

*Dear Reader,*

*The Midnight Palace is the second in a series of novels I wrote for young adults in the 1990s, back when even I was probably more young than adult myself! Writing for the young, or the young at heart, is a risky business and I learned that teenagers are a notoriously demanding and honest audience. My intention when crafting these books was to create stories that would appeal to them; also that they would hopefully be enjoyed by more mature and experienced fellow travellers for whom they might rekindle memories of the first books they had read, those magical tales of mystery and adventure that every reader hoards in the treasure chest of their brain. So whether you are young or young at heart, I hope you will enjoy this ride into the twilight world of Calcutta in the 1930s, where the shadows of the night are thicker than blood. Never mind the number of candles on your birthday cake – for those in the know, it's what lies beneath them that matters! Enjoy.*

*Carlos Ruiz Lafón*

*February 2011*

*I'LL NEVER FORGET THE NIGHT IT SNOWED OVER Calcutta. The calendar at St Patrick's Orphanage was inching towards the final days of May 1932, leaving behind one of the hottest months ever recorded in the city of palaces.*

*With each passing day we felt sadder and more fearful of the approaching summer, when we would all turn sixteen, for this would mean our separation and the end of the Chowbar Society, the secret club of seven members that had been our refuge during our years at the orphanage. We had grown up there with no other family than ourselves, with no other memories than the stories we told in the small hours round an open fire in the courtyard of an abandoned mansion – a large rambling ruin which stood on the corner of Cotton Street and Brabourne Road and which we'd christened the Midnight Palace. At the time, I didn't know I would never again see the streets of my childhood, the city whose spell has haunted me to this day.*

*I have never returned to Calcutta, but I have always been true to the promise we all made to ourselves on the banks of the Hooghly River: the promise never to forget what we had witnessed. Time has taught me to treasure the memory of those days and to preserve the letters I*

*received from the accursed city, for they keep the flame of my memories alive. It was through those letters that I found out our palace had been demolished and an office building erected over its ashes, and that Mr Thomas Carter, the head of St Patrick's, had passed away after spending the last years of his life in darkness, following the fire that closed his eyes for ever.*

*As the years went by, I heard about the gradual disappearance of all the sites that had formed the backdrop to our lives. The fury of a city that seemed to be devouring itself and the deceptive passage of time eventually erased all trace of the Chowbar Society and its members; at which point, I began to fear that this story might be lost for ever for want of a narrator. The vagaries of fate have chosen me, the person least suited to the task, to tell the tale and unveil the secret that both bonded and separated us so many years ago in the old railway station of Jheeter's Gate. I would have preferred someone else to have been in charge of rescuing this story, but once again life has taught me that my role is to be a witness, not the leading actor.*

*All these years I've kept the few letters sent to me by Roshan, guarding them closely because they shed light on the fate of each member of our unique society; I've read them over and over again, aloud, in the solitude of my study. Perhaps because somehow I felt that I had unwittingly become the repository of everything that had happened to us. Perhaps because I understood that, among that group of seven youngsters, I was always the*

*most reluctant to take risks, the least daring, and therefore the most likely to survive.*

*In that spirit, and trusting that my memory won't betray me, I will try to relive the mysterious and terrible events that took place during those four blazing days in May 1932.*

*It will not be easy and I beg my readers to forgive my inadequate words as I attempt to salvage that dark Calcutta summer from the past. I have done my best to reconstruct the truth, to return to those troubled days that would inevitably shape our future. All that is left for me now is to take my leave and allow the facts to speak for themselves.*

*I'll never forget the fear on the faces of my friends the night it snowed in Calcutta. But, as Ben used to tell me, the best place to start a story is at the beginning ...*







*Calcutta, May 1916*

SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT A BOAT EMERGED OUT of the mist that rose like a fetid curse from the surface of the Hooghly River. The faint glow of a flickering lantern attached to the mast revealed the figure of a man wrapped in a cape, rowing with difficulty towards the distant shore. Further to the east, under a blanket of leaden clouds, the outline of Fort William in the Maidan – a sort of Hyde Park carved out of tropical jungle – stood out against an endless expanse of street lamps and bonfires that spread as far as the eye could see. Calcutta.

The man stopped for a few moments to recover his breath and look back at the silhouette of Jheeter's Gate Station rising from the shadows on the opposite bank. The further he went, the more the station made of glass and steel seemed to melt into the city – a jungle of marble mausoleums blackened by decades of neglect; naked walls once coated in ochre, blue and gold, their colours peeled away by the fury of the monsoon, leaving them blurred and faded, like watercolours dissolving in a pond.

Only the certainty that he had just a few hours to live – perhaps only a few minutes – kept him going, leaving behind in that ill-fated place the woman he had sworn to protect. As Lieutenant Peake made his last journey to Calcutta, aboard an old river boat, the rain that had arrived in the early hours of darkness was washing away every last second of his life.

While he struggled to row the boat towards the shore, the lieutenant could hear the crying of the two babies hidden inside the bilge. Peake turned his head and noticed the lights of the other boat twinkling only a hundred metres behind him. He pictured the smile of his pursuer, savouring the hunt for his prey. Relentless.

Ignoring the children's tears of hunger and cold he applied his remaining strength to steering the boat towards the threshold that led into the ghostly labyrinth of streets. Two hundred years had been enough to

transform the thick jungle growing around Kalighat into a city even God did not dare enter.

In a matter of minutes the storm looming over the city had unleashed all its fury. By mid-April and well into the month of June, the city withered in the clutches of the so-called Indian summer, with temperatures reaching up to forty degrees and a level of humidity close to saturation. But with the arrival of violent electric storms, which turned the sky into a battle scene, thermometers could plunge thirty degrees in a few moments.

The curtain of rain hid the unsteady jetties of rotten wood that dangled over the water's edge, but Peake didn't stop until he felt the hull hit the planks of the fishermen's dock. Only then did he thrust the anchoring pole into the muddy riverbed and rush to extract the children, who lay wrapped in a blanket. As he took them in his arms, the crying of the babies permeated the night like a trail of blood calling out to a predator. Pressing the bundle against his chest, Peake jumped ashore.

As the rain pelted down, he saw the other boat approaching the river bank, slowly, like a funeral barge. Gripped by fear, Peake ran towards the streets bordering the southern edge of the Maidan, a district known by its privileged residents – mostly British and other Europeans – as the White Town.

He clung to one remaining hope of being able to save the children, but he was still far from the heart of North Calcutta and Aryami Bose's house. The old

lady was the only person who could help him now. Peake stopped for a moment and scanned the gloomy expanse of the Maidan, searching for the distant glow of the street lamps that flickered in the northern part of the city. The dark streets, cloaked by the storm, would be his safest hiding place. Holding the children tight, Lieutenant Peake set off again, heading east, hoping to find cover in the shadows cast by the palatial buildings of the city centre.

Moments later, the black barge that had been pursuing him came to a halt by the dock. Three men jumped ashore and moored the vessel. The small cabin door slowly opened and a dark figure wrapped in a black cloak crossed the gangplank the men had laid from the jetty, ignoring the rain. Once ashore, the figure stretched out a black-gloved hand and, pointing to the place where Peake had disappeared, gave a sinister smile.



THE WINDING ROAD that cut across the Maidan, rounding the fortress, had turned into a swamp under the pounding rain. Peake vaguely remembered having crossed that part of the city in the days when he was serving under Colonel Llewelyn. But that had been in broad daylight, on horseback and surrounded by an armed cavalry regiment. Ironically, fate now took him along the same stretch of open fields that had been levelled by Lord

Clive in 1758 so that the cannons of Fort William could enjoy a clear line of fire in all directions. Only this time he was the target.

Lieutenant Peake ran towards an area of trees, sensing the furtive gaze of those hidden in the dark, the nocturnal inhabitants of the Maidan. He knew that nobody here would try to waylay him and snatch his cape or take the children who were crying in his arms. The invisible presences could smell death clinging to his heels, and not a soul would dare come between him and his pursuer.

Peake jumped over the railings separating the Maidan from Chowringhee Road and entered the main artery of Calcutta. The majestic avenue had been built on top of the old path which, only three hundred years earlier, had crossed the Bengali jungle southwards, leading to the temple of Kali, the Kalighat, which gave the city its name.

Because of the rain, the swarms of people who usually prowled the area at night had retreated and the city looked like a large, empty bazaar. Peake knew that the veil of rain that blurred his vision, but also shrouded him, could vanish as instantly as it had appeared. The storms that entered the Ganges Delta from the ocean quickly travelled north or west after discharging their deluge on the Bengali Peninsula, leaving behind a trail of mist and flooded streets, where children played in filthy puddles and carts ran aground in the mud like drifting ships.

The lieutenant ran along Chowringhee Road until he felt the muscles of his legs give way and he was barely able to support the weight of the babies. He could see the lights of the northern district, but he knew he would not be able to keep up this pace much longer, and Aryami Bose's house was still a good distance away. He had to make a stop.

He paused to get his breath back under the staircase of an old textile warehouse, the walls of which were covered in official notices announcing its imminent demolition. He vaguely recalled having inspected the place years ago after some rich merchant had reported that it concealed a notorious opium den.

Now, dirty water poured down the crumbling stairs like dark blood gushing from a wound. The place seemed deserted. Lieutenant Peake lifted the children close to his face and looked into their bewildered eyes; the two babies were no longer crying, but they were trembling from the cold and the blanket that covered them was soaking. Peake held their tiny hands in his, hoping to give them some warmth as he peeped through the cracks in the staircase, keeping an eye on the streets leading off the Maidan. He couldn't remember how many assassins his pursuer had recruited, but he knew that there were only two bullets left in his revolver, two bullets he would have to use with all the cunning he could muster – he had fired the rest of his ammunition in the tunnels of the railway station.

Peake wrapped the children in the drier part of the blanket and left them lying on a bit of dry floor he spied in a hollow in the warehouse wall.

He pulled out his revolver, slowly peering round the side of the stairs. He strained his eyes and recognised the line of distant lights on the other side of the Hooghly River. The sound of hurried footsteps startled him and he moved back into the shadows.

Three men emerged from the darkness of the Maidan, the blades of their knives shining in the gloom. Peake rushed to gather the children in his arms once again and took a deep breath, aware that if he were to flee at that moment, the men would fall on him like a pack of wolves.

The lieutenant stood motionless against the wall, watching his pursuers as they stopped to search for his trail. The assassins exchanged a few mumbled words and then one signalled to the other two that they should separate. Peake shuddered as he realised that the one who had given the order was now approaching the staircase; for a split second he thought that the smell of his fear alone would lead the killer to his hiding place.

Desperately, he scanned the wall below the staircase in search of some gap through which he could escape. He knelt down by the hollow where he had left the babies a few seconds earlier and tried to dislodge some planks which were loose and softened by damp. The rotten wood yielded easily and Peake felt a breath of noxious air

escape from the dilapidated building. He turned his head and saw the murderer standing only twenty metres away, at the foot of the staircase, brandishing his knife.

Peake wrapped the babies in his cape for protection and crawled through into the warehouse. A sharp pain, just above his knee, suddenly paralysed his right leg. He patted his leg with trembling hands and found a rusty nail sunk into his flesh. Stifling a scream, Peake grabbed the tip of the cold metal and pulled hard. He felt the skin tear and warm blood trickled through his fingers. A wave of nausea and pain clouded his vision. Gasping, he gathered the babies and struggled to his feet. An eerie passageway with hundreds of empty shelves spread before him. Without a moment's hesitation, Peake ran towards the other end of the warehouse, the wounded structure creaking beneath the storm.



WHEN PEAKE RE-EMERGED INTO the night after running hundreds of metres through the bowels of the ruined building, he discovered he was only a stone's throw from the Tiretta Bazar, one of the commercial centres of North Calcutta. He thanked his lucky stars and set off towards the jumble of narrow streets, heading straight for the house of Aryami Bose.

It took him ten minutes to reach the home of the last woman in the Bose family line. Aryami lived alone in a

sprawling house built in the Bengali style that rose amid the dense wild vegetation that had invaded the courtyard over the years, making the place look abandoned. Yet no inhabitant of North Calcutta – an area also known as the Black Town – would have dared go beyond that courtyard and enter the domain of Aryami Bose. Those who knew her loved and respected her as much as they feared her. And there wasn't a soul in the streets of North Calcutta who hadn't heard of Aryami Bose and her ancestry. For the people of the area she was like a spirit: an invisible and powerful presence.

Peake ran to the spearheaded gates, through the overgrown courtyard and up the cracked marble staircase that led to the front door. Holding both babies under one arm he banged repeatedly with his fist, hoping he would be heard through the storm.

The lieutenant continued to pound on the door for a good five minutes, his eyes fixed on the deserted streets behind him, fearing he would catch sight of his pursuers at any moment. When the door finally yielded, Peake turned round and was blinded by the light of a candle. A voice he hadn't heard in five years whispered his name. He shaded his eyes with one hand and recognised the inscrutable face of Aryami Bose.

The woman read his expression and gazed down at the children, a shadow of pain passing over her face.

'She's dead, Aryami,' murmured Peake. 'She was already dead when I found her ...'

Aryami closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Peake saw that the news cut deep into the lady's heart, her worst suspicions confirmed.

'Come in,' she said at last, letting him pass and closing the door behind him.

Peake hurried over to a table, where he laid down the babies and removed their wet clothes. Without saying a word, Aryami fetched some dry strips of cloth and wrapped the children in them while Peake stoked the fire.

'I'm being followed, Aryami,' said Peake. 'I can't stay here.'

'You're wounded,' said the woman, pointing to the gash from the nail.

'Just a scratch,' Peake lied. 'It doesn't hurt.'

Aryami moved closer to him and stretched out her hand to stroke his face.

'You always loved her ...'

Peake turned his head away and didn't reply.

'They could have been your children,' said Aryami. 'They might have had better luck.'

'I must go, Aryami,' the lieutenant insisted. 'If I stay here they'll find me. They won't give up.'

They exchanged defeated looks, both aware of the fate that awaited Peake as soon as he returned to the streets. Aryami took his hands in hers and pressed them tightly.

'I was never good to you,' she said. 'I feared for my

daughter, for the life she might have had with a British officer. But I was wrong. I suppose you'll never forgive me.'

'It doesn't matter any more,' replied Peake. 'I *must* go. Right now.'

He took one last look at the babies, who had settled quietly by the fire. They smiled as they looked at him, their eyes bright and filled with a playful curiosity. At last they were safe. The lieutenant walked to the door and took a deep breath. Exhaustion and the throbbing pain in his leg overwhelmed him after the few moments of rest. He had used the last reserves of his strength to bring the infants to this place, and now he wondered how he was going to face the inevitable. Outside, the rain was still lashing down but there was no sign of his pursuer or his henchmen.

'Michael ...' said Aryami behind him.

The young man stopped but didn't turn round.

'She knew,' lied Aryami. 'She knew from the start, and I'm sure that, in some way, she felt the same for you. It was my fault. Don't hold it against her.'

Peake replied with a nod and closed the door behind him. For a few seconds he stood there, under the rain, finally at peace with himself, then he set off to meet his pursuers. After retracing his steps back to the abandoned warehouse, he entered the dark building once more in search of a hiding place.

As he crouched in the shadows weariness and pain

fused slowly into a drunken sense of calm, and his lips betrayed a faint smile. He no longer had any reason, or hope, to go on living.



THE LONG TAPERED FINGERS in the black glove stroked the bloodstained tip of the nail poking through the broken plank near the entrance to the warehouse. Slowly, while the assassins waited in silence behind him, the slender figure, whose face was hidden under a black hood, raised the tip of one forefinger to his lips and licked the dark thick blood as if it were a drop of honey. A few seconds later the hooded figure turned towards the men he had hired a few hours earlier for a handful of coins and the promise of further pay when they'd finished the job. He pointed inside the building. The three henchmen scurried through the opening made by Lieutenant Peake a short while earlier. The hooded man smirked in the darkness.

'You've chosen a sad place to die, Peake,' he whispered to himself.

Hiding behind a column of empty crates in the depths of the warehouse, Peake watched the silhouettes of the three men as they entered the building. Although he couldn't see him from where he stood, he was certain that their master was waiting on the other side of the wall; he could sense his presence. Peake pulled out his revolver

and rotated the cylinder until one of the two bullets was aligned with the barrel, muffling the sound under his tunic. He was no longer running away from death, but he was determined not to travel this road alone.

The adrenalin coursing through his veins had eased the pain in his knee until it was just a dull, distant throb. Surprised at how calm he felt, Peake smiled again and remained motionless in his hiding place. He watched the slow advance of the three men through the passage until his executioners came to a halt about ten metres away. One of the men lifted a hand to stop the others and pointed at some stains on the ground. Peake raised his weapon to his chest, cocked the hammer, and took aim.

At a new signal, the three men separated. Two of them went sideways while the third made straight for the pile of crates, and Peake. The lieutenant counted to five, then suddenly pushed the column of boxes forward. The crates crashed down on top of his attacker while Peake ran towards the opening through which they had entered the warehouse.

One of the killers surprised him at a junction in the corridor, wielding his knife close to the lieutenant's face. But before the thug could even blink, the barrel of Peake's revolver was thrust under his chin.

'Drop the knife,' spat the lieutenant.

Seeing the ice in the lieutenant's eyes, the man did as he was told. Peake grabbed him by his hair and, without

removing his weapon, turned to the assassin's allies, shielding his body with that of his hostage. The other two thugs moved menacingly towards Peake.

'Lieutenant, spare us the drama and hand over what we're looking for,' a familiar voice murmured behind him. 'These are honest men. With families.'

Peake turned to see the hooded man leering at him in the dark, just a few metres from where he stood.

'I'm going to blow this man's head off, Jawahal,' Peake snarled.

His hostage closed his eyes, trembling.

The hooded man crossed his arms patiently and gave out a small sigh of annoyance.

'Do so if it pleases you, Lieutenant. But that won't get you out of here.'

'I'm serious,' Peake replied.

'Of course, Lieutenant,' said Jawahal in a conciliatory tone. 'Shoot if you have the courage required to kill a man in cold blood and without His Majesty's permission. Otherwise, drop the weapon, and that way we'll be able to reach an agreement that is satisfactory to both parties.'

The two armed henchmen were standing nearby, ready to jump on Peake at the first signal from the hooded man.

'Very well,' Peake said at last. 'What do you think of *this* agreement?'

He pushed his hostage onto the floor and, raising his revolver, turned towards the hooded man. The first shot echoed through the warehouse. Jawahal's gloved

hand emerged from the cloud of gunpowder, his palm outstretched. Peake thought he could see the crushed bullet shining in the dark, then melting slowly into a thread of liquid metal that slid through Jawahal's fingers like a fistful of sand.

'Bad shot, Lieutenant. Try again, only this time come closer.'

Without giving him time to move, the hooded man leaned forward and grasped the hand with which Peake was holding his weapon. He then pulled the end of the gun towards his own face until it rested between his eyes.

'Didn't they teach you to do it like this at the academy?' he whispered.

'There was a time when we were friends,' said Peake.

Jawahal smiled with contempt.

'That time, Lieutenant, has passed.'

'May God forgive me,' muttered Peake, pulling the trigger again.

In an instant that seemed endless, Peake watched as the bullet pierced Jawahal's skull, tearing the hood off his head. For a few seconds light passed through the wound but gradually the smoking hole closed in on itself. Peake felt the revolver slipping from his fingers.

The blazing eyes of his opponent fixed themselves on his and a long black tongue flicked across the man's lips.

'You still don't understand, do you, Lieutenant? Where are the babies?'

It was not a question. It was an order.

Dumb with terror, Peake shook his head.

‘As you wish.’

Jawahal squeezed Peake’s hand. The lieutenant felt the bones in his fingers being crushed under his flesh. The spasm of pain made him fall to his knees, unable to breathe.

‘Where are the babies?’ Jawahal hissed.

Peake tried to say something, but the agony spreading from the bloody stump that had been his hand paralysed his speech.

‘Are you trying to say something, Lieutenant?’ Jawahal whispered, kneeling beside him.

Peake nodded.

‘Good, good.’ His enemy smiled. ‘Frankly, I don’t find your suffering amusing. So help me put an end to it.’

‘The children are dead,’ Peake groaned.

An expression of distaste crept over Jawahal’s face.

‘You were doing so well, Lieutenant. Don’t ruin it now.’

‘They’re dead,’ Peake repeated.

Jawahal shrugged and slowly nodded his head.

‘All right,’ he conceded. ‘You leave me no choice. But before you go, let me remind you that, when Kylian’s life was in your hands, you were incapable of saving her. She died because of men like you. But those men have gone. You are the last one. The future is mine.’

Peake raised his eyes to Jawahal, and as he did so, he noticed the man’s pupils narrowing into thin slits, his golden irises blazing. With painstaking elegance, Jawahal

started to remove the glove on his right hand.

‘Unfortunately you won’t live to see it,’ Jawahal added. ‘Don’t think for a second that your heroic act has served any purpose. You’re an idiot, Lieutenant Peake. You always gave me that impression, and now all you have done is confirm it. I hope there is a hell reserved especially for idiots, Peake, because that’s where I’m sending you.’

Peake closed his eyes and listened to the hiss of fire just inches from his face. Then, after a moment that seemed eternal, he felt burning fingers closing round his throat, cutting off his very last breath. In the distance he could hear the sound of that accursed train and the ghostly voices of hundreds of children howling from the flames. After that, only darkness.



ONE BY ONE, ARYAMI Bose blew out the candles that lit up her sanctuary until only the hesitant glow of the fire remained, projecting fleeting haloes of light against the naked walls. The children were now asleep and the silence was broken only by the rain pattering against the closed shutters and the occasional crackling of the fire. Silent tears slid down Aryami’s face as she took the photograph of her daughter Kylian from the small brass and ivory box where she kept her most prized possessions.

A travelling photographer from Bombay had taken that picture some time before the wedding and hadn't accepted any payment for it. It showed Kylian just as Aryami remembered her, with that uncanny luminosity that seemed to emanate from her. Kylian's radiance had mesmerised all who knew her, just as it had captivated the expert eye of the photographer, who had given her the nickname by which she was still remembered: the Princess of Light.

Naturally, Kylian never became a true princess and had no kingdom other than the streets she grew up on. The day she left the Bose home to go and live with her husband, the people of Machuabazar had said farewell with tears in their eyes as they watched the white carriage carry away their Black Town princess for ever. She was scarcely more than a child at the time.

Aryami sat down next to the babies, facing the fireplace, and pressed the old photograph against her chest. Outside the storm raged on and Aryami drew on the force of its anger to help her decide what she should do next. Lieutenant Peake's pursuer would not be content simply with killing him. The young man's courage had earned her a few valuable minutes, which she could not waste, not even to mourn for her daughter. Experience had taught her that there would always be plenty of time to lament the errors of the past.



SHE PUT THE PHOTOGRAPH back into the box and took out a pendant she'd had made for Kylian years ago, a jewel she never had the chance to wear. It consisted of two gold circles, a sun and a moon, that fitted into one another to make a single piece. She pressed the centre of the pendant and the two parts separated. Aryami strung each half on a separate gold chain and put one round each of the babies' necks.

As she did so, she considered the decisions she must make. There seemed to be only one way of ensuring the children's survival: she must separate them and keep them apart, erase their past and hide their identity from the world and from themselves, however painful that might be. It was not possible for them to remain together; sooner or later they would give themselves away, and she could not take that risk. Aryami knew she had to resolve the dilemma before daybreak.

She took the babies in her arms and kissed them gently on the forehead. Their tiny hands stroked her face and fingered the tears that rolled down her cheeks. Both babies gurgled cheerfully at her, not understanding. She hugged them tight in her arms once more then placed them back in the improvised cot she had made for them.

She then lit a candle and took paper and pen. The future of her grandchildren was now in her hands. Taking a deep breath she began to write. In the background she could hear the rain easing off and the roar of the storm

fading towards the north as an endless blanket of stars unfurled over Calcutta.



HAVING REACHED THE AGE of fifty, Thomas Carter thought that the city that had been his home for the last thirty-two years had no more surprises in store for him.

In the early hours of that morning in May 1916, after one of the fiercest monsoon storms he remembered, the surprise had arrived at the door of St Patrick's Orphanage in the form of a basket containing a baby and a sealed letter marked personal and addressed to him.

The surprise was two-fold. Firstly, nobody bothered to abandon a baby in Calcutta on the doorstep of an orphanage, for there were plenty of alleyways, rubbish dumps and wells all over the city where it could be done more easily. Secondly, nobody wrote letters of introduction like the one he received, signed and leaving no doubt as to its author.

Carter examined his spectacles against the light, breathed on them, then wiped them with an old cotton handkerchief he used for the same task at least a dozen times a day – twice as much during the Indian summer.

The baby boy was asleep downstairs, in Vendela's bedroom. The head nurse had been keeping a watchful

eye on him since he'd been examined by Dr Woodward, who'd been dragged out of his bed shortly before dawn with no other explanation than a reminder of his Hippocratic oath.

The infant was essentially healthy. He showed some signs of dehydration but didn't seem to be suffering from any of the catalogue of ills that cut short the lives of thousands of children, denying them the right even to reach the age when they'd be able to say their mothers' name. The only things that had come with the child were the gold pendant in the shape of a sun that Carter held between his fingers, and the letter – a document which, were he to believe its content, placed him in a very awkward situation.

Carter put the pendant in the top drawer of his desk and turned the key. Then he picked up the letter and read it for at least the tenth time.

*Dear Mr Carter,*

*I feel obliged to ask for your help in the most painful of circumstances, appealing to the friendship that I know united you and my late husband for over ten years. During that time my husband never ceased to praise your honesty and the extraordinary trust you inspired in him. That is why today I beg you to heed my plea with the greatest urgency, however strange it may seem, and if possible with the greatest secrecy.*

*The child I am obliged to hand over to you has lost both his parents. The murderer swore he would kill them and*

*then wipe out their descendants. I cannot reveal the reasons that led this man to commit such an act, nor do I think it appropriate to do so. Suffice it to say that the discovery of the child should be kept secret. Under no circumstance should you inform the police or the British authorities, because the murderer has connections in both that would soon lead him to the boy.*

*For obvious reasons, I cannot raise the child myself without exposing him to the same fate that befell his parents. That is why I must beg you to take care of him, give him a name and educate him according to the principles of your institution, so that he grows up to be as honest and honourable as his parents were. And it is vitally important that the child should never learn the truth about his past.*

*I don't have time to give you any more details, but I will remind you once more of the friendship and trust you shared with my husband in order to justify my request.*

*When you finish reading this letter, I beg you to destroy it, together with anything that might lead to the discovery of the child. I am sorry I cannot undertake this request in person, but the seriousness of the situation prevents me from doing so.*

*In the hope that you will make the right decision, please accept my eternal gratitude.*

*Aryami Bose*

A knock on the door interrupted his reading. Carter removed his spectacles, carefully folded the letter and placed it in the drawer of his desk, which he then locked.

‘Come in,’ he said.

Vendela, the head nurse of St Patrick’s, put her head round the door; as usual her expression was stern and efficient. She didn’t seem to be the bearer of good news.

‘There’s a gentleman downstairs who wishes to speak to you,’ she said briefly.

Carter frowned.

‘What about?’

‘He wouldn’t give any details.’ Her tone seemed to imply that any such details were bound to be vaguely suspicious.

Vendela hesitated, then stepped into the office and closed the door behind her.

‘I think it’s about the baby,’ the nurse said anxiously. ‘I didn’t tell him anything.’

‘Have you spoken to anyone else?’ Carter enquired.

Vendela shook her head. He gave her a nod and put the key of the desk in his trouser pocket.

‘I can tell him you’re not in,’ suggested Vendela.

For a moment Carter considered the option, but decided that if Vendela’s suspicions were correct – and they usually were – it would only reinforce the impression that St Patrick’s Orphanage had something to hide. That made up his mind.

‘No. I’ll receive him, Vendela. Ask him to come in and make sure none of the staff talk to him. Absolute secrecy on this matter. All right?’

‘Understood.’

Carter heard Vendela’s footsteps as she walked down the corridor. He wiped his glasses again. Outside the rain was hammering against the windowpanes once more.



THE MAN WORE A long cloak, and his head was wrapped in a turban, which was pinned with a dark brooch shaped like a snake. He had the affected manners of a prosperous North Calcutta merchant and his features seemed vaguely Hindu, although his skin was an unhealthy colour, as if it had never been touched by sunlight. The racial melting pot of Calcutta had filled its streets with a fusion of Bengalis, Armenians, Jews, Anglo-Saxons, Chinese, Muslims and numerous other groups who had come to the land of Kali in search of fortune or refuge. The man’s face could have belonged to any of those races, or to none.

Carter could sense the stranger’s eyes burning into his back, inspecting him carefully as he poured tea into two cups on the tray Vendela had provided.

‘Do sit down,’ said Carter to the man. ‘Sugar?’

‘I’ll take it the way you take it.’

The stranger’s voice betrayed no accent or emotion of any sort. Carter swallowed hard, then fixed a friendly smile on his lips and turned round to pass his visitor the cup. A gloved hand, with long fingers sharp as claws,

closed round the scalding china without a moment's hesitation. Carter sat down in his armchair and stirred sugar into his tea.

'I'm sorry to bother you, Mr Carter. I suppose you must be very busy, so I'll be brief.'

Carter gave a polite nod.

'What is the reason for your visit, Mr ...?'

'My name is Jawahal, Mr Carter,' the stranger explained. 'I'll be frank. My question may seem odd to you, but have you found a child, a baby, just a few days old, either last night or today?'

Carter frowned and did his best to look surprised. Nothing too obvious, but not too subtle either.

'A baby? I'm not sure I understand ...'

Jawahal smiled broadly.

'I don't know where to begin. You see, it's rather an awkward story. I trust you'll be discreet, Mr Carter.'

'But of course, Mr Jawahal,' replied Carter, taking a sip of his tea.

The man, who had not tasted his cup, relaxed and launched into his tale.

'I own a large textile business in the north of the city,' he began. 'I am what might be described as comfortably off. There are those who would call me wealthy, and rightly so, I suppose. I'm responsible for a number of families and I'm privileged to be able to help them as much as I can.'

'With things the way they are, we all need to do what

we can,' said Carter, his gaze fixed on those two dark inscrutable eyes.

'Yes, of course,' the stranger continued. 'The matter that brings me to your worthy institution is a painful one, and I'd like to put an end to it as soon as possible. A week ago a young girl who works in one of my factories gave birth to a baby boy. It seems that the father of the child is an Anglo-Indian rogue who disappeared as soon as he heard of the girl's pregnancy. I'm told that the girl's family come from Delhi. They're Muslim, very strict, and they were not aware of the situation.'

Carter nodded gravely.

'A couple of days ago one of my foremen told me that, in a fit of madness, the girl fled from the house where she was living with some relatives. It seems she was intending to sell the child,' Jawahal went on. 'Don't get me wrong. She's a good girl, but she was under so much pressure that she became desperate. Which isn't so surprising – this country is just as intolerant of human weakness as yours is.'

'And you think the baby might be here, Mr Jahawal?' asked Carter, trying to bring him back to the subject.

'Jawahal,' the visitor corrected him. 'Let me explain. Once I became aware of the circumstances I felt responsible, in a way. After all, the girl worked for me. I combed the city with a couple of trusted foremen and discovered that she had sold the child to a loathsome criminal who sells babies to professional beggars –

a phenomenon that nowadays is as common as it is deplorable. We found the man, but, for reasons that are now irrelevant, he managed to escape. This happened last night, near your orphanage. I have reason to believe that, fearing what might happen to him, he may have abandoned the baby nearby.'

'I see,' said Carter. 'And have you informed the local authorities of this matter, Mr Jawahal? The trafficking of children is punished severely, as you must know.'

The stranger folded his hands together and gave a little sigh.

'I was hoping to solve this problem without having to go to those lengths,' he said. 'If I did that, I would implicate the young girl, and the child would be left without a father or a mother.'

Carter sized up the stranger's story, nodding slowly and repeatedly to show he understood although he didn't believe a single word.

'I'm sorry I can't be of help to you, Mr Jawahal. Unfortunately we haven't found a baby or heard of any child being found nearby,' Carter explained. 'Still, if you leave me your details I'll get in touch if I hear anything, although I'm afraid I would have to inform the authorities if the baby was abandoned outside this orphanage. That's the law, and I can't ignore it.'

The man stared silently at Carter for a few seconds without blinking. Carter held his gaze and didn't alter his expression, although he could feel his stomach

shrinking and his pulse accelerating, as if he were facing a snake that was about to strike. Finally the stranger gave a pleasant smile and pointed in the direction of the Raj Bhawan, the palatial government building that rose in the distance.

‘You British are admirable observers of the law, which is to your credit. Wasn’t it Lord Wellesley who, in 1799, decided to move government headquarters to that magnificent site in order to lend its laws greater weight? Or was it in 1800?’

‘I’m afraid I’m not an expert on local history,’ Carter replied, disconcerted by the sudden twist Jawahal had given the conversation.

The visitor frowned, mutely signalling his disapproval of Carter’s confessed ignorance.

‘With only two hundred and fifty years to its name, Calcutta has so little history that the least we can do is learn about it, Mr Carter. But, returning to the subject, I’d say it was in 1799. Do you know why the move was made? Wellesley, the governor general, said that India must be ruled from a palace and not from an accountants’ office; with the ideas of a prince, not those of a spice trader. Quite a vision, I’d say.’

‘Indeed,’ Carter agreed. He stood up, ready to see the visitor out.

‘All the more so in an empire in which decadence is an art form and Calcutta its main showcase,’ Jawahal added.

Carter nodded his head, not quite sure what he was agreeing with.

‘I’m sorry I’ve wasted your time, Mr Carter,’ concluded Jawahal.

‘On the contrary,’ replied Carter. ‘I’m just sorry I haven’t been of any assistance. In such circumstances we must all do what we can to help.’

‘Absolutely,’ Jawahal agreed, also standing up. ‘Once again, I appreciate your kindness. I just wanted to ask you one more question.’

‘With pleasure,’ answered Carter, although he couldn’t wait to get rid of this man.

Jawahal smiled maliciously, as if he’d read Carter’s thoughts.

‘At what age do the children you take in leave this place, Mr Carter?’

Carter couldn’t hide his surprise.

‘I hope you don’t think I’m being tactless,’ Jawahal added hurriedly. ‘If that is the case, please ignore my question. I’m just curious.’

‘No, not at all. It’s no secret. The boarders at St Patrick’s remain under our roof until the day they turn sixteen. That’s when the guardianship period ends. At that point they are considered to be adults, or so the law says, ready to take charge of their own lives. As you can see, this is a privileged institution.’

Jawahal listened attentively and appeared to be considering the matter.

‘I imagine it must be very painful for you to see them leave after having cared for them all those years,’ Jawahal observed. ‘In a way, you’re like a father to all these children.’

‘It’s my job,’ Carter lied.

‘Of course. But – if you don’t mind my asking – how do you know the real age of a child who has no parents or family? It’s a technicality, I suppose ...’

‘The age of our boarders is set from the day the child is taken in, or else the institution makes an approximate calculation,’ Carter explained, feeling uncomfortable about discussing the orphanage’s procedures with the stranger.

‘Which makes you a little god, Mr Carter.’

‘That is a view I do not share,’ Carter replied dryly. Jawahal relished the displeasure on Carter’s face.

‘Forgive my audacity, Mr Carter,’ Jawahal replied. ‘It was a pleasure to meet you. I may visit in the future and make a donation to your noble institution. Perhaps I’ll return in sixteen years’ time; that way I’ll be able to meet the youngsters who become part of your large family today ...’

‘It will be a pleasure to receive you then, if that is your wish,’ said Carter, leading the stranger to the door. ‘It looks like the rain has got worse. Maybe you’d prefer to wait until it dies down?’

The man turned towards Carter and his pupils glowed like two black pearls. He seemed to have been

weighing up every gesture, every expression from the moment he'd entered the office, sniffing out any cracks in the story and analysing every word. Carter regretted extending his offer of hospitality. At that precise moment the only thing Carter wanted was to see the back of this individual. He didn't care if a hurricane was laying waste to the city.

'The rain will stop soon, Mr Carter,' Jawahal replied. 'Thanks all the same.'

Right on cue, Vendela was waiting in the corridor as the meeting ended, and she escorted the visitor to the exit. From the window of his office Carter watched the black figure setting off into the rain then disappearing among the narrow streets at the foot of the hill. Carter stood there for a while, looking out of his window, his eyes fixed on the Raj Bhawan, the seat of the British government. A few minutes later, just as Jawahal had predicted, the rain stopped.

Thomas Carter poured himself another cup of tea and sat in his armchair gazing out at the city. He had grown up in a place similar to the home he now managed, in Liverpool. Within the walls of that institution he had learned three things that would always serve him well: not to overvalue material comforts, to appreciate the classics and, last but not least, to recognise a liar from a mile away.

He took a leisurely sip of his tea and, in view of the fact that Calcutta could still surprise him, decided to

start celebrating his fiftieth birthday. He walked over to a glass cabinet and took out the box of cigars he reserved for special occasions. Striking a match, he lit the valuable item with due calm and ceremony. Then, putting the flame to good use, he pulled Aryami Bose's letter out of the drawer and set fire to it. While the parchment turned to ashes on a small tray with St Patrick's initials engraved on it, Carter savoured the cigar and, in honour of Benjamin Franklin, one of his childhood heroes, decided that their new tenant would be called Ben, and that he personally would put all his energy into making sure the orphanage provided the boy with the family fate had stolen from him.