

# The Least of These

by Meghan Brubaker

## *Ramabai*

The angry screams caught her attention first, followed by the unmistakable sounds of someone receiving a beating. Pandita Ramabai had heard noises like these countless times before, but still, they always stirred her heart with a mixture of compassion and outrage.

Forgetting her intended destination, she strode toward the sounds, which were coming from a stately house near the edge of the town.

"You are a poison to us all!" a woman shrieked. "It wasn't enough for you to kill my son, now you have made my husband sick, too!"

Ramabai winced as she heard flesh being struck again.

"Leave this house and don't come back!" the enraged woman screamed. "We have no place for you here anymore!"

**6** Though Ramabai knew the devastation these words must be causing the poor girl receiving them, she felt a slight thrill. After all, rescuing widows from horrible conditions had been her mission for the past thirty years. Now, here was

another opportunity to save a young girl's life.

"Thank you for bringing me here at just the right moment, Lord, and give me wisdom," she murmured as she watched a young teenage girl stumbling desperately from the house and running toward a small grove of trees.

Ramabai followed her cautiously, knowing one wrong movement might terrify the girl into running away further. She could no longer hear the girl's sobs or heavy breathing. Her eyes scanned through the trees, searching, searching.

Where did she go? Ramabai's mind raced. And if I do find her, will she trust me enough to come with me?

## *Meera*

Meera's lungs were burning, but not as badly as her beaten body. She slumped against a tree, wishing for death. Anything would be better than this life.

Her brain screamed desperately for air, but she willed herself to keep holding her breath. Perhaps she could just stop breathing, and all her suffering could end.

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Suddenly, out of nowhere, a woman appeared, holding out her hands. Her sudden presence made Meera gasp, filling her lungs with life-giving air.

“Don’t be afraid,” the woman said gently, getting closer and closer.

Don’t be afraid? Meera almost laughed at the absurd statement. Fear was all she knew now. She shrank away from the reaching hands, but her weary body couldn’t move very far. She braced herself for a slap or a punch, but instead, the woman gently grasped Meera’s shoulders. For so long, the only touches Meera had received were harsh, brutal, and abusive. She had almost forgotten that hands could be gentle, too.

“I want to help you. You can trust me,” the tiny woman was saying.

Meera knew she should be afraid. She should be mustering up the last of her strength and running away. But she was so tired, and the woman’s voice was so soft. Trembling and exhausted, she let the woman help her to her feet and lead her by the hand toward the road.

Her brain and her body couldn’t seem to work together anymore. Her mind was screaming, “Run! Fight! She’s going to hurt you or sell you into slavery or kill you!” But her

traitorous body just kept moving along with the woman as they skirted the outside of the town and got into a small bullock cart.

Once the cart was moving, Meera shrank away from the woman and glanced at her furtively. She couldn’t have been taller than five feet; in fact, Meera was probably taller than she was. The woman had greying brown hair and gazed at her with clear grey-green eyes that seemed to be trying to communicate something. Was it resentment? Hatred? Anger? Meera cycled through all the words that defined how she had been treated for so long. The last time someone looked at her like that was... Uma. Meera realized with a jolt that the woman was gazing at her with kindness. She had almost forgotten what kindness looked like. It had been so long since she had been able to visit her neighbor Uma, the one person in her life who was kind to her.

But now, this woman, she seemed to be doing the same thing.

The woman was talking, but Meera’s mind could only understand snippets of what she was saying. “Take care of you... three meals a day... hundreds of women and girls like you... safe place to live...”

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**7** As they passed through a small wooden gate, Meera saw a simple sign bearing the words “Mukti Mission.”

Without thinking, she mumbled the word to herself. “Mukti.” Freedom? What kind of place would have a name like that?

Suddenly, she became aware of the woman staring at her intently. “You can read.” It was a statement, not a question.

Too late, Meera realized her mistake. By repeating the word she had seen on the sign, she had revealed her secret.

She shook her head “no” in response to the woman’s declaration, but the woman apparently wasn’t going to let it go. “I heard you say the word ‘mukti’ when we passed the sign. How would you have known to say that unless you could read?”

Meera just shook her head again, refusing to make eye contact with the persistent woman beside her. Her ability to read had been what ruined her life before. She wasn’t going to let it ruin her life again.

### **Lissa**

The familiar creaking of the bullock cart surprised Lissa. She wasn’t expecting Pandita Ramabai to return for at least a few hours. Leaving the

school for the blind girls where she spent her afternoons, she hurried to meet the pandita and find out what had brought her back to Mukti so soon.

As soon as she saw the young girl huddled in the cart, Lissa understood exactly what had happened. In the past eleven years of working as the pandita’s assistant, she had grown accustomed to the other woman’s habit of dropping everything she was doing to bring yet another poor, unfortunate widow to the safe haven of Mukti Mission.

“We’re going to take care of you now. You don’t need to be afraid,” the pandita was saying as Lissa arrived at the cart. “What’s your name, child?”

Lissa’s heart broke when she saw the girl’s gaunt face, made more pitiful by the stain of purple and blue bruising around her eye. Blood was seeping through the simple cloth of her white sari, creating a stain on her shoulders where she had no doubt received a beating sometime in the recent past.

When the girl finally spoke, it was so soft that Lissa almost missed it. “Meera.”

“Well, Meera,” the pandita said, her voice exuding a gentle strength, “This is Miss Hastie. She’s going to help you. I promise she won’t hurt you.”

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Lissa gently helped the girl out of the cart. Like many widows when they first arrived at Mukti, the girl's half-starved body felt like a brittle twig that could snap at any moment. Lissa longed to hold the girl's hand or put her arm around her shoulder to make her feel safe, but with the way the child cringed at any touch, Lissa knew that she would feel safest if given a bit of space.

Leading her away from the cart, she began to speak calmly. "I'm Miss Hastie, and the woman who rescued you is named Pandita Ramabai." Lissa could see the familiar surprise on Meera's face, so she launched into her usual explanation.

"You probably didn't know that there could be a female version of a pandit, did you?" This was one of the things that Lissa, who had been born in England, had learned soon after moving to India. Pandit was a title given to an accomplished scholar. But because women were not taught how to read in this country, all of them were men. Well, almost all of them.

"You see," she continued to tell Meera, "Ramabai is not like most women. You'll learn that very quickly. And one thing that makes her different is that her father taught her to read and write at a young age."

Lissa noticed that something about that statement seemed to jolt little Meera. She wondered about it briefly, but kept talking. "When she was twenty years old, her incredible knowledge of the Sanskrit scriptures caught the attention of powerful scholars in Calcutta. They gave her the title 'pandita' in recognition of her exceptional abilities."

Lissa paused her monologue for a moment to gently shepherd the girl toward the clinic, where she could clean her and dress her wounds.

"The pandita is loved by everyone, and it's not just because she's a brilliant scholar and speaker. She is a champion for widows and orphans. There are nearly two thousand of us living here at Mukti, and almost everyone is a widow or an orphan. You see, the pandita knows what it feels like to be an orphan—her family died when she was sixteen. She is also a widow, but she refused to be treated the way widows usually are."

As Lissa gently peeled the dirty sari from poor Meera's bony shoulders, she could tell the girl was tense and terrified. This was normal. So many of the battered, mistreated women who came to them struggled to believe that someone might be offering them kindness instead of more abuse.

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Even though she had lived in India for many years, Lissa still couldn't get used to the way women were treated here. The pandita had often ranted to her about the way women were described in the holy Hindu texts. "Women were bad, very bad, worse than demons, as unholy as untruth." They were taught that the only way they could achieve an afterlife that wasn't full of pain and suffering was to worship their husband as a god. Even if he was an evil or cruel man, a woman had no hope of getting into the home of the gods without pleasing her husband.

And then, if a woman's husband died, things got even worse for her. Since it was believed a woman was only valuable if she could be useful to her husband, when her husband died, she became worthless. She would often be blamed for her husband's death. There was even a horrific custom of burning women alive on their husband's funeral pyres. However, Lissa had been told that many women viewed this death as far superior to what their lives would be like as widows.

**8** Considered the property of their in-laws and on the same level as livestock, they were often treated with unthinkable cruelties. Many were forced to become slaves or turned out onto the streets to beg for the rest of their lives.

But here at Mukti Mission, Pandita Ramabai had created a community of safety, value, acceptance, and love for these desperate women. As Lissa gently cared for Meera, she wondered what secrets were hiding behind her tormented eyes. What atrocities had she experienced in her short life? And how long would it take for her to understand that she was loved?

### **Meera**

Meera still couldn't comprehend what was happening to her. It felt as if she had fallen into a mysterious dream where things actually went right for her—unlike the nightmares which so often haunted her sleep. This woman with the unbelievably pale skin and round, pleasant face kept telling her things that couldn't possibly be true.

"We all work together here to make our own food and clothes. Every woman has a job, and once you're feeling strong enough, we'll find out what you enjoy doing and give you work in that area. As long as you live here, you will always be well fed and taken care of."

Meera longed to believe what the woman was saying—she wanted it to be true so badly that she ached. But she knew that it could not be. Widows didn't get taken care of, and neither did orphans. That's just not how it worked.

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Meera had been promised in marriage when she was only a baby, just like most girls in her caste. However, she had had the added misfortune of her parents dying when she was only three years old. At that point, she had been sent to her husband's family, even though he was only a boy as well. While they were legally married, she had rarely even seen him. Confined to the women's quarters of his high caste home, she had spent her days doing mindless tasks, always surrounded by the same four walls and gloomy darkness of windowless rooms.

As a new bride, she was the lowest member of the family. She soon learned not to talk or laugh loudly and never to speak to a male unless commanded to do so. As dismal as those first years were, they were actually some of the happiest of her life. Her mother-in-law took long naps in the early afternoon, and if she was careful, she could sneak out of the house for a few hours. On one of those outings, she had met her neighbor, Uma, and she had learned what kindness felt like. She had learned many other things from Uma, too, but no one must ever know about those things.

Miss Hastie had finished cleaning her up and had wrapped her in a new sari made of the loveliest cloth.

Meera stroked its soft, satiny folds in secret delight as Miss Hastie led her to a large dining room. When they entered the doorway, Meera shrank back, overcome with fear. The smell of curry and rice tickled her nostrils, but it wasn't enough to compel her inside. The room was full of women—hundreds and hundreds of them—neatly lined up in rows that seemed to stretch on forever.

Terror pushed its way into Meera's throat, and she blindly started to run. When someone grabbed her, she started to scream. "No, let me go! Stop! Stop!"

"Meera, it's all right," Miss Hastie tried to soothe her, but her gentle words were no match for the desperate certainty Meera felt. These women were dangerous. She couldn't trust anyone. People only hurt her. That's what always happened. In the end, even Uma had hurt her, in her own way.

"I'm sorry, Meera," Miss Hastie was saying. "I should have realized that would be overwhelming for you. Come. I'll take you to the kitchen, and you may eat there."

Meera's sharpened, almost animal-like instincts battled back and forth between the need to run away and the need to put food into her empty stomach. In the end, the

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promise of food won, and she went with Miss Hastie through another door where the smells were even more tantalizing.

Miss Hastie handed her a plate filled with more food than she had eaten in a whole week. Meera's eyes closed in delight as the flavors of the first bite exploded on her tongue. She ate ravenously until every bite was gone, licking the plate clean so that no drop of sauce would be left behind.

Later, as Meera lay on the pallet that had been given to her in the dormitory, her tired and aching body finally allowed itself to relax. That didn't last very long, however, because a shadowy figure appeared beside her in the dark.

"Hey," an unfamiliar voice whispered. "I'm going to run away. You may come with me, if you want."

Meera struggled to sit up and make sense of what was going on. Another girl was crouched beside her, a small bundle in her arms.

"You don't know what it's like here," the girl continued. "I came three days ago, so I know what these people are really doing."

As much as Meera didn't trust the people of Mukti mission, she immediately disliked this unknown girl. "What are they actually doing?" she challenged, suspicious of anyone

who spoke with such a know-it-all tone.

"The people in charge of this mission aren't good Hindus," the girl said disdainfully. "They're . . ." and here she paused as if for dramatic effect, "Christians." The disgust in her voice was evident.

Christians? Could this girl be telling the truth? Meera's mind raced. She had never met a Christian before, but she knew enough to know that anyone who wasn't a Hindu was destined to be tormented horribly in the afterlife.

The girl continued. "Aren't you curious why they're being so kind to you? It's because they want you to trust them so you'll be easier to control. They're going to feed you all sorts of good food. Then, once you're all fattened up, they'll hang you on a great big hook from the ceiling. I've seen the hooks. They're this big." She indicated some apparently astonishing size with her hands, which Meera couldn't see in the darkness.

The girl continued in a sinister voice, "Then they'll build a fire under you and drain all the oil from your body. They can sell it for a fabulously high price. You don't want that to happen to you, do you?"

Meera shrank away from this strange girl and her strange ideas. Surely this wasn't true. The pandita

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and Miss Hastie seemed so gentle. And yet, hadn't she been telling herself all along that no one would be this kind without a selfish reason?

"I stole some food," the girl said, holding up her bundle. "I'm going to run away. And because I'm so nice, I'll let you come with me. You haven't been brainwashed yet, like the rest of the fools here."

Meera felt frozen with indecision. If what this girl was saying was true, then she should escape immediately. But she didn't trust her. She didn't trust Miss Hastie or the pandita either, but at least they hadn't been rude, like this girl was. Besides, she was so tired, and the soft pallet beneath her felt so good. Maybe she could just stay for one night, to get some rest. Then she could run away tomorrow.

"I don't want to go anywhere with you," she hissed. "Leave me alone."

"Fine," the girl said flippantly. "At least I warned you." Then she disappeared into the night.

Meera settled back onto her pallet, trying to push the unsettling conversation from her mind. It didn't take long before her aching and exhausted body was fast asleep.

### **Ramabai**

The dawn was just starting to break as Ramabai rose from her morning prayers. She always started the day by talking to her best friend and Savior. This morning, she felt as though God had been bringing the face of the new girl to her mind so persistently that He had to be telling her something. While Ramabai cared deeply for each new member of the community, they were often taken care of by others. However, she couldn't escape the feeling that Meera was here for a special purpose, and she intended to find out what it might be.

Entering the girls' dormitory with a bowl of breakfast in her hands and a satchel of papers hanging on her shoulder, she nodded and smiled at each young woman she passed. Each of them was well-established at Mukti and would eat breakfast at the dining hall before dispersing to their daily work.

Ramabai found Meera still sleeping on her pallet, which she had evidently shoved into the most remote corner of the room she could find. Unwilling to wake her when she was resting so peacefully, Ramabai simply settled down beside her and pulled her translation work from her satchel.

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It had been ten years since she had started work on her biggest project yet—a new translation of the Bible in the Marathi dialect.

While she had originally planned that this work would take her seven years, it had already extended well past that. Ramabai was carefully translating from the Hebrew and Greek, and her vision of what this Bible could provide for the Indian people made every grueling hour worth it.

Already, she had sent out missionary teams of Bible Women with sections of the translated Bible, which had been printed right here on the printing presses at Mukti. These bands of courageous women travelled to cities that were steeped in idol worship, sharing the Gospel with the hungry hearts waiting there. Sometimes they were met with fierce opposition, but already so many hurting people had come to the truth. Ramabai loved to dream of the Bible transforming India and causing people to start treating widows and orphans with the love of Christ.

Little Meera stirred and sleepily opened her eyes. Ramabai hated to see the instant fear that washed over the girl's face as she scrambled off her pallet and eyed Ramabai from a safe distance a few feet away.

“Good morning, Meera,” Ramabai said cheerfully. “I hope you slept well. Here’s some breakfast.” She held out the bowl slowly, and Meera accepted it warily.

“While you’re eating, I hope you don’t mind if I tell you a little more about myself. Then, if you want to, maybe you can tell me a little about you, too.”

Meera was so busy scooping the boiled oats into her mouth that she didn’t even seem to be listening. Still, Ramabai continued.

“When I was your age, I never stayed in one place for very long. My father, mother, sister, brother, and I travelled to various pilgrimage sites all across India. We recited the sacred Hindu texts in return for payment. You see, my father believed that women should have the same right as men to read the holy ancient scriptures. Soon after he married my mother, he taught her to read. When I was a young child, she taught me how to read and write as well.”

Ramabai watched Meera’s face closely as she revealed this information. The girl made eye contact with her for the briefest of moments, the first sign Ramabai had seen that Meera was even listening to what she was saying.

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“There was a terrible famine that lasted for over two years. During that time, my parents and sister starved to death. Somehow, my brother and I survived and kept travelling to make money. Those were difficult years. Later, my brother died also, leaving me alone.”

She paused and looked at Meera intently. “It’s hard to be alone, isn’t it?”

Meera’s head moved in the slightest of nods, so tiny that Ramabai almost missed it.

“I got married soon after my brother died, to a good man who took care of me. Together, we began to explore other religions. I just knew the way the Hindu scriptures commanded men to treat women was wrong, deeply wrong. That could not be the truth, so we began to search for a religion that did speak truth.”

She reached out to take the empty bowl from Meera’s hand, gently brushing the girl’s fingers as she did. She took it as a good sign that Meera did not shrink away from her touch this time.

9 “My husband died of cholera just eighteen months after we got married. Now I was an orphan and a widow, but I also had a baby girl, my precious Manorama. She has filled

my life with life and love. I’m sure you’ll meet her at some point.”

Sensing that Meera was getting restless, Ramabai stood, gathering her things. “Come with me, Meera. I have somewhere special I want to show you. I think you’ll really like it.”

### **Meera**

Meera knew that it was unwise to follow this woman, especially if what the girl had said last night was true. But something about the pandita was compelling, and she couldn’t resist wanting to know more about this interesting woman.

They walked down the dirt path through what felt like an entire village. Fields of red peppers and lowari grain blanketed huge patches of land. The fields were dotted with women harvesting these precious crops.

As they passed various buildings, Meera peered into them curiously. In one, she saw women sitting at looms, creating huge swaths of vibrant cloth. In others, there were women weaving baskets from reeds, doing needlework, and making clothes. They passed several cows being milked, some women churning butter, and even a massive oil press. This, however, reminded Meera of what the girl had said last night about these women planning to

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make oil out of her. She shuddered at the thought, but was soon distracted by what she saw in the next building they passed.

It was clearly a classroom, where children were bent over lesson books. But the most surprising thing was that there were girls in there, too. The pandita clearly wasn't lying about one thing—she wanted girls to be able to read. A tiny thrill of excitement spiraled upwards in her chest, but she stubbornly pushed it down.

“Here we are,” the pandita announced pleasantly. “This, in my humble opinion, is the most beautiful room in all of Mukti Mission.”

She opened the door almost sacredly. Meera's eyes darted about, checking for any large hooks or girls hanging from the ceiling. Instead, she saw dozens of women seated at tables. They all had papers spread before them, and each woman was either reading intently or scribing with great care and detail.

Meera realized that the pandita was watching her carefully, so she quickly made sure her face gave away no emotion.

“I know you can read, Meera, and I think that's wonderful,” the pandita whispered gently. “You don't need to hide that part of yourself here.”

For some reason, Meera felt tears prickling her eyes.

“Come over here,” the pandita ushered her to a seat in the corner. “I have a story I'd like you to read.”

Meera soundlessly settled into the chair as the pandita bustled over to another part of the room and returned with a few pages of neatly-written Marathi. Meera pretended not to care, but her heart was pounding. It had been so long since she had read anything. Perhaps . . . but no. Her ability to read was dangerous.

It hadn't been that way at the beginning. At first, when Uma had started offering secret reading lessons within the high walls of her private courtyard, reading had been the most beautiful gift. It had opened doors to Meera that she would never be able to walk through in real life—adventures that took her beyond the same four suffocating walls in which she spent her days. Years had passed, and somehow Uma had kept finding new books for her to read. Meera had never asked how Uma had access to so many books. Perhaps she, like the pandita, had a male relative who believed that women should be educated, too.

But then it had all fallen apart when her husband, who was still practically a stranger, got sick and died. Suddenly, in the eyes of her mother-

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in-law, Meera's usefulness had vanished. Everyone believed that she was responsible for his death. The punishments for this unknown transgression had started at once. Her hair had been shaved off, she was only given one meal a day, and it was rare for a day to go by without her being beaten in some way.

And then, things had gotten worse. Much worse. Meera still didn't know how, but her mother-in-law had discovered her secret. The woman had flown into a rage, her face purple and spit flying from her mouth as she attacked Meera. "Everyone knows that if a woman reads or holds a pen, her husband will die! Your reading has killed him as surely as if you took a knife to his throat!"

After that, her mother-in-law had seemed to try to come up with new ways to torment her. The days and weeks blurred together in an unending stream of misery. And she no longer had her daily escape to Uma's world of kindness and books. Soon she began to hate everything and everyone—even Uma, who had made her life even more bitter, though not on purpose.

Reading had opened her world, but it had also closed it. Now, for the first time in years, she had been given the chance to read again. She

glanced down at the pages in front of her. The words, dancing across the page in elegant loops and scrolls, looked so innocent. Would it really be so wrong for her to allow them into her mind?

And so, hesitantly, Meera did. She started to read. She read the captivating story of a woman at a well who met an interesting yet mysterious man named Jesus. Even though this woman was an outcast and hated by her whole village, this man Jesus spoke to her with love and kindness. And more importantly, He gave her hope—something to live for.

The story stirred deep feelings in Meera's heart. She jumped when someone placed a hand on her shoulder. It was the pandita, who smiled knowingly at the tears streaming down Meera's face.

"It's a wonderful story, isn't it? I had been introduced to Christianity before, but it wasn't until I read this exact story that I realized he was truly the Divine Savior he claimed to be. I wanted Him to be my Savior, too. It became so clear to me that no one but He could uplift the downtrodden women of India. This story changed my life."

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Meera nodded. She didn't know it yet, but reading this story would change her life, too.

**Lissa**, *Two years later*

On her way to work with the blind women, Lissa stopped by the translating room to see if the pandita needed anything. As always, her heart thrilled as she viewed over a hundred girls and women engaging in the work that was sure to transform countless lives.

With a bit of embarrassment, Lissa remembered her uneasiness when she had first heard that the pandita was tackling such an enormous undertaking. "But isn't there already a Marathi translation of the Bible?" she had protested, thinking that there were much more pressing needs to be filled.

In her characteristically passionate way, the pandita had launched into a ten-minute speech about the many problems with the current translation. For starters, she had argued, it was not phrased in common language that an uneducated person could understand. It had also been translated with the help of Hindu scholars and contained a lot of Hindu ideas which were not true to the words of Scripture at all. Lissa still remembered the fire in the pandita's eyes as she said, "Supposing in each chapter of the Bible there are five

mistakes, or mistranslated words, then we have no less than 5,945 mistakes or mistranslations in the whole Marathi Bible. Ought we to teach and preach the Bible with so many mistakes?"

Lissa was pulled from the past to the present by the sound of laughter. It was Meera, who was now almost unrecognizable as the frightened, mistrustful girl who had been rescued two years ago. She had blossomed at Mukti, showing incredible talent as a translator. Now, she was an indispensable part of the Bible translation team.

Lissa approached Meera and Adrika, who were giggling over something written on the page in front them.

"Oh, hello, Miss Hastie," Meera said between giggles.

"Hello, Meera and Adrika. I didn't realize translating the Bible could be so funny."

"Oh, I hope you don't find us disrespectful," Adrika said, suddenly serious.

"It's just that this old Marathi translation is so ridiculous sometimes!" Meera exclaimed, before both girls erupted into laughter again.

Unable to speak, they showed Miss Hastie the translation they were working on. Their translation read,

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“The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’”

Then, their eyes dancing with laughter, they handed Lissa the old Marathi translation. As she read it, soon she was laughing, too. “The estate of a certain opulent agriculturalist was profusely fertile, and meditating within himself, he vociferated, ‘The spaciousness of my granary being inadequate for the storage of my produce, I am perplexed as to my future procedure.’”

“You’re certainly doing an important work, ladies,” Lissa said, chuckling as she moved on.

The smile soon disappeared from her face when she saw the pandita. She really was looking so old and so tired. Ever since her daughter Manorama had died unexpectedly nine months before, the pandita’s youth and vigor seemed to be draining away.

At this point, the two women had worked together for so long that Lissa didn’t even need to say anything for the pandita to know what she was thinking.

“I’ll be all right, Miss Hastie. You worry too much.”

“And you don’t worry enough. You’re not going to help anyone if you don’t take care of yourself. Why don’t you go rest for an hour or two? Then you’ll have more energy to continue.”

Surprisingly, the pandita didn’t protest further. She simply nodded and shuffled toward her bedroom.

Lissa watched her go, concerned. This woman had done so much for so many people. What would the world be like without her in it?

### **Ramabai**

**10** Ramabai felt so weary. She had worked herself to near exhaustion at many points in her life, but this felt different somehow.

“Is it time for me to come home to You?” she prayed. Is that what I’m feeling? But Lord, we are so close to completing the Bible translation. I want to be with You, of course, but could You help me finish this work You asked me to start? Please, Lord, I’m asking you for ten more days. Just ten more days, and then You may take me home.

### **Meera**

The atmosphere in the translation room should have been charged with excitement and celebration. The translation was finished! The pandita had finished the final drafts

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just hours before. However, she was now lying on a pallet in the corner of the room, too weak to even walk back to her bedroom. The translation team was gathered around her, praying softly.

The pandita was whispering something. Meera, seated beside her, strained to catch the words.

“He gave me exactly ten,” the old woman whispered.

“Ten what?” Meera asked, but the pandita either didn’t hear her or didn’t answer.

“Meera, will you please bring me the last page?” she asked. Meera sprang up to do as she was asked. The pandita had been finishing her drafts of the book of Matthew. She easily found the last page the pandita had been working on and brought it back to her bedside.

“Read it,” the pandita whispered.

Meera handed the page to Miss Hastie. It seemed only right that she, Pandita Ramabai’s assistant, close friend, and chosen successor, should be the one to read to her on her deathbed. It also seemed fitting that the pandita should die surrounded by a small group of the many widows whose lives she had utterly transformed through her unselfish work.

Miss Hastie’s gentle voice filled the room, and Meera realized that at some point, the pandita had slipped from this life into the next one.

Tearfully, Miss Hastie read the last words on the page. “And the King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me.’”

#### *Author’s Note*

*Although this story contains fictional elements, every attempt has been made to be as historically accurate as possible. All details regarding Ramabai’s childhood circumstances, the treatment of widows, the translation work completed by Ramabai, and the workings of Mukti Mission are taken from historical accounts. Lissa Hastie and Pandita Ramabai were real people who I have tried to depict as fairly as possible. Meera is a fictional character who represents the experiences of many child widows. Adrika and the girl in the night are also fictional; however, the odd belief that widows at Mukti were being fattened up to be drained of their oil was apparently not uncommon, as Ramabai is quoted in saying to a biographer. The Bible passage read to Pandita Ramabai as she lay dying is an added detail. It is true, though, that she asked God to be given ten more days of life and finished her final translating just hours before she died.*