

# Sold

## CHAPTER TWO

### WINDFALL

We are awakened in the middle of the night by a thunderous roaring outside our hut. Ama and I come down to see my stepfather seated on a machine with two wheels and a pair of metal antlers. “It is a motorcycle,” he says. “I won it from a city boy home for the festival.” The metal beast coughs, and great blasts of smoke come from its tail. “I told you this was an auspicious night,” my stepfather says. I do not see how this thing is of any use to us. But Ama hugs me and whispers in my ear that we will trade the beast at Bajai Sita’s. In an instant I see it all. We will buy back Ama’s earrings. We will have enough money for a drum of cooking oil, a barrel of flour, a new dress for me and one for Ama, a jacket for the baby, a tin roof. Perhaps, I think grudgingly, even enough for a new vest for my stepfather.

### THE NEXT DAY

In the morning, my stepfather is up early, tending lovingly to his beast. He rubs it down with a rag and talks to it like a baby. “We are going to the tea shop,” he tells it, “so that everyone can envy my good fortune.” The beast, however, balks at his suggestion. It belches and breaks wind, but it will not roar the way it did last night. My stepfather kicks the thing, curses at it, then finally it snarls in reply. My stepfather rides away, slipping and sliding in the mud.

## NIGHTFALL

It is nearly dark when my stepfather comes back from the tea shop. The beast is nowhere to be seen, and my stepfather is on foot, without his city coat or even his hat. Ama runs to the door, sees, then turns her face to the corner so as not to shame him when he comes in and climbs the ladder to the sleeping loft.

## A TINY EARTHQUAKE

Ama has to be coaxed from bed the next morning with a cup of hot tea. She says she is not ill, but she has the look of a great sickness about her. I put the baby in a basket on my back and go about my chores, all the while keeping my eyes on Ama. Her steps are slow and heavy, and she stops often in her work to shake her head and sigh.

At noon, I warm the remains of yesterday's soup, feed it to the baby, then tighten my waistcloth so my own hungry stomach will think it is full. Then I go in search of Ama so that she can wipe the bowl clean with the last heel of bread. When she doesn't answer my calls, I go outside and find her hiding behind Tali's shed, weeping. "What is it, Ama?" I say.

Ama wipes her cheek with the hem of her shawl. "Your stepfather has said you must go to the city and earn your keep as a maid."

This news is like a tiny earthquake, shaking the very ground beneath my feet. And yet, for Ama, I stand firm. "This is good news, Ama," I say, my voice full of a boldness I did not know I had. "There will be one less mouth to feed here, and I will send my wages home."

Ama nods weakly.

"If I go, you will have money enough for rice and curds, milk and sugar. Enough for a coat for the baby and a sweater for you."

She smiles wanly and strokes my cheek with her work-worn hand.

"Enough," I say, "for a tin roof."

## CITY RULES FOR MAIDS

“In the city,” says Ama, “the maids clean the floors with one rag and the dishes with another. Take care not to mix them up, or you will risk a beating. Get up early in the morning before anyone else in the house and be the last one to bed at night. Never sit down in the presence of your mistress or her husband or even in front of the children. And never eat your meal until they have gone to bed. This will prove what a hard worker you are. Hide your wages inside your blouse. That way, she says, you will fool anyone who thinks you keep your money in your waistcloth. Do not eat any food that comes in a paper wrapper. You do not know who has cooked it. Put a pinch of cardamom in the rice, she says. This will make it more filling. Stay two steps behind your mistress if you are helping her with the marketing, and keep your head bowed when you are in public so that the city men cannot see your face. Say your prayers every day and wash your skirt and blouse once a month. You will make us proud,” Ama Says.

## HAPPINESS HOUSE

**We come to the great city of Calcutta. We turn down an alley and arrive** in front of a metal gate held fast with a heavy chain. Uncle takes a key from his vest, opens the lock, and hurries me inside.

“Will Auntie be here?” I say.

“Who?” He is distracted, locking the chain behind us.

“Auntie Bimla,” I say. “Will she be here?”

“Later,” he says. “She’ll be here later.”

Beyond the gate, a man lies sleeping in front of a door. Uncle nudges him with the toe of his boot. The man rises, lets us in, then locks the door behind us. This place is dark as a cave, and it smells of liquor and incense. As my eyes adjust, I see a dozen sleeping girls, some in the corners, some on rope cots.

“What kind of place is this?” I ask uncle.

“Happiness House,” he says. “Auntie Mumtaz will explain it all to you.”

In the weak morning light, I see that the girls are wearing dresses of every color. They have heavy silver bangles on their wrists and ankles, and earrings of gold and jewels. Their eyes are painted with black crayon, and their lips are drawn on like red chilis. At home, these girls would be up at dawn to do their chores, not sleeping in their festival clothes until the midday meal. I wonder if perhaps this Happiness House is where the movie stars live.

### TEN THOUSAND RUPEES

A figure rises from the corner and steps toward us. She has the reed-thin body of a girl and the hollow cheeks of an old woman. She is, under the folds of her yellow dress, frail as a baby bird. Uncle speaks with her in brisk city language, and the aging bird girl disappears behind a curtain. Moments later the cloth is drawn back. Inside a darkened chamber, a fat woman in a purple sari lounges on a cot. She has folds of flesh like roti dough at her waist, and a face as plump as an overripe mango. She snaps her fingers and the bird girl flinches. Even Uncle Husband seems to draw back. He pushes me toward the fat mango woman, so close that I can see the bloom of hair on her upper lip. I stand upright, so she can see what a strong worker I am.

She surveys me head to toe, then spits. "How much?" she says to Uncle Husband.

"Fifteen thousand," he says.

The woman laughs. "For this one? She is thin as yesterday's tea."

They bargain back and forth, sometimes in my language, sometimes in another tongue. Uncle goes high, the woman goes low. Eventually Uncle shrugs and gives up.

The woman takes a record book out from inside the folds of her dress. She writes down the number 10,000. The woman snaps her fingers, and the bird girl rises and takes me by the arm.

I look to Uncle Husband. "Go on," he says impatiently. "She will find you a bed."

I am afraid to leave Uncle Husband, who protected me from the bad border men and bought me a roti, and who is the only person I know in this strange dead city. But I obey, pulling my bundle to my chest and following the girl down a hallway. She takes me upstairs to a tiny room, unlocks the door, and gestures for me to enter.

“My Auntie Bimla is coming for me,” I tell her. “When she comes to the door, will you tell her I am here?” I cannot tell if the girl understands. She doesn’t answer. She simply closes the door.

I don’t know why I am in this strange house or where Auntie Bimla is. It seems as though this Auntie Mumtaz is my new mistress. She is a strict one, to be sure, but I will prove myself to her. And then my mother will have a new dress, shoes for the cold season, even a new shawl made of the finest yarn. My little brother will have fruit and curds twice a day and a jacket of yak fur. Even my stepfather can get new spectacles and a vest, I suppose. And our roof, our new tin roof, will be the shiniest one on the mountainside. This is what I am thinking as I hear the girl lock the door behind her.

## IN THIS ROOM

There are posters of gods and movie stars on the walls. An electric sun hanging from the middle of the ceiling. A rope bed. A palm frond machine that stirs the air. And iron bars on the windows. A corner of the room is curtained off with a length of cloth from an old sari. On the floor, a plastic bucket sits next to a hole in the floor. I can tell from the stink that this is the privy. I sit on the bed and try to picture Tali’s little pink nose. The mists dancing around the swallow-tailed peak. The tawny grain fields. Ama’s crow-black hair. Krishna’s sleepy cat eyes. But my thoughts spin like the palm frond machine. I think of the aging bird girl and wonder why she is so skinny if she eats sweet cakes and dates and oranges and mangoes every day. I think of the woman with the rolls of roti dough at her waist and wonder why she lives in this darkened cave building if she is so rich. And if she will teach me city words when I am finished with my chores. But finally my eyes grow heavy and I lie down on the bed. And after four days of traveling, I fall asleep.

## HOMESICK

I awake for a moment, unsure of where I am. I yawn and wait for the scent of hearth smoke and baking bread. And what greets my nose is the stench of the privy hole next to my bed. I pray for a mountain breeze, brisk with the promise of snow, and instead I see the palm frond machine lazily churning the same sultry city air. I listen for the clucking of the hens. What I hear are the fighting voices of a man and woman in the room next to mine. So far, this city is not what I had hoped. Perhaps if I close my eyes and fall asleep again, I can at least dream of home.

## TV

I awake when two girls come and unlock the door. One is pretty, with teardrop eyes and deep brown skin, like the hide of a nut. The other has a crooked face. Her right cheek is sunken, and the corner of her mouth is tugged down in a permanent half frown. They take me to a room where the other girls have gathered. The aging bird girl is there, as well as others. Young ones dressed to look old, and old ones dressed to look young. A naked baby sleeps on a blanket on the floor, and a little girl in pigtails kneels at her mother's feet as she checks her scalp for lice. There is no chatter or laughter like there is when the village women gather. Instead they are all entranced by a black box with a large glass window in front. Inside the box, a tiny woman is singing. She is wearing gold pants, and her hair is blowing in the wind. The half-frowning girl pushes a button and the woman is gone. A man sits at a table reading from a paper. She pushes the button again and again, and the picture inside the box changes again and again. There is a woman scrubbing a pot, shaking her head. Then there is a man hitting a ball with a paddle. Then a schoolgirl drinking Coca-Cola. Then back to the woman in the gold pants. A man with slicked-back hair whispers in the woman's ear. She puts a finger to his lips, then dances to the corner of the box and disappears. I put my hand to my mouth and wait to see what will happen next.

The girl with the nut-brown skin leans toward me. "It's a television," she says in my language. "TV."

I have heard about television. My stepfather says his brother received one as a dowry when his son married a wealthy girl. There are no golden roofs here, but perhaps this city is a grand one after all — if every house has a TV.

## A CITY GIRL

The fat woman in the purple sari walks into the room. The girl with the crooked face jumps up and turns off the TV. The dark-skinned girl sits and waits, while the others saunter away. The fat woman asks angry questions in the city language.

“Yes, Mumtaz,” says the dark-skinned girl.

“No, Mumtaz,” says the frowning girl.

This Mumtaz pinches the skin above my elbow and twists it until my eyes sting. I don't move. I don't say a word. Even when she lets go and shoves me toward the other girls. Then Mumtaz is gone. And the dark-skinned girl is washing my face, the half-frowning one brushing my hair. They do not speak, and I feel shy around these bold city girls, as they do for me what only my ama has done before.

“What are you doing?” I say.

The dark-skinned girl starts to answer, but the frowning one tells her to shush, and yanks the brush through my hair. She opens a tin box and removes a small bottle of red liquid. Then she takes my hand and paints the liquid on my nails, while the other girl uses a black crayon and draws on my eyelids. What is happening?” I say.

They don't answer.

The dark girl, the one who explained to me about the TV, says “Shhh.” Then, when the frowning girl turns away, she whispers in my language, “You'll know soon enough.”

I see my face reflected in a silver glass on the wall. Another Lakshmi looks back at me. She has black-rimmed tiger eyes, a mouth red as a pomegranate, and flowing hair like the tiny gold-pants woman in the TV. She is fancy, like Auntie Bimla, like a movie star, like these other city girls. I smile at this new Lakshmi. And she smiles back. Uncertainly.

## OLD MAN

Mumtaz studies me. “Are you ready to go to work?” she says in my language.

I nod and say yes, then nod again, although I do not understand how these city people do their chores in such fine clothes and uncomfortable shoes. I follow Mumtaz down a hallway lined with tiny rooms. We pass by girls sitting cross-legged on the floor. Girls drawing on tiger eyes. Girls spraying themselves with flower water. Some of them stare at me. Some take no notice.

We go up some stairs, down another hallway, then into a room where an old man is lying on a bed. His skin is yellow and he has tufts of hair poking out from his ears. Mumtaz speaks kindly to him and I wonder if he is sick. Across the hall, in another room, where a red cloth is hung across the doorway, I hear the sound of grunting. It is a strange, animal sound that makes me shudder. Mumtaz points to me and says something to the old man. He licks his palm and smoothes down his hair. They do not seem to notice the grunting. Then it stops. The red cloth is pulled back. And a man stands in the hallway zipping his pants. I look down at my red-painted nails and my new shoes. Something is not right here. I don't know what is going on, but it is not right, not right at all. Mumtaz pats the edge of the bed and tells me to come closer. The old man makes a clucking sound.

“Don't be afraid,” she says. “Come here, now.”

I don't move.

Her voice turns hard. “Get over here, you ignorant girl,” she says.

Still, I do not move.

Then Mumtaz flies at me. She grabs me by the hair and drags me across the room. She flings me onto the bed next to the old man. And then he is on top of me, holding me down with the strength of ten men - I bite down with all my might. He cries out “Aghh!” and I am running. Running down the hall, past the other girls, losing my fancy city shoes along the way, until I am back in the room where I started, pulling my old clothes out of my bundle.

## SOLD

I'm wiping the makeup off my face when the dark-skinned girl comes in. “What do you think you're doing?” she says.

“I'm going home.” Her tear-shaped eyes grow dark. “There is a mistake,” I tell her. “I'm here to work as a maid for a rich lady.”

“Is that what you were told?”

Then Mumtaz arrives at the door, huffing, her mango face pink with anger. “What do you think you’re doing?” she says.

“Leaving,” I say. “I’m going home.”

Mumtaz laughs. “Home?” she says. “And how would you get there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know the way home?” she says. “Do you have money for the train? Do you speak the language here? Do you even have any idea where you are?”

My heart is pounding like the drumming of a monsoon rain, and my shoulders are shaking as if I had a great chill.

“You ignorant hill girl,” she says. “You don’t know anything. Do you?”

I wrap my arms around myself and grip with all my might. But the trembling will not stop.

“Well then,” Mumtaz says, pulling her record book out from her waistcloth, “Let me explain it to you.” You belong to me,” she says. “And I paid a pretty sum for you, too.” She opens to a page in her book and points to the notation for 10,000 rupees. “You will take men to your room,” she says. “And do whatever they ask of you. You will work here, like the other girls, until your debt is paid off.”

My head is spinning now, but I see only one thing: the number in her book. It warps and blurs, then fractures into bits that swim before my eyes. I fight back tears and find my voice. “But Auntie Bimla said—”

“Your ‘auntie,’” she scoffs, “works for me.”

I understand it all now. I blink back the tears in my eyes. I ball my hands into fists. I will not do this dirty business. I will wait until dark and escape from Mumtaz and her Happiness House.

“Shahanna!” Mumtaz snaps her fingers and the dark-skinned girl hands her a pair of scissors.

This Shahanna leans close and whispers to me, “It will go easier on you if you hold still.” There is a slicing sound, and a clump of my hair falls to the floor. I cry out and try to break free, but Shahanna has hold of me.

Mumtaz draws back, the jaw of the scissors poised at my neck. “Hold still,” she says, her teeth clenched. “Or I’ll slice your throat.”

I look at Shahanna. Her eyes are wide with fear. I stay very still, looking at the girl in the silver glass. Soon she has the shorn head of a disgraced woman and a face of stone.

“Try to escape with that head of hair,” Mumtaz says, “and they’ll bring you right back here.”

And then they are gone, leaving me alone in the locked-in room. I pound on the door. I howl like an animal. I pray. I pace the room. I kick the door. But I do not cry.