

Sold

Chapter Four

POLICE

Tonight I saw a curious thing. Usually the men give their money to Mumtaz. What I saw tonight, as I came downstairs, was Mumtaz handing a fat roll of rupee notes to a man. He was dressed all in tan, like the man at the border, and he had a gun on his hip. While the man was counting his money, Shilpa, the aging bird girl who spies for Mumtaz, spotted me and chased me away.

“Is that man a goonda?” I ask Shahanna.

“He’s worse,” she says. “He’s a policeman.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Policemen are supposed to stop people like Mumtaz from selling girls,” she says. “But she gives this one money each week and he looks the other way.”

I don’t understand this city. It is full of so many bad people. Even the people who are supposed to be good.

SOMETHING ELSE I KNOW ABOUT THE DAVID BECKHAM BOY

I know that lately, when he bends to kiss his mama each after-noon, he lingers longer than he used to. I know that he is checking for a fever. I know because I overheard Mumtaz telling Pushpa that if the fever comes back, they will all be out on the street.

YES

I am sitting on my bed, adding yesterday's profits to the tally in my notebook, when the David Beckham boy comes in. My old yellow pencil is nothing but a stub, and I slip it up my sleeve so this boy who goes to a proper school and does his work with a proper pencil won't see. He grabs his kite and turns to leave, then stops a moment and looks at me. "Do you want me to teach you how to read the words in the storybook?" he says.

I do. I don't dare admit how much. "Yes," I say, my eyes still fixed on my notebook. "Yes, I do."

"Okay, then," he says. "I'll give you a lesson when I get home from school tomorrow." And then he is gone. Leaving me to consider how long it has been since a tomorrow meant anything to me.

WHAT I LEARNED TODAY

When the David Beckham boy came home from school today, he threw his backpack in the corner, kissed his mother, played with his sister, and then sat down and taught me a few important things. I learned that there are two languages here: Hindi and English. I learned that Hindi is not too different from my native tongue. I learned the Hindi words for: *girl*, *boy*, and "How are you today?"

MORE WORDS

Today the David Beckham boy taught me some more words. Now I can say: *sit*, *walk*, *book*, *bowl*, *good*, *bad*, *happy*, and *sad*. I learned some sentences, too: "My name is Lakshmi." "I am from Nepal." "I am thirteen." I also learned that the David Beckham boy's name is Harish. David Beckham, it seems, is some kind of god.

WHAT I LEARNED TODAY

My notebook is nearly full. There are the old equations that my mountain teacher gave me. There are the odd new words I learned on my journey with Uncle Husband. There are pages of calculations, showing my debt to Mumtaz and my earnings so far. And now there are pages full of the Hindi and English words Harish has taught me. Beautiful words like: *candy, bread, cricket, pen, crayon, dress, bracelet, radio, chicken, cow, cartoon, and remote control.*

Shahanna comes in and sees me writing in my notebook. “Don’t let Mumtaz or Shilpa see you with that,” she says. “If they find out you can read and write, they will think you are planning to escape.”

I nod.

“And then they will put you back in the locked-in room.”

HOW ARE YOU TODAY?

Whenever Harish sees me, he says, in the new language I am learning, “How are you today?”

I reply, “Fine, thank you. And you?”

I love the way these new words feel in my mouth. Even if they are not true.

A STRANGE VOCABULARY

Now Harish is teaching me American words from a new storybook. The book was a present from a white woman who runs a special singing-and-playing school where Harish goes on Saturdays. He says the American lady is kind. He says Anita is wrong about the Americans, that they do not shame the children of the brothels. He says this is a story Mumtaz has told her to keep her from running away.

I do not know which of them to believe. But I do know, from this storybook, that this America is a strange place. Everyone there is as rich as a king. The birds

there are big as men. They eat a sweet treat made from snow. And the children play the kicking game with the black-and-white ball, like the one on TV. This is the David Beckham game, Harish says. These are the American words I can say: *Big Bird, Elmo, ice cream, soccer.*

AN ACCIDENTAL KINDNESS

The man who came to my room today was not like the others. He was young and clean and gentle. He didn't simply fix his hair in the mirror and walk out without a word. He held me. Perhaps it was an accident. Or perhaps he forgot where he was, imagining for a moment he was with his sweetheart. But I could feel myself, my true self give in to the simple pleasure of being held. His body warmed mine the way the Himalayan sun warms the soil. His skin was soft — like the velvet of Tali's nose. And his contentment soaked through to me like an evening rain shower. And so I held him, too. Slowly, I put my arms around him and allowed them to stay. Eventually, we pulled apart. I was the last to let go.

He stood and looked at me with something like shyness. "Thank you," he said.

Harish had taught me how to say thank you in his language, but it seemed a paltry word for my debt to this man.

AM I PRETTY?

In the days after the hugging man leaves, I consider myself in the mirror. My plain self, not the self wearing lipstick and eyeliner and a filmy dress. Sometimes I see a girl who is growing into womanhood. Other days I see a girl growing old before her time. It doesn't matter, of course. Because no one will ever want me now.

NOT COUNTING

It has been twelve days since the hugging man came. I have decided to stop counting the days until he comes back.

A GIFT

Today, Harish tells me, is the festival of brothers and sisters. He shows me the rag doll he is giving to Jeena. “I bought it with my own money” he says. Then he hands me a pencil. It is shiny yellow and it smells of lead and rubber. And possibility. “For you,” he says. And then he runs off, his paper kite in his hand.

And I am glad because something strange is happening. Something surprising and unstoppable. A tear is running down my cheek. It quivers a moment on the tip of my nose, then splashes onto my skirt, leaving a small, dark circle. I have been beaten here, locked away, violated a hundred times and a hundred times more. I have been starved and cheated, tricked and disgraced. How odd it is that I am undone by the simple kindness of a small boy with a yellow pencil.

SOMETHING FOR THE DAVID BECKHAM BOY

The next day, I am at the window waiting for Harish to return from school. I see him come down the lane, playing make-believe soccer with a tin can. I tap on the windowpane, and a few minutes later I hear him bounding up the steps. He walks into our room and I offer him my gift: it is a ball of rags, my old homespun shawl, ripped into shreds and tied in a tight round bundle.

He is puzzled at this bundle of ragged cloth.

“A soccer ball,” I tell him.

He takes the ball of rags and balances it on his toe. He nods his approval. He nudges it around the room. Then gives it a good, solid kick toward the door frame. He spreads his arms wide, like a bird in flight, and calls back a quick thank you over his shoulder. Then he is gone. I hear the front door close, and I run to the window to watch him turn into a barefoot David Beckham, dodging shoppers and

rickshaws as he heads down the lane. I follow him with my eyes for as long as I can. A piece of me has left Happiness House.

THE LIVING DEAD

Today at the morning meal, an unfamiliar figure is at the table, hunched over a bowl, picking at her rice. She looks up, and I see that it is Monica.

“Well,” she says with strange cheer. “My father recovered from his operation.” Her smile is wide, too wide. And I am afraid of her angry happiness. “He needs a cane,” she says. “But he is still as strong as a goat.”

I nod slowly, unsure what to say.

“Look,” she says. She shrugs off her shawl, revealing arms and shoulders covered in angry purple bruises. “He did this with his cane.”

I wince.

But Monica laughs bitterly.

I don’t understand. “I thought you said they would honor you and thank you,” I say.

She snorts. “When they heard I was coming,” she says, “they met me outside the village and begged me not to come back and disgrace them.”

“Did you get to see your daughter?” I say.

Monica cannot meet my eyes. “They told her I was dead.”

BEYOND WORDS

Pushpa has been in bed for three days and nights, and now Mumtaz is in our room. “If you don’t get out of bed and see customers today,” she says, “you are out on the street.”

Pushpa nods, stands slowly, then sinks to her knees. She kisses Mumtaz’s feet. “Please,” she begs. “I’ll work tonight, I promise.” Then she is seized by one

of her coughing fits. She coughs until tears run down her cheeks and she spits blood into a rag.

“Pshhht,” Mumtaz says. “You are of no use to me now! No man wants to make love to walking death.”

“Have mercy,” Pushpa cries, holding her hands up in prayer. “Think of my children.”

Mumtaz sneers at her, then all at once her eyes begin to gleam like new rupee coins. “There is something you could do,” Mumtaz says. Pushpa looks up expectantly. “Sell her to me.” She points to little Jeena, asleep in her bedroll. “In a few years, when she is old enough, I can make a lot of money with her.”

Pushpa seems not to understand.

“There are men who would pay dearly,” Mumtaz says, “to be with a pure one. Men who think it will cure their disease.” She puts a hand on Pushpa’s slender shoulder and smiles.

Then comes an unearthly sound. It is a wild sound, an animal sound, a howling, mournful, raging cry, as the sickly woman on the floor claws at the skirts of the fat woman standing over her. It is a sound beyond language.

WHAT DESPAIR LOOKS LIKE

For the rest of the afternoon, Pushpa sits on her bed with her head in her hands. Shahanna tries to comfort her, but Pushpa stares into space, unmoving. Finally she rises, tucks a blanket under Jeena’s chin, and whispers to her. “Don’t worry,” she says. “I will not let that woman take you.”

Then Harish comes home from school, flushed and disheveled from his game of make-believe soccer. He beams at his mother, delighted to see her out of bed, then stops as he takes in her misery. Neither one says a word. Harish simply pulls his little tin trunk out from under the bed, and the two of them begin packing their things.

A WORD TOO SMALL

I look on, speechless, as Harish ties up his bedroll and Pushpa places her possessions — a hairbrush, a sweater, a photo of her husband — inside Harish's trunk. Anita is sitting on the bed, clutching Jeena to her breast, the two sides of her poor, lopsided face matched, for once, in perfect misery. Finally, Anita kisses the top of the baby's head, hands her to Pushpa, then runs from the room, sobbing.

Harish looks up at me. "How are you today, Lakshmi?" he says. The words are the same as always; but his little-boy voice breaks as he says my name.

I am not fine. I cannot pretend. But I do not know a word big enough to hold my sadness. I bite my lip and shrug.

Harish looks away, then goes back to his packing.

"Where will you go?" I say.

"I will ask the lady teacher from America if she knows a place we can stay until my mother is better," he says. "Until then, I must earn the money." He places his rag-bundle soccer ball inside the trunk, snaps it shut. "I have heard they pay children fifty rupees a week," he says, "to break stones at the roadside." He lifts the trunk, his skinny arms straining at the weight, and I wonder how long those little arms will last breaking stones.

I point to the American storybook he's left. "Don't forget this."

He shifts the trunk to his other arm. "You can have it," he says. Harish walks to the door, dragging the trunk. All the words he taught me, all the beautiful words, are useless now.

Finally I remember one, one that will answer the question he asked — "How are you today, Lakshmi?" — as if today were just another day. "Harish," I say.

He just looks at me.

"Sorry," I say. "I am sorry today." Then he is gone.

REPETITION

“Lakshmi,” I say to myself. “My name is Lakshmi.” Now that Harish is gone, no one says my name. So I say it to myself. “My name is Lakshmi,” I repeat. “I am from Nepal. I am thirteen.” I am not sure, but I think so much time has passed, that I am fourteen.

LIKE ANITA

In the afternoons now, I watch TV with my head on Shahanna’s shoulder. But without Harish, I am like Anita. I cannot smile, even if there is a reason.

INSTEAD OF HARISH

Monica comes to my room today, her hands behind her back. “Are the others all downstairs?” she whispers. I nod. It is time for *The Bold and the Beautiful*. The others would all be laughing and cheering, while I lie upstairs in my bed pretending that Harish will be home any minute to resume our lessons. “Here,” she says. “Take this.” She thrusts a tattered, gray thing in my direction.

I examine it cautiously and see that it is an old rag doll, loved almost beyond recognition. Its button eyes are gone. Its mouth, a tiny red stitch. Its dress thin and colorless.

“You can have her for a while,” she says. “You know, instead of Harish.” She says this so quickly her words barely register.

I stand to thank her but she is already gone. And I understand then, somehow, that Monica, the thirsty vine, Monica, the one with tricks to make the men pay extra, sleeps with this tattered rag doll.

A STRANGE CUSTOMER

I have never seen such a queer-looking person. He has the pink skin of a pig. His hair is the color of straw. His eyes are ice blue. And he is wearing short pants that show his hairy monkey legs. But he looks like one of the people in Harish’s storybook. He is too friendly, this pink American man. He grips my hand in greeting, a strange and uncouth gesture that makes me pull back in alarm. He says

hello in my language. I say nothing in reply. “What is your name?” he says. His words are slow and clumsy, as if he has a mouth full of roti. “Your name,” he says again, more slowly still. “What is your name?”

This pink man is the first man here to ask my name, but I don’t give it to him.

“How old are you?”

I know what I am supposed to say. But something keeps me from lying to this pink stranger. I shrug.

He is unmoved by my rudeness. Indeed, he smiles, his ice-blue eyes oddly warm. “Are you being kept here against your will?”

My will? This is something I lost long ago, I want to tell him. I want to pummel this pink-skinned man with my fists. I want to spit on this stranger with his eyes of cold pity, his idiot way of speaking my language, and his bad-mannered questions that make me look at the humiliation that is my life. I fold my arms across myself.

He takes a little book from one of his pockets, consults its battered pages, then looks up at me. Slowly with care, he asks me a question. “Do you want to leave here?”

I know about these Americans. Anita has told me all about them. I will not be fooled into leaving here only to be stripped naked and have people throw stones at me and call me a dirty woman. I shake my head no.

“You don’t want to leave here?”

I just stare at him.

“I can take you to a place where you will get new clothes,” he says. “And good food. And you will not have to be with men.”

I pretend I don’t understand. Because I don’t. I don’t understand how I will pay my debt to Mumtaz in this new place.

“Do you want to go there?”

I shake my head no.

“It is a clean place,” he says.

I don't even blink.

He takes his wallet from his jacket. I wait to catch a glimpse of his riches, but what he hands me is a small white card. It is full of American words I cannot read, and in the center is a drawing of a bird in flight. I put the card inside my waistcloth. And then he is gone. How odd he is, this man who pays for a girl and does nothing but talk.