



A  
TAPESTRY  
OF  
LIGHT

*a novel*

KIMBERLY DUFFY

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To Hazel,  
my sweet homebody whose light just might  
change the world. We may never live in one of  
those mansions you love looking at on Zillow,  
but I'm giving you one in this book. And that gift  
can never compare to the one God gave us  
when you were born.

“Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

—Matthew 17:20 NIV



Pitying I dropp'd a tear:  
But I saw a glow-worm near,  
Who replied, “What wailing wight  
Calls the watchman of the night?

“I am set to light the ground,  
While the beetle goes his round:  
Follow now the beetles hum;  
Little wanderer hie thee home!”

—William Blake, “A Dream”



**CALCUTTA, INDIA**  
**NOVEMBER 1885**

**H**ardly anyone was buried at South Park Street Cemetery anymore, and yet Otilie Russell had spent more time there during her twenty years than any other soul living in Calcutta. The plaque on the front gate said it had been closed in 1790, but the board occasionally allowed the burial of august persons. Persons like her father, superintendent of the Imperial Museum, who had died five years earlier when cholera swept the city.

It hadn't taken only him. Two tombs nestled against his—Jemima's and Nathan's. So much grief enclosed in stone. And now her mother.

Reverend Hook stood before the mausoleum's open door and performed a eulogy Otilie didn't hear. He'd traveled all the way from Lal Bazar Chapel for the burial. She should pay attention to his words and find comfort.

But comfort seemed a long way off. Certainly not something that could be had with the stringing together of a few pretty words, even if those words came from the Bible.

Otilie slipped her hand from her little brother's and wiped it on the black silk of her skirt. She'd pulled this dress from the

top shelf of the wardrobe last night, wishing she'd never had to see the hideous thing again, hoping the differences in her body between fifteen and twenty were enough that she'd be forced to wear a white sari like her grandmother.

But there was no grace for her these days. Here she stood, surrounded by the dead, with the same slim frame. The same narrow hips and shoulders. The same pain snapping at her heart.

A snuffle beside her drew the morbidity from her thoughts, and she took Thaddeus's hand again. "*Maji*. Mama." The Hindi and English words slipped from his lips like a prayer.

Ottilie could hardly make sense of their mother's death—there in the morning, enjoying tea and making *cholar dal* with their servant, Dilip, her voice bouncing around their little house as she called for them to wake up, then gone by midafternoon, struck down as she crossed the street, her arms full of the paper-wrapped dresses she was delivering to a client. Struck by a drunk Englishman riding a horse through the city, heedless of pedestrians, said the witnesses.

If Ottilie could barely comprehend it, how could a six-year-old work through the horror of his suddenly upside-down world?

She knelt beside Thaddeus, indifferent toward the dust coating her skirt, and wrapped her arm around his thin, quaking shoulders. "Do you know, little glowworm, I think *Maji* is looking down on us from heaven. I'm sure she can see you and is pointing you out to the angels. Can you hear her voice? Close your eyes and listen for it."

Thaddeus screwed his eyes shut, and Ottilie leaned in closer. "Listen for her. She's not too far. Heaven is only on the other side of the veil."

Reverend Hook's somber words hung heavily, like the vines draping the hundred-year-old gravestones and obelisks. "The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart: and merciful men are taken away, none considering that the righteous is taken

away from the evil to come. He shall enter into peace: they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness.”

Ottilie pressed her head against Thaddeus’s side and squeezed her own eyes shut. *Please, Maji, please let me hear you. Please be near. I don’t know what to do. How to live. What will happen?*

Nothing. She heard nothing.

“I hear her, *Didi!*” Thaddeus said, his exultant cry drawing indulgent glances from the people huddled around them. “She says, ‘There is Thaddeus, our little glowworm, bringing light and joy to everyone.’”

Ottilie smiled, tears dripping from her nose and splashing her bodice. Thaddeus heard what Maji said to him every morning. It was how she greeted him each day, holding out her arms as he rubbed sleep from his eyes. It felt right that she should leave him with those words.

“You see, you only need to listen, and you’ll hear her.” Ottilie tapped his heart. “Right here.”

Thaddeus stood on his tiptoes, trying to peer past the pastor and into the gaping mouth of their family’s final resting place. “Even though she’s in that house?”

*Nānī*, standing straight-backed beside Ottilie, tsked. “She’s not in that house, *navasa*. She’s in heaven.” Her words were strong in their certainty. That was how *Nānī* spoke. It made Ottilie feel safe. Not everything had changed. Not everyone was lost.

Ottilie stood and leaned against her grandmother’s side. Not too heavily because, as small as she was herself, *Nānī* only met her chest. But height and breadth didn’t account for support.

Sometimes little things held more strength than the grand.

“I don’t like to think of Sonia moldering away in that stone monument.” *Nānī* swiveled her head, taking in the fallen grave-stones of long-dead colonizers, and shuddered. “Bodies everywhere. Surrounded by them.”

“She’s not there, you said.”

Her grandmother's eyes snapped. "You know what I mean. Her spirit is free, but the temple that housed her? No. When I die, take me home to Benares and scatter me on the river."

"You sound like a Hindu, Nānī. You'll scandalize the reverend."

After her husband had left her, Nānī had thrown off British clothing and customs, saying they made no sense in India and that Jesus hadn't addressed such things in the Bible, so why should she embrace foreign ways? She was an anomaly in the Eurasian community, whose members wanted nothing more than to be thought of as English. But Nānī had been raised in a Hindu home in the holy city of Benares. Reverend Hook didn't seem to mind, but sometimes Nānī said things that made people question what she really believed.

Nānī flicked her finger against Otilie's neck. "I'm as Hindu as the queen sitting on her throne. But when I die, I will go home. My spirit to God, and my body to the Ganges."

"Shush. Don't talk about this anymore. I've had enough of death." Otilie pulled away and focused on the *krishnachura* that shaded her family's grave and the mausoleum of the British merchant resting beside them. In April, the ornamental tree would burst with thousands of red flowers, showering her parents and siblings in a *dupatta* of petals.

Thaddeus tugged at her sleeve. "He's done."

Reverend Hook had stopped his monologue and was standing with his hand against one of the mausoleum's columns. It was an elegant structure, purchased before Maji realized Father hadn't been nearly as good with his money as he had his artifacts and family. There was only room for five in it, though. Otilie would be buried there with them. She wouldn't marry and would more than likely die before her brother. And Nānī was to be dust on the river.

Otilie passed a trembling hand across the back of her neck where sweat had pooled in the dips of her high collar. The

Bengali custom of wearing simple white clothing in mourning seemed much more practical than the British one of black. Maybe, if she lived in the land of cold winters and cloudy skies, her attire would make sense. But precious little of this entire situation made sense to her.

The reverend was making his way toward her, his eyes drooping and steps heavy. Otilie shuffled back, her gaze darting, looking for escape. But already the mourners were disappearing like specters, slipping down the pebbled path and over weed-strangled graves. She didn't want to speak with him, to hear his well-intentioned condolences that would likely consist of trite proverbs. They'd gust past her hastily erected barricade—the only thing keeping her from losing herself to grief—and she couldn't be accountable for the anger and hopelessness that would assault her. That would blast like a cannon against his tired words.

“Look, there is your English friend. Go to her. I will see to the reverend.” Nānī shoved Otilie forward.

Before she could make her escape, another man appeared. A soldier. He walked toward them, and Nānī hissed through her teeth.

The soldier stopped before Otilie, his gaze skipping over Nānī and landing on her face. “Otilie.”

She drew herself up, not even reaching his shoulder, but tall enough to shield her grandmother. She clutched Thaddeus's sleeve and tugged him toward her, ignoring his wiggles and complaint. They could face this man together. A cord of three. Four, if you counted God . . . which she didn't.

“Hello, Colonel.”

She'd never call him Grandfather.

For a moment the three of them stared at the colonel. He stared back—not at Nānī, but at Otilie and Thaddeus, his mouth working as though he wanted to say something but found words too difficult to form. Otilie didn't rescue him. She took

a moment to absorb the sounds of the cemetery—the gentle murmurs of condolences as people continued to glide past them and out the gate, the rat-tat-tat of a woodpecker, the tinkling of anklets.

Finally, he scrubbed his hand down one wiry muttonchop and said, “I heard about Sonia’s death. I’m sorry.”

“Who are you?” Thaddeus, finally succeeding in wrenching his arm free of Otilie’s grasp, looked up at the colonel with wide eyes. They hadn’t been able to dispel him of his fascination with all things military. He loved nothing more than watching the sepoy practicing their drills on the Maidan parade grounds.

The colonel’s lips twitched. “I’m your—”

“He’s no one, Thaddeus.” Otilie glared at the colonel, urging him to contradict her, to give her an excuse to tell him exactly what she thought of his imposing uniform and unwanted presence at his daughter’s funeral—a daughter he’d refused to acknowledge after he traded in her and Nānī for a proper British wife.

Instead, he said, “I knew your mother well.”

Nānī snorted.

“I shouldn’t have come. I can see that now.” His voice gave no indication of the dejection stooping his shoulders beneath the heavy epaulets of his uniform, but Otilie had made a habit of studying people, of deducing their moods by almost imperceptible changes in expression, posture, and tone.

She steeled herself against the slight softening of her heart. He didn’t deserve it. His next words proved it.

“Do you need anything? Money?”

Otilie laughed. “Money?” She didn’t elaborate but could see her point hit home. He closed his eyes. “You need to leave. Let us grieve in peace.”

The colonel looked past Otilie’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Gitisha. Truly.”

Nānī said nothing, and he left.

Ottilie turned and caught her grandmother just as she began to sway. “It’s fine. He’s gone.”

“He left. Again. But now my daughter is gone too.” Nānī’s body shuddered against Ottilie, and the earthy scents of the henna and mustard oil she religiously rubbed into her hair each week sent Ottilie back a month, a year, a decade, to evenings spent rubbing the mixture into her mother’s hair, detangling it with a wooden comb, massaging her scalp in tight circles and listening to her sighs.

“Maji, Maji,” Ottilie whispered. Tears clogged her throat, coming thick with Nānī’s cries.

They hadn’t cried since the police chief had come to the door twenty-four hours earlier. There had been no time. But now, with Maji’s body interned, their three-room house empty of her constant prattling and the sound of her bare feet slapping against the stone floors, and the reverend’s shadowy words filling the crevices of the cemetery, there was room for tears.

Ottilie dissolved against Nānī, and they crumpled to the grass. Thaddeus wiggled between them, his wiry arms creeping around their backs, the glue holding together the remaining women of the family.

Ottilie rested her chin on Nānī’s shoulder and through swollen eyes took in the mausoleum. During the service the sun had crept high, and now its rays glinted against the pale stone. It warmed Ottilie’s face. And her spirit. Maji and Papa, together again. And with the two children they’d lost along the way.

No, they hadn’t been lost. The lost remained on earth, captive to dust and starlight.

Papa’s voice, bubbling with laughter, filled her mind. *“The heart of a poet—an artist—beats in that ever pragmatic chest of yours, Ottilie. You are just as nimble with words as you are your fingers and beetle wings.”*

And they had laughed because Ottilie always was the perfect mixture of Papa and Maji. Hard and soft. Poetry and practicality.

Which was good, because now she'd have to be both for Thaddeus.

A firm hand gripped her shoulder. "Dear friend."

At the sound of Damaris Winship's solid voice, Otilie extricated herself from her brother and grandmother. Damaris's embrace was just as weighty, just as reassuring, as her tone. Otilie's head barely reached her friend's chin, but their friendship allowed for no self-consciousness.

They could not have looked more different—Damaris with her thick red curls and pale skin dotted by freckles against Otilie's long dark curtain of hair and skin the color of dried soapberries—but they had forged a deep connection. One that still, two years later, surprised Otilie.

"I'm so very sorry. Your mother was lovely." Damaris stepped back, and her hands cupped Otilie's face. "She was one of the best women I've ever had the pleasure of knowing." Her thumbs wiped away the tears streaking Otilie's cheeks. "You *will* get through this. You have her strength."

Nānī and Thaddeus stood and brushed the dirt from their knees, and Damaris eyed them. "I like the way you grieve. There's no pretending or adopting a stiff upper lip. It's a more natural expression. You don't seem embarrassed by your outward showing of emotion."

"Death is inevitable and common," Nānī said, coming to stand beside them. She pulled Thaddeus to her side. "There is no pretense in it. Not in birth either. There's no reason to hide grief or joy."

Damaris pressed a kiss against Nānī's cheek. "You're right. I'm going to allow myself that opportunity." She walked to the mausoleum, gave a short nod to Reverend Hook, then stepped inside.

When she was lost to the shadows, Otilie met the reverend's eyes and sighed. She couldn't avoid him forever. They still attended his church every Sunday, despite the thirty-minute walk.

When she approached him, though, he gave no tired excuses for their loss.

He took Ottilie's hands. "I'm sorry. Your mother was loved, and you've experienced too much suffering already."

Ottilie dropped her head and inhaled deeply. "I admit I don't understand this. I can't make sense of it."

"I don't think we can ever make sense of the evil things that happen in this world. And it was evil. The man who killed your mother may not be brought to justice on this earth, but he will be held accountable before God."

She didn't think those words would comfort her, but they did. Because, in the end, they had so little control over how life played out. And God, despite his distance, was righteous. She knew that. It didn't ease the roiling anger that seemed so close to the surface, but it did send a shaft of light through it. A promise of one day finding peace.

Damaris appeared in the mausoleum's open door, wiping at her eyes. Reverend Hook patted Ottilie's hand. "I'll take care of everything here. You go home and rest with your family."

Her family? So reduced. So small. She looked at Thaddeus, sitting on the ground and piling stones into a tower, and Nānī, who watched the clouds with a blank expression. A strand of three. Her family seemed like a fragile thing. But it was enough. She'd make sure it held together.

And Nānī was strong—not even sixty. She carried the wiry strength of her Indian forebears. Her black braid showed only a few strands of gray, her face even fewer wrinkles. She would be with them for years yet.

Their cord would remain unbroken.

Damaris joined her. "I've hired a *tanga*."

Ottilie squeezed her friend's hand, grateful for her foresight and compassion. The horse-drawn carriage would have them home more quickly than walking, and they could avoid the

crush of people going about their day in Calcutta's crowded streets. "Thank you."

Damaris helped lift Nānī into the back of the cart just outside the cemetery gates, and the rest of them squeezed around her, Thaddeus on Damaris's lap. The driver slapped his reins against the tired-looking horse, and they jerked into traffic.

Nānī dozed, her head hanging at an awkward angle, a wheezy snore escaping her open lips, and Thaddeus leaned over the side of the cart and made a game of trying to touch cows with red-painted horns and women carrying heavy loads atop their heads.

"What will you do, Otilie?" Damaris asked. "Will you continue your mother's work?"

Their eyes met and they smiled, both knowing she'd done the brunt of her mother's work for a year, since Maji's sight had begun failing—brought on by the almost constant fancywork she'd needed to take on to keep them in food, clothing, and shelter.

"I'll try. It's the only way I can continue to support us." Otilie could become an *ayah* for a wealthy English family—her education at La Martiniere for Girls would make her in high demand. She knew French and English, math and history, and years at her father's knee and exploring the museum had given her what amounted to a fairly advanced understanding of natural sciences.

But she couldn't sacrifice her pride to the snobbishness. The constant innuendos about her birth, references to being dark for a Eurasian. "*Is there any British blood in you?*"

As though her father's inheritance could only reveal itself in her skin tone and eye color. His love of poetry pumped through her blood. His beautiful watercolors were expressed through her embroidery. She was her father's daughter, no matter that she looked just like her grandmother. Thaddeus, with his fair skin and sun-tinted brown hair, might *look* like their father, but Otilie claimed Edwin Russell's heartbeat.

"The lieutenant governor is throwing a Christmas ball at the

Government House next month. I'll persuade Mother I need an embellished gown." Damaris's father, a man whose family had grown rich on Indian spices, could well afford the cost of an embroidered dress.

Ottilie pressed a kiss to Damaris's cheek and grabbed for the back of her brother's shirt just before he tumbled beneath the carriage wheels. "Sit down, Thaddeus, or you'll make us a weak strand of two." Thaddeus furrowed his brows, and she pulled him off Damaris's lap and into her own, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing him tightly.

The tanga jerked to a stop outside the narrow lane leading to their house, pressed in on all sides by others.

"I will leave you here," Damaris said. "Come to the house Monday morning, and I'll see that Mother is swayed by my sudden interest in fashion." She smirked and gestured at her simple skirt and bodice. Damaris, much to her mother's disgust, never wore a stitch of impractical clothing.

That she would willingly wear a ball gown—and Ottilie was sure Damaris's mother would leverage her daughter's desire to help a friend and make it the most ridiculous ball gown ever sewn—spoke leagues about her character. Damaris Winship was a friend like no other. And Ottilie felt safer in the world for her presence.