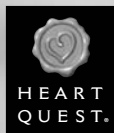




CATHERINE  
PALMER



*Romance fiction from*

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois

[www.heartquest.com](http://www.heartquest.com)

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at [www.tyndale.com](http://www.tyndale.com)

TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Tyndale's quill logo is a trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Check out the latest about HeartQuest Books at [www.heartquest.com](http://www.heartquest.com)

HeartQuest is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Copyright © 2005 by Catherine Palmer. All rights reserved.

Cover artwork copyright © 2004 by Anne Cook. All rights reserved.

Photograph of artwork copyright © 2004 by Brian MacDonald. All rights reserved.

Author's photo copyright © 2000 by Childress Studio. All rights reserved.

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

Designed by Alyssa Force

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Scripture quotations in the epigraph and author's note are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or publisher.

---

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Palmer, Catherine, date.

Sweet violet / Catherine Palmer

p. cm. — (HeartQuest) (English ivy series)

ISBN 1-4143-0071-9 (sc)

1. Arranged marriage—Fiction. 2. British—India—Fiction. 3. Missing persons—Fiction.

4. Missionaries—Fiction. 5. India—Fiction. I. Title. II. Series.

PS3566.A495S94 2005

813'.54—dc22

2004026288

---

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# ~ One ~

*Calcutta, India*

1816

“WHEN I FIRST came to Calcutta from England, I thought I should never grow accustomed to the bazaar.” Edmund Sherbourne chuckled as he and his companion, Dr. William Carey, passed a turbaned man seated on a carpet laid out on the dusty street. Surrounded by a throng of gawkers, the man played a simple tune on a reed flute. At the sound of the melody, a cobra emerged from a basket and began to sway from side to side, its hood fanning out and sending the watchers into squeals of terrified delight.

“In the village of Otley near my home, I have never seen such astounding sights or smelled such . . . interesting . . . smells,” Edmund went on. Savoring the thought of spicy grilled shish kebabs for their luncheon, the two men made their way down a narrow aisle between a jumble of booths offering for sale everything from sacks of coal to brass pots to

mounds of cauliflower, okra, cashews, and seafood. Edmund could not suppress a wry grin as they skirted a pig and five crows rooting in a rubbish heap near some vegetable stalls. “Now, however, I may state with confidence that nothing in India can ever surprise me.”

“Nothing, Edmund?” Dr. Carey’s bald head gleamed in the bright afternoon sun as he bent to drop a rupee into a tin cup held by a leper whose nose had vanished entirely. “I find I am regularly stupefied by the wonders and tragedies of India.”

“True, Calcutta is filled with an amazing variety of things to see. Yet I have come to . . . to . . .” As he spoke, Edmund’s attention fell upon a sight so unexpected, so utterly astonishing, that his tongue literally tripped over itself.

A row of sari-clad women lined the fruit sellers’ tables as they selected produce for the day’s meals. With their backs to Edmund, the ladies’ long, glistening, ebony plaits hung to their knees like oiled ropes. All but one. Centered in the midst of the pattern of thick black cords, a single golden braid coiled down the spine of a slender creature in a turquoise sari.

Her hair was golden.

As blonde as a sheaf of winter wheat! Like a shimmering cable that trimmed the most opulent of curtains, this woman’s braid formed the perfect adornment to the silken folds of her gown, the gentle slope of her shoulders, the narrow line of her waist, and the perfect curve of her hips.

“You have come to what?” Dr. Carey asked as he paused to examine a religious fresco painted on the wall of an adjoining stone house. “Have you come to view Calcutta as comfortable at last, Edmund? Will you miss it after your return to

England? You have lived in India five years. Surely you must feel somewhat at home here now.”

Edmund tore his attention from the fascinating vision of the gold braid and forced himself to focus on the painting of various Hindu gods cavorting across the fresco. Like Dr. Carey, he had become accustomed to Calcutta and the region of West Bengal through which he regularly traveled. But was it home?

He thought of the dear town of Otley in Mid-Warfedale, near the center of Yorkshire. Its quaint thatched-roof shops and cobblestone streets could hardly be compared to this steaming city rife with disease, poverty, and paganism. Otley was a quiet place where people called upon one another at teatime, walked side by side to church, and sold lacework and hot cross buns in the market.

Calcutta teemed with thieves and beggars. Street merchants hawked idols made of clay or brass. Cows wandered freely past whitewashed houses so dank their walls seemed to sweat. Burka-clad women and lungi-wearing men padded by in bare feet, while Hindu ladies in their saris . . . ladies in saris . . .

Edmund glanced back over his shoulder at the fruit stalls. Shoppers picked at the pyramids of coconuts, heaps of bananas, and mounds of papayas and mangoes while haggling over prices with the vendors. The row of long black braids appeared unchanged—and yet the gold one was gone.

Who could the woman be? A poor creature afflicted with albinism, perhaps? Edmund had seen such victims—like most others stricken with defects or diseases, they were cast out of their families and abandoned to beg on the streets. But the woman’s hair had been gold, not white. And now that

Edmund recalled the scene more clearly, he realized her arms had been stacked with brilliant glass bangles above and below her elbows. She was not a beggar. No, indeed. Her sari, in fact—

“You hail from a rather prominent family in Yorkshire, do you not?” Dr. Carey was asking. “I believe you must be greatly devoted to them.”

Deciding the heat had played tricks with his imagination, Edmund let out a breath. Surely the woman had been a mirage, nothing more.

“I confess, home to me will always be Thorne Lodge,” he told his friend. “The Sherbourne family has resided upon that great estate for many centuries. I may have mentioned that my brother Randolph recently acceded to the barony at the death of our father.”

“Is it this brother whose marriage troubles you so greatly that you are compelled to return to England?”

Edmund nodded. “Randolph has united himself to a most unacceptable young lady from a family that has endeavored to bring utter destruction upon our own. Worse—I am now informed by my brother that he and his wife anticipate the birth of their first child next spring. That the two families should share an heir is abhorrent, for ownership of the estates must certainly come into question. How Randolph was coerced into such an unhappy situation is beyond my ability to comprehend.”

“By your recent letter to me,” Dr. Carey said, “you believe this brother may be of unsound mind.”

“Indeed so. I fear it greatly.” The men turned a corner of the bazaar and entered the area where garment vendors labored—cobblers cutting sandals from water-buffalo hide,

sari sellers beading hems, jewelers hammering silver into bangles and rings.

“Our father’s demise was most unexpected and untimely,” Edmund explained. “He had been an excellent sportsman, and his death by accidental shooting seems most unlikely. Though an inquest was made, no evidence to contradict the conclusion of the coroner could be drawn. Yet, I am hard-pressed to doubt that our father fell victim to this detestable family.”

“The very family into which your brother married?” The older man’s narrow eyebrows drew into a line across his forehead. “This does seem odd. Yet, I wonder if it cannot all be explained in a letter. I understand that you have booked passage on the *Scaleby Castle* already, but may I not persuade you to reconsider resigning your post here in Calcutta? My dear young friend, will you permit me to be frank?”

“Of course, sir. I am eager to know your opinion in all these matters.” Edmund had learned of the venerable Dr. Carey’s work in India long before he felt God’s calling to journey here as a missionary. “You have given me much valuable advice during my years in this country. Indeed, I cannot think how I should have survived without your assistance.”

“Then I shall speak my mind. You and I both were sent to India by the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen. As you may know, several distinguished gentlemen and I formed that society in Kettering in 1792.”

“I was but a lad of five at the time.”

Carey laughed. “How ancient that makes me, for now we are colleagues!”

“I should very much like to remain so, sir. Your companionship has been—”

There! The flash of gold snapped the words out of Edmund’s mouth. Just three stalls down, the woman stood fingering a stack of brightly colored saris. He could see her cheek, as pink as a rose. And her eyes were—blue!

“Our companionship was born of the Holy Spirit,” Dr. Carey declared as Edmund’s speech once again faltered. “I am certain I should miss your presence here, and our society in England would be greatly bereft. Edmund, our organization was the first ever formed in England, and it now supports a good many missionaries in India, Burma, and elsewhere. If you are unhappy here, may I suggest that you take on a different region? The fields are white unto harvest, and yet the workers are few.”

“I fear this reaper is weary and poorly fitted to the task.” Disheartened at the turn of the conversation with Dr. Carey, Edmund tried to think of another topic as their path took them nearer the woman. Now he saw that she was conversing with a small Indian, whose darker skin and style of garment identified her as a member of the Untouchable caste. The blonde lady must be English and the other, her servant. Yet both wore saris. Braids. Bangles. Sandals. Alike in every way, they were yet as different as possible. How odd.

“You had hoped to preach here in Calcutta,” Dr. Carey was saying. “I do understand your disappointment in that, Edmund. I realize your original calling from God was to build a church and shepherd a body of believers in the city.”

Edmund’s heart foundered as the woman turned suddenly in the opposite direction and began to walk away. He must



know who she was. Why did she dress as an Indian? Was she the wife of one of the East India merchants? a sister of some member of a Royal regiment posted at Fort William?

“I . . . I had indeed hoped to preach in Calcutta,” Edmund mumbled as he continued to puzzle over the woman. Increasing his pace to match hers, he felt himself strangely off balance, almost as though stricken by a bout of malaria. Had the heat indeed affected him? Did he hover on the verge of madness, as did too many of his fellow Englishmen in this fevered land? Or was his discourse with Dr. Carey of such intensity that he had become disoriented? He must slow down. Concentrate. Focus.

“I believed God called me to this city,” he reminded his mentor, “but I soon learned that the East India Company would not approve of my proselytizing. I have had to travel north into Danish-occupied areas, as you did before me. Though it is now legal for us to preach in the city, I have found it is still discouraged.”

“The company is an abominable monopoly,” Dr. Carey pronounced vehemently, “just as it has been since its inception in 1600. The act of Parliament three years ago limited its powers, yet we still find it all but impossible to secure a license to preach.”

“I do understand that the Indian trade has been much reduced by the act. Indeed, merchants here claim they are gravely threatened.”

“Bah! Under the supervision of the Board of Control, the company continues to function as the de facto government of India. It rules this land with an iron fist, controlling everyone and everything within reach of its power. The company serves

only itself, suppressing even such a beneficial influence as the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Edmund’s heart contracted as he listened to this censure of the British East India Company. His entire being had been consumed with the effort of securing a permit to preach in Calcutta, and failing that, to establish small churches in the outlying regions. All to no avail. In five years of hard labor—tramping endless miles of jungle, fording snake-infested rivers, enduring heat that caused him to wonder if he were in hell itself—Edmund had not succeeded in bringing about a single conversion. Still, he could not blame the company for his failure.

“The gospel is beneficial,” Edmund stated, “but I have come to believe myself unfit to proclaim it.”

“Unfit?” Dr. Carey cried. “Nonsense! Young man, you are as accomplished a speaker as I have heard in all my life. Never have I enjoyed such bold rhetoric, such elegant discourse, or such esteemed oration as that delivered by you upon your acceptance of my invitation to preach in the church at Serampore. My dear sir, I have no doubt of God’s calling upon your life. You are willing to venture where no missionary has dared, and at the pulpit you speak with the authority of God Himself!”

Once, Edmund had believed the same of himself. Now he could hardly find the energy to open his Bible. Rather than viewing an outing to the Calcutta bazaar as an opportunity to witness to the pagans who populated its streets, he was thinking about a strange golden-haired woman in a sari. How had he come to this? Where was his direction, his ambition, his fire?

“Dr. Carey, I am downtrodden,” Edmund admitted. “All

my efforts on behalf of Christ have failed, and I cannot see that they shall succeed no matter how long I might remain in India. Why should a Hindu ever wish to accept the possibility of heaven and hell? Stay as he is, and he can look forward to an eternity of rebirths, eventually resulting in unity with God. And as for the Muslim, he already believes in Paradise and hell.”

“As you well know, Edmund, Christianity encompasses far more than belief in an afterlife. Surrender to Jesus Christ produces an abundant life. A peace which passes understanding. A faith in things hoped for and a certainty of things not seen.”

“But faith is—”

The woman suddenly stepped out from the shadows of a palm-thatched awning. Clutching a folded length of bright pink silk, she caught her breath and gaped at Edmund.

He stiffened as he jerked off his tall-crowned black hat. “Good afternoon, madam,” he said, bowing.

She blinked, and now he saw that her eyes were not blue but an alluring blue gray, like the sky before the monsoon rains. If not for her eyes, her velvety pink cheeks, and the gleam of her golden braid, the young lady would certainly pass for an Indian—and a member of the upper Brahman caste. Shimmering from head to toe in her turquoise sari, she wore so many rings that Edmund could hardly see her fingers. Bracelets encircled her arms. Heavy gold earrings studded with rubies hung from her ears, while a chain of rubies and emeralds set off her fair neck.

“*Nomoshkar*,” she addressed him. “*Shuvo oporanho. Tumi kyamon acho?*”

Edmund's fragile grasp on the Bengali language selected this moment to loosen completely. Mouth ajar and eyes agog, he stared at the woman as though he were a clumsy fish just pulled from the Hooghly River. She smiled and glanced at the smaller woman beside her. The servant shrugged as if to say that the man before them was an utter dolt.

The golden-haired creature chuckled, nudged her companion, and began to walk away.

But Dr. Carey stepped forward. "*Kichu mone korben na,*" the gentleman spoke up, excusing himself for interrupting the meeting between his companion and the lady.

Edmund, to his chagrin, suddenly understood every word, as the native language came rushing back into his head in a flood. His humiliation was utter.

The woman's brilliant smile now turned to Dr. Carey, who saluted her in impeccable Bengali. He asked after her well-being and that of her family. She replied that all were in perfect health, thank you very much, and was it not a lovely day? He assured her that it was indeed the most delightful of days. As no one who knew both parties was available to make introductions, he bade her farewell, took Edmund by the arm, and led him down the nearest alley.

"Fascinating," the missionary said.

"She is . . . she is most unusual." Edmund had located his vocal cords at last. "Quite unexpected."

"You mistake my meaning, young Edmund. It is *you* who fascinate me," Dr. Carey replied. "I believe India has managed to take you by surprise after all."

Edmund cleared his throat. "I confess you are correct. But did you not think the lady most unusual?"

“Lovely, actually. Edmund, admit it—you were instantly smitten by her.”

“Nonsense. I was merely taken aback.”

Dr. Carey laughed. “I surmise you are in want of a wife, my young friend, for I have never seen a man so captivated by a pretty girl. From the moment she stepped out into the street, you were hopelessly enamored.”

“Upon my word, sir, you are mistaken. Her manner of dress and speech stunned me momentarily. Can she be English?”

“Of course she is. She is likely the wife of some merchant, and she has adopted native ways. Such transformations are not uncommon here, though I was surprised at her fluency with the language. Perhaps she is a merchant’s daughter and was brought up in India.”

“Doubtful, for English children usually are sent back to their homeland for education and left in the charge of boarding schools and relatives. I cannot say I have met an English child above ten years of age in Calcutta.”

“True, and so she must be someone’s wife or sister,” Dr. Carey acknowledged. “At any rate, when you arrive in England, you must ask your brother to attach you to some reputable young lady at once. Make certain she is sturdy, healthy, and a stalwart Christian. And then you may return to India better able to conquer the demons that beset you.”

“Sir, I assure you I have no intention of ever marrying. I am wholly committed to Christ and to my labors as a minister—whether in India or in England. I cannot speak more plainly on this matter.”

Nearing the shish-kebab vendors, Edmund drank down the steadying aroma of spicy meat. Realization filled him as surely

as the fragrant smoke that tickled his nostrils. He had been hungry—that was all. The entire reason for his discomfort and confusion had been his empty stomach and light head. With a good meal under his belt, all would be well.

“I have testified to you in the past,” he told Dr. Carey, “that I was devoted to my own pleasure during my tenure at university. As an accomplished swordsman, I competed often in fencing tournaments, and I won many prizes. This aptitude with the sword, I discovered, brought me great admiration from ladies, and I cultivated their attention toward the end of gratifying myself. Realizing that my visage and form were considered manly, I flattered myself into thinking I was handsome, bold, and witty. And I confess that I pursued the singular objective of becoming the favorite bachelor among my female society in London.”

“I am certain the young lady we just encountered thought you admirable,” Dr. Carey answered. “Her eyes sparkled at the very sight of your masculine physique.”

Edmund could not contain a chuckle. “Indeed, sir. But perhaps her sparkle was meant for you.”

“Bosh. I am twice her age and happily settled with my dear wife. But what of marriage for you, Edmund? I believe the companionship would be of benefit.”

“Dr. Carey, I am steadfastly set upon my course. The experiences of my past and my subsequent surrender to Christ have altered me completely. I am no longer a carefree youth. My entire attention is taken up with the pursuit of theological enlightenment. I have abandoned the company of women, the diversion of sport, and even the congenial gatherings of family and friends. I find I no longer have any need of such

shallow occupations. My greatest joy is reading the Bible. My most beloved occupation is preaching the gospel, and I never allow my discourse to wander far from matters of doctrinal import.”

“How deadly dull!” Dr. Carey exclaimed.

Edmund turned to him in surprise. “But surely you are no different, sir. I know you too well to believe otherwise.”

“Then you know little of me. I take great pleasure in my wife and my children. I am fascinated with botany, printing presses, the study of language, and any number of activities beyond the theological realm. Indeed, at times I find myself hard-pressed to turn my attention to sermon preparation. Life holds many wondrous things, Edmund. The Bible teaches us that ‘every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.’”

As they joined a queue forming at one of the grills, Edmund reflected on the blue-eyed woman whose golden braid had so allured him. “I cannot allow fleshly pursuits to absorb me,” he told Dr. Carey. “The verses preceding that which you quoted me from the book of James state that ‘every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.’ I dare not permit a woman—or any other temptation—to enter my life, sir.”

Dr. Carey nodded soberly. “You are young . . . and good . . . and I shall miss your zeal at our mission meetings, my dear friend.”

“Thank you, sir.” Edmund paid for his shish kebab and

joined the elder man in a brief word of prayer. As Dr. Carey tugged off a bite of chicken, Edmund wondered what had become of the golden-haired woman. She had vanished, it seemed, just as the bazaar, Calcutta, and India would one day soon disappear from his life. Perhaps he would miss the surprises of this land more than he imagined.



“Come now, Moumita. You must do as I say, or I shall sack you at once.” Violet Rosse crossed her arms and looked daggers at her *ayah*, who stood across the bedroom and glared back. Using the mixture of English and Bengali that the two had always spoken, the younger woman continued. “You are in my employ, and if you refuse to obey me, I shall have you cast out into the street with the other Untouchables. You will have created such a bad *kharma* for yourself that you will thank the gods to have even one grain of rice to eat.”

“Oh, you are wicked.” Moumita’s lips tightened. “Did I raise you to be so evil? *Na*, I taught you every good thing! I loved you and cared for you as though you were my own daughter. And now you threaten me with such a terrible fate?”

Violet swallowed hard at the severity of her *ayah*’s criticism. She could not deny its validity. When Violet was only six, her mother had died of cholera, but the loss was hardly felt. Mrs. Rosse had preferred the wives of merchants in the East India Company to the companionship of her only child—a little girl with golden ringlets and a penchant for making mud pies in the garden.

Moumita Choudhary, a young, childless Hindu widow of



the lowest caste, had been hired as an *ayah*. Her only assignment was to look after the child and to keep her as English as possible—though Moumita had confessed she was not quite certain what that meant. It hardly mattered, for Violet felt sure she could not have had a better mother.

But now was not the time for sentimentality. This very evening in her bedroom overlooking the Hooghly River, Violet had made her decision. She would not turn back.

“If you will not come to Krishnangar with me, Moumita,” she said, “I shall go alone.”

“*Dushtu meye!*” Moumita stepped forward, hand raised. “Such a naughty daughter!”

Violet stood in stony defiance. “You may not strike me, Moumita. I am a woman now, and I shall chart the course of my own life. I need no one—not even you. I shall go wherever I please and do whatever I wish.”

“But you cannot go out into Calcutta at night. Would you risk your very life?”

Violet reflected for a moment on the sprawling city beyond the wall that surrounded the Rosse compound. Three miles long and one mile broad, Calcutta was populated by more than two hundred thousand souls. Though it housed Fort William, a public jail, a general hospital, and other bastions of civilization, the city was a cauldron of every vice known to man.

“Do you suppose I cannot defend myself?” Violet retorted. “I am strong and resourceful, and my wit is the match of any man’s. I shall go—no matter what the danger.”

“But your destiny has been decided already.” Moumita shook her head. “Ah, *meye*. Your father has planned a good future for you. In England, you will marry a rich man. What

better life could a woman expect? By rebelling against him, you create a bad fate for yourself. Do you wish to bring about this kind of *kharma*? Certainly not! Then think good thoughts and be grateful to Sahib Rosse. At least in England, if your husband dies, you will not have to make the choice to burn alive on his funeral pyre or be separated from your family and village forever.”

“*Na*, Moumita—I do not want a husband. Never.” As she spoke the words, a memory flitted through Violet’s mind. A tall man bowed before her . . . the English gentleman in the bazaar . . . so handsome . . . regal . . . proper. If ever she had wished for a husband, it might be for someone like him. A man strong enough to protect her, yet humble enough to respect and honor her. A man with green eyes and a manly bearing and soft brown hair.

But of course, anyone Violet would marry must love India and speak perfect Bengali—and with that fellow’s silly black hat and fumbling speech, he could never meet her expectations. She dismissed him from her thoughts.

“Moumita, I have no interest in any man, nor do I ever plan to marry. I have important work to do.”

“Silly flowers!”

“Whether you approve or not, the study of botany is my occupation, and orchids my specialty. Dr. Wallich has committed himself to teaching me all he knows of the science of hybridization. He has amassed a collection of *Cymbidiums* and *Dendrobiums* that demands careful identification, Moumita, and he needs my assistance. You know very well that I have labored many hours over the catalogue at the Royal Botanic Garden—”

“It is the lot of every woman to marry, *meye*,” Moumita cut in, shaking her forefinger from side to side. “Women are not to study flowers. We are to marry and bear as many children as possible. If the gods are willing, the man your father has chosen will be good to you. At least in England, you will never have to fear drowning in the monsoon floods.”

Violet’s shoulders sagged. How could she ever explain herself to this simple woman who loved her so dearly? “I cannot go to England,” she said. “They have winter there.”

“Winter is good. In winter, you cannot become ill from cholera or typhus or malaria.”

“But flowers cannot grow in winter. They die—as I shall die if I am forced to leave India.”

“You have no choice in this, *meye*. Your father’s mind is settled. If you can be obedient to him now, you will bring good *kharma* for yourself—a kind husband, healthy children, and a large house. One day, if you behave properly, perhaps your soul will be reborn into a higher form. Maybe you will even get to live in India again.”

As Violet gazed at the intense little woman before her, she struggled against the tears that had threatened all evening. At dinner with several guests present, her father had announced his intention to send her to England to a young ladies’ finishing school. Following completion of her course of study, Violet would marry his colleague, a tradesman named Alfred Cunliffe.

The guests, who even now lounged with Malcolm Rosse in the sitting room below, had heard every word. Violet knew her father would never retract anything he had said in public. Her lot was cast—unless she took charge of her own life. Which was exactly what she intended to do.

“Moumita, you cannot predict my future,” she said. “All my life, I have tried to be good, just as you instructed me. I have done my best to keep my thoughts pure and never to harm or kill any living thing. I learned everything my tutors taught and more. And I have been kind to everyone. Nearly everyone.”

The older woman gave a hoot of derision. “How many times have you run away from me to explore the bazaars? Always, you used to climb over the walls to play with Untouchable children on the banks of the Hooghly. You refused to let me comb your hair. You would not eat your cabbage. You have been a very naughty girl!”

Violet pursed her lips. It was true. She had shouted at the gardener for uprooting and discarding the first orchid she ever planted—a fragile bloom she had buried deep in the heavy, black dirt of the *mali*’s carefully tended beds. She had stolen jasmine blossoms from the neighbor’s yard and sweets from a vendor’s cart and books from her father’s library.

Not only had she behaved badly. Malevolent thoughts had often filled her mind when she reflected on bossy Moumita, or her hookah-puffing father, or the cook who forced her to eat the dry spiced cabbage known as *gobi bhaji*, which she despised. And with great venom she had regarded the gatekeeper who always chased her when she climbed over the whitewashed wall that kept Calcutta’s unwashed, diseased, and starving throngs from Malcolm Rosse’s opulent house and impeccable gardens.

“Even now,” Moumita said, “you are a young lady, and still you are a great disappointment and an annoyance to everyone around you. Every day you go to the Royal Botanic Garden to help that man—”

“Dr. Nathaniel Wallich. We are cataloging species of Asian flora.”

“Yes, and the bamboo cages filled with your orchids hang from nearly every tree in the garden outside this house. The *mali* is most unhappy with you. Now you are refusing to obey your father and go to England to get married. If the gods are keeping a tally—and they most certainly are!—your wickedness must surely equal your virtue. *Meye*, I fear you will be reborn as an ant to be stepped on by some low-caste leper in the bazaar!”

“Death would be better than the destiny my father has prepared for me!” Violet cried. “England is a cold and rainy place. It is nothing but moors.”

Moumita’s eyes narrowed. “What is a moor?”

“Something terrible, I believe, for I have read that there are no orchids in all that place. Moumita, I must flee for my life. Can you not understand?”

“Flee for your life? You will not die in England. Many people live there, and they are healthy. Look at all those fat merchants who sail their East India ships here from that country—do they look ill to you?”

“But those men are not like me. They were born in England. Though I look and speak like an Englishwoman, Moumita, I am not. I am Indian!”

“How can you say such a thing?” The pitch of the *ayah*’s voice rose. “Have I not done my duty to keep you a British girl? Do we not speak English together constantly? Do I not try to curl and pin your hair on top of your head like the women in those books in your father’s library? Have I not made you read to me all the stories of the English gods and goddesses? The tale of the red-hooded child who was nearly

eaten by a wolf, the story of the woman who pricked her finger with a spindle and slept for one hundred years, the account of the poor Untouchable girl who was given a shoe made of glass. Do you not remember? All seemed hopeless for her, but suddenly a goddess came and transformed a pumpkin into a fine rickshaw!”

“That was not a goddess. It was a fairy godmother.”

“And what is that?”

“How should I know, Moumita? I know no more about England than you.” Violet picked up the two bags she had packed for her journey. “Of course we read the English stories together. But you also told me the saga of Rama and Sita, and the tale of Ganesha, whose head was chopped off and replaced with that of an elephant, and the story of Hanuman, who is half man and half monkey—”

“But I taught you to be English!”

“I *am* English, Moumita. You did your job well. I am also Indian. I love the Ganges and the Hooghly rivers, the old men with their teeth stained red from chewing betel nut, the temples filled with oil lamps and flowers. I love the smell of spices in the bazaar—cinnamon, cardamom, turmeric, ginger, coriander, curry. I wake each morning to the muezzins calling from the minarets of Calcutta’s mosques, bidding worshipers to bow before Allah. How shall I live in a land with no sugarcane? no curry? no mangoes? Moumita, how shall I live without orchids?”

The older woman brushed a finger over Violet’s damp cheek and nodded. “You are right, *meye*. I am not able to think of forcing you to live in such a place as England. But where can you escape from your father? Who will help you?”

Violet lowered her voice. “I have heard of an Englishman who lives up the Hooghly in Serampore. His work is to translate texts from English and Latin into Bengali, and he has a strong knowledge of botany. Dr. Wallich told me that he is the one who edited and published Dr. William Roxburgh’s *Hortus Bengalensis*, which was the first catalogue of plants growing in the Royal Botanic Garden.”

“He works for the East India Company like Dr. Wallich?”

“I do not know his employer, but I understand he is much involved with Dr. Wallich’s research. It was they who arranged the plants and shrubs into twenty-three classes: Monandria to Polygamia. In fact, this Englishman is even now preparing the manuscript of Roxburgh’s *Flora Indica* for publication on his own printing press.”

“*Bas*,” Moumita said, holding up her hand to stop the flow of words. She had little patience for Violet’s passionate interest in botany. “Do you think this man at Serampore can help you?”

“I am hopeful he will agree to act as my liaison, transporting to Dr. Wallich the specimens I collect. And after I visit with him and secure his cooperation, I shall travel the road to Krishnangar alone.”

Moumita snorted in annoyance. “Then I must go with you on this foolish journey. And when your father catches up to you—which he will—then I shall be cast back into the street from which I came.” She sighed. “Better that I should have burned on my husband’s funeral pyre than face such a destiny as this.”

“Oh, Moumita.” Violet dropped her bags, threw her arms around the older woman, and drank in the scent of coconut

oil that anointed the long black braid running down her dear *ayah's* back. Rose water fragranced Moumita's soft brown skin, and her breath smelled of the sweet aniseed she loved to chew.

"I shall never allow anything bad to happen to you," Violet said. "Please believe me. I shall always look after you and see that you are cared for."

"Perhaps in my next life I shall be born a cow for all the trouble you have caused me. Then I can wander the streets of Calcutta with no one to bother me." She shrugged and shook her head. "But if I am reborn as a cow, it is more likely that I shall be owned by a Muslim and get eaten straightaway."

Laughing in spite of herself, Violet shouldered her bags once again and stepped to the door. "Maybe you will be lucky and be reborn a pig. Then the Muslims would never even touch you."

Moumita pulled the loose end of her sari from her shoulder and wrapped it over her head. "*Na*, I shall be rolled into meatballs," she sighed. "Fried and eaten with cauliflower."

"Shh," Violet whispered. Glancing behind to make certain her *ayah* was following, she slipped out into the hallway and crept down the stone staircase. The two women tiptoed to a wooden lattice that screened the front room of the house, and Violet peered through the leaves of the philodendron vine that wound through it.

Near one of the sprawling tufted couches that littered the room stood Malcolm Rosse, smoking his hookah and holding forth on some topic of interest only to himself. No doubt her father was discussing the latest schemes of the East India Company, as he always did when guests came to dinner.



As she took a fortifying breath, Violet spotted a rounded clay pot near the screen. *Cymbidium eburneum*. Standing nearly two feet tall, the green-leafed orchid plant that rose from the pot bore three large white blossoms on a long, arching stem. Each stunningly perfect flower must have measured more than four inches in diameter, and she reached down to touch the petals as though the orchid were a precious child.

“I brought this *Cymbidium* in from our garden this morning,” she whispered to Moumita. “Smell it. It is like fruit, I think—mango, perhaps, or apricot.”

As her *ayah* obediently bent to sniff, Violet thought of the fate to which her father had sentenced her. This orchid could never grow in Yorkshire. In such a place it would most surely perish.

Taking Moumita’s hand, she motioned toward the door. They had a long night’s journey ahead.