

SOLD

Chapter Three

THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS

Each day, a thousand people pass below my window. Children on their way to school. Mothers hurrying home from the market. Rickshaw pullers, vegetable sellers, street sweepers and alms-seekers. Not one looks up. Each morning and evening Mumtaz comes, beats me with a leather strap, and locks the door behind her. And each night, I dream that Ama and I are sitting outside our hut, looking down the mountain at the festival lights, and she is twining my hair into long dark braids.

A CUP OF TEA

I have grown to dread one sound more than any other: the rasping of the key in the lock, which means that Mumtaz has arrived with her strap and her taunts. And so I am in the corner of the locked-in room, my face to the wall, when the door opens. It is Shahanna, the girl with the nut-brown skin, holding a cup of tea.

She guides the cup to my mouth and talks softly. “Take it,” she says. “Your lips are cracked.”

I sip, unwilling at first to let on how badly I want it, then I gulp it down greedily.

“Slow down,” she says, gently prying the cup from my hand. “If you go too fast, you will retch.”

I do as she says, but soon, too soon, the cup is empty.

Shahanna reaches out and runs a gentle hand over my head. “Your hair is already starting to grow back,” she says.

I try to speak, but there is no voice in my throat after all these days with no one to talk to. I want to tell this kind, dark-skinned girl about all the things I don't do. That I don't think about my parched lips or my shorn hair. That I don't look in the mirror. But the words won't come.

"Mumtaz will let you live," she says, "if you do as she says."

I turn my back to her and look out the window. Two schoolgirls in crisp blue uniforms skip by on the street below, holding hands.

"I've been out there," Shahanna says. "And I can tell you that it's not so bad here."

I am wary, knowing now how these city people cannot be believed.

"It's true," she says. "Out there, you're no better than a dog." She points to a mongrel that has stopped to nose through a ditch full of human waste. "Here at least we have a bed and food and clothes." She pauses.

I shake my head. "No," I hear myself say in a ragged voice. "I will not do this disgraceful thing."

Shahanna sighs. "She will only sell you to another place just like this." She moves toward the door. Inside I am begging her not to go, not to leave me alone watching the world go by outside my locked-in room. But on the outside I am blank. I have already learned from these city people. From the ones who turned a blind eye to the legless beggar boy, from the ones who shuffle through this city of the dead with their eyes empty. You are safe here only if you do not show how frightened you are.

CHANGES

One afternoon, Mumtaz comes to the door and tells me to gather up my things. "Now that you are no longer a virgin," she says, "I cannot fetch a good price for you."

I cannot believe my ears. "So I can go now?" I say.

Mumtaz spits. "You did not come easily," she says. "You cannot easily go." I don't understand. "You can go home ..." She pauses, picks a fleck of betel leaf off her tongue, examines it. I try to slow the pounding of my heart at the mention of

the word “home.” Mumtaz flicks the bit of leaf into the air and continues. “... as soon as you’ve worked off the twenty thousand rupees I paid for you.”

“But —” I have seen her record book, with its entry of 10,000 rupees. I know this 20,000 price is a lie. Somehow, of all the things that have been done to me, this — this outrage — is the worst. I haven’t cried, not one tear, since that first night with the fish-lips man. But now tears surge up in my eyes. I blink them back and lift my chin.

“But what?” she says. She pulls the leather strap out from under her skirt and slaps it against her open palm. I bow my head. “From now on,” Mumtaz says, “you will join the other girls downstairs each night. You will share a bedroom and be free to walk the house.”

I stare straight ahead.

Mumtaz comes close and takes my chin in her hand. “But if you try to run away” she says, “I will grind you up.” I shudder, cup my hands over myself, and nod. “Now hurry up,” she says as she walks out. “I need this room.”

WHAT IS NORMAL

The aging bird girl says I am to go to the kitchen, to join the other girls for the midday meal. How odd it is then, after all these days of dreaming to be free, that my feet will not obey.

“Come on,” she says. Then she pinches my ear and drags me into the hall.

The strangeness of walking — moving more than a few paces to the window and back — makes the journey of a dozen steps feel like a million. And the hallway, a stretch of bare floor and cracked walls, seems to me wonderful, new and foreign and vast, and strange. And painfully bright. When I finally reach the end of the hall, I see a kitchen. Girls in loud, colored dresses are calling out to each other — some in city language, some in my native tongue — all of them shouting to be heard over the wail of a music machine. They bare their teeth as they laugh, shove handfuls of rice into painted mouths. A fat, toothless woman stirs a vat of greasy stew while a naked child crawls at her feet, and the air is thick with the smells of spices and cooking oil, perfume and cigarette smoke.

It is all, suddenly, too much. I sink to the floor. Then Shahanna is at my side with a steaming bowl of rice. I eat, but do not taste it. I open my mouth — to thank her, to try to tell her how odd it is to be with people again — but I can't find any words.

When I have finished my rice, she helps me to my feet, then says I must come watch TV with everyone else. "It's fun," she says. "You'll see."

When we get to the TV room, the frowning girl is pushing the button. The box comes to life, just like before. Strange words appear on the glass, and loud, happy music plays. The girls cheer. "It's *The Bold and the Beautiful*," says Shahanna. "It's from America. It's our favorite show." Inside the TV, a little pink-skinned man is talking to a woman with hair the color of straw. She raises her hand to slap him across the face, but he catches her wrist in his grip and stops her. Then, without warning, they are kissing.

The Happiness House girls clap and cheer and cackle like hens. The tiny pink-skinned TV man and woman are strange to me. But these flesh-and-blood girls are, to me, stranger still. How they can eat and laugh and carry on as normal when soon the men will come is so perplexing that, while they laugh, I fight back tears.

IN MY NEW ROOM

There are posters of gods and movie stars on the walls, an electric sun hanging from the middle of the ceiling, a palm frond machine that stirs the air, a hole-in-the-floor privy, iron bars on the windows, and four rope beds separated by old sheets that hang from the ceiling. "You draw the sheet around your bed when you have a customer," Shahanna tells me. Six of us share a room: the half-frowning girl, whose name is Anita; a coughing woman named Pushpa; and her two children. One of the children is a toddler, who is crawling around on the floor dragging an empty plastic bottle on a string. The other, Shahanna says, is a boy of eight. She points to the half-frowning girl. "Anita," she says, "is from our country."

I place my palms together at my heart and say hello to her in our language.

She looks over at me briefly, then goes back to pasting a movie star picture above her bed. I cannot tell, from her crooked face, if she is smiling or frowning. Or both. Or neither. The coughing woman, Pushpa, came to work for Mumtaz when her husband died. She is pretty — with dusky skin and almond eyes — but she is so

thin her collarbones poke out of her dress like the twigs of the neem tree. As Shahanna is speaking, Pushpa is seized with a bout of coughing that racks her entire body. When the coughing subsides, she spits into a handkerchief, sighs heavily, then curls up on her bed with her face toward the wall. The little girl tugs on Pushpa's braid and cries, "Mama, Mama," but Pushpa doesn't answer.

MEETING THE DAVID BECKHAM BOY

In the middle of the afternoon, a boy of about eight comes in and flings a backpack in the corner. He has hair that sticks up like the tassels on a cornstalk and knees as knobby as a baby goat's. He gives Pushpa a kiss on the cheek and tickles baby Jeena under her chin. He notices me and points to his shirt. It has the number twenty-three on the back. "David Beckham," he says. I do not understand these words, but it is clear that this David Beckham boy is very proud of his shirt.

Shahanna says it is time for us to put on our makeup. Pushpa rises wearily, gives the baby a bottle, and puts her on a little bedroll under her cot. The David Beckham boy grabs a paper kite and runs off. If I could speak his language, I would ask him if the night air in the city smells like the night air on the mountain, like rain clouds and jasmine and possibility.

EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW NOW

While Anita and Pushpa stand in front of the mirror, painting their faces, Shahanna explains everything to me.

"Before, when you were in the locked room," Shahanna says, "Mumtaz sent the customers to you. Now, if you want to pay off your debt, you must do what it takes to make them choose you. Tell the customers that you are twelve, she says. Or Mumtaz will beat you senseless. Do whatever the customer asks of you, Shahanna says. Otherwise he will beat you senseless. Then he will do whatever he likes and leave without paying.

"Always wash yourself with a wet rag after the man is finished," Pushpa says. "This will keep you from getting a disease. If a customer likes you, he may give you a sweet, she says. You must eat it right away, or Mumtaz will take it and eat it herself. If a customer likes you, he may give you a tip. Hide it where no one can see so that you will have enough to buy yourself a cup of tea each day. Once a

month,” Pushpa says, “a government woman comes to the back door with a basket of condoms. Take a handful and hide them under your mattress, but do not let Shilpa, the aging bird girl, see you; she is Mumtaz’s spy.”

“The Americans will try to trick you into running away,” says Anita. “Don’t be fooled. They will shame you and make you walk naked through the streets.”

“If an old man is at the door, bat your eyelashes and act the part of a little girl,” says Pushpa. “He will pay extra for this.”

“If Mumtaz brings you one of her important friends, bat your eyelashes and act the part of a little girl,” says Shahanna. “*He* will pay nothing. There are special things you need to know about how to use your shawl, she says. Flick the ends of your shawl in a come-closer gesture, and you’ll draw the shy men to you, the ones who’ll slip an extra coin to you. Draw your shawl to your chin, bend your neck like a peacock. This will bring the older men to you, the ones who’ll leave a sweet on your pillow.”

“Press your shawl to your nose with the back of your hand,” Pushpa says, “when you must bring a dirty man to your bed. He will leave nothing but his smell, the stink of sweat, and hair oil and liquor and man. But you can use your shawl to block the worst of it.”

Anita turns away from the mirror, transformed from a crooked-faced country girl into a tiger-eyed city woman. “There is another way to use a shawl,” she says. I cannot tell from her always-frowning face if she is being kind or cruel. “That new girl, the one in your old room,” she says. “Yesterday morning Mumtaz found her hanging from the rafters.”

PRETENDING

Her coughing is so bad today that Pushpa cannot get out of bed, so we take turns playing with baby Jeena, tickling her, cooing to her, bouncing her on our knees. It is peaceful until Anita and the cook begin pinching each other’s ears over whose turn it is to hold the baby. In the midst of their fighting the baby begins to wail. Pushpa rises wearily from her cot and takes Jeena in her arms. “You do not remember,” she whispers to her little girl, “but we used to have a proper home.”

She opens her blouse and puts the child to her breast. But it is to no avail. There is no nourishment left in Pushpa's withered body, and again the baby begins to cry.

Jeena is not the only baby here. Several of the women have children. They dote on them, going even deeper into debt with Mumtaz to buy them fresh clothes for school, hair ribbons, and sneakers. The others — the ones without children — treat them like pets, buying them sweets from the street boy when one of their good customers gives them a tip.

I ask Shahanna why this is so. "We all need to pretend," she says. "If we did not pretend, how would we live?"

"But why does Mumtaz go along with this?" "Only Mumtaz does not pretend," she says. "She knows that once the women have children, they cannot leave. They will do whatever she asks, or be thrown out in the street."

I ask Shahanna why the women don't get the shots that will keep the babies from coming. She looks at me like I'm mad. "All the girls want babies," she says. "It's our only family here."

And so the children of Happiness House go off to school in the mornings and come home in the afternoons and do their homework. They play tag in the alleyway, eat sweet cakes, and watch TV. But in the evening, it is harder to pretend. As soon as dark falls, the bigger ones go up to the roof. They fly homemade paper kites until they are too tired to stand, daring to come down to sleep only late at night after the men have finally gone. The younger ones, like Jeena, are given special medicine so they can sleep under the bed while their mothers are with customers. Morning comes early for the children at Happiness House, and they beg for more sleep with dazed and cloudy eyes. It takes a great deal of coaxing to get them dressed in their school clothes to begin another day of pretending.

THE CUSTOMERS

They are old, young, dirty, clean, tall, short, dark, light, bearded, smooth, fat, thin. They are all the same. Most of them are from the city. A few are from my home country.

One day, a customer addressed his friend in my language as they left. "How was yours?" he said. "Was she good?"

“It was great,” the other one said. “I wish I could do it again.”

“Me, too,” said the first one. “If only I had another thirty rupees.”

Thirty rupees. That is the price of a bottle of Coca-Cola at Bajai Sita’s store. That is what he paid for me.

MONICA

There is one girl here who gets the most customers. She is not the prettiest among us — she has a face like a fox and pointy gray teeth — but she is the boldest. While the rest of us wait for the men to point in our direction, Monica trains her hungry eyes on them the minute they walk in the door. She does not bat her eyelashes and act the little girl. She preens and struts and twines her arms around the men like a thirsty vine.

One night, I am alone with Monica. She is studying one of her beloved movie magazines, posing and puckering her lips like the woman on the page in front of her. “I can teach you some tricks,” she says to me. Tricks to make the customers pay more.”

I am afraid of this thirsty-vine woman. I look at my hands folded in my lap, and say nothing.

“You think you are better than me?” she says. “Too good to learn my tricks?”

I am too afraid to even shake my head no.

“Hah!” She laughs mirthlessly, tossing her hair over her shoulder with a shake of her head. “I’ve earned nearly enough to pay down my debt,” she says. “In another month, I’ll be on my way home.”

I try to take in this idea — that Monica will soon be free — when a man comes into the room. He has city shoes on his feet and a gold chain around his neck. In an instant, Monica is at his side, winding her arms around him, like a snake. And then they are gone, and I am alone to consider an odd and somewhat sour feeling: disappointment that the man did not choose me.

AN ORDINARY BOY

I have been watching the David Beckham boy, although I do not let on. I know that the first thing he does when he comes home from school is to kiss Pushpa and tickle his baby sister. I know that he sticks his tongue out when he is concentrating on his homework. I know that Anita saves her bread for him since she cannot chew on her bad side. I know that he has two favorite television shows: one where men kick a black-and-white ball around a giant green paddy field, and another where people try to guess the right answers to difficult questions so they can win a million rupees. And I know that he plays along with the millionaire show, because I saw him whispering the answers under his breath. I know that he keeps his belongings in a tin trunk under his bed. And I know what's in there — a rusty key, an empty bottle of hair oil, a plastic flower, and three gold buttons — because I peeked inside when he was at school one day. I know, from all this watching, that he is just an ordinary boy. But sometimes I find myself hating him. I hate him for having schoolbooks and playmates. For having a mother who combs his hair on the mornings she's feeling well enough. And for having the freedom to come and go as he pleases. But sometimes, I hate myself for hating him. Simply because he is an ordinary boy.

WHAT IS MISSING NOW

I no longer notice the smell of the indoor privy. And I long ago stopped feeling the blows of Mumtaz's strap. But today when I buried my face in my bundle of clothes from home, there was no hearth smoke in the folds of my skirt, no crisp Himalayan night air in my shawl. I have been frugal with myself, not daring to unwrap the bundle more than once a day, for fear that it would lose its magic. But today, it became just a rag skirt and a tattered shawl.

STEALING FROM THE DAVID BECKHAM BOY

It seems that the David Beckham boy runs a business here. In the afternoons, he runs errands. The good-earning girls, the ones who are allowed to keep their tips, give him a list of what they want and send him out to the stores. I have seen him come back with movie magazines for Monica and Coca-Cola for Shilpa. Sometimes he just gets a smeary lipstick kiss on the cheek. But sometimes he gets a few coins for his troubles.

At night, he works for their customers. They yell for him, and he runs to the corner to get them liquor or cigarettes. Sometimes he gets nothing more than a pat on the head. And sometimes, if he takes too long, a slap across the face. But sometimes he gets a rupee or two.

When he thinks no one is looking, he hides his earnings in his little tin trunk. In the afternoons, when he is out playing tag with his school chums or running his errand business, I steal from the David Beckham boy. I do not take his money, though. I steal something better. While the other girls are downstairs watching the TV, I take his brightly colored storybook and make it mine. I do not understand the words inside, and the pictures are queer and otherworldly. But at least for a few minutes, I pretend I am in school with Gita and my soft, moonfaced teacher, and I am the number one girl in class again.

UNDERSTANDING ANITA

I ask Shahanna why Anita is always frowning. “She is angry all the time,” I say. “Even when *The Bold and the Beautiful* is on TV.”

“Anita escaped once,” Shahanna says. “When the goondas found her, they beat her with a metal pipe.”

I don’t know this word goonda.

“The goondas are men who work for Mumtaz,” she says. “If you try to escape, they will hunt you. If they catch you, they will beat you. If you get a disease, they will throw you out in the street. If you try to get back in, they will beat you.”

I ask Shahanna what happened to Anita. “The goondas smashed her cheek and her jaw. Now one side of her face is dead. She could not smile, even if she had a reason to.”

CAUGHT

One afternoon, I linger too long in my make-believe school, and the David Beckham boy catches me poring over his storybook. I drop the book to the floor and wait for him to pull my hair or rap my knuckles. But he just cocks his head to one side and stares at me. He steps close and stoops to pick up the book. He holds it out in my direction. But I turn my back to him and flee the room, pounding the

floor with my heels as I go. I hate him more than ever now. For catching me at my make-believe game. For seeing that I want his life for my own.