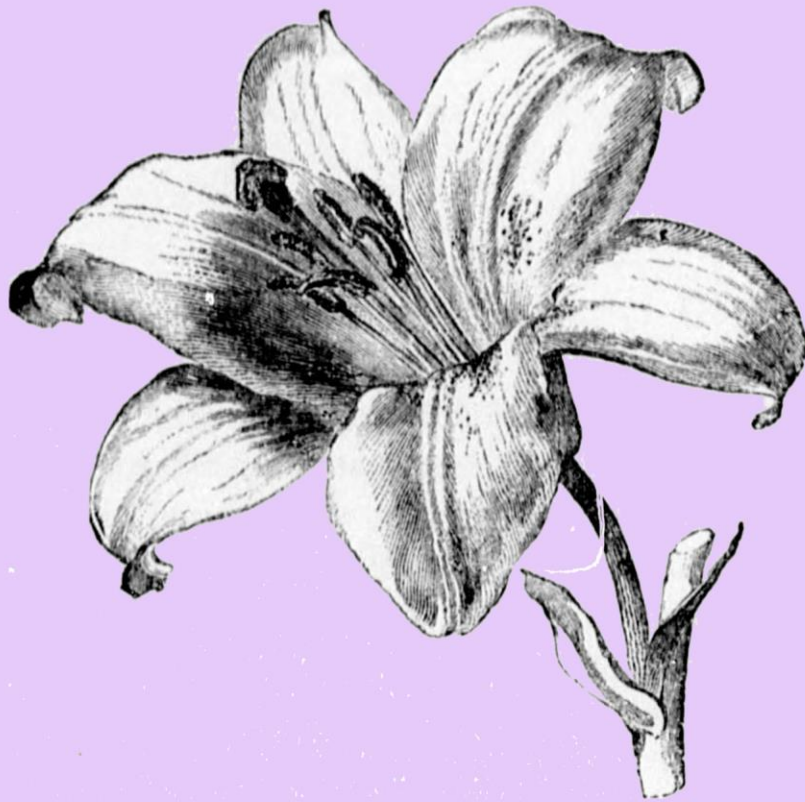


The Red Palace



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Chapter One

Prince Badar Ali stepped onto his balcony of marble and red sandstone and gazed out over the distant plains he had yearned to see for so many years. As he stood in the place where he had spent idle hours of his youth daydreaming, a background feeling rushed forward and filled him with sudden awareness. Before the Rana had sent him to study in far-off England, he had not realized how much pleasure he took from knowing the soaring Himalayas were at his back. He felt their comfort now, solid and confident. He let his mind's eye roam among the majestic snowcaps, the sacred source of the five rivers flowing through the fertile plains of the Punjab spreading far and wide to the horizon. He sent his sacred mountains a prayer for strength and wisdom.

He breathed in. The air, released from the suffocating heat of the day, carried now only the scents of hibiscus and frangipani and jasmine from the palace's many gardens. The sound of water trickling in his personal fountain a few feet away mingled with the fluttery gust of a sudden flight of a flock of geese overhead, jackals snarling and quarreling in the distance, and parrots and paddy birds and ring-doves calling and cooing as they bedded down in their trees for the night. He watched the dusty purple of dusk shade into the amethyst of twilight then deepen into the indigo of sunset. This was the magical moment before the great arc of the night wheeled its burden of stars slowly above. It was the fraction of an ecstatic second between daylight and nightlight, when a *houri* ' virgin of Paradise' could slip through the heavenly gauze to dance on the ground and beckon a *djinni* 'genie' to join her.

He glanced down into the darkness. The palace wall dropped one hundred feet to meet the scrub at the edge of a thicket in the midst of which wandered a hidden stream. In that half-second he caught the flash of a figure, lithe and surely lovely, flit past the scrub and steal into the thicket. The next second stars spangled the sky, the sickle moon was flung high, and all houris fled, leaving the capricious djinnis to pester or to bless poor earthlings, as they pleased.

What had he just seen? He entertained fanciful possibilities until his

education of the last ten years broke through his thoughts like a thundering phalanx of British cavalry. They bore him the terse and sober message: *Apply the scientific method.*

What had his professor at Cambridge once said? “Man’s natural tendency is to start from a conclusion and work backward to confirm his assumption. But the scientific method drives down the wrong side of the road by starting with the assumption and then making every effort to disconfirm it.” So. Westerners had once believed that meat left outside long enough would spontaneously generate new life in the form of maggots and flies. Then a clever Italian chap tested the idea by placing meat and eggs in both sealed and unsealed containers. When he checked back to compare the two conditions, he saw the sealed containers had not spontaneously generated life. Next was tested the assumption that forgotten piles of dirty rags would turn into mice and, lo and behold, Westerners began to change their perceptions of the world. Armed with their new experimental prowess they set out to harness the rest of the world.

Ask a question; construct a hypothesis resulting in a prediction; test the prediction; draw a conclusion. The scientific method.

The obvious question was: Did houris exist? However, if he predicted Yes, he could never test the hypothesis because if they had the qualities the great religious scholar Bayazid claimed for them, they would never let themselves be caught. So he needed a new question. He stood there long enough in contemplation, his gaze focused on the darkness below, to chance to see the same form flit back the way she had come. Or was what he saw and heard merely the scuttle of a nocturnal animal? Nevertheless, the quick scurry prompted the question: Could a human being – and a female, no less, or perhaps a boy – come and go from such a well-guarded palace, unattended and under cover of night? From this question materialized another: Is the palace well-guarded?

He hypothesized that, Yes, it is possible for a human being to come and go from the *Laal Mahal* ‘Red Palace’ at will and, No, the palace is not well-guarded. The next questions were Who is this Earthly Houris? and How does she make her escape?

When he had been in England, he had longed for his return to India.

However, he had not relished the labor awaiting him after ten years away and the duties to be thrust upon him in the face of his father's declining health. Nevertheless, over the next few days, as he reacquainted himself with the workings of the Laal Mahal, his hypothesis and its attendant questions acted like a mental spur stimulating him to seek information.

The next day he had the Head of the Guards sit with a scribe and write down the hours and duties and posts of the various soldiers who kept the watch. If there were a spy in his court – this woman or boy who came and went – it was best he keep his suspicions to himself. Although he had maintained a regular correspondence over the years with his father's chief minister, Koda Des, he still could not know yet which way the political winds really blew through this grand pile of sandstone with its planless maze of rooms and corridors.

He kept his watch, too, on his balcony every night at the magical moment when the houris danced, and he marked the days on the Western calendar he had brought with him. On the fourth night he saw a figure trace the same route she had taken on the first evening of his arrival then came another sighting four nights later, thereby establishing a pattern. Four nights after that he took his inquiry into the field and hid himself behind a clump of trees not too far from the path taken three times already by the Earthly Houris.

And she was a woman. He could tell from her form and her movements when she passed not far from him, completely unaware of his presence. Beyond her outlines he could discern nothing of her features or the exact shape of her figure because she was enfolded in a long robe with a hood and belted at the waist. He knew what his father would have done with her. He would have had her arrested and likely executed. However, his father would never have discovered her, because Badar Ali's balcony was the only one with the view of the Earthly Houris's path, and his father would have never crouched and watched and discovered anything by observation. If she were a danger to the palace, Badar Ali would discover it, which meant he needed to find out what she did in the thicket.

So he followed her and had his answer. She went to bathe.

Odd, but not terribly dangerous. She did not seem to be a spy because she did

not meet anyone, just rinsed herself off in the stream. He was too far away from her, and it was too dark in the thicket to see her features or enjoy the sight of her nudity, but he was sure her activities included nothing beyond washing skin with water. He could think of no reason why a woman would not wash herself in the *hammam* 'bath' in the *Zenana* 'women's quarters.' Could it be modesty? Or did she have something to hide? A deformity? When she returned along her path he caught a glimpse of her calves. Her skin was white, like that of a *hour*i – or a Persian.

He opened a new line of investigation. His return to India had coincided with the Sepoy Rebellion that had broken out to the east in Meerut then spread to Delhi and Lucknow. His state was thankfully far to the west and not under the control of the East India Company, so the brutal massacres of British men, women and children had not spread to infect his peaceful principality. However, given the rebellion, a new idea had come to him concerning his Earthly Hour*i*, and he was now scouring with fascination otherwise tedious reports of the comings and goings of every caravan in the region, engrossed by any detail that might explain how a foreign woman – perhaps an *Angrezi-bai* 'Englishwoman' – came to be in the Laal Mahal.

He could not pose a question about a specific woman to any man in the palace. Nor could he ask Yasmina, the woman he had chosen from the ones who had been presented to him upon his return. But surely the women in the *Zenana* knew she was there and who she was – or at least some women must. It was a puzzle, so he dug in and pieced together the strengths and weaknesses both in the *mofussil* 'the countryside' and in the sometimes-treacherous palace. What was more, he was able to assemble a strange but plausible story about his Earthly Hour*i*.

He asked for a private audience with his father, which meant they would not meet in the open-air pillared and arched pavilion in the first courtyard. Instead he went to the Rana's receiving room where the floor was strewn with Persian rugs and brocade cushions, the walls were hung with shot silk, and the low tables scattered throughout were carved from sandalwood and inlaid with ivory. The chamber was redolent of roses and orange blossoms and vanilla tobacco. Split cane blinds had been lowered to filter the mid-afternoon scorch.

His father was reclining on a magnificent divan, equally magnificently robed and wearing a turban studded with a large emerald. Rubies graced his fingers. The size of the jewels served to emphasize his bulk and seemed to further weigh him down. He had become quite stout and indolent, overindulgence being a hazardous if commonplace temptation for someone of his rank. His son, with all due British public school discipline, planned to avoid it.

Badar Ali chose his cushion, and the audience began predictably enough with Badar Ali doing most of the talking, his father doing most of the smoking, with the bubble of the hookah punctuating the conversation. The heir apparent outlined the state of the realm with efficiency, leaving out details sure to distract his less than enthusiastic sire.

The Rana was so immune to distressing news that he dismissed the whole of his son's well-researched remarks on the *sepoy* 'infantry' rebellion rocking India with a negligent hand and the terse and arguably true statement, "The British deserved what they received."

"It is surely the end of Company rule in India," was Badar Ali's assessment, and since he was at the end of his recital he let a pause fall, requiring his father to rouse himself enough to say,

"An energetic report, my son, I thank you." It did not sound wholly like a compliment nor did it carry much heartfelt gratitude.

Talk turned to palace gossip, amusing anecdotes about Badar Ali's time in *Belait* 'England,' the Rana's health, and finally his mistresses. Here Badar Ali sighed meaningfully.

After taking a long, thoughtful draw on the hookah the Rana asked, "You do not care to speak forthrightly with me, my son? I had rather thought you had found the way of it until this point."

Thus encouraged he said baldly, "I want access to more women."

The Rana bent his head a fraction in acknowledgement of his son's statement. It was a direct challenge and, although lazy and self-absorbed, the Rana was not yet ready to cede the final keys to his kingdom by giving his son free rein in the *serail* 'harem.'

Badar Ali knew this and had already set his course. He was comfortable to let his words hover, threatening and forceful. He allowed the Rana time to consider his response, all the while knowing his father was imagining and discarding at least three if not four ways he could put a period to Badar Ali's existence. He had an heir to spare, after all, in nine-year-old Laiju, the son of his now-deceased second wife.

Badar Ali extended the silence in order to give the Rana time for his thoughts to travel onward and to fear the same ways his son could easily organize his father's last breath. The Rana might have known a moment of pause, a second-guessing of his decision to send his son to school in Belait to learn how the Angrezis thought. Then again, as Badar Ali knew well, it had not been the Rana's idea but rather that of Koda Des, and the Rana had only endorsed the wisdom of it. Perhaps he was considering that his son had learned too well the crafty ways of the men of the East India Company who had once brought large swaths of India under Company rule.

After a sufficient time, Badar Ali added, "But not all of the women."

The Rana inclined his head, perhaps in acknowledgement of his son's finesse. His slight shift on the divan was the only sign to suggest he might have been relieved.

Chapter Two

Badar Ali had enlisted the help of Gita, his old nurse who was like a mother to him, his own having died in childbirth. Gita had been able to discover that a foreign woman was currently hidden in the Zenana, having negotiated a remarkable deal with the Rana's three favorites.

This hefty nugget of information meant that Badar Ali was likely on the hunt for a Mrs. Elizabeth Wilkins, whose husband had been killed in an ambush hardly six weeks earlier on the long journey from Bombay to Rawalpindi. There Charles Wilkins was to have taken a post as a clerk and historian in the East India Company, more familiarly known as John Company. Official accounts of the massacre conflicted on the point whether Wilkins was traveling with his wife and whether she was found among the dead bodies. Her account would surely be the stuff of memoirs if she, like her late husband, had a talent for writing. Resourceful she surely was. She

seemed to have survived what by all measures was a savage attack and then found refuge in the women's quarters of a Rana's palace with no man being the wiser – surely the safest place in India for an Englishwoman at the moment. Her tale would be the stuff of fairy stories. Perhaps she was, indeed, an Earthly Hourii.

But even such a quasi-magical creature was subject to the gravity of palace politics, and Gita had given voice to the question – knowing the capricious and often cruel natures of the Rana's favorites – just how long it would be before the Three Scorpions, ahem, Beauties would tire of whatever game they were playing and end it in time-honored palace tradition: by tossing Mrs. Wilkins over one of the walls.

Badar Ali put his plan in place.

His visit to the serail in the women's quarters had been announced two days in advance, but still when he appeared, with Gita at this side, he felt the air ripple with what seemed flutters of surprise. Some seventy women, whether standing or reclining, managed the contradictory feats of both stirring in agitation and remaining immobile and of both glancing at him and keeping their eyes properly downcast. His instructions had preceded him. The women who were reclining immediately stood up and found their places in a line, arranged according to rank, running the perimeter of the luminous blue-tiled main room of the Zenana. The women were not naked, as they might have expected to be, but were all, per his instructions, wearing a robe that brushed mid-calf and closed with a belt. The colors ranged from peacock to canary to sunset. Their hair was bound away in scarves of apricot, aquamarine or grape. The air was sweet with coconut oil and almond oil and spicy with patchouli.

He sought first Yasmina. A quick count put her fifteenth in line. He would start with her, meaning that he would not poach on the fourteen who preceded her and who may be considered the Rana's favorites.

"Your hand," he said to Yasmina, holding out his palm. Then, "Look up."

She put her hand in his and raised sensuous sloe eyes to meet his gaze. He nodded then dropped her hand and stepped in front of the next woman with the same instructions. So he went, woman by woman, holding her hand and looking into her eyes. Toward the tail end of the line, a woman put a slim dark hand into his and

hesitated before she looked up. Her eyes, in a face as dark as her hands, were crystal blue. He betrayed no more interest in her than his customary nod and moved on to the next woman. When he came to the end of the line he turned to face the group, bowed once low and left the room with Gita.

That afternoon, after the worst of the heat had broken, he repaired to the room he had dubbed in English his Exchequer. The past few weeks had not been long enough to tame the riot of curling foolscap littering the massive rosewood desk. He did not look up when Gita brought the woman he had identified as Mrs. Wilkins into the room and led her to a Mughal rug positioned five feet to his left of the front of his desk. Gita pushed Mrs. Wilkins down so that her legs buckled and was seated on her left hip, with her legs tucked. He did not look at her when Gita removed the robe to reveal Mrs. Wilkins' nakedness, but he could see out of the corner of his eye that her skin had been washed of the dark nut brown stain that would have made her unappealing to the Rana. Her blonde hair, rinsed of the henna dye dulling it, was unbound and flowing down her back. He knew the Angrezi-log called the color 'guinea gold.'

Gita must have told her what was in store for her. Still Mrs. Wilkins was unprepared enough for her disrobing to emit an audible gasp, and out of the corner of his eye he saw her reach out to snatch back the robe. But Gita was too fast for her and left the room to retire to a chair in the antechamber to his left where she would remain until he called for her.

He had arranged the rug so he could see Mrs. Wilkins in his peripheral vision without having to look up from his work. When she recovered from her shock, she turned so that her back was to him. He snapped his fingers once. Gita came into the room and put her into position. Gita left. A few seconds later, Mrs. Wilkins lay down on her stomach. Again he snapped his fingers once, and Gita did her part. On it went for quite some time with Mrs. Wilkins finding ways to hide herself – the British had stamina, he would grant them that – until she finally settled into the position he desired and became frozen in it. He continued to work calmly. Barely audible above the scritch-scratch of his pen were her tiny gulps of air, as if she were swallowing

sobs.

He did not look directly at her once. Nevertheless, he had a fair idea of her loveliness, and he found that her presence cut the otherwise dreariness of his work to laughably low degrees. He even imagined looking forward to the most routine of his tasks when accompanied by his pretty naked pet. Her opinion of the arrangement did not much concern him, but he had a fair idea she thought him the lowest of the low – savage, barbarian, uncouth, uncivilized, *native*. He had an equally good idea about her feelings. Although she seemed to be holding her breath, her quivering embarrassment, outrage, fear and indignation were pouring off of her in perceptible waves.

Mid-way through the session Koda Des, working in the antechamber to the right of Badar Ali, asked if the prince was ready to hear legal cases. This doorway to the Exchequer was filled with a screen of lacy marble, porous enough for sound to penetrate but ornate enough to prevent any gazes from falling on Mrs. Wilkins. Badar Ali put down his pen, turned to the right, with his back to his naked captive, and said Yes. For the next two and a half hours he adjudicated the usual human folly involving quarrels over land rights and water rights and elephant path rights, dowry disputes, market stall rivalries, the search for who to blame for dead livestock, one strange case of arson, two involving drunken brawls, and a petty grievance nursed to epic proportions over generations with both sides claiming its importance to be second only to the greatest battle in the *Mahabharata*.

When he'd had enough he stood up and announced that any unheard cases would be taken up the next week. He snapped his fingers twice, bringing Gita out of the antechamber to the left. With his back still turned away from Mrs. Wilkins, he headed for the antechamber to his right.

Chapter Three

Elizabeth was rigid with emotional shock and limbs stiff from immobility. Thus, when Gita came to help her up and to enfold her in her robe, she rose awkwardly. Her emotions had slashed wildly in impotent rage for so long that her interior state had eventually been overwhelmed and became as numb as her body.

Once standing, it was all she could do to put one foot in front of the next. She was led, bewildered, through a honeycomb of corridors and antechambers to arrive back at the private room she had been taken to an hour after the prince's visit to the women's quarters that morning. Gita left her at the threshold saying something to the effect that food would be brought to her.

She looked around blindly and registered little beyond the low bed with its cascade of pillows into which she immediately burrowed herself, curling up like a hedgehog. Holding herself in a tight ball she attempted to bind the wounds of her lacerated emotions, to soothe the burn of her humiliation, to search for a way to gather together the fibers of her being that had been bruised, battered and beaten to near extinction in the past few weeks.

This effort of self-comfort lasted until the moment a new fear struck her. She shot bolt upright, clutching her heart. Would the prince, now that he had stripped her of her dignity, come to rob her of her virtue? She would not let him see her cower. If in the previous minute she had been emotionally drained, she was now back on alert.

She stood up and decided to take stock of her surroundings, to orient herself within the palace. She knew from the outside that the main bulk of the fortress was a fantastic jumble of walls, battlements and wooden balconies, fretted windows, airy turrets, carved galleries and majestic pavilions. From the inside she knew only the women's quarters with its harem and rabbit warren of chambers and alcoves. These were separated, on the one side, by pierced wooden screens adjacent to the Hall of Audience and, on the other, by a garden full of fruit trees and roses, tame gazelles and strutting peacocks, gracing the entrance to the Queen's rooms.

She knew from the way the light moved through the women's quarters during the day that they were nestled in a part of the west wing. She guessed the Rana's family occupied the rest of that wing. She also knew the secret passages leading to a trap door to the exterior through which the lovers of bored concubines came and went, eluding lazy guards, but she did not know Badar Ali's balcony was the only break in the bleak mass of the western wall.

The room she now occupied was like others she had seen, in that it was small

- hardly ten feet by ten feet - and elegantly furnished with a comfortable bed, piles of velvet pillows and cushions, a low table inlaid with silver and thick rugs underfoot. There the similarities ended. Her room boasted the marvel of one small window whose graceful arch was carved in a charming trefoil pattern and whose magnificent view of the countryside told her that her room abutted one of the palace walls. A glance at the setting sun informed her that her view lay to the south. The surprise of the window was matched by the lack of a door, not even a curtain. Nevertheless, her space was private enough, surrounded as it was by a small herb and flower garden, walled on four sides, and with only one gate, which she guessed was locked on the outside. This relative self-containment, then, was the most remarkable aspect of her current living quarters since she had formed a sense that all other spaces were more interconnected.

She leaned against the doorframe and let wash over her the sharp scents of mace and saffron and ginger mingled with sweet wafts of orchid and citron and champa. It was a beautiful space, she could acknowledge, but alien all the same, and she shivered in the face of the fresh threat that might await her from the prince.

She fell to contemplating the small fountain on the south edge of the garden where Gita had earlier washed the brown stain from her skin and the dye from her hair. She steered her thoughts toward making sense of being seated on a rug naked in the presence of a savage prince but winced away from the effort, as if pricked by a sudden shower of needles. She drew a breath and tried again to creep up on these most recent memories, she a predator in the tall grasses stalking her prey, but in the end she couldn't find the will to pounce. No sense could be made of those hours that had been as outrageously offensive to her as they had been finally puzzling. The prince hadn't looked at her, not really, nor had he taken any other kind of interest in her.

Perhaps he wouldn't come this night.

Her heart seized to hear the chain on the far gate rattling and the sounds of a lock being opened. Her heart eased to see Gita come through the gate bearing a tray. She was suddenly ravenous.

She awoke disoriented. Her torso was stretched out on the bed while her feet were on the floor. When she sat up, her neck had a crick. The room was dark, the only light being a faint glow at the window, but it was enough for her to see the tray set on the table and the remains of her vegetable curry, the last bite of a tasty dish of *dal* 'chickpeas' and broken pieces of *naan* 'bread' surrounded by crumbs along with a bowl of pistachios and walnuts reduced to a pile of shells. After eating she must have fallen asleep sitting up. She was still wearing her robe.

The relief of having avoided the horror of violation left her vulnerable to terrifying memories that leapt out at her now, like a tiger from the brush. Some ancient layer of the human capacity for survival shielded her from remembering the carnage she witnessed through the tall elephant grass, flattened on her stomach, after she had wandered away from the caravan during one of its stops to relieve herself. She also remembered little of the next hours as she lay there immobile, baking in the sun, flies buzzing, insects crawling, snakes finding their way to the same stream of water that had drawn her.

What burst forth ferociously was her memory of that first night. She felt the heat and saw the moonlight, heard the ugly sounds of jackals howling, hyenas laughing, bats swooping, a mongoose chittering. The air was heavy with the stench of flesh ripped open. She had climbed for refuge into the skinny branches of a *sal* tree, hoping that a snake had not taken the place of the vultures that likely usually roosted there but were then gorging on the remains of the human feast in the dusty road left by the bigger animals.

In the first flush of dawn she roused from a fretful doze to discover she was still clinging to a branch. She looked down, expecting the *sal* to be encircled by a pack of jackals waiting for her carcass to fall into their midst. She saw nothing but dry dirt and tufts of grass and felt woozy relief.

Then she did what she had to do. She approached the horrific scene, averting her eyes as much as possible, valiantly managing the bile rising up her throat. She identified her beloved and covered what was left of his face with a scrap of a bloody handkerchief. She stripped the ruined saris from the bodies of several serving women intending to fashion a whole one for herself and found a relatively intact

chuddah 'shawl' she would rinse of its bloodstains in the stream. Then she divested herself of her Western clothing before she tore it all to shreds and attempted to make it look like it, too, was bloodied. She was thankful for the necklace she wore, sure she could use the string of pearls to good end.

Of course anything of value was long gone, the horses, the wagons, boxes filled with dishes, glasses, silverware, linens, books, instruments. So she wasted no time trying to find anything in the wreckage. However, under the splinters of a broken carriage, she came across a seemingly worthless piece of paper and picked it up. Ripped in places and ground into the earth by dusty boots, it was legible all the same. She was holding a survey map of the region. She held it to her breast and sent a prayer of thanks heavenward.

The next day she began experimenting with nuts and berries to darken her skin and dull her hair.

Chapter Four

In the morning Gita came with another tray of food and a fresh robe. She replaced the old tray on the low table with the new one and bade Elizabeth don the new robe. Then she retreated with the old tray and robe.

Annoyed that she was apparently to be in possession of only one item of clothing at a time, and a flimsy one at that, Elizabeth felt rather grumpy as she sat on a cushion next to the table. Her mood took a turn when, upon choosing among the covered bowls, she noticed they were sitting atop a rectangle of tobacco brown leather. She picked the object up and discovered it to be a slim volume. She opened to the title page and read with astonishment *A Brief History of Persia* by Sir William Jones.

She had heard of the author, of course, from Charles for whom Sir William Jones, who had died some sixty years earlier, was something of a hero. Jones had attended Harrow, like Charles, and was a school legend for his mastery of the many languages of India and the renown he had earned as a judge in his adopted land. Charles had even spoken eagerly of undertaking a trip to the other side of India in order to pay his respects at Jones's grave in Calcutta. And now a book of his appears

on her morning tray? What was she to make of it?

She was to read it, of course. So she ate and read while the back of her mind swirled in confusion.

Finally the confusion burst forth to flood all thought, and she jumped up. She looked at the book as if it were a tame palace mongoose suddenly become feral, teeth bared. So she flicked it on the bed and abruptly left the room. She took several turns in the garden, trying to master her bubbling emotions, then returned to her room to gaze out the window.

The familiar act of reading had momentarily lulled her into a sense of normalcy so vivid it finally heightened the strangeness of her present circumstances. Taking stock, she could acknowledge she was likely better off than she had been the day before, since she didn't think her ruse in the harem could last much longer. At the same time she faced new perils – and had now lost access to the last of her pearls.

Still, she did not think her life was in immediate danger. The relative luxury of the feeling opened her to wonder how she had survived the early weeks of dust caking her eyelids and coating the roof of her mouth as she trudged the elephant trails, and then, more recently the task of both ingratiating and abasing herself in the serail. Her thoughts on the matter had long since fractured in the piercing terrors of every event. The best she could do was to gingerly piece together the many Hindustani lessons Charles had insisted she take before leaving London with the off-hand wisdom of the fifteen-year-old urchin she had sponsored and who had once told her, “Cor, Miss, in a tight corner, I smears me face with dirt, puts on rags and acts like a crazy owd besom as I walks down the street. Won't nobody touch me.” Add to that her late father's skill as a veterinarian and the magic tricks Harry had delighted to teach her.

Here her efforts at making sense of her life ground to a halt, lost as she suddenly was in the grievous fear she might never again correspond with her younger brother and mother, let alone see them. She winced from thinking of Charles, whom she had not yet had a chance to mourn.

Even if she had wanted to be alone with her thoughts, she was not to have the

opportunity. Gita returned to take her tray and said, as she had before, “*Chup*,” accompanied by a gesture to follow. Elizabeth knew the word meant ‘be silent.’ As they left Elizabeth’s quarters, Gita said, under her breath, “Now it’s back to the prince, so let’s see how she does today.”

Obeying the injunction for silence, Elizabeth merely sighed her displeasure.

Gita stopped and looked around at her captive. “Do you know our language?” When Elizabeth did not immediately reply, Gita said, “You may speak.”

She replied with a well-practiced phrase, “I understand more than I am able to say.”

Gita cocked a brow with interest and turned back around.

They continued on their way. Elizabeth paid attention to their route, since they were apparently heading to the room where she had spent the afternoon before, and she wanted to have a plan of the palace in her head. It was still only mid-morning, so the closer she thought they came to the prince’s office chamber her heart sank, fearing she would have to spend the whole day naked before him.

Her fear was misplaced.

They arrived at the antechamber. Instead of being led into the main chamber, Gita gestured to a rug in the corner then added, “Sit,” now knowing her charge could understand. Gita chose for herself a low stool. And then they waited.

And waited.

Gita, apparently not the chatty type, broke the silence at one moment by asking, “Do you sew?”

She took a moment to piece together bits of her vocabulary and replied, “My mother taught me, yes.”

Gita nodded then fell silent again.

Elizabeth kept her mind carefully blank, ready for whatever was to come her way this day. Eventually the heat and the inactivity overcame her and she dozed, only to be roused when a page came with bowls of dates and dried apricots, plates of honey cakes and pots of jasmine tea. She ate her fill, having once again found her appetite after starving during the long days she had kept to the back roads before arriving at the town of Garkata at the foot of the Red Palace.

Several long hours passed before she recognized the voice of the prince calling to Gita. With a nod, Gita gestured toward the prince's chamber. Steeling herself Elizabeth rose and entered the room to find the prince's back to her, speaking to someone of the other side of the marble partition shimmering like a wave of frozen lace. This was the first full view she had of Badar Ali, and although it was only from the back, she could see he was tall and well built. Since he was wearing no turban, she saw as well that his thick dark hair was shorter than she might have expected, curling as it did around the collar of his tunic of dove grey silk. Around his trim waist was wrapped a broad *kamarband* 'sash' of slate grey.

Gita removed her robe, and she sat down on the rug placed a good five feet from the desk, arranging her limbs for maximum modesty. It hardly mattered. When the prince finished his conversation and turned toward his desk, his eyes were on the documents he was holding as he shuffled through them. He took his seat and got to work.

Elizabeth trained her gaze in a far corner, struggling as she did the day before with exposure and humiliation. The experience was less searing this second time around but equally puzzling. Simmering now in the stew of her outrage and helplessness was the strong spice of vexation. She clung to the vexation as she wondered for the thousandth time in the past day how the prince had learned of her presence in the harem. Had it been luck on his part and misfortune on hers that he plucked from the bevy a blue-eyed woman who turned out to have white skin and blonde hair? Or had she, indeed, seen a stir of satisfaction in the depths of his eyes when he had asked her to look up at him and had seen what he had expected? She tried now to recall the color of his eyes but her apprehension at the time had been too great to register anything beyond her own troubled emotions.

Minutes trickled past and dribbled into hours. She watched the crosshatched oblong of light cast from the latticed window at the prince's back inch across the marble floor. She attempted to keep her emotions self-contained but must have lost her concentration, because at one point, upon shifting positions, she sighed deeply. At that moment she felt a bolt of attention from the prince, as if he registered her sigh and then her presence for the first time. She felt his awareness fully upon her,

even if his eyes were not.

Not much later he rose and left the room with two snaps of his fingers for Gita to escort Elizabeth away.

That evening Gita brought a young woman to Elizabeth's quarters.

"She's to talk to you," Gita explained, "and you'll sew together."

"I'm Lila," the young woman said, smiling and holding out for Elizabeth's inspection a flat wide basket filled with neatly folded colorful cloths and a jumble of colorful threads. Once the introduction was completed, it was quickly established that the name 'Elizabeth' was beyond pronunciation, and so the endearment Zaza-bai was invented on the spot.

Gita left, and the two young women got to work and to talking.

"How long have you been in the palace?" was Elizabeth's first question.

"A week," Lila replied gaily. "It's tremendously exciting."

"I'm sure it is for you," Elizabeth replied with a twinge of disappointment. She was hoping her companion would be more knowledgeable. "So you know little of palace ways."

"I'm afraid I don't," the girl acknowledged with a slight frown then brightened. "But I've heard a secret entry in the west wall that has just been sealed, and now there's quite a bit of upset in the serail!"

At this news Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat, and she wondered for the second time whether the prince hadn't saved her from a worse fate in the harem. "How did you hear such a thing?"

"From my sister," was the answer. "We have our ways of communicating."

Elizabeth bridged the implication. "She's in the harem, then, your sister?"

"Yes! The goddess Lakshmi wisely chose to bestow upon her the charms to catch the Rana's eye, and so I have been spared the honor" – said with charming irony and a flutter of downcast lashes – "of his attentions!"

Lila turned out to be the chatterbox Gita was not, and Elizabeth, on occasion, had to ask her new companion to slow down and repeat herself. Despite the strain on Elizabeth's powers of comprehension, the evening passed pleasantly enough, and

she guessed she had the prince to thank for the gift of Lila.

Thereafter a routine was established, and each day passed exactly as the previous. One afternoon she managed to snatch a chunk of carbon from an unlit brazier she passed going to and from the prince's office, and she began to mark the days on the back flyleaf of *A Brief History of Persia*.

She knew when a week had elapsed, and now the prince sat once again as judge over the cases coming his way from the other side of the frozen lace. This time she listened. Although she could not understand all that was said, she clearly distinguished among the cases the prince adjudicated in Hindustani and those in Persian. She knew before arriving in India that the Persian Mughals had once ruled this patch of the earth before the East India Company had wrested control. She now knew from the work of Sir William Jones that, among other things, the state of Rajgurat had gained its independence and had reverted to Hindustani rule. Where it stood with respect to whatever was happening in India now – and she was sure something was afoot because her best instincts had told her to keep out of sight as she had made her way to Garkata – she had no knowledge whatsoever. This ignorance compounded her puzzlement over her treatment by the prince.

The very next day, when she arrived in the prince's chamber, she was greeted by a haphazard stack of books teetering next to her rug. Her instinct was to look in question at the prince but she successfully quelled the impulse. She chose a book from the midst of the pile and saw it was a Hindustani grammar. In English. Although she was making progress with the language through her conversations with Lila, she was glad for the grammar because it would speed her fluency. At the same time, the book bore mute testimony to the fact that someone – no doubt, the prince – thought she needed to learn the language better, and thus was triggered the fear she might be staying a long time in the Laal Mahal. She put the grammar aside.

Another book was in Persian, if she was any judge of the Arabic script. Since she knew nothing of either the script or the language, she guessed it had been given to her to admire the beautiful color plates depicting various gardens. Other books catalogued Indian dress and food. One held glorious representations of the Hindu deities, from the elephant god Ganesha to the large-breasted Parvati and her consort

Shiva, pages rife with images of monkeys and blue-skinned warriors and goddesses laden with gold. She leafed through the books happily, grateful for the relief of the tedium of sitting on the rug, doing nothing.

It was only then she realized her outrage and humiliation had vanished along with her clothing. Instead, her dislike of the empty hours had made her petulant and dissatisfied. Once again she had an impulse to look up at the prince but quashed it. She also successfully stifled a sigh.

Then came the day, another two weeks later, when she found the novelty of a low table next to her rug. Atop it lay a single book along with a plate of sweets. She assumed her position and reached for the book, opening it at random. She was in sufficient control of herself in 'her glorious nakedness,' as she had come to phrase it, not to gasp or otherwise betray any emotion when her gaze fell on an explicit picture of a couple intertwined and in the throes of sexual ecstasy. She flipped back to the equally scandalously decorated frontispiece and title page. She had learned enough of the curlicues of the Hindustani alphabet to read *Kama* 'desire' *Sutra* 'thread'.

She considered putting the book down, but her curiosity got the better of her. So she affected the gestures – suspecting the prince was paying unassuming attention to her reaction – of a casual browse through the fascinating images. She paused to read what she could of the explanations, but her vocabulary had not enlarged enough to fully understand them. Then she returned the book to the table and closed her eyes.

Her imagination burned with what she had just seen, flesh connected in ways she had never imagined, lovers lying together in the sunlight and the moonlight, feeding one another juicy fruit, stroking one another's arms and legs with flower petals and silk scarves, stroking more intimate places with hands and tongues, joining with abandon. She could not prevent herself from casting back on her physical relations with Charles – and to wonder, in some disappointment, about them.

She cracked her eyelashes and saw the prince with his dark head bent over his work. Motes of gold danced in the honeycombed light behind him. The scent of

sandalwood of the low table mixed with the honey from her plate of sweets and joined the wafts of jasmine from the gardens able to float on the lightest of breezes. Her skin felt dewy. She felt a first frightful, delightful stab of desire. She opened her eyes fully, chose a sticky cake and popped it into her mouth.

As clearly as if she had seen lime lines drawn to outline a tennis court, she understood the prince was playing a game with her. On her side of the net sprang the fragile bud of a transgressive idea to play along with him. It would take a little more time to flower.

Chapter Five

Badar Ali had buttoned up the holes in palace security by sacking the feckless head of the guards and several of his sergeants and replacing them with men with less appetite for dicing and more for discipline. He had made a point of getting to know his younger half-brother who had been but a toddler when Badar Ali had left for England. It had taken hardly more than one exchange to see that the boy, having inherited his father's indolence and his mother's beauty, enjoyed being cosseted and fawned over and did not suffer from ambition or yearn for power. However, Laiju did express eagerness to find a bride so that he could be at the center of a wedding celebration lasting four days, the repeated retellings of Badar Ali's own youthful wedding (but ultimately aborted marriage) having fired his imagination with pomp and circumstance. Badar Ali assured Laiju he would have such an occasion, perhaps within the next year, now that the Rana's astrologers had found two promising prospects for Badar Ali himself. Badar Ali viewed his possible forthcoming wedding with the same dispassion he had approached palace security. Both were matters of routine housekeeping.

Although he had already accomplished much, he had not wanted to leave the Laal Mahal so soon after his return from such a long absence. However, the reports he was receiving on the increasing mutinies, civilian rebellions and revolts erupting around great swaths of Central India along with the sieges of Delhi and Lucknow finally convinced him to gather his own considerable forces and to leave the still impartial and relatively peaceful state of Rajgurat to head east. He wanted to

discover first-hand how strong might still be John Company's military, knowing it would be folly to discover it fully intact when gun and cannon fire blasted on his borders.

He need not have worried. As he had predicted to his father, the Company was finished in India. The massacres of British women and children alongside their menfolk had devastated Company forces and will, but the horrors had not changed Britain's interest in India. Although the fighting was far from finished, the rebels had been defeated at Gwalior by British government troops, and Badar Ali knew enough about the history of debates in Parliament and the views of many of his former classmates at Cambridge – those young men with their long noses and pinched nostrils who had now taken their seats – to guess what might be the response of the Crown in the face of the present devastation. The Angrezi-log had a powerful habit of holding control and an insatiable taste for making and unmaking kings. Badar Ali had a calculation to make.

He returned to Laal Mahal still debating his options. With one of his decisions he was mightily pleased. Before leaving on his expedition he had ordered Mrs. Wilkins to continue to appear in his Exchequer even in his absence, since he enjoyed exerting control over her – a simple masculine pleasure rendered all the more piquant by her English beauty. He had also devised a schedule for her comforts, but they were more for his amusement than hers. First she was to be afforded pillows of silk and satin, all gaily striped, then to have at hand an ewer of cool water and a drinking cup of horn. Gita had discovered Mrs. Wilkins liked dates and dried apricots, so dates and dried apricots she would have. Next came a low bookshelf to define the area behind her rug. The final touches were a magnificent floor vase filled with flowers, a miniature lemon tree and a capacious bowl in which lotus flowers floated.

Thus it was when Badar Ali entered his Exchequer for the first time upon his return, he found his naked pet lounging in what looked to be the corner of a palace bower. She was lying on her right side, facing away from him, elbow propped on the floor, head in her hand, apparently reading. At the flurry of his entrance, she glanced over her shoulder at him, with lazy interest, and returned to her book. He took his

seat at his desk and did not snap his fingers to fetch Gita to turn her toward him. The sultry look in her eyes when she had met his gaze for that brief second was a bold enough statement of her acceptance of his rules. Let her find the positions she desired, then. He liked the view of her backside, which he decided to enjoy openly. As he ran his gaze over the graceful violin curve of her torso and buttocks, he noted that her ribs were no longer sticking out and her arms were now pleasingly rounded.

Over the next few days he discovered she had become very comfortable in her bower, indeed. At one moment he turned his head to speak with Koda Des in the antechamber. The next moment he returned to his work – and noticed out of the corner of his eye that he could not see her. He looked up and, sure enough, her rug was empty. Since Gita had said nothing, he assumed his pet had gone to one of the water rooms. Moments later she returned wearing a long diaphanous yellow silk scarf shot with sapphire wrapped under her arms and knotted at her breasts. When she stepped onto her rug, she let the scarf flutter to the ground while facing him and then sank fluidly onto a group of pillows she had arranged so she could read sitting up.

Before he had left on his expedition he had routinely sought out Yasmina immediately upon leaving his Exchequer. His pet's provocation with the scarf distracted him enough to need to interrupt the present session and to find Yasmina, after which he returned to work in a more focused frame of mind. Thereafter he made a point to visit Yasmina before he came to his Exchequer.

Even though he had no intention of petting his pretty pet, he was increasingly satisfied with their arrangement, even smug in a way only a man can be when a woman he desires makes her reciprocal desire known. Not that she needed words. Or even longing regards. Rather the early freeze of her first days on the rug had melted into a companionable, luxurious calm, and he felt, at moments, as if she were content with her current lot.

Not that the present arrangement could remain forever – and he had never intended it so. From the beginning he had had other plans for her, not as a sexual plaything but as a political pawn.

The first intrusion into the Exchequer – this quiet world for two simmering with sensuality – came when Koda Des announced a visitor on a day not scheduled for one.

Badar Ali frowned. “I’m not receiving,” was his curt response.

Koda Des did not hesitate. “This one you might wish to receive, Prince.”

Badar Ali put down his pen and offered the traditional Hindustani greeting.

A moment later he heard a man say, in English, “Baddie, why Baddie Ali, it’s your old friend George Jenkins. From Cambridge. Remember me?”

“I’m not likely to forget, old friend,” he replied easily. “You’re the one who couldn’t take a single wicket in our last cricket match against Oxford.”

He could hear Jenkins clear his throat. “Didn’t think you’d remember that first,” came the rather disconcerted reply.

“Is there something I should remember better?” he challenged.

“The old times!” came the reply. “The good old times, kicking up larks, when we were younger and full of vinegar, don’t you know?”

Badar Ali remembered few good times in the bleak and brutal corridors of exclusive English education, and as for larks, it was unlikely Jenkins was thinking of the ways Badar Ali had been mercilessly bullied for refusing to eat both unclean pork and sacred beef and incessantly reminded that no native would ever crack the upper echelons of Company rule in India, no matter how accommodating or how rich the state of Rajgurat might be.

“Yes, those times,” Badar Ali said, wondering idly what part of his game with his pretty pet had been motivated by revenge. Then, “Why are you here?”

“To see you, of course. May I come in?”

“No, you may not. My man must have already told you the way business is conducted in this part of the palace.”

“I – yes – that is, no – well! I have only recently arrived,” Jenkins said, by way of explaining his apparent lack of understanding and then added, with some self-importance, “I’m now in the employ of Colonel Archer, you know, in –”

“Rawalpindi, yes, I know.”

“Of course! Capital fellow, Colonel Archer!”

“And he sent you here?”

“It was my idea,” Jenkins countered. “On account of our connection, yours and mine, to catch up, you could say.”

“But surely he sent a letter of introduction.”

“I told him there was no need for one!”

Badar Ali suppressed an unamused laugh. “You should know, dear old Jenks, that the way we deal with liars and other bad actors in this part of the world is to throw them over a palace wall.”

A bit of sputtering was followed by, “Aw, Baddie, that’s not very sporting of you.”

This second mention of Badar Ali’s hated nickname – although he knew he’d been called worse behind his back – did not go down any better than the first, and so he did not hesitate to point out, “You and I are not playing a gentleman’s game on the banks of the Thames, not here in Rajgurat. However, since I do have a desire to hear what Colonel Archer might want from me and you have an apparent desire to see me in the flesh I invite you as my guest for dinner this evening. In the meantime, my man will attend to you. That is all.”

Badar Ali then called out instructions to Koda Des, telling him to make sure the visitor was given every consideration of hospitality – and never left alone – and then to inform the Master of the Hall to prepare a banquet, lowest level, for the supposed emissary of a middle-level British representative. He wrote a carefully worded note to the Rana, requesting his presence at the event. He sanded it, folded it into fourths then got up and went around the marble screen to hand it to a waiting page squatting against an antechamber wall.

When he returned to his desk he saw Mrs. Wilkins half-seated on a pile of pillows so that only a part of her beautiful torso was visible to him, not her face. The only change she seemed to have made, upon hearing his exchange in English, was to have bound her hair in her silk scarf so that the heavy fall was lifted from her back, thereby cooling her. Nothing in her manner otherwise suggested she had thought anything was out of the ordinary. She had continued reading.

Soon thereafter he laid his pen across the stack of reports, accounts and

correspondence and snapped his fingers twice for Gita.

He retired to his chambers in the west wing, whereupon he issued further instructions for the evening ahead and received the news that his visitor had arrived with two Pashtu speaking guides, a sign that the man had indeed come from the north and west. He ordered a bath. While soaking he drew from memory everything he knew about George Jenkins. Then he thought at length about Mrs. Wilkins.

Enormous Persian rugs had been rolled out on the tiled surface of the first courtyard and were arranged around the dais upon which stood the Rana's open-pillared pavilion. Great cushions softened the space on the rugs while low tables studded it. The sky above was a billowy canopy whose twilight brought into sharp relief the majestic contours of the surrounding battlements and balconies, while the lights from torches licked the marble and the mirrors on the Rana's pavilion and the enameled and bejeweled shrines on either side. The courtyard was filled with palace men, some of rank but mostly file, all happy for the diversion of this spontaneous event. Serving boys circulated among them, staggering under the weight of great platters of food and drink and incessantly jostling one another in their numbers.

Badar Ali had chosen to sit with his guest not where they would be absorbed in the thick of things. Rather, he had positioned them at the more strategic edge of the action nearest the magnificently carved Ganesha entryway to the palace interior, a place where his guest would have a sense of the whole. He had also eschewed the formality of rows of Western-style tables set with straight-backed chairs, which would have deferred to the possible preference of his guest – which was to say that he wanted his guest to be lulled into the comfort of the Persian practice of lounging. He decided this evening was also an occasion to open one of the bottles of fine Scottish whisky he had brought back with him.

George Jenkins, as Badar Ali had guessed, was an easy touch. The moment they met face to face in the Audience Hall Badar Ali had seen that Jenkins was all eyes for the palace treasures, although he affected nonchalance with his greeting, which was the understatement, “Nice pile you have here.”

Badar Ali did not think the comment warranted a reply and led his guest

outside to the festivities where he invited him to sit, to eat and to drink. Conversation flowed easily enough, with Jenkins filling his old school chum in on the events of his life since leaving the safety of ivy-covered walls. He had “racketed about” as he phrased it, for quite a while, leaving Badar Ali to infer that his family had failed to come up with enough money to buy him a commission in the army. By the time the stars had come out to sequin the sky and commas of tobacco smoke drifted up from the hookahs, Jenkins finally came around to admitting he had decided to come to India, again as he phrased it, “to make his fortune.”

Badar Ali further inferred that Jenkins had no position with Colonel Archer but rather hoped that his connection with Badar Ali would somehow open a door for him in Rawalpindi. In response Badar Ali murmured only, “Ah, a time honored custom.”

Jenkins sat up a bit and said, “No need to take offense, dear old boy. It’s not as if you Indians have ever made the most of what you have.”

To this predictable piece of British impertinence Badar Ali raised his arms to encompass his ‘nice pile.’ But he was not going to belabor the point because he knew the catechism, since he had heard it often enough at Cambridge. He recited, “‘The steam engine, lads, the steam engine!’” He shook his head. “Now that you British are uniting the world with your steamships and railroads, you think it’s up to you to run it!”

“Makes sense, if you think about it,” Jenkins replied. He seemed ready to plunge down the deep conversational rut of British moral and intellectual superiority when his attention was caught by an elaborate procession making its languorous way into the pavilion. His eyes boggled, his head bobbed once then he turned to Badar Ali and asked in tones of pure amazement,

“Your father?”

The Rana’s entrance was theatrically done, and the portly sovereign, around whom orbited no less than two dozen courtiers, made a nice stage prop as he settled his girth on the throne.

“My father, yes.”

Jenkins could hardly tear his eyes away from the Rana’s magnificence when

he said, as if he could not help himself, "You're nothing like him."

Flattering, Badar Ali supposed. "But all his will be mine someday."

Jenkins jerked his gaze back to his host and seemed to register for the first time that the boy he and his classmates had so cruelly tormented when seated on hard school benches six thousand miles away was a man very different than any of them could have imagined. He reached, rather absently, for the bottle of whisky by his side and poured himself another glass then, belatedly, offered to fill his host's glass as well. Badar Ali accepted.

They spoke of this and that, the rebels' recent defeat and Rajgurat's continuing neutrality. Jenkins had rattled around this part of the world long enough to stumble upon the news of an English woman who had disappeared a few months before, thirty miles or so to the southwest of Garkata. He wondered, did Badar Ali know anything about her?

"A Mrs. Elizabeth Wilkins is her name. Vanished, seemingly, after an attack on her caravan."

Badar Ali offered mildly, "Perhaps she's in hiding."

"Hiding, why?"

"A lone English woman roaming the countryside in these times? Never mind the defeat at Gwalior. If she came to my doorstep I'd offer her refuge, at least until the political situation clears up. It'll take another few months to sort, I should think."

"At least," Jenkins agreed and then shrugged as if he did not much care about the woman's safety. "There's a reward for information about her – dead or alive. It's not a handsome sum, but it would help, don't you know."

Badar Ali took great pleasure in imagining Jenkins's body soaring through space after being heaved over a palace wall.

Just then the evening's entertainment began, thereby turning his thoughts to less blood-thirty pleasures. Onto the space in front of the pavilion first came the trained monkeys, second the fire-eaters and musicians and last the belly dancers.

Jenkins sat bolt upright at the sight of six young women swirling onto the scene, each wearing a *choli* 'blouse' baring the midriff, voluminous harem pants, a heavy girdle spangled with jingling coins and a fluttery veil obscuring the lower half

of her face. His tongue seemed ready to roll out of his mouth when the women joined hands and held them up so they could dance in a line, bare feet with prettily beringed toes stepping daintily over and around the others, bellies undulating in sensuous synchrony, hips shaking, belts tinkling. The vision was mesmerizing, and the sight of six lovelies plying their ancient art invited wild fantasies.

Badar Ali's gaze lazily skimmed over the beauties, enjoying each one in turn, idly noting the differences in their costumes. One exposed more of her breasts than other. Another had more golden bangles on her arms. The next had her hair bound by a yellow silk scarf shot with sapphire. Here Badar Ali's relaxation ended, and he, like Jenkins, sat bolt upright.

The eyes of the woman wearing the scarf were heavy with kohl, as were the others. The difference was that she, unlike her sisters, did not flash her eyes at her audience.

Mrs. Wilkins?

His heart flipped over to imagine such audacity, such defiance by his pretty pet. No, surely not. He must be mistaken. He tried to discern the color of her skin, but the flickering torches had turned it to burnished bronze – and he knew she knew how to change its color if she wanted. As for the yellow and sapphire scarf, there were no doubt dozens in the palace.

Weren't there?

A wave of a feeling he could only define as helplessness washed over him as he watched entranced, unable to look away.

Chapter Six

Elizabeth was mildly surprised when, the next day, Gita did not come to take her to the prince's chamber. Her first thought was that he had ridden off with his old classmate, George Jenkins, but this was confounded by the further thought that, even in his absence, she had spent time in her queenly corner. Nor did Gita come for her the day after that. She also learned – for she now had her sources – that the prince had not left the palace.

The game had taken a new turn.

She had felt a thrill harp down her spine when she first heard the prince speak English. It was a shock, as if the parrots she had tamed on her way to Garkata had suddenly learned to speak. The next instant the comparison shamed her. The prince was no mute animal, and she had learned enough during her weeks on her rug that neither was he a savage. He was, in fact, a fair and considerate man, hard-working, intelligent certainly and likely shrewd, and although she had no better idea what he was doing with her now than she had on the first day, she realized they were not playing so straightforward a game as tennis. Chess, then? She had no head for it.

At least she had an uncomplicated relationship with Lila who, Elizabeth had discovered, was partial dried apricots, and so over the weeks, Elizabeth made sure to spirit away handfuls of the treats for her newfound friend. Lila eventually came to see that her Zaza-bai's heart was not in embroidery, and so she had communicated with her sister in the Zenana ("We have our ways," as she liked to say), and one day put a necked bowl lute into Elizabeth's hands.

Mystified, Elizabeth looked at her friend in inquiry.

"It's a *surbahar*," Lila announced happily.

"Spring melody," Elizabeth translated.

The connection was immediate. Elizabeth had spent some tortured hours in her childhood forced into harp lessons, but she had been overwhelmed by the size of the instrument and did not like it. Unfortunately the same had been true of the piano, and so her mother came to the conclusion that Elizabeth had no musical gifts. In truth, she had simply not found the right instrument.

The *surbahar* had a low range of notes that pleased Elizabeth's ear, and when she began to pluck out English melodies she found they did not quite fit the range of her instrument and so adapted them. Without ado she dived into a rendition of *In the Countryside*.

When the song was finished Lila clapped her hands with pleasure and opined, "Even though you, Zaza-bai, are Angrezi-bai it must be that the goddess Saraswati has surely blessed you at birth" – adding, in triumph – "and you had to come to Hind for your gift to be realized!"

Elizabeth's talent was, in fact, rather modest but Lila's admiration for her *feringhi* 'foreign' friend's abilities was so great that she recruited a palace cook, who had once been young and beautiful but who had not parlayed her assets well, to teach Zaza-bai the ancient art of belly dancing. Here the results were nothing short of astounding.

When she was eight and Harry was five Elizabeth had made up the game of 'wobbly belly' whereby they would bare their midriffs and move their tummy muscles in waves. They thought it great good fun until their mother caught them out and put an immediate stop to it. Her mother later told Elizabeth severely that she should be ashamed. And Elizabeth had been.

Relearning the rhythmic contractions brought Elizabeth back to her youth, and belly dancing gave her a sudden, physical connection to all she had lost. The grand adventure to India had turned to disaster only a few weeks after disembarking at Bombay, and with her future murky at best she found great comfort in turning what had once been a childhood trick into a respected art form. She entertained the hazy notion that lucky were the people whose natural gifts found expression in their native land's arts.

Cook had never had so apt a pupil. After only a few weeks of instruction, when it was announced a banquet was to be held for a friend of the prince, Cook surprised Elizabeth by challenging her to dance. "I think you should be among the six to perform for the prince and his guest."

"I couldn't," Elizabeth demurred, all nerves jangling.

"Have I not been a good enough teacher?" Cook demanded.

"Of course!"

"Would I ask you, if I didn't think you were ready?"

Elizabeth hesitated before admitting, "No."

"You see, then," Cook concluded with a smile, which took on a crafty cast. "I have ways to make sure that Padma – the least graceful, in my opinion – will be indisposed so that you, Zaza-bai, can slip quietly into her place."

With a little more coaxing, Elizabeth's spirit of adventure – the one that had caused her to fall in love with Charles's mission to India perhaps more than she had

fallen in love with the man himself – sparked to life, and she agreed to the absurd, reckless and delightful plan. She was not sorry. The experience of dancing in public had been nothing less than exhilarating, and for those few minutes of wobbly belly art and magic Elizabeth Hodson Wilkins disappeared into the alluring and exotic beauty Zaza-bai.

On the third day after her performance Gita came to fetch her. The moment she disposed herself, naked, on the rug in the prince’s chamber, she knew something had changed. In the past she had sensed he kept some part of his attention on her, as if he were aware of her and wanted her to know it. This day she had the distinct feeling he was deliberately ignoring her – and pointedly so. She could not help herself from asking, once again and inevitably: what on *earth* was he doing with her here?

Since she could not divine the answer she simply made herself comfortable and chose her reading. History it would be today, for a rather weighty tome on the subject had been added her to her bookshelf.

Only one moment during the afternoon stood out. During the weeks of the prince’s absence, when the comforts of food and drink and pillows had materialized around her, she had become accustomed to coming and going as she pleased. She wisely chose to leave the room only when she needed one of the clever water rooms and so this day, after having drunk a few horns of cool water infused with cucumber, she got up and left. Gita handed her a cobalt scarf to wear, since Gita did not want her to walk naked in the palace, even if it no one would see her. For some reason, Gita thought a scarf more appropriate than a robe for these occasions.

When she returned to the prince’s chamber, his head jerked up and he looked at her directly – for the very first time she was aware of. His hard focus seemed to be on the scarf. The next second he returned his attention to his work. She sat down on her rug and arranged the scarf around her as she wished. She turned on her side, away from him, and returned to reading.

The monsoons came. Late, this year, so she was told. With the sky turned to lead and rains lashing down like monstrous overturned bushels of dirty rice, the life

of the palace seemed to withdraw into itself like the body of a snail into its shell. Her visits to the prince's office were suspended, and she found she had a bit more freedom, which meant she spent more time with Lila and Cook.

As often as Lila could smuggle a surbahar out of the Zenana, she and Cook and Elizabeth would huddle in a quiet corner in a kitchen storeroom, and Elizabeth would pluck out melodies, constantly retuning the instrument against the damp, while Cook would spin palace yarns. In spite of herself Elizabeth was most interested in those stories pertaining to the prince. She had long since learned he had spent ten years at the best schools in Belait, and she supposed this must have been common knowledge in the palace as long as she had been there, but she had not at first known that 'Belait' and 'England' were equivalents.

One day Elizabeth chanced to ask whether the prince was married.

"Why, yes, when he was nine years old," came the startling answer, "he was married in a magnificent ceremony – lasting for four days!"

"Nine years old?" Elizabeth queried, sure she had misheard.

Cook searched a memory. Then, "Maybe he was ten. His bride was four years old at the time. The Rana had made a fine pact with the Raja of Pravithstan, and the bride's family was suitably impressed, I can assure you! Horses and elephants as beautifully outfitted as any courtier, the young prince looking so fine and grown-up in his turban." Cook fell into long reminiscence of this glorious occasion and ended with more practical matters. "Of course a nine-year-old and a four-year-old aren't going to consummate a marriage – that was to be for later! – and so on the dawn of the fifth day, the bride's party packed up and began their long journey back to Pravithstan. Hardly five years later, the Rana received word the prince's little wife had died of an illness, and it took days for his chief minister –"

"Koda Des," Elizabeth interpolated.

"– yes, Koda Des, to calm him down. Well, the Rana was in a rage over the failed pact, but eventually Koda Des pointed out that the prince could now make an even more advantageous marriage."

"And did he?"

Cook nodded confidently then amended, "Almost, but this time, when the

bridal party was on their way to Garkata, the bride was bitten by a cobra.”

“A cobra,” Lila intoned, meaningfully.

“And you know what that means,” Cook said.

“I suppose it meant she died,” Elizabeth replied.

“Yes, of course, but it also meant that the goddess Parvati had spared our prince an evil woman. Now, because the preparations for the festivities had been mostly completed, the palace was opened to the town folk of Garkata who were allowed to celebrate for two days, and everyone rejoiced.”

“Very auspicious,” Lila agreed. “One early marriage aborted, one bad one thwarted, a good sign for the prince indeed.”

Elizabeth felt compelled to ask, “If a princess loses a husband and then a fiancé is it similarly auspicious?”

Lila looked aghast and Cook merely blank when she replied, “How could that be? In such a case the princess would be considered quite unmarriageable – unless her father were exceedingly rich – and even then Anyway,” she continued more brightly, apparently unwilling to entertain further thoughts of such a doomed young woman, “since, after the death of the prince’s little wife, it had taken the Rana’s astrologists three years to find the new – and ultimately unsuitable – bride, it was decided it best neither to rush into a new marriage pact nor to delay the prince’s education in Belait.”

“So he is not now married,” Elizabeth concluded.

Lila said, “Yasmina thinks he’ll marry her.”

Elizabeth strummed the opening note of her adapted version of *The Girl Who Stole My Heart*. This was the first she’d heard of Yasmina. A bolt of understanding shot through her, an explanation of some parts of the prince’s behavior. Or was the bolt she felt one of jealousy? The very fact such a question had arisen invited the answer: Yes. But if it was jealousy, it was a strange kind. Of course it would be. So was her relationship with the prince – a misty thing she could see and feel but not grasp.

Cook sniffed. “Yasmina has no chance. The Rana’s astrologers have found him not one but two prospective brides, both beauties, of course. He is off visiting them

now.” She frowned. “Very unusual it is, too, for him to wish to meet them first and choosing between them instead of simply sending magnificent presents to the father with the highest rank.” Shaking her head, she added with uncanny accuracy, “It must be a custom he acquired in Belait.”

Elizabeth plinked a twang-y, off-key note then another one. She attempted to tune her instrument but could not get it to play right.

The monsoons left. The sky, scrubbed clean, turned an extravagant blue. Gita came again to lead her to the prince’s chamber, although after these four months she could have easily negotiated the labyrinth of corridors by now on her own. The closer they came the more she tried to quell her eagerness – but was unsuccessful. The moment she crossed the threshold and saw the prince at his desk and the now familiar luxuries surrounding her rug her eagerness welled up to surface as happiness and even relief to be back where she wanted to be.

Over the next few weeks the prince’s attention flowed back to her in currents and eddies and finally gathered into a watery swell. So she lounged and luxuriated in her nakedness, reaching often for the *Kama Sutra*. She indulged in shameless fantasies of encounters with the man seated five feet away whose face she had not once clearly seen. Over the next few weeks after that she felt as if her flesh had become fruit, and she was ripening on the vine. A peach, perhaps? No, too English. Zaza-bai was a mango, sweet and juicy and cultivated in the foothills of the Himalayas. The feeling of flesh as fruit was delicious and came with the tang of disappointment. As certain as she was of his attention, she knew he would not pluck her. He had placed her within sight but out of reach. The combination of desire on her part and restraint on his came to be so perfectly poised that her only satisfaction was to bask in its exquisite balance.

Then, toward the beginning of October, by Elizabeth’s calculation, the day came when Gita showed up in her garden not with a new robe but rather with a large box containing Western-style dress and a letter addressed to her from Colonel Robert Archer, Rawalpindi.

Chapter Seven

Her departure struck her as cruel. The constriction of her dress, of which she had once been so accustomed, was the physical manifestation. The manner of her departure at dawn, through a side gate, with only Koda Des in attendance, was the emotional equivalent of a slap on the face. Her only solace was the fact that Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Hempelsted were quite sure that Mrs. Wilkins need not speak, *could* not speak, for the horrors she must have suffered during all those months in the Red Palace.

“You will be all right in time, my poor – that is, my *dear* Mrs. Wilkins, I assure you!” said Mrs. Archer, patting poor Elizabeth’s hand.

“Oh, yes,” seconded Mrs. Hempelsted. “You will be all right in time. Oh, my dear.”

As the carriage bumped its way down the zigzagging path tying the Laal Mahal to the bustling, brawling town of Garkata, Elizabeth strained to identify the lovely little trefoil in the southern façade of the palace. But the jostling got the better of her, and she could not definitively identify which window had been hers. She watched as the great bulk of the palace that had harbored her and awakened her disappeared into the distance behind clouds of dust and the tangle of the market streets with their striped tents, clogged with men and women hawking their wares, holy men with their bowls and the usual urchins scrambling around the carriage wheels.

“Oh, my dear,” Mrs. Hempelsted was given to say, rather too often.

Oh my dear, indeed was Elizabeth’s silent response. She had been given no opportunity to see Lila or Cook or even Gita, to press her hands palm to palm at her forehead and to bow and say, with humble respect, *namaste* ‘the Spirit in me salutes the Spirit in you.’ She would never again lie relaxed and naked on a rug in the prince’s chamber, listening to him settle legal disputes, the two of them surrounded by golden sunlight and the scents of lemon and lotus floating between them, with nuts and honey and books at hand.

Their little caravan consisted of two carriages and ten outriders, five of them in crisp red British coats and five *sowar* ‘cavalry’ in full drab and sporting

magnificent turbans. Their swords and rifles and belts of ammunition should have been reassuring, but once they were out in the hot brooding stillness of the open road, Elizabeth could not prevent herself from starting slightly as the drowsiest rustle outside the carriage, even if it was only leaves enjoying what they could of an errant breeze. She recalled the jaunty courage accompanying her as she walked down the gangplank in Bombay, setting foot on the vast sprawl of India with its many riches for the taking. Her optimism in an untroubled future was quickly slain that bright, bloody day in May. In its place, she noted with a bit of simple pride, was the bone-deep confidence she could survive anything.

She could certainly survive Mrs. Archer's condescending pity.

"Not that Prince Badar Ali acted improperly," the colonel's wife said two days into the long journey – not for the first time and in a way that conveyed she thought exactly the opposite and was vexed by it all. "Colonel Archer would not hear of any criticisms of the prince's decision to keep you hidden away when I, upon learning of your whereabouts for the first time only ten days ago it was, wondered why the prince had not immediately asked my husband to have you brought at once to Rawalpindi!" She frowned and noted, "Trained at Cambridge," but balanced this point in the prince's favor with a dainty snort and the following comment, "Keeping you in such a place for such a long period of time – well! It can only be –"

"An abundance of caution?" Elizabeth ventured.

" – the product of a savage mind." Mrs. Archer apparently recalled some sort of lesson her husband might have taught her because she refined her comment by adding, "A decidedly un-*English* way of handling the situation, I should say. Why, any Englishman would think an Englishwoman should be with her own kind and" – now challenging Elizabeth's assertion of the possibility of the prince's rationality – "what do you mean by *caution*?"

"You yourself told me only yesterday," she said, "of all the unrest in India in recent months. I, of course, knew nothing about it because I received no news of the outside world during my time in the palace."

"But the worst of it was over in June," she retorted.

"So you told me. You also told me there were conflicting stories about the

attack on my caravan.”

Mrs. Hempelsted jumped in, perhaps unwisely, “Oh, yes, we were told at first that your entire party had been – that is, that you had been among the” She could not quite bring herself to finish the gruesome thought and fell into further confusion when she proceeded down the equally perilous path, “And, then, because the scene had been so horrible – confusing, I mean – it took some doing for the British officers who went to take stock of the situation to realize that”

“I was not at the scene,” Elizabeth finished calmly and added, “and no one could have known that, subsequently, I made a decision to stay alive. Perhaps the prince feared someone might be looking for me to finish the job.”

Mrs. Archer reasserted the moral tone in the carriage and her job of assuring it by patting Elizabeth’s hand and saying, “You must not speak of it. You must not *think* of it. Put it all behind you, my dear.”

“Yes,” was Mrs. Hempelsted’s contribution. “Oh, my dear.”

Elizabeth was glad to be spared the recital of her ordeal on the road to Garkata and of her life in the palace, but she did not think she could avoid forever giving a reckoning of the last six months of her life. She could not have guessed just then the two very public circumstances under which such an accounting would take place nor the stir and the consequences that would ensue. At the moment she simply gave herself up to the heavy sway and discomforts of the carriage and to long thoughts of the pleasures of the palace. She steadfastly refused to consider the likely scenario that Colonel Archer would greet her with the news that he had secured her passage Home.

Their caravan eventually made its labored, heaving ascent up the Pothohor Plateau and finally through the main portal in a magnificent stone gate built by the Mughals. As the largest garrison town of the British Indian army, Rawalpindi struck Elizabeth less like a conventional place laid out in streets anchored by buildings and more like a colorful blur of activity swirling several feet above ground. Swarms of men on horseback. Columns of men trailing in their wake. On the journey from Garkata she had become accustomed to the intensity of the simmering heat and the white merciless sunlight and all manner of animals laughing and snarling and

howling as their caravan camped for the night. Now she had to contend with city noise. Orders were shouted from seemingly every direction. Drums rolled, rattled and snapped. All manner of metal clanged, turning her ears into anvils against which hammers slammed. The din was numbing.

A good ten minutes into this dizzying introduction to Elizabeth's newest reality, relief came with a turn down a mercifully quiet, tree-lined lane. She let out a long breath, unaware she had been holding it.

"Quite," Mrs. Archer said, the word ringing with her contempt of this Outpost of Empire. "But we shall make the best of it, won't we, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Hempelsted."

By this time in the journey Elizabeth had been able to put the confusion of her still raw and rather tangled feelings about the Red Palace far enough to one side in order to pay attention to her two traveling companions, a perfectly matched set of bully and victim. Elizabeth had come to understand Mrs. Hempelsted as a kind woman who seemed to submit, at times, to Mrs. Archer's sharp tongue and equally barbed opinions as if she felt sorry for Mrs. Archer's fundamental unhappiness with her lot in life and did not wish to make Mrs. Archer's life more difficult by taking issue with her; at other times, it seemed Mrs. Hempelsted felt she was deserving of Mrs. Archer's nearly constant criticisms. Elizabeth had no wish to upset the balance of their relationship, but she had developed a fondness for Mrs. Hempelsted. Thus, when the carriage stopped before a pair of bungalows, one yellow, the other light blue, both huddled under a thick cover of trees, Elizabeth took Mrs. Hempelsted's hand and said with some spirit,

"We shall very much make the best of it."

Mrs. Hempelsted's smile suggested she appreciated Elizabeth's gesture, however small, of emotional support.

Elizabeth was to be housed in the yellow bungalow along with Mrs. Hempelsted, while Mrs. Archer would be next door with her husband. Each bungalow had a charming veranda that spread its wings so far the two nearly touched in the middle ground between them. Elizabeth trod the short, flower-lined path to the shallow steps, crossed the veranda and entered an interior that gave her

an instant cramp, it being very much smaller than the palatial spaces she had grown accustomed to. At the same time she blinked against the oddity of seeing familiar objects of her former life: a sofa and chairs and footstools, tables set with bibelots and proper lamps with fringed shades, landscapes of the English countryside on the walls and a portrait of Queen Victoria in pride of place above the sofa. Her heart stuttered, and a strong wave of homesickness washed over her.

Colonel Archer had left her a note on a desk, telling her that he had already set a letter to her mother, assuring her that her daughter was alive and well. The Colonel been so thoughtful to provide her with pen and paper and envelopes, so she sat down first thing to write her mother and brother who would want the further reassurance of seeing her own handwriting.

After completing this important task she told Mrs. Hempelsted she needed to lie down for a while and withdrew into the room assigned her. There she found a thin young woman, hardly more than a girl, sitting on the floor on her heels. Elizabeth looked around and saw the girl had already unpacked the bag of items Mrs. Archer had brought for Elizabeth's use.

"And what is your name?" she asked in English.

When the girl smiled in obvious incomprehension, Elizabeth tried again in Hindustani.

"I'm Sumita," the girl replied in some astonishment.

"How do you come to speak Hindustani? We're in Pashtu country now."

"My father is in the army and was sent from Rajasthan and stationed here, and because he has proven himself to be both brave and loyal, my mother has the honor of working for Miss-us Ar-cher, and I have the honor of serving you, Miss-us Wil-i-kins."

"For the honor, then, please call me Zaza-bai."

The girl's mouth fell open. "Yes, Zaza-bai Memsahib."

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, and now I'm going to take a little rest."

When the girl didn't move, Elizabeth gently suggested Sumita should take a rest herself and visit her mother next door.

When the girl was gone, Elizabeth looked around and judged her current

bedroom only slightly larger than the one she had at the palace. This room, however, had windows on one side and the back wall and an armoire in which she discovered two dresses as well as more underclothing and nightwear. She stripped down and curled into clean, crisp sheets, glorious in her nakedness.

The lie-down did her good and shored up her forces for the evening ahead, which proved to be a bit trying – and certainly did not have the sober tone Mrs. Archer had intended for Mrs. Wilkins’s first night back in civilization.

After a light supper, Elizabeth and Mrs. Hempelsted went next door to meet a few of the gentlewomen in town whom Mrs. Archer thought suitable for Elizabeth’s acquaintance. Even better, Colonel Archer was away on a reconnaissance mission, so it was to be a quiet ladies night. However, news of the arrival of the miraculous survivor had spread and proved to be so powerful a magnet that, without the colonel’s presence, Mrs. Archer’s considerable fortitude alone was not equal to the task of keeping out the many guests who showed up at her door.

One such guest was Frederick Stanhope. Trading on the fact he had met Mrs. Wilkins in London – not once but twice! – as his reason for coming uninvited, he did not wait for Mrs. Archer to make an introduction. Instead he wended his way through the throng in the sitting room, a prepared script trembling on his lips. However, upon meeting his quarry, the carefully composed words flew away and he said, as if he could not help himself. “I say, Mrs. Wilkins, you’re looking well.”

Elizabeth looked away from Miss Dawson to whom she was speaking, searched her memory of the tall, sandy-haired and now slightly bug-eyed man before her and ventured, “Mr. Stanhope?”

“You’re looking well,” he repeated then flushed to the roots of his hair.

She smiled and attempted to put him out of his misery by saying, “It’s not easy to know what to say to someone who has come back from the dead, is it? Do you know Miss Dawson?”

To this he stammered his third stupidity in a matter of mere seconds, “Why, yes, everyone knows Miss Dawson!”

Elizabeth supposed everyone did, because Miss Dawson was clearly the reigning beauty in Rawalpindi. “Well, then, I’ll let you further your acquaintance.”

She turned her back and left them, knowing her quick disposal of a prior acquaintance was likely rude. But Mr. Stanhope had made her uncomfortable, and she needed to get away from him. She found, however, she had almost nowhere to go. Mrs. Archer's sitting room was already packed after only an hour, and her hostess had long since ceased being able to make 'the proper introduction' of Elizabeth to all who crossed her threshold. So Elizabeth sought the safe harbor of the veranda, where fewer people were milling.

Just before she was able to make her way through the door, Mrs. Hempelsted said, "You're a success, my dear." Although this lady was not, in particular, a keen observer, the interest in Elizabeth taken by the upper echelon of Rawalpindi society would have been hard to miss.

Elizabeth could not deny it. It was strange to meet her fellow countrymen after so many months away from them, to exchange polite nothings knowing their brains were seething with conjecture about her life in the Red Palace. She looked back over her shoulder at the crowd and then it struck her. *Men*. She had not been around so many men or in such close proximity to them for many months, and they made her uneasy. How odd. She had never felt that way about mixed company before.

Hardly had that thought sunk in when she felt a tug at her skirt. She looked down into the unhappy face of Sumita.

"Zaza-bai Memsahib," she said in a little voice. "I was fixing everything for you in your room for the night and I had to come tell you I broke a tooth in your comb."

"A tooth in my comb?" Elizabeth replied, amused. She thought of the pretty tortoise shell comb that had been hers at the Red Palace but pushed the memory aside. "I'm not upset, if that's what you think."

Sumita blinked. "My mother told me that Miss-us Ar-chere told her I should immediately report any damage caused by me so that I could be punished."

She was aware then that the room behind her had gone quiet. She said gently, "It's quite all right, Sumita. You have told me. Thank you. Please, take the rest of the evening off."

Chapter Eight

Elizabeth mentally prepared herself for what would surely come next, the reason why everyone had come. She turned slowly and saw everyone openly staring at her.

“You speak the language well, Mrs. Wilkins,” one man, an officer she had met perhaps twenty minutes earlier, commented.

She suppressed her anger to be addressed directly by a man, one she hardly knew, and answered as calmly as she could, “Yes, sir, my late husband insisted I learn some of the language before arriving. It served me well. And I have recently had much practice.”

The collective beast of curiosity in the room slipped its leash. A volley of questions came next, which combined into the equivalent of the comprehensive request: “You must tell us!”

Tell you *what*? Elizabeth wondered. As she composed her thoughts, her gaze skimmed the crowd to find Mrs. Archer who, in these uncontrolled circumstances, had taken on the appearance of a stuffed bear. She did not want to embarrass her hostess but she did want to give enough details to settle the curiosity. She felt as if she was trying to tie one of the tricky embroidery knots Lila had taught her. She hoped she would do better with her words than her fingers had with thread.

“British ingenuity,” she began with a straightening of her spine.

“Jolly good!” someone said to a ripple of laughter.

She continued, “I was spared from death by an accident of timing.” Enough said on that score. “After that my first job was to blend in, the second to find a refuge.” She explained the ways she found to darken the skin of her face and hands and feet and to dull her hair. She told how she had tamed two parrots on the road to Garkata.

“Tamed parrots?” This from a skeptical woman.

“My father was a veterinarian. I grew up with parrots. I know a lot about them. When I got to town, I sold one and used the other to gain entry to the Red

Palace.”

“Are parrots so prized?” asked another. “I thought they were common.”

“Mine was prized,” she said. “Pearls came out of his ears.”

A puzzled pause fell. At the time she was trying to find a way to safety in Garkata she had been tired and hungry and frightened, with only her wits left to save her. Her trick with the parrot had been born of dire desperation. Standing now in the safety of Mrs. Archer’s sitting room she realized she could present it as an amusing anecdote.

She took a light tone. “I know a lot about parrots,” she repeated. “I know what they eat, how they digest, how their digestion can be altered based on what they eat.” She did not feel the need to elaborate further. “I was on the point of selling the second parrot when three young women, very nicely dressed, passed by and took an interest in my bird. I assumed they had money, so I came up with the idea to prove to them he was a magic parrot, hoping they might wish to buy it.”

She left out the part that the three young women were the spoiled favorites of the Rana and that they were not supposed to be outside the Zenana. More importantly, she did not mention the three had a secret passage in and out of the palace, which proved to be her salvation because a penniless lone woman would not have been given access to the palace through the front gate. She had also not thought of attempting refuge there because she did not know at the time the political leanings in the state of Rajgurat.

“Although I left my Western clothing at the scene I kept my pearl necklace,” she explained. “I broke the chain and stored the individual pearls in a belt I fashioned to wear under my sari. While the three women weren’t looking, I fished one out and gave it to one of the girls. I told them it had come out of the parrot’s right ear and said another one would come out from his left ear but they had to give him time. So I had the women buy a few delicacies in the market, which I fed to him along with another pearl. Then we went to a park to wait. I put my hands where they could see them but also told them they had to stare into the parrot’s eyes and to wish for a pearl. When I got the result I wanted, I said a magic word ... and pulled a pearl from his left ear.”

“How?” a woman asked, still puzzled.

“Sleight of hand,” she said, seeing no need to say the words *parrot poop*.

“Ah,” she said, unenlightened.

She forged on. “One of the young women asked me, ‘If your parrot can produce pearls, then why are you so thin and dressed so poorly?’ For the flash of a second I thought my trick was doomed, but then I managed to find the way out. I told them, ‘The magic of the parrot cannot be used for his owner’s benefit. I can, however, give the pearls to whomever I want.’”

“I say!” came an approving cry.

“Yes, the explanation served me well,” Elizabeth acknowledged, “because the women then had no interest in owning the parrot and instead invited me to come with them. It was then I realized I had the great good fortune to be sheltered in the Red Palace.” She did not say then she had only a couple of weeks’ worth of pearls and that the prince had, in effect, saved her from the probable wrath of the greedy trio. Before anyone could stop to think how odd it would be for three apparently well-born Indian women to be in public without escort, she wrapped up her story with a magnificent lie, “And the three women, who had jewels aplenty, eventually lost interest in the parrot and took up the task of making me feel at home.”

This recital was followed by applause and calls of “Brilliant!” “Well done!” “Jolly well done!” and “British ingenuity, indeed!”

Mrs. Archer, whose instincts as a hostess were good enough to know she could break things up now that the audience had been satisfied, was able to get all the people who had not been specifically invited out of her house.

Ten minutes later Elizabeth, experiencing emotional deflation from her public recital, pleaded a desire to go home. Mrs. Archer, who could not unbend enough to congratulate Elizabeth on her quick wits, said that she understood and bid her unusual and popular guest good night.

Elizabeth prepared herself for bed but her nerves were too taut from the difficult evening to find sleep. So she lay awake and let her thoughts drift. At some point she became aware of a conversation taking place not far from her back window. When she heard the words, “Mr. Jenkins said the palace was quite

decadent," she identified the speaker as Miss Dawson. So she got up and crouched at her back window, knowing exactly the old adage about eavesdroppers hearing nothing good – and decided to stay and listen anyway.

"Quite a horrible thing, wasn't it, what happened to Mr. Jenkins," came the reply.

Elizabeth wasn't sure of the voice and tentatively assigned it to a Miss Benchley.

"He was a bit of a bounder, our Mr. Jenkins," Miss Dawson opined.

"But to die so horribly, being stabbed after a bad turn of a card."

"My point precisely," was Miss Dawson's rather chilly assessment of the end of this man's life. "The lot had probably been drinking – and no charges were laid against the man who stabbed him. But more to the point at the moment was his description of what went on in the palace that spread throughout town."

After a moment of silence Miss Benchley ventured, "Perhaps it wasn't so bad. Perhaps he was exaggerating, he being a bounder and all."

Elizabeth could almost hear Miss Dawson's shrug. "No matter. No man will have her now."

"She's pretty, though."

"Passably."

Elizabeth didn't disagree. She had never thought herself a beauty.

"The men certainly like her. They were hanging on her every word. Freddie Stanhope made a great cake of himself and couldn't keep his eyes off her."

"The outlandish story she told!" Miss Dawson said with a nice touch of scorn. "Parrots, indeed. It can't be true."

"Possibly," Miss Benchley conceded. "But it is true she escaped a brutal attack. It's also true she found refuge in the Red Palace. And everyone agrees she was delivered to us by order of the prince."

"Still, no respectable man is likely to have her now."

Miss Dawson's pronouncement seemed to settle the matter, and the two women moved away, making it impossible for Elizabeth to hear more of their conversation.

Welcome home! she concluded with all due irony.

She might have guessed how she would be received but, given the tumble of her emotions, had not got that far in her thinking. She decided it was just as well she had bumped up against the hard truth without having to strain her own thoughts on the matter. And now the stark problem of her place in the world was staring her in the face.

Her conclusion twisted into the tentative *Welcome home?*

Mrs. Hempelsted had not overstated her assessment of Elizabeth's popularity. The next day morning callers came aplenty. Mrs. Archer, anticipating the possibility, had come early to advise Elizabeth. However, before she could deliver herself of her sound advice, Elizabeth informed her that if anyone should chance to come calling, they should be told that Elizabeth would be staying in her room and needed time alone.

Mrs. Archer's response was tight-lipped. "That is most wise and exactly as I thought myself."

So it went over the next few days, during which she discovered that Mr. Frederick Stanhope was fond of leaving his card. Him she most definitely did not wish to see. Instead, she was content with the company of Mrs. Hempelsted and Sumita and the surbahar that clever little Sumita was able to scare up for her.

"We won't tell anyone you know how to play it," Mrs. Hempelsted said, when Elizabeth put the instrument in her lap and began to strum.

Elizabeth looked up, half-amused. "No, I suppose you're right."

Mrs. Hempelsted considered the matter. "I wonder whether Mrs. Archer can hear it, our bungalows being so close to one another, you know."

"I shall play softly."

After a few minutes Mrs. Hempelsted felt compelled to say, frowning slightly, "What a strange sound."

"Why, yes, it is," Elizabeth agreed, "but I'm used to it now and find it soothing."

The quiet and relative solitude did her good, and the twing and the twang of

the notes, as she plucked out melodies, helped to knit the frayed parts of her soul.

Those parts came unspooled one afternoon when Mrs. Archer swept into the sitting room of the yellow bungalow to announce that her husband had returned and had asked that she meet him at his offices in the colonial government building where she had just been. What she was going to say next was thwarted when she looked at the odd instrument Elizabeth was holding. She glared at it for a moment, shook her head once then continued,

“I have just met your Prince Badar Ali,” she said with some importance then added, “His Royal Highness of Rajgurat,” as if she took pleasure in saying the full title.

Elizabeth put the instrument aside, her heart beating faster to imagine him in Rawalpindi. She held her breath.

Mrs. Archer’s ample bosom puffed out. “And the prince has graciously asked me to be in charge of organizing a dinner he wants to hold in my husband’s honor at the Summer Palace at the end of this week.” Mrs. Archer ended her announcement with a finely parsed English compliment. “Although he is a bit darker than I would like, I find him a not entirely unreasonable man.”

Elizabeth didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She was entirely sure of the fluttering she felt at the prospect of seeing him again.

Chapter 9

Badar Ali left Colonel Archer’s office, satisfied. A copy of a treaty he had just negotiated sat comfortably in his jacket pocket. It was waiting to be signed, if both parties still agreed, in a ceremony at the Summer Palace.

Riding out with his traveling party, he quickly put Rawalpindi behind him and headed north and west. The sun still blistered during the day but as evening came upon them and it came time to make camp the air was noticeably cooler. Above the foothills that lay like wrinkled velvet the long, jagged line of the snowy peaks of the Himalayas came into view. As the sun set they turned from shimmering white to cool blue and then winked sapphire before a big yellow moon came out to gild them. The journey could have been undertaken in one day, but Badar Ali had

chosen to head out in the afternoon so he could enjoy a night in the open air with his men, hawking and hunting as they went, eating rice and curries and sticky sweetmeats served on green leaves, washing it down with buffalo milk or water from a nearby stream.

They rose early and easily reached the Summer Palace before mid-day. The lion-colored sandstone palace heaved into view miles before they arrived, with the contours of the massive bulk bristling with fragile domed peacock towers becoming clearer by the minute. It had taken several months of copious correspondence with authorities in Rawalpindi and Lahore to secure the use of this now largely neglected residence, and he had sent ahead servants and provisions to clean up this largely neutral territory where he hoped negotiations would be completed. He smoothed his way past Colonel Archer's objection that Badar Ali would act as host by enlisting Mrs. Archer's help in organizing the main dinner. She had only to tell the ministers Badar Ali left behind in Rawalpindi what she needed, and they would be at her command. He left her with a list of fifteen people he thought suitable to attend the occasion, having felt a lift in his breast to include the name of Mrs. Elizabeth Wilkins. He invited Mrs. Archer to add another fifteen of her own choosing.

Down they rode into a green valley where they splashed across a rushing river, shunning the bridge. Then came the climb to the main courtyard of the palace whose massive wooden and iron gates were already thrown open. Badar Ali had received a plan of the palace and consulted it as he roamed the exterior corridors, with their airy arches framing views of the magnificent valley and majestic mountains. He poked in and out of what would be the guest chambers. The palace showed the usual signs of decay from disuse but at least the cobwebs had now been cleared, the mattresses aired, rugs beaten, the kitchen spruced up and the plentiful courtyard gardens watered and tended. Guessing the Summer Palace had secret corridors similar to those sneaking through the Laal Mahal he made a point of finding them and following them – just in case.

He was standing in one of the peacock towers when the carriages from Rawalpindi picked their way up the path to the main courtyard. When he thought anyone in the traveling party scanning the battlements might be close enough to see

him, he stepped away. He was not on hand in the courtyard to greet his guests. He waited until the first soft shadows of evening were scurrying throughout the palace to dress in European formal attire and to descend to the main hallway where he established a receiving line composed only of himself, with four of his ministers standing behind him, resplendent in colorful finery. Monstrous wrought-iron chandeliers ablaze with candles turned the massive paving stones of the floor to bronze. The usual fragrant smells of a palace in autumn surrounded him, but he seemed unable to detect the scent of anything but roasting beef. He knew his guests would enjoy it, even if he did not partake.

The colonel, covered in medals, and Mrs. Archer, covered in jewels, were the first ones to greet him. He took careful note of the order of the following guests, determined by rank, and acknowledged his impatience for his pretty pet to make her way and to – Here his thoughts broke off, for he realized he had long since ceased thinking of her as a tame palace cat. A regal lioness in command of her domain was more like it, but he shied away from trying to identify the location or extent of that domain. When at last her turn came to greet him, she curtsied low and put her hand in his, and he was momentarily taken aback by the streak of electricity he felt shoot up his arm. She had raised her eyes only as far as a point on his neck. He wondered, a little moodily, when he would be able to see her blue eyes.

With introductions finished, the meal began on the adjoining terrace ringed with torches, smoldering braziers scattered here and there to ward off cool breezes rolling down from the mountains. Badar Ali had stealthily made three changes to the seating cards Mrs. Archer had arranged on the long table set for thirty. He removed himself from the head to sit slightly off center on one side. He likewise removed Colonel Archer from the foot of the table and put him on the side opposite Badar Ali, slightly off center in the other direction, so that he and Colonel Archer were not directly opposite one another, but within easy speaking distance. He then seated Mrs. Wilkins three chairs to the colonel's right. As the guests took their places, he noted Mrs. Archer's slight confusion, but the hostess was hardly in position to say anything once everyone was seated.

The dishes were served – good solid English fare – wine flowed and talk was

animated. It was entirely predicable that the topic of the railroads was first at bat, and the usual grumblings were aired that it would be a decade – or more! – before Rawalpindi would have its train to Delhi. On the talk went, in small groups around the table, until – and here again Badar Ali could have timed to the minute the entrance of this topic into the conversation – all side groups ceased and the table became united around the moral basis of English rule in India.

“Suttee,” one of the gentlemen said. “Just heard of another one.” He shuddered. “Not here, thank God, but Puducherry. Still back in the Dark Ages!”

Grumbles of assent rolled around the table.

Mrs. Hempelsted interjected with sorrow and indignation, “Girls made to stir boiling rice with their little fingers in order to teach them to bear fire without flinching! Barbaric!”

The horrors of the ancient practice of burning the widow on her husband’s funeral pyre never failed to unite Englishmen around common cause. Heartfelt feelings were vented until Colonel Archer asked, because he was in easy speaking distance of Badar Ali,

“And what say you, Your Highness?”

Badar Ali’s answer was ready-made. “The Rana embraced the British ban when it was first introduced a couple of decades ago.” Badar Ali did not bother to mention that when the ban came into effect, the Rana had already buried his first wife and so was not much exercised by the new law; and when, some years later, his second wife went the way of the first and he had no desire for a third, he did not exert himself to reintroduce suttee in his state. “For all intents and purposes it has stopped. Upon my return in May I read a report that suttee was carried out in one of our remote villages some years ago, but beyond that, the practice has been stamped out and is now considered backward.”

This was cause for cheer, the clinking of glasses and a confident sense that the British had done right for India. The topic also opened on to the one Badar Ali had felt bubbling up all evening and was just now rising to the surface.

“It’s good to find India moving forward,” said the man sitting next to Mrs. Wilkins. Badar Ali identified him as Jonathan Mavery, a *boxwallah* ‘European trader’

whose fortunes had miraculously survived the Sepoy Rebellion. "A woman shouldn't be burned alive because her husband dies. My word. Think of it, Mrs. Wilkins."

"I would rather not," she replied to appreciative laughter that vented the pent-up emotions invariably accompanying the topic.

Mr. Mavery's redirection of the conversation was all it took for the group's attention to fall on Mrs. Wilkins. Badar Ali had felt various interested pairs of eyes darting back and forth between himself and his lioness all evening long. Speculating. Wondering.

"I'm sure you'd find a way to escape," Mavery continued, "from all the stories I've heard about your bravery and resourcefulness. Magic parrots and the rest."

Magic parrots? He would have to ask her about them if she gave him a signal she would be open to meeting with him.

She demurred and declined to comment, but Mavery was not going to let her off the hook. He was ideally suited and seated to give the table what they wanted to hear. "And the berries! Why, that was bloody – pardon me! – thumping great thinking!"

She seemed to understand what was expected of her, because she composed herself before saying, "I experimented and found a combination of crushed nuts and berries to darken my skin."

After a pause Mavery prompted, "And?"

"I discovered the dye lasted about four days. I also discovered that a new application would not work over the old, so I had to wash it all off and start anew. It would have been better if I could have applied the oil in layers, to make it become more permanent." She shook her head. "It didn't work."

Four days. So. The mystery of the schedule of her open-air nocturnal baths was solved.

"But then you might have ended up with permanently dyed skin," a woman objected. "Did you think of that?"

"I thought only of staying alive."

Mavery kept it going. "And then you ended up at the Red Palace, as a guest of his highness, where you got to know him."

“Got to know him?” she queried blankly, looking directly at her interlocutor.

Mavery was momentarily off balance. “I mean, I mean,” he blustered before coming to his point, “You both speak English. Surely, you must have had a conversation or two.”

She smiled slightly and said in tones of simple truth, “The first words I exchanged with his highness were this evening, when he said something like ‘Mrs. Wilkins, thank you for coming.’ And I said, ‘Your Highness, the pleasure is mine.’”

Mavery glanced in question at Badar Ali who merely inclined his head in assent and sat back to enjoy whatever was to come next. Mavery returned his attention to Mrs. Avery. “Perhaps he sent you a note, keeping you updated.”

“He sent me no note,” she said then let her gaze briefly travel around the table but she did not look directly at Badar Ali. “It wouldn’t have been proper.”

“Not proper to let you know anything about your status?”

“My status as a guest was quite clear.” She paused then said, “I don’t know what you’ve heard about the Red Palace or practices in other palaces, but men and women are kept strictly apart. His highness would not have engaged in conversation or any other kind of communication with me. He acted to maintain my status, not to compromise it.”

“Surely, no, I mean, surely, men and women get together.”

Again she smiled. “I am sure they do. However, in the palace I was no man’s mother, daughter, sister or wife, so there was no reason I would be in any kind of proximity to a man. In fact, you see the distance between me and his highness right now – I judge it to be five feet or more. This was the closest I came to any man during my time in the palace. It is hardly conversational distance.”

“Remarkable,” was Mavery’s response.

Mrs. Wilkins was wearing the most modest dress of any woman in the room, but Badar Ali judged her to be the most desirable, certainly the most sensuous in her gestures and manner, and he was guessing every other man did, too. He could feel the shifts her comments were causing, making the single men aware of her as eligible in a way they might not have been before, and making the married men downgrade her potential as an easy target for a fling. Badar Adi was, once again,

momentarily surprised by his response. He could not deny the murderous impulses that suddenly came alive in his breast to imagine any man but himself consorting with his lioness.

“In the context it all made sense,” she said. “You see here we are seated next to one another, alternating man, woman, man, woman. It’s normal for us, how we organize society. At the palace, no.”

“How did you feel about it?”

Her smile was serene. “Safe.”

Chapter Ten

Elizabeth judged her countrymen to be nothing less than astounded by her comments. Miss Dawson, for one, looked very put out. She could imagine the prince was pleased, if only because she had increased his credibility in the eyes of her countrymen. But there was more to it. The thrill she had felt at his touch when she had put her hand in his seemed to reestablish their silent connection. Emotions thick and vibrant were flowing between them; she could feel them. Perhaps the connection was perceptible to all, and Mr. Mavery had taken the opportunity of probing into what it might be.

One bright guest added two plus two. “So that’s why there were no women in line to receive us, only men standing behind his highness, and they didn’t join us for dinner.”

Since the comment was aimed at her, she fielded it. She gestured to her plate. “The only thing more taboo, Captain Watt, than a man seated next to a woman he isn’t related to would be to eat beef.”

Captain Watt replied, “The sacred cow, quite right. I notice you haven’t touched yours, Mrs. Wilkins.”

“It’s a taste I have to reacquire, I suppose.”

Now that the captain had entered the lists, others found their way to asking questions. Mrs. Petty commented, “Last week the description you gave at Mrs. Archer’s of how you made your way into the Red Palace was utterly charming, but I don’t imagine all your adventures were equally charming.” Then, apparently

realizing the insensitivity of what she had just said, she added, mortified, "Not that they started in any pleasant way. I do beg your pardon."

Elizabeth never wished for anyone to be made uncomfortable by what had befallen her. "Thank you, Mrs. Petty. You have nothing to apologize for, since my experiences have been so far out of the ordinary it is hard to know how to speak of them! And you are quite right. Nothing was pleasant at first. I will admit to being terrified, to not knowing whether I would live to see another day. I didn't know where I was. I had only a beaten-up map to guide me to a town where I thought I might find food, shelter and perhaps a way to communicate with someone in the Company. I hardly knew the way forward or even if there were a way forward."

The Sepoy Rebellion was quickly discussed, along with brief, respectful mention of the attack on the Wilkins' caravan, which had been deemed unrelated to the general unrest. Elizabeth didn't think attention would stay off her for long, and she was right. When the political situation had been thrashed out, Colonel Archer took the reins by saying,

"Tell us the more pleasant things, then, Mrs. Wilkins, if you please. You were invited to the palace, and the women did their best to acclimate you."

"Yes," she replied, "but on that score there is not much more to tell."

"You surprise me," continued the colonel. "Mrs. Archer tells me you apparently learned to play the – what is it? – ah, yes, the surbahar."

She felt the prince's surprise and interest but still she did not look at him. "The women were very kind and patient, encouraging me in different arts."

"Such as –?"

"Needlework," she replied easily, "but I was not much of a deft hand at it. Lovely work they do, to be sure, so I left it to the experts."

Lieutenant Sheffield, a young man whose florid complexion might have been further deepened by too much wine, said dismissively, "Musical instruments and needlework?" Then, eagerly, "Tell us about the belly dancing. That's what we'd like to hear."

Gasps were audible. The prince's interest flared. Murmurs arose to the effect that Mrs. Wilkins need not respond.

She knew just how to dampen interest. "I can tell you the dance began as an aid to women giving birth. Watching the rhythmic contractions of another woman's stomach helps in the process. Only later did it become a public art form."

Colonel Archer, naturally embarrassed and grasping for a change of subject, asked hastily, "And what is it like in the women's quarters?"

She had a good idea the men at the table – the women, too, for that matter – would have liked to hear about the nakedness in the serail itself, how the women teased the eunuchs, how the Three Scorpions, ahem, Beauties, as they were widely known, whined and bullied and always got their way, how the light reflected off the blue tiles of the harem in ever changing patterns as the sun circled the sky. They would surely want to know about the scents of sweet perfumes, the feel of the spicy oils, and the grooming rituals the women performed on a regular basis, as well as the customs in the bath.

"I was not a part of the women's quarters," she said, "although I was housed there. You see, I had my own room with a garden and a separate entrance."

"Your very own garden?" Mrs. Archer chimed in.

"Herbs and flowers and my own fountain," she replied. With a deferential nod in the prince's direction, she added, "Kindly granted by his highness, so I understood."

"If you were separated then how did you learn all you did?"

"I was assigned companions. They helped make my time quite enjoyable."

She experienced a bad moment similar to the one she had had in the market in Garkata, at the point when her story of the magic parrot might have unraveled. She realized that every detail of her account of her arrival at the palace and the subsequent months she had spent here did not strictly add up, and she had a sense that her audience was becoming aware of discrepancies – omissions, certainly – but was not quite sure where they were or how to reconcile them. She was saved from embarrassment by Miss Dawson's apparent pique that Elizabeth could emerge from her experiences unscathed and untainted.

"Mrs. Wilkins," the beauty of Rawalpindi said, "you make it sound as if each one of us would so lucky to be a guest at the Red Palace."

She looked at Miss Dawson who was seated near the prince and said, speaking to him, "I can tell you that I think fondly of the many afternoons I spent there, lazily reading, enjoying the play of sunlight freckling the marble floor as it strained through carved windows. I drank cool water, ate nuts and dried fruit and often paused to daydream." She paused then added warmly, "I would take one more afternoon if it were given to me."

Complete silence fell. After a moment Mr. Mavery roused himself to comment, "I say, Mrs. Wilkins, you have given us a rather different version of life in the palace than the one that circulated in town a few months back."

She could guess that the stories of the palace told by George Jenkins floated into everyone's mind with the word 'decadent' uppermost. She said, "To sum it up in two words, life in the palace is both controlled and luxurious."

She had hoped to end the discussion, and she succeeded. Talk moved on, awkwardly at first, to new subjects. Dessert was served and soon thereafter the women repaired to a nearby chamber where tea was brewing, while the men stayed behind to enjoy their brandy.

Elizabeth made sure to take a place next to Mrs. Hempelsted on a Persian divan. She chatted with her housemate, listened to the general discussion but contributed little to it, since she had already said her piece. She intuited, however, that her descriptions were churning in busy brains. She caught, here and there, an assessing glance thrown her way. She overheard one woman opine that perhaps taking an extended break from the company of men might be good for one's womanhood. Although the question of Elizabeth's virtue had been put to rest, the women could not quite conceal their suspicions that *something* had happened in the palace, something that had made this only passably pretty woman the object of such male interest – and interest there had been, Elizabeth had felt it. But she cared only about the interest of one man to whom she had made her frank appeal. She hoped he would act on it but was fearful he wouldn't.

She could have told the women that once desire had surfaced on her skin, she had no wish to tamp the dew back down through her pores. The sensuality of palace life had shown her the suppressed sensuality of English society. If men and women

were separated for long periods of time, they could cultivate their desires for the times they did come together. However, if men and women were going to sit next to one another for the space of a long meal, for instance, then one half of the participants, at least, had to be in control of their desire. Which meant, in the case of Englishwomen, to have no desire at all. She hit on the base meaning of 'proper.'

Miss Dawson's pique seemed to be a constant spur. At one moment she said, loud enough for the whole group to hear and almost in spite of herself, "The prince is a fine-looking man. It is too bad, Mrs. Wilkins, that you had no interaction with him."

Elizabeth was spared the necessity of a reply. This was all too much for Mrs. Archer, who could not have liked the general tenor of Elizabeth's conversation at dinner but could hardly censure a woman generally regarded a stellar example of British fortitude in the face of adversity. She was likely happy to find in Miss Dawson a more appropriate target for the upset of her feelings the dinner might have caused.

"Miss Dawson," she said severely, "what maggot has penetrated your brain? What an entirely unsuitable thing to say – or even *think*."

Miss Dawson had no fear of Mrs. Archer. She was too popular to be left off any guest list. She said, "His accent is perfect, he is very well tailored and he has a fine – pardon me, I should say *luxurious* – estate. We have often spoken of any number of officers in our army in just such terms."

It was beneath Mrs. Archer's dignity to mention the color of his skin in such a public setting. "Yes, in our army, and you may speak of them however you wish, but if you throw around the term 'fine looking man' too often, you will get a reputation for being fast. Now, as far as the prince is concerned, Colonel Archer is in important negotiations with him – which the colonel forbade me to mention – but since it seems" – here she glanced at Elizabeth – "the prince can be depended upon to do the right thing, the treaty signing is likely to go very well tomorrow evening, and I mention it now so that you may put the prince in his proper context: a man doing business with us but who is not of us."

Miss Dawson seemed uncowed by the reproof but did not pursue the matter.

Elizabeth, for her part, had come to understand what she might have been able to guess all along. The prince had treated her in such a way that she was likely to give some version of the story she told at the table tonight. She had served his political purposes, and so what? He had not invited her to the palace, she had smuggled herself in. He had discovered her presence and done with her what he wanted. She wasn't sorry. And she did want him to make good on the promise of sexuality he had given her in every way but words.

Chapter Eleven

"Well done, Your Highness," Colonel Archer said when the women had left the dining hall. "I now better understand the care you took with Mrs. Wilkins and the way you valued her safety in this uncertain political situation over haste in returning her to us."

Badar Ali returned this easy lob with one of his own. He nodded in appreciation of the compliment and said, "Every organization is only as strong as its leader, and although I admit to having chafed under the strictures of British education" – groans of assent could be heard around the table – "I discovered upon my return to the Laal Mahal that a strong dose of British discipline would strengthen not only the palace but also the state of Rajgurat and its relationship to Crown rule in India, which is now taking shape. So, yes, I took care, reading reports and corresponding widely."

Various rounds of "Well said!" and "Here, here!" were offered as well as more than one toast to Badar Ali and the state of Rajgurat. He partook sparingly of the alcohol, now able to imagine other pleasures ahead in the evening.

Thereafter talk turned to sizing up the strengths and weaknesses of the equestrian teams in Rawalpindi and to predicting who would knock the spots off the others in the upcoming *gymkhana* 'tournament'. Badar Ali was an avid sportsman and so could participate in the discussion while allowing part of his thoughts to travel in another direction. The success of his plan for the evening had far exceeded his expectations. His position with Colonel Archer was strong. His lioness had played her part perfectly, aiming her comments with deadly precision. Her

description of their afternoons together had certainly hit him exactly where she intended.

He glanced through the tall windows of the hall perfectly framing the distant Himalayan peak of Liligo, tinged a delicate pink in the twilight and rising above the surrounding ridges and gullies like a great frozen wave. He felt something shift inside him. It was an unsettling of some emotional mass, heard as a rumbling, perhaps dangerous. He thought back to the moment he realized he might be watching his beautiful lioness belly dance – and he was now sure she had been in that enchanting line of women – and remembered his feeling of helplessness. After her performance he had thought it wise to no longer summon her to his Exchequer. But three days later, he managed to talk himself out of his precaution and was happy with his decision when she was once again curled up on her rug, surrounded by her luxuries.

Talk among the men drifted. Stupid jokes were cracked and laughed at. Enough brandy had been drunk for one man to ask, “Tell us, Watt, how goes your courtship of Miss Dawson?”

Several of Watt’s fellow officers glanced at Colonel Archer who rolled his eyes to the ceiling and gestured to the effect that he would allow the subject.

“She has many suitors to choose from, I’m afraid,” Watt replied, “and I have no idea whether she holds me in higher esteem than any other.”

He was offered encouragement. “When your promotion comes through, things may change” was followed by “I’ve seen how she looks at you. I would not be so crass to call her a flirt, but you may be assured of her regard.” And “Keep at it, man. Perseverance wins a woman’s heart. That, and your handsome face, of course.”

Badar Ali considered the possibility that Watt’s tepid assessment of the interest shown to him by Miss Dawson signaled he might be open to pursuing another woman, while efforts to keep his attention on Miss Dawson were designed to have him retire from the lists of pursuing that other woman. His suspicions were confirmed when the subject switched to Mrs. Wilkins, as if the transition were a matter of course.

Mavery said, “Back in Rawalpindi, Stanhope told me he had met Mrs. Wilkins

twice in London. I didn't have the pleasure, but I did meet her husband through contacts at the Company. Friendly chap. Seemed competent, well-suited to his position and very eager to get on with his assignment." His slight pause was meditative. Then, "I'm not sure he could have guessed how pluck up to the backbone his wife would turn out to be."

Murmurs of assent and admiration were uttered.

"Had quite a time of it, she did," Colonel Archer agreed then added, "I've taken the liberty of arranging her passage back to England. A few weeks from now I'm sending her to Bombay where she'll stay until the weather is right for ships to sail."

Thus was the topic of Mrs. Wilkins at an end.

Badar Ali, interpreting his mix of emotions as eagerness, wrapped things up with a suggestion of cigars on the terrace. He was happy a number of men chose to take him up on the offer, even happier Colonel Archer declined. So he set the servants in motion and then left the hall with the colonel, chatting amiably, mostly about the weather. As they traveled the hallways, with the view of the Himalayas, now dark and brooding coming in and out of view, Badar Ali offered to find a local version of a Sherpa and to have the colonel and some of his men join him in a climb.

The colonel, pleased by the offer, accepted quickly. They had arrived at an intersection where the guest rooms for the British lay to the right. Badar Ali bowed, bade his guest a good night and turned pointedly to the left.

Not much later he had shed his formal attire for the billowing comforts of loose trousers and a dressing gown and was moving through the secret passage leading to a veranda that adjoined the room he had assigned to his lioness. He came to the end and found the latches he had earlier learned to use. Wood scraped wood, and the panel slid open to reveal her regally seated on a stone bench, her arms folded across the top of the carved railing overlooking an interior garden. Her profile, aglow in the moonlight, was dearly familiar to him. The shawl she wore over her night rail was in charming disarray around her shoulders. Her golden hair tumbled down her back.

At the sound she looked up, her expression of happiness visible even in the

darkness. She made a movement to rise, but he quickly gestured for her to stay put. Then he pointed to the door behind her, the one leading to her bedchamber. She did not immediately go there but instead watched him walk around the inside perimeter of the veranda so he could keep to the shadows. When he was a few feet away, she rose, letting her shawl drift to the floor, and stood by her door. The next moment she was in his arms.

She held his face in her hands and said, "Let me look at you."

He finally felt the force of her beautiful blue eyes on him, but he retained enough of his wits to tell her, "We're being watched. Closely. I have guards in the hallways and the garden below and more guards to watch the ones the colonel has posted to protect you."

"He thinks one of his men would importune me tonight?"

"No, the colonel is a man of sense. He fears me."

Her eyes continued to roam his face. "He was right." Then she dropped her hands, grasped one of his and led him into the bedroom where she pushed him down onto the rug by her bed.

He fell into a comfortable heap and pulled her next to him. "Quite right," he said, "the bed might make noise."

Her small laugh was enchanting. "Silly man," she said, drawing away from him so she could slip out of her night rail, "do you think I'd want to be anywhere but on a rug?" When he put his hands on the tie at his waist, she brushed them aside. Shaking her head, she admonished, "No, no, you're mine. Lay back."

He did as she bade, and she lovingly withdrew his dressing gown. Then she proceeded to kiss him where she chose, behind his ears, on his eyelids, on his lips. Her fingers spread through his hair, pressing fingertips into his scalp. They moved around his head to the base of his skull where she massaged his neck then his shoulders. Her breasts brushed his chest, lightly, producing tingling sensations dancing down his spine to his groin. She brushed her throat against his lips and he breathed her in.

"Roses," he murmured.

"From Rawalpindi," she said. "At the market Mrs. Archer wouldn't hear of me

buying jasmine.”

She took her time ministering to him, and he luxuriated. She took great interest in his hands, sucking his fingers one by one then placing them so he could cup her breasts. She looked at him languorously then bent down to kiss him. He lost himself in the softness of her lips, her scent, her comfortable nakedness, her boldness. Then she finally inched down to remove his trousers and kissed him intimately with feather kisses, almost maddening in the way they further increased his arousal.

“Let me know when you’re ready,” he managed.

“I’ve been ready for a long time,” she said, turning toward him, her hand wrapping around his member to replace her lips. “You know that.” Then she straddled him and sheathed him in one liquid motion, breathing, “Lingam.”

“Yoni,” he replied.

She draped herself on his torso, wrapping her arms around his head. The fit was perfect. The rhythm was perfect. Soon they were scampering up the peaks of the Himalayas, rough and jagged and beautiful, breathing intoxicating air that became rarer and rarer and rarer still until they almost reached the top when she put her hands on his shoulders and pressed her arms to their full extension, sitting fully upright atop him. The next moment came the surging flood of pure pleasure, and she was shaking from the awesome power of it with him and for him to see through half-closed lashes. A moment later she collapsed on top of him, and they tumbled together halfway down the mountain to land in a snow-white drift, panting with the sheer delight of surprise and the deep satisfaction of a desire long deferred.

When he could stay inside her no longer, she slid off him and used her discarded night rail to delicate purpose. Then she snuggled against him and permitted him now to stroke her as he wished. When he was recovered enough to speak, he said,

“Tell me about the parrots.”

She shifted slightly to prop her elbow on the rug and her head in her hand. She pressed her lips to his ear, traced the shell with her tongue and whispered with a seductive lilt, “If we’re to have but this one night together, I’m not going to waste

time talking.”

The mass inside him that had shifted after dinner suddenly lurched, the far-off rumbling approached and gathered speed and, at the very time it was happening – which meant it was, in fact, too late to escape – he realized he was caught in an avalanche of emotion. It roared and screamed the rest of the way down the side of the mountain, accelerating in such mass and volume that when this furious force of nature hit hard ground he was buried in hopeless desire with no way out.

He was paralyzed.

She took advantage of his state to do all the things she wanted, as patient in the time he needed for the next passage as she had been in his Exchequer where she had exposed herself to him from various angles, reading and popping sweet delights into her mouth. He was on her rug now, roused to a constant state of pleasure blending into bliss, and could not be bothered to work out how he had lost possession of his heart or what – if anything – he could do about it.

What he did was to revel in her, with her skin like milk, her hair a fall of sunlight in the darkness, her eyes mountain lakes. He was mesmerized every time she would pause to hold his face and simply stare at him. When soft cat’s paws crept into the room to announce the approach of dawn, they finished with him on top of her, their arms stretched out above their heads, fingers entwined. He made a move to untangle himself but she held him in the vise of her thighs.

“One more minute,” she begged.

He gave it to her. Then it was time to leave. She helped him into his clothes and pressed herself to his length. Then she kissed him with passion, stared at him one last time and let him go.

He left in a state of considerable confusion. He recalled the feeling that had animated him at end of dinner, which he identified at the time as eagerness. Upon leaving her now, he understood that some emotional predator had roamed around behind his evident sexual drive and desire to be with her. It was restless and made him anxious. As he traveled back through the secret passageway, he was stunned to confront that restless predator– that fear-inducing, head-and-heart-seizing power, unexpected, even unwanted.

Love. Impossible – and yet equally impossible to deny.

It happened to others, this love, to his silly fellow college Cantabs who would moon over a pretty face, declare their lives transformed and claim to be walking on air. One of his mistresses in England had fancied herself in love with him. He had dismissed the idea as absurd. Love did not figure in a financial transaction. As for Yasmina, he neither knew nor cared how she felt.

Koda Des had once told him that he was devoted to his wife. Badar Ali understood devotion. He understood care for others, respect and responsibility. He could even imagine love for a child. But an overwhelming love for a woman, especially a foreigner – this *feringhi Angrezi-bai*? Or did his distaste for his emotion arise from his distance from her lack of social status, her commonness? Or *his* commonness for feeling such a thing he thought infected only a man without a principality to call his own. But then he recalled it was widely reported Queen Victoria loved her Prince Albert, and the birth of their ninth child this year seemed to support the reports. But she was a woman. In him the feeling made him feel weak and vulnerable in a way he had never felt before.

A new question plagued him: When had it happened? The avalanche he had felt in her arms, when she teased him and refused to tell him about the parrots, had been an end point, not the beginning. Had he fallen in love with her at dinner when she recounted without self-pity to an overly curious audience the horrors she must have felt on her road to Garkata and then generously transformed him into a prince among princes in the eyes of that audience? No, it was surely when he saw her entrancing belly dance. Or, earlier that same day, when she had learned to play the game in the Exchequer so well she refused to bat an eye when she discovered he spoke her language as well as she did. No, it must have been when she raised her eyes to his in the serail, and he saw in their beautiful depths her apprehension but also her bone-deep resolve. The colonel had said she had backbone, and Badar Ali could not but admire her for it. An alchemical formula might account for his feeling, then, two parts admiration and one part sexual desire produced the deep drift smothering him.

He was fooling himself. He first fell in love upon beholding his Earthly Hour.

She owned him now and probably had all along. Further revelation: she was anything but common. In fact, she was the most extraordinary creature he had ever met, her most distinctive trait being her uncommon courage.

He would have to summon some uncommon courage for himself, but he did not know at first what for or why. By the time he arrived at his chamber, he had hit on the *real* question, the one firing his anxiety and requiring his courage, the one that would answer all the others: Did she return his love?

Chapter Twelve

Elizabeth refused to let any thought of what might happen in even the very next minute spoil how she felt at the present moment. She was happy, she was full, she was complete. She hugged this happiness and fullness and completion to her, with the goal of hanging onto them for as long as she could. Ten minutes would be nice. An hour would be better. The whole morning would be glorious. She didn't think she could keep reality at bay forever – no, perish thoughts of reality! They were for later. Now was for wallowing in the continuing glow of her happiness and fullness and completion.

When the sky was light enough to declare the day, she sought the Hindustani-speaking serving girl who had been assigned to her and told her she would take her breakfast in her room. Then she composed notes for both Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Hempelsted, saying she needed further rest alone this morning after all the social interactions of the evening before. They should not worry if they didn't see her until the evening. She was sure they would understand.

After she ate her breakfast and sent her notes around, she had nothing to do, but she was used to daydreaming, so she sat on her veranda and relived every detail of the night before, no longer fantasies but facts! She accepted a few sandwiches for a light lunch and kept spinning dreamy scenes. These delicious thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a note in the early afternoon. Taking the folded paper from the hand of a palace page, she imagined Mrs. Archer had responded to her earlier missive. She opened the note, and her heart spasmed to see the words written in a bold hand:

Please meet me in the garden below your veranda at 4:00. BA

Her heart quavered then quailed. Of course she wanted to see him again and she assumed she would, perhaps at dinner in the midst of company, but she did not think it a good idea to see him alone, which was clearly his intention. Being alone with him again would make it that much harder to never see him again. They had fulfilled the promise of their attraction – and magnificently so – but to ask for more was to ask for trouble.

Daydreaming was no longer possible. She paced at length and dithered even more. At one moment she looked down and murmured in astonishment, “I am wringing my hands.” But her heart was sure of what her hands were not, and she made the only rationally irrational choice. She got dressed, pinned her hair, chose the prettier of the two shawls she now owned and descended to the garden at the appointed time.

Badar Ali was waiting for her at the other end of the garden. When she entered by the gate just below her veranda, he rose from the chair set next to a table for two. She was startled to see him in Rajgurat dress, his customary gray silk tunic and trousers sashed with a kamarband of olive and khaki. He was wearing a turban. As she made her way to him across the paving stones he kept his eyes on her. She lowered hers out of modesty and an instinct for protection that had served her well throughout her ordeals. The air was fresh and the garden a delight of rare, late-blooming lilies. She wanted to take in every detail of the yellow sandstone fashioned into arched galleries defining the space so she could treasure these moments forever, but she was too saturated with her own emotions to be able to register more than fragments of her surroundings, the trickle of a fountain, the creamy scent of lily, an errant breeze.

When she was next to him she looked directly into his face and saw, in the light of day, his eyes were more hazel than gray. She tucked this precious nugget of information into her memory bank, knowing she would mine its ore at a later date.

He helped her to her seat with a light touch on her elbow, setting her heart to wobbling, and asked if she would like a cup of tea.

It was then she noticed the table was set with proper tea and cakes. She also

realized that a cup of tea gave her something to do. "I would love one, Your Highness. May I pour?"

She was not allowed. A lurking serving boy sprang into action at Badar Ali's command. It was comforting to have ritual gestures to fall back on while she tried to calm her pulses.

When they had finished with the polite nothings, Badar Ali rested his forearm on his edge of the table hardly more than a foot away from her and invited, "Tell me the story, if you please, what you would like for me to know."

She put her hands in her lap and smiled. She thought *He wants a conversation. He wants me to confide in him.* She knew exactly which story he meant, and she guessed he wanted more to remember her by.

"It was like nothing I have ever seen or wish to see again," she began then flicked him a glance. "Have you seen battle, Your Highness?"

"No," he replied. "Rajgurat has long been peaceful, and my ten years in England were equally so. Fortunately the Sepoy Rebellion did not reach our borders, and by the time I rode out for reconnaissance – you know, the period when I had you still come to the Exchequer in my absence –"

"Exchequer?" she broke in, amused.

He smiled. "That's what I call my office. In any case, when I rode out, the worst was already over. So, no, I have not had to face up close what you have."

"Such brutality," she said, "the images are so ... gruesome, really, that I look back and imagine it was all a horrible nightmare. And I do think," she added, for she had no reason not to speak honestly and from the heart, "that the quiet and luxury and, indeed, safety, as I mentioned last night, I eventually found in the Red Palace helped soothe me, heal me."

"I'm glad."

She then spoke without restraint of her hunger and fear on the road to Garkata, which she summed up with the wistful comment, "Of course if I had known at the time I would end up all right, the ordeal would have been considerably less emotionally taxing and maybe even, at times, enjoyable."

"You are a brave woman," he commented, "but enjoyable?"

“It’s not knowing the outcome that is so debilitating, don’t you think? Although I was able to find a few things to eat and always found leafy shelter at midday, I could not enjoy those meager comforts. I might have enjoyed bathing in the streams more if I had been in a lighter frame of mind. It is very liberating.”

“I assume, then, that you enjoyed the use of the stream outside the Red Palace,” he said, “because by then your life was in less danger.”

She turned to look at him and uttered an interested, “Oh?”

“Yes, I witnessed your escapes from my balcony, determined your schedule then followed you.”

“Ah, that’s it, then,” she said, enlightened. Then, “Why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

She made a helpless gesture then said, “The Exchequer.”

“You have to ask?”

“I suppose I do. I perfectly well understand how you would use me for political purposes but I don’t understand why you chose the very particular way you did, unless it was for your –”

“My pleasure?” he broke in. “I didn’t necessarily know it would become yours as well, but I wanted to see you naked and had the power to do so.”

She absorbed the obviousness, which was to say the base male nature, of his motives then asked, “And my books and the other luxuries? It was a game.”

“Which you played perfectly,” he acknowledged. “In fact, so well that I –” he broke off, shook his head then reversed course. “Again, it was for my amusement, but you also benefitted. Your thoughts?”

With pursed lips she conceded, “High-handed and blunt but ultimately effective.”

He nodded. “And, now, since I’ve answered your questions, it’s time you tell me about the parrots.”

She nodded and plunged into the particulars of her family background that enabled her to think of such an outrageous trick.

His smile was appreciative. He said, shaking his head, “I’m amazed the Scorpions didn’t catch on.”

“Oh, I’m sure they guessed it was some kind of ruse, but they were still entertained by it when you plucked me out of the serail.”

“How many days’-worth of pearls did you have left?”

She paused then admitted, “Three.”

She didn’t have to look at him to know he was wearing a smug grin.

“Admit it,” he said.

“It’s enough I admitted to the effectiveness of my nakedness and your game.”

“But there’s more to it. My timing was consequential. I saved you. Admit it!”

She said swiftly, “I would have found another way to amuse the Scorpions. Or I would have taken my chances and found a way to flee the palace. Perhaps the rumors of the secret door in the western wall being closed were false.”

He shook his head. “I had it sealed the day I took you.”

This was a new kind of game, a verbal one, and she hated being on the losing end. The only way out was a change of subject. With great dignity she said, “Well, then something else would have occurred to me, if you hadn’t taken me. But speaking of bad ends – which I suppose we are in my case – I’m put in mind of what I heard about your Mr. George Jenkins.”

Badar Ali drew a long breath and said, “A card game gone bad, so I was told, with no more than a hundred rupees at stake. Foolish, bugging chap.”

When he didn’t beg pardon for his language, she suddenly realized they had become too comfortable with one another, that she had ceased calling him Your Highness and had forgotten she would never see him again. She felt her heart wrench and tears well up behind her eyes. This meeting was the mistake she had originally thought, for now she would know how easy a conversationalist he was, and she would have to mourn that loss, too.

Looking down at her hands and before she would cry, she said in a rush, “You’re breaking my heart.”

“I don’t mean to,” he said. His voice was tender, perhaps even tentative.

She looked at him. “Then what do you mean?”

“I – I – ” he began then fell silent for the space of two long breaths before he said, “It would be easier to tell you if there weren’t so many people taking such a

damnable interest in us just now," adding, "although I had no choice but to make our meeting in public. The best I could do was to arrange our table in a place no one can overhear us."

She felt her heart ease – the merest fraction! – and her tears receded a hair. His hesitation told her he meant to confess something. She could feel his yearning and uncertainty as completely as her own breath. Was it possible –?

She looked around as discretely as she could and became aware of a person here and there and then even various groups of people milling in the corridors surrounding the garden.

She looked back at him and saw the answer in his eyes. Her heart was saved from breaking, but now she thought it might burst with joy.

One such person taking an interest in the conversation was Colonel Archer. He was not attempting to disguise his interest, as were the others. He had a treaty to sign or decline later in the day, and he felt he was entitled to learn as much as he could about Prince Badar Ali of Rajpurat. From the timing and openness of the prince's meeting with Mrs. Wilkins, the colonel knew the prince was signaling his honest dealing, that he intended no subterfuge where Mrs. Wilkins was concerned. The colonel was impressed. He also had a fair idea what the charming garden meeting was all about, and he was impressed by that, too, although for entirely different reasons.

Behind him he heard, "There you are, Mr. Archer."

He turned, briefly put a hand on his wife's shoulder then dropped it. He returned, "Mrs. Archer."

She came to stand next to him and followed his line of sight. Her voice was tight when she said, "I cannot like it."

"No, but there it is, for all to see."

"And the prince in full Indian dress. What do you make of it?"

The colonel did not think the young prince did anything without careful consideration. "He's emphasizing his origins. He blended in much more easily last night wearing his English suit."

“Why should he emphasize his origins?”

“He wants her to see him that way, so she can be sure.”

“Sure?” she echoed.

“She is going to have a decision to make, and, if I am any judge of the matter, I will be cancelling her passage back to England.”

“You can’t mean”

“I can’t explain it, but they have a connection, a bond. Everyone suspected it last night. It’s even clearer now.”

Mrs. Archer said with some indignation, “Are you suggesting that Mrs. Wilkins hoodwinked us with her stories?”

“I believe with all my heart that she was telling the absolute truth. I also believe that I am looking at a man deeply in love.”

Mrs. Archer fell silent, and the colonel, knowing her as well as he did, was sorry for the quality of that silence. He and his wife were looking at a man who was willing to put the woman he loved before all other considerations, when they both knew that the colonel had always loved his wife and family but loved Honor more. She had known the score before going into the marriage, but he knew his outsized love for the Army had taken its toll. He put his arm around her shoulders. It took her several moments to unbend and lean into him.

“How did it happen?” Mrs. Archer wanted to know.

The colonel was baffled. “I don’t know.”

What the colonel did know was that Badar Ali was a man who forthrightly rose to the challenge of defining himself with respect to a worthy woman.

“It’s not right,” Mrs. Archer persisted. “Mrs. Wilkins cannot have transferred her affections so quickly. Her poor, dear husband has been departed much less than a year.”

“She has, no doubt, had five years of experience in the last six months.”

Mrs. Archer frowned. “I recall her saying that the prince had bridal prospects, princesses – apparently chosen by the Rana’s astrologers no less!”

“The prince has evidently changed his plans.”

“And what does she bring him an Indian princess does not?”

“At a guess, I would say a character of steel.”

Mrs. Archer could hardly contradict her husband’s assessment of Mrs. Wilkins but was still able to find further objections. “Do you imagine the denizens of the Red Palace will easily accept the change in Mrs. Wilkins’s status from guest to Rani?”

He considered the very real problem and guessed at the real solution. “The prince is warrior caste, of course, but the treaty he’s negotiating for Rajgurat in the coming Crown rule will let him operate above caste. He’s an able negotiator, a politician really, who will manoeuvre however necessary.”

Mrs. Archer was still dissatisfied. “Their children will never be accepted in polite society.”

“No, they won’t, that’s true. It won’t be easy. But she’ll be an asset for us.”

“Her loyalties will be divided.”

He shook his head. “Her loyalty will be only to him, if I am seeing things correctly. I imagine she’ll put her considerable ingenuity into making sure – whatever political shifts occur in this beautiful, dangerous, outrageous land – that he stays alive.” He paused then added, “Still, she’ll be an asset for us.”

They stood looking at a man and a woman seated together in a garden. The man did not look away from his beloved, the woman kept her eyes mostly on her hands. They weren’t touching but the air around them was thick with all the other ways they connected. They were conversing easily, even intimately. The emotions flickering to brief life on their faces were impossible to conceal and tracked their emotional ebbs and flows. At one moment she had the look of a stoic holding back tears. Hardly the next she was smiling, her head bent, as if in relief. Then she looked up and over at her love, and Colonel Archer glanced away from them, not relishing the sense of being a guilty intruder on such a private moment.

“I’m holding to my promise, *larla*,” Badar Ali said, still savoring the sweet taste of ‘darling’ that had been on his lips all week.

“I never doubted you,” she replied serenely.

He placed his love in front of him. The winding staircase was steep and

narrow and the stone steps worn and slick, so he stood behind to catch her, if need be. For an extra measure of safety, he framed her waist with his hands. It was an added pleasure to see and feel the swing of her hips, her shape enhanced by the folds of her sapphire silk sari. After three turns of the corkscrew they stepped out onto the marble and red sandstone balcony suspended high on the western wall of the Laal Mahal.

She gasped, "It's breathtaking" and looked around in wonder then chuckled. "Literally."

"I thought you would enjoy it. Come."

He slipped his fingers through hers and led her forward to stand between slender sandstone arches holding aloft the humped Hindu dome and framing the magnificent vista unfurling before them toward an unseen horizon.

He pointed down. "There. Straight below was the first time I saw you."

She peered over the edge. "You have good eyesight."

"It was May. I still had the last of strong sunlight. At this time of year there is far less, but it was the same time of day."

He had chosen to bring her at the magical moment when houris were tempted to flit through the fluttering seam between daylight and nightlight and to dance on the earth and tease the djinnis. The moon was on the wane and would not rise for another hour. The sun had sunk and left in the sky only lilacs and lavenders fading to grey. Gauzy clouds gave the scattering of stars a hazy mother-of-pearl cast. Over the vast plain stretching away in every direction shadows began to roam. They settled here and there, turning well-scythed fields into a brocade of bronze and tarnished tin.

The colors winked their last, and a light wind rose. It was fresh with the first hint of the hard edge of winter's knife. It gusted, rustling through the scrub directly below and giving Badar Ali the perfect occasion to wrap his arms around his love. He pulled her back to his front, enfolding her in his warmth.

She let him have her weight and heaved a sigh. "It's an exquisite time of day."

"Your time, I suppose, my Earthly Houri."

She turned and held his face lightly in her hands. He hoped she would never

lose the desire to look at him in such a way. She dropped her hands to his shoulders and corrected, "Our time." She smiled. "We shall need to come here every evening at just this time so that we can have our moments alone above the fray."

The fray. He couldn't have put it better himself. "Are you up to the prospect of a visit from Colonel Archer, a brace of secretaries, a score of assorted British dignitaries and the whole under escort of Sikh cavalry – and with only a month to plan?"

She gave his shoulders a squeeze. "I am, if it secures your position here."

"My father can recline upon his indolent throne for the rest of his life," he replied. "I'm the one with the treaties."

"Very secure, then."

"And the astrologers are already at work on my brother's wedding. We can have – "

She broke him off by pressing her index finger against his lips. "No talk of the fray," she said now wagging her finger. "Not here." Her brows rose and she cocked an ear, "Ah! Do you hear it?"

"The jackal packs howling their worst, you mean?"

She chuckled. "It's the night-song of India, my prince. Only now can I appreciate the beauty." She shook her head. "It terrified me every night on my road to Garkata."

On her road to him.

His love, fierce and beautiful and loving, nestled in his arms. The Himalayas soared behind him. His heart was full and joyous. He sent his sacred mountains a prayer of profound gratitude.