. It was a golden day, and the harvest sun flickered in the trees,

warm and inviting. I walked down to the brook and then found my path to the big house, through the woods.

I was about to turn back to the camp, when something moved and caught my eye. In the clearing I could see that a gardener had brushed the fallen leaves into a large pile, perhaps to burn, or maybe just to make the gardens look tidier. Suddenly a force whirled at the leaves at full speed. They whisked into the air, up and up, falling carelessly to the floor. In the middle of the gust was a girl, or perhaps a young lady. With great abandon she leapt and ran at the leaves kicking them high and picking them up so that they showered her like rain. The girl laughed out loud, a laugh that was light, free and musical. Her laugh was as natural as the trees, the leaves and the sun streaming through the lime trees. Her skirts spun, billowing about. She moved with the grace and charm of a young horse, not yet ready to be tamed. The smell of freshly fallen leaves and rich soil filled the air. I sat down, hidden by the trees, spellbound.

The girl was a free spirit, a sprite or, maybe a witch. Cobweb nuzzled my hand and watched with me, I remained quiet, not daring to breathe.

The girl stood to look at what she had done, and shook her hair. It came loose and fell, long, smooth and burnished over her shoulders and down her back. In an instant, she threw her cape and bonnet to the ground. For a few seconds she disappeared, and then came back with a broom. I could hear her singing as she brushed the leaves back into a pile, adding more and more from around the clearing.

I thought she had done a very good job of the brushing, and that she would make a very good wife for a Gaje man.

Finally the work was done, and she stood for a while looking at the big pile of leaves. I thought that then she would surely leave. Then a wonderful thing happened. The girl ran to the end of the clearing, but then turned and ran back with the force of a charging bull, throwing herself on top of the mountain of leaves.

The girl lay atop the pile laughing, her arms and legs swimming in the leaves. Her hair floated around her and mingled with the Autumn sun. The leaves and her hair were a mass of liquid amber, chestnut, magenta and maple. The gold overhead played between the trees casting shadows of claret copper and wine.

I was captivated, and could not move. In the distance, I heard someone call. The girl lay for a moment, and then rose to her feet with a sigh. Once more she brushed the leaves, singing to herself, cheerfully. As she walked to the edge of the clearing, I felt a longing I had never felt before. I wanted to collect her in my arms, like she had collected the leaves. I wanted to sweep her up, and never let her go. I wanted to rein her in and tame her like a young horse, and keep her for my own. I sensed another movement and a big black and white dog bounced into the newly formed pile of leaves gleefully spreading them all over the clearing.

I heard the girl call out, "Darcy?" and the dog bounded off to after her. I sat smiling, not able to leave, wishing, aching for her to return. My body sang with joy, my heart enchanted.

My life had begun.

I was in love.

Cast in a spell on a golden Autumn day.

I sighed, and felt tears stinging my eyes, and a pain weighing down my heart.

This could not be so.

For the girl was a lady, a Gaje.

And I am Noah Harper.

A gypsy.

