

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Secret Children

Written by Alison McQueen

Published by Orion Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Secret Children

ALISON McQUEEN



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 2012

by Orion

This paperback edition published in 2012

by Orion Books Ltd,

Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane

London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Alison McQueen 2012

The moral right of Alison McQueen to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the
prior permission of the copyright owner.

All the characters in this book are fictitious,
and any resemblance to actual persons, living
or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4091-3551-7

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers
that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and
made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to
the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

Prologue

Oxfordshire, England, 2006

The cold, persistent drizzle of the early English summer seemed fitting for such a tiny cloud of mourners. Silently they stood, not even a half-dozen in their numbers, waiting for the remains of the day. Caitlin, sombre black coat drawn high around pale cheeks to shield swollen eyes, helped her ageing relative along the uneven path that wound its way between the gravestones set uniformly along this green hillside so far away from home. Slowly they walked, surveying the curtained silence of the recently dead, Caitlin's reluctant whisper hanging heavy on the damp air.

'I'm sorry about the phone call, Aunty. I should never have asked.'

'It's all right. You have nothing to apologise for. You can ask me anything you want to, although I am not sure whether I shall have the answers.'

Caitlin fell silent for a moment, then could no longer help herself. 'She never told us anything. Never spoke of her life. It was as though she never existed before Daddy came along.' Her head dropped. 'I had so many questions, so many things I wanted to know. Ever since Daddy died, all she did was cry all the time and blame everyone around her. There was no comforting her, no matter how I tried. Then she got sick. And now it's too late.'

The old woman halted and looked Caitlin directly in the eye. ‘You have to understand how difficult it was for her.’

Although her sight was failing her, there was not a single moment of almost four score years that Mary did not remember with perfect clarity; even those parts she might have wished to forget. Carefully she regarded Caitlin, almost middle-aged now, bereft in her loss. She wished that she could ease her niece’s suffering. It was a child’s right to know their heritage. Yet there was nothing to be done.

‘You mustn’t be cross with her.’ Mary forced a tender smile. ‘Try to think of your mother kindly. For her, it was the only way.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Caitlin shook her head.

‘We can only do the best we can,’ her aunt said softly. ‘And life is not always easy.’

Caitlin sensed that she had said enough. With a resigned squeeze of her hand, they continued slowly along the wet path, a carpet of smooth pebbles shining beneath their feet, finally coming to rest beside the few floral offerings laid out beneath a small plaque carrying the name *Serafina Carlisle*. They paused to look at the wind-chilled blooms, delicate and vulnerable heads nodding rhythmically against the spattering raindrops.

Caitlin bent down to read aloud one of the tribute cards, a bland sentence from some distant friend of her father whose name she had not heard for many years, but the words caught in her throat and were lost to the biting wind. She cried small tears that fell freely like pearls, accepting frail comfort from her only aunt. Mary took Caitlin’s arm and led her gently towards the lone bench set into the path beside an ancient yew, a single low bough spreading its shelter above them. Ignoring the small pools of water gathered on the drenched slats, she bade her niece to sit before taking the place beside her. With tiny brown hands flecked with the hallmarks of old age, she took

a handkerchief from her handbag, and remembered a promise she had made a long time ago.

Not for as long as we both shall live.

The colours that fall across the landscape of this remote north-eastern corner of India are hewn from a different light. Go there and you will see. The eternal blue of the verdant hills sweeps up to meet mountains afloat on a sea of clouds, skimming the edges of the deep valley clefts, their gorges thick with wild green jungle.

The early mists linger across the highest peaks, where, for a while, it is impossible to tell where the land ends and the sky begins. An eerie silence settles in with the heavy moistness that hangs on the air, dampening the skin, raising the hairs on the arms. The sun is slow to rise and cast its unhurried warmth upon the ground, sweeping away the fragile dew, revealing the colourful saris that pick their way along the high terraces, filling the baskets slung behind their heads with the leaves once prized for their healing properties, now cultivated for the silver-lined caddies of the white man.

As far as the eye can see, emerald tea gardens cling to the hillsides, mile upon mile of undulating curves, hugging the steep slopes like moss on an aged stone, paths zigzagging through the low-slung shrubs, cushioning the landscape in miniature green clouds, arid silver trunks reaching gnarled tentacles down into the hardened ground. Perhaps, had it not been for the indigenous *Camellia sinensis assamica* discovered growing in its hidden hills a century before, the British might

have left it well alone, this unforgiving, ungovernable place of ancient dynasties and tribal feuds where rulers come and go. There is no place like it on God's earth.

Some took these distant lands to their hearts and made them their own, their families becoming inextricably entwined with the jewel in their king's crown. This is the way it had been for James Macdonald, son of the most eminent surgeon in India's Doon valley, born of these lands, thousands of miles from the Scottish shores that had spawned his father. A tall, thickset man with jet-black hair slicked into daily submission with a curt application of brilliantine, James Macdonald was among the first generation of Britishers delivered on India's burning soil. Every shred of his fabric had invisibly absorbed the intricacies of the British stronghold coiled around India's throat. Raised as a son of the Empire, justly moulded to take up his mantle as colonial overlord, his tongue moved easily between the language of the kings and the song of the natives. His skin, where exposed, had been baked by the sun into a permanent olive hue, deepening his robust features, lending his heavy brow a guarded impression of intensity. There was never any question that he would stay, and never any sense that he belonged either here or anywhere else. Any number of men would have given their eye teeth for such a birthright, to be able to stake their claim and rule their own fate with only the barest minimum of interference. For James, it was just the way things were, his prescribed destiny.

The remote solitude of the plantation pleased James well enough, his temperament neither fire nor water, his predisposition towards introversion perfectly matched to the harmonious ebb and flow of the passing seasons, his sense of detachment somehow less ill-suited to this secluded region far from the bustle of the overrun conurbations. It had been a relief to loosen the ties to his family's influence and to shift

eastwards, away from the tiresome expectations, away from the dull, predictable introductions to the well-bred young women who came to the dances at the clubhouses, dispatched to the colonies like brood mares to provide wifely stock for those men who had not the time nor the inclination to return to England in search of a suitable match.

That James's family had wished him to take a wife before he broke away from the fold could not have been made more plain, but his heart had not been in it, his mind cast firmly on the plans and ambitions of every young man who had yet to make his mark, to find his own place in the grand order of things, to savour the freedoms for which every son yearns before being enveloped by the burden of anticipation bestowed upon him by hopeful parents.

James had had no need of a wife, his vitality in no rush to see itself extinguished by an early marriage to a wide-eyed English girl who would serve only to remind him of the rigidities of his upbringing before producing a litter of children, the new generation under whom India would serve. Still two years from his thirtieth birthday, he entertained that he had plenty of time to consider his future. Yet the gradual insistence of his stirring loneliness drew sighs from the emptiness when he least expected it, riding out to survey the high terraces, inspecting the yields, overseeing the tree clearance for the planned expansion to the south, his thoughts all the while nudging him inexorably towards the deep cravings that plagued his every hour.

There were places a man could go to when his yearnings became too much. Remote shacks where women waited with painted faces and beckoning smiles. James had availed himself of such pleasures before, certainly, but he had been younger and more foolish then, and had quickly found that there was no companionship to be had in the brief embrace of a sacrificial lamb.

That a man must have a woman is as basic as his need for water or air, and there were no laws in this lonely province to rub against nature's grain. Here was a place where a man could satisfy his every desire without question or consequence.

Of those precious commodities that the white man came to steal away, among the tea, the oil, the rich seams of coal and the rubies that lay hidden deep within the dry red earth, were other prizes, far away from the prying eyes of convention, of which few spoke except in hushed whispers. It would be an honour for any woman to be so chosen, to be permitted to serve her purpose unto one man and one man only. She must be grateful, for she had been born female, to live a hapless, passive life, and would never amount to anything until she became a man's possession.

The arrangement had been made at his own request, when the long nights began to stretch too far ahead, that a girl be found to satisfy his restlessness, that she be clean and pure, fair of face, and untroublesome of nature.

He was not the first to have done so, and, most certainly, he would not be the last.

'Perhaps Sahib should take an orphan girl,' advised the old, bone-dry widow who lived on the outskirts of the ramshackle village nearby, spinning marriages for anyone who could afford her services, acting as an unofficial go-between for those who did not have the required connections. Her age and position excused her from the usual proprieties that prevented open talk from a woman on such matters.

The old woman eyed the man sitting in front of her, cross-legged on the floor, the small stone slab between them providing a low table on which their cups were set. Of course, she realised exactly who he was. She knew everything that happened here, and the whereabouts of every man not yet married.

She watched the steam rise from his tea, curling in front of her intriguing new customer's face, and smiled a shrewd smile.

'For an orphan girl will be most honoured by your master's attentions and is bound to show her gratitude, and there can be no complications from her family if she has none. Yes,' she nodded in firm agreement with herself, 'I think this would be a good match indeed. Just leave it to me.'

Shiva was not to be fooled and sat calmly, his slender face set with the same expressionless pose he had seen his master adopt when dealing with an adversary. For the past three years and two months, Shiva had attended to James's every daily need, from his morning tea to the turning-down of his bed at night. The Sahib had arrived from the new plantations in the north-west, bringing no wife with him. It was only natural that he should wish for companionship, and Shiva was determined to serve his master well. Shiva was comfortably settled, white cotton lungi tucked beneath him. This was a delicate transaction that would require great patience, and he had arrived at the matchmaker's decrepit house well prepared for the long, tedious negotiations that would be an inevitable part of the deal. He had not liked the woman from the first moment he stepped over the threshold into her grubby home. She was ugly, both of face and of manner, and her house carried the foul smell of must and stale bread. He looked around at the crumbling walls, bare bricks of red earth baked into hard loaves by the sun. His voice, steady and melodious, betrayed nothing of his sentiments.

'And see my master fobbed off with a filthy street urchin you picked up from the gutter for nothing? Would a wise man buy a cow without knowing the stock from which it had come, only to watch it die of disease and then wonder why?' Shiva set his pale hazel eyes upon her. 'You must think me no better than an idiot. Perhaps we should not do business today. I had

heard that you were a reliable matchmaker. Now I see that you are just a sly old crone looking to take advantage of a man you must consider a fool.'

'Of course not.' She bowed to him. 'I merely raise the suggestion so that your master may consider all the options. This is not an easy matter. It will take great skill to find the right girl. Then, of course, there will be the delicate issue of dealing with the family. They will expect to be properly compensated, and not everyone is in such a hurry to rid themselves of their daughters, you know.' She took a noisy gulp from her tea and allowed him a little time to properly absorb the difficulties facing her. Shiva took no notice, knowing very well that this was just another one of her tricks to raise her price. 'If your master can afford to be so choosy, then of course he will have to pay a little more. You are an educated man.' He ignored the smile that crept across her face, her words lying somewhere between a compliment and a slight. 'You must know that there are stories that travel among the people far out into the fields and villages. Even the poorest family may think twice before sending their daughter into the clutches of a white planter.'

'I doubt that very much,' said Shiva curtly, sniffing his disdain as the murky aroma of filth reached his nostrils again.

'Then you do not know?' The old woman's eyes sparkled. 'They are frightened to death of them! I will have to use all my powers of persuasion to tempt the girl away from the simple life that she knows.' She drew a protracted breath and shook her head with amusement. 'Ah, perhaps you are right. We should not do business today. I think that this will be far more effort to me than it is worth. I should not be worrying about such things at my age.' She dropped her eyes from Shiva, as though having lost interest. 'I will stick to my usual village customers, and you may take my compliments and apologies to your master.'

Shiva did not move from his place, refusing to rise to her

mischievous, knowing that it was merely a matter of money.

‘The Sahib is a good man,’ he reminded her, although he knew very well that this would be of no concern to her at all. ‘The girl will be well looked after and she will have nothing to fear from him. You will find a suitable choice, but not from the hill tribes. That will only cause trouble.’ The old woman nodded in small agreement. ‘And she must have a fine nose, not a great hook like a fish eagle, and her eyes must not be too slanted.’ Shiva imagined that he knew the Sahib well enough to gauge his preferences in matters of beauty. He had seen, on rare occasion, the type of face or figure that might catch his master’s attentions for a few fleeting moments. The Sahib did not even glance at any woman who held a hint of Tibetan appearance. Nor did he care for those with overly large features, or the field workers with their ripe hips and rough hands. ‘And my master will have to see and approve her before the transaction is completed.’

‘What? You ask too much!’ The old widow yanked the short woollen shawl around her shoulders in irritation. ‘Am I expected to search miles of jungle for this wretch, bargain with her family, feed her, clean her and bring her all the way back for nothing? And what am I to do with her if your master says no?’

‘Of course, you will have expenses.’ Shiva placed a cloth pouch tied with a reed on the table between them. She took it, peered inside, raised her eyebrows momentarily and settled with a small gesture of her hand. ‘But choose carefully, old woman. You are dealing with a man who will not accept anything less than perfection, so you can forget your usual notions of a quick sale and an easy meal. Be very particular, and you will be well rewarded.’ Shiva left the tea untouched. ‘And one final condition. This is a private transaction. Is that understood? You are not to go gossiping with the village hags,

and no one is to see her. This is nobody else's business.'

The old woman smiled slightly, hiding her few teeth behind a wrinkled hand, and slid the pouch into the front of her *choli*. 'I think we understand one another very well,' she said.

Shiva bade the old woman goodbye and felt grateful for the fresh air outside.

The old woman rose from her seat, her movements surprisingly nimble, and watched Shiva through the crack in the wooden door, waiting until he had disappeared along the rough track that cut through the thicket of trees before sliding into the shadows and taking the purse from her breast. She tipped its contents into her hand and smiled to herself, spreading the money over her palms. Returning one third of the coins to the pouch, she took the rest and buried them deep in the hard ground in the corner of her hovel, stabbing at the dirt with a kukri and covering the freshly dug grave with a grimy cooking pot. She would have no need for it now that she had enough money to buy her fill from the street traders for a very long time, and she congratulated herself for striking such a good bargain. Men were fools and made easy prey in matters of love. Had she been bargaining with a woman in need of a wife for her son, she would have been lucky to receive a tenth of the price. The old woman rewarded herself with a self-satisfied yawn, tucked the pouch back into her *choli* and settled herself on the floor to rest through the heat of the afternoon. After all, there was no need for her to rush. She already knew where the girl was to be found.