

Sold

Chapter Five

A SECRET

There is a moment, between the light and the dark, when the smell of frying onions blows in through the windows. All over the city, the cooking hour has begun. This is the saddest smell in the world because it means that here at Mumtaz's house the men will start to arrive. I am looking out the window, my whole being yearning toward that smell, when Shahanna comes in. "Shahanna," I say. "Can you keep a secret?"

She looks around to make sure that we are alone and nods.

"I had an American customer the other day," I say. "He said he would take me away from here."

Shahanna moves a step closer to me, her dark eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Did he say he would pay off your debt to Mumtaz?"

I shake my head.

"Then how would you get past her goondas?"

"I don't know," I say.

"You know what Anita says," she whispers. "She says the Americans will trick you and shame you and make you walk naked in public."

I nod. I think about telling her what he said about the clean place, about the new clothes he promised. "Perhaps," I say, "Anita is wrong."

Shahanna looks out the window at the street below. "But Anita's the only one of us who's been out there," she says. We are both quiet for a moment, watching the world outside go by underneath our window bars. Then Shahanna grasps my hands in hers. "If he comes back, will you go with him?" she says.

I don't know what to say.

She squeezes my hands tightly, and her eyes burn with a fervor I have never seen before in my gentle friend. "Will you take me with you?"

I step back. Shahanna has been nothing but kind to me, from the day I first arrived. She taught me everything I know to survive here. But she scares me now with this wild talk. I am afraid. Afraid that Mumtaz will beat us senseless. And I am afraid that the Americans will shame us and abandon us in the streets. But most of all, I am afraid to imagine a life outside this place.

RAID

What I remember is this: It was the middle of the afternoon. Shahanna was upstairs painting her nails, Mumtaz was out getting herself fitted for a new sari, and Anita and I were in the TV room with the other girls when there was thunder at the front door. A man's voice shouted, "Open up!"

The goonda at the front door, a skinny boy Mumtaz hired just a few days ago, leaped to his feet and ran for the back door. The girls jumped out of their seats and scattered like roaches. I couldn't move. Anita was running for the kitchen, but when she saw me frozen in place, she came back, grabbed my wrist, and pulled me along with her.

The cook was waiting for us, holding open a panel beneath the sink. Anita crawled in first, then pulled me in behind her. In the tiny dark space, there was barely enough room for one person, let alone two, and so once the door was shut, we huddled there amid the pipes and rags and buckets, holding our breath. Soon we heard yelling.

Men's voices came closer. Heavy footsteps coming toward us, down the hall, then into the kitchen. A man shouted at the cook. She cursed at him. Cupboard doors were flung open and slammed shut. There was the sound of rice spilling, a pan clattering to the floor, the cook shrieking and stomping her foot. The footsteps came close, then closer, and stopped.

Anita's hand found mine and we held on tight.

Then angry voices came from upstairs. I could hear furniture being overturned, wood splintering, a man yelling, a woman crying. There was a stampede of footsteps, then running. And then the men were heading away from where we were hiding. Next came a heavy thud, a crash, then quiet. After that, all we could hear was muttering and the shuffling of feet. Eventually the front door slammed shut.

When it was finally still, the cook came and opened the cupboard. I climbed out, but Anita refused to budge. When finally she crawled out, I could see that Anita had wet herself. What I saw next was this: rice and lentils, flour and spices, enough food for a week, strewn about the floor, a pair of rats nibbling on the spoils as the cook fought with them for what remained. In the next room, the TV was dashed to the floor, its magic window now a hundred shards of glass. I ran upstairs, saw our room in chaos, our beds overturned, Anita's movie star posters ripped from the wall. The worst is what I did not see: Shahanna.

AFTERMATH

When all the other girls come out of their hiding places, and the ones who ran down the lane come back, we all huddle in the TV room. The cook runs off to the sari shop to find Mumtaz. "I bet it was the Americans," whispers Anita.

Shilpa spits. "It was the probably the police. Sometimes, they take a girl when Mumtaz falls behind in her payment."

I swallow and say nothing.

Mumtaz storms into the TV room, her fat mango face slick with sweat. "Get to work, you lazy whores," she says. When no one moves, she shoves Shilpa and she falls to the floor, nearly landing in a pile of broken glass. "Clean up this mess," Mumtaz cries. "So we can be back in business tonight." She doesn't say anything about Shahanna. And when I dare to ask, the only answer comes from her leather strap.

GOSSIP

The next day at the morning meal, Anita says it was the Americans who took Shahanna away. The peanut vendor said he saw the whole thing. He told the cook

and she told Anita. “They probably stripped her naked and left her in the gutter,” she says.

Shilpa says it was the police. A police officer who is one of her regular customers told her it was because Mumtaz didn’t pay up this month. “They probably beat her and left her for dead,” she said.

I cannot stand to hear them talk about my poor, good friend, and so I rise and leave the table. The last thing I hear is one of them saying that we’ll never know the truth. I go up to my room, lie on my bed, and pull the thin blanket over my head, because I know at least one truth: if these terrible things have happened to Shahanna, it is all my fault.

A HIDING PLACE

The next day as I am walking down the hall, I hear a voice coming from the closet. “Psst, Lakshmi,” says someone. “In here.”

I stop, open the door, and see Anita inside the shallow cupboard, her body flattened against the wall. “Next time there is a raid,” she says, “I’m going to hide in here.”

“But, Anita,” I say, “anyone can open this door.”

She holds up a metal lock with numbers on its face. “I stole it,” she says, her crooked face half smiling, “from the grain bin.”

I don’t understand. Until she points to a hasp on the inside of the door.

“We can lock ourselves in,” she says. “Then no one will be able to open this door.”

ANOTHER AMERICAN

This one comes to the door looking somewhat lost. He is not as tall as the first one, and his eyes and hair are as dark as a normal man’s, but my heart thuds when he points to me and he follows me up the steps. I wait for him to shake my hand, but he just looks around the room. I wait for him to ask if I want to go to the clean place, but he fumbles through his pants pockets and mutters something in a

language I cannot understand. I know what to do. I lift the corner of the mat on the floor and feel around for the white card the other American gave me. I hold it out to him. He looks puzzled. He sits down on the bed. He seizes my braid and pulls me down on top of him as the white card flutters to the floor. It is then that I see the red veins in his eyes and smell the liquor on his breath. He is not a good American. He is just another drunk.

MONSTER

A new girl arrived today. I know because I heard her sobs through the door of the locked-in room as I passed by on my way to the kitchen. Mumtaz is a monster, I tell myself. Only a monster could do what she does to innocent girls. But I wonder. If the crying of a young girl is the same to me as the bleating of the horns in the street below, what have I become?

DIGITAL MAGIC

It is only afternoon, but already a customer is at the door. I see at once that he is an American. It is not the same one who gave me the flying-bird card; this one is taller, and he is wearing a vest of many pockets. I shrink behind the door frame; every day I have prayed for an American to come. Now that one is here I don't know what to do. I hear a noise from the counting room and see that Shilpa is watching. So I go to the man like a thirsty vine. I tell him I will make him happy. I tell him I know some good tricks.

Shilpa goes back to her movie star magazine, and the man follows me up the steps. When we get to my room, he grips my hand in greeting, the same uncouth way the first American did.

I pull away.

He says hello in my language.

I say nothing in reply.

“What is your name?” he says. His words are hurried, and he looks nervously over his shoulder. “Your name,” he says again. “What is your name?”

I cannot open my mouth.

“How old are you?”

I don't reply.

He sighs. “May I take your picture?” he says. He takes a small silver box from one of his pockets. He touches a button and its eye blinks open with a whir.

I do not like this seeing box, but I do not object.

“I will not tell the fat woman,” he says. “You have my promise.”

A tiny lightning jumps out of the box, the eye blinks shut. And for a moment, I see doubles and triples of the man, framed in a red glow.

He is smiling, looking at the back of his little lightning box. “Come see your picture,” he says.

I take just one step toward him and wait. He holds the silver box toward me, and I can see a tiny version of myself— smaller than the people on TV — in a tiny TV in the back of the silver box.

“Digital,” he says.

I don't know this word, but it must be the name of the strange American magic he has that allows him to put me in his silver box.

“Do you want to leave here?” he says.

I cannot answer. How do I know if he is a good man? What if he is like the drunken American? What if he is like the ones Anita talks about, the ones who make young girls walk naked in the street?

“I can take you to a clean place,” he says. “Look,” he says. “Pictures. Of the shelter. Other girls.” He holds out the silver box so I can see the tiny TV in the back. He pushes a button. There is a tiny image of a Nepali girl smiling back at me. He pushes the button again. There are girls in school uniforms sitting at a desk. Girls fetching water at a spring. The man turns off his digital magic machine.

I am afraid, all of a sudden, that he is leaving. I wish there was a way to say something, to keep this American here a little longer. I reach under my bed and pull out the American storybook, the one Harish gave me. I hold it out toward the American. He cocks his head to one side, puzzled. I point to a picture. “Elmo,” I say. He nods slowly. “Ice cream,” I say.

“Yes,” he says. “Very good.”

“America.”

The man smiles.

I do not mean to, but I am smiling at this queer-looking man, smiling and trembling at the magic — not of his digital image-taking box — but at the magic of a handful of nonsense words to keep him here a little longer.

BELIEVING

The American man whispers. His way of speaking my language is hurried now as he reads from a battered Nepali wordbook. I see that it has the image of the flying bird on its cover, and I say a silent prayer of thanks to the street boy whose name I will never know. “What the fat woman does here to you is bad,” he says. “Very bad.”

I nod.

“She cannot force you to do these things,” he says.

This American is not so magical after all, I decide. He doesn’t know about Mumtaz’s leather strap. And the goondas. And the chain on the door.

“I will come back for you,” he says. “I will come back with other men, good men, from this country — fathers and uncles who want to help — policemen who are not friends of Mumtaz. We will take you away from here.” This is too good to believe. “You must believe me,” he says.

I shut my eyes tight. I don’t know what to believe. I believed that the stranger in the yellow cloud dress was taking me to the city to work as a maid. I believed that Uncle Husband would protect me from the bad city people. I believed that if I worked hard enough here at Happiness House, I could pay down my debt. And I believed it was all worth it for the sake of my family. I am too afraid to believe him. And so I am going to believe that this strange pink man is a dream, a cruel trick of the mind. I am going to believe that when I open my eyes he will be gone. I count to 100. Count to 100 again and open my eyes. He is still there, gripping his battered Nepali wordbook. “The clean place,” I say. “I want to go there.”

NAMASTE

The American man says he will come back. He will return, he says, as soon as he can, with the other men and the good police officers who will force Mumtaz to let me go. When he returns, I must go with him quickly, before the goondas can try to stop us. He bows and says, “Namaste,” the word in my language that means hello and good-bye. And then he is gone, leaving me to wonder if he was really here at all.

READY

When no one is looking, I pack my bundle for my journey to the clean place and hide it under my bed. What I am taking: my American storybook, a hair ribbon Shahanna left behind, my notebook, my old homespun skirt, Monica’s rag doll. What I am leaving behind: the makeup and nail paint that Mumtaz made me buy, some rags, and everything that happened here.

TWO KINDS OF STUPIDITY

It has been three days, and still the pink-skinned man hasn’t returned with the good policemen. How stupid I was to believe in him and his digital magic. How stupid I am to keep believing.

FORGETTING HOW TO FORGET

I learned ways to be with men. I learned how to forget what was happening to me even as it was happening. But ever since the pink-skinned man came here, with his pictures of the clean place, I cannot remember those ways. Now, while I wait for the American to return, and the men come to me, I grit my teeth, for fear that I will bite through their skin to their very bones. I squeeze my eyes closed tight, for fear that I will see what has actually happened to me.

PLAYING THE FOOL

Five days have passed, and still there is no sign of the American. Only a fool would keep waiting after five days.

A KIND OF ILLNESS

This ache in my chest is a relentless thing, worse than any fever. A fever is gone with a few of Mumtaz's white pills. But this illness has had me in its grip for a week now. This affliction — hope — is so cruel and stubborn, I believe it will kill me.

THE WORDS HARISH TAUGHT ME

It is so late at night it is almost morning, and I am awake, ready to begin another day of waiting for the American. There is a banging on the door and a voice shouts, "Police!"

Anita bolts out of bed. "Hurry," she says, grabbing my hand. I am right behind her, sneaking down the hall toward her hiding place in the closet. We can hear voices coming from downstairs as we tiptoe down the hall.

"I am here for a young girl," says a man.

"What kind of place do you think this is?" says Mumtaz. "There are no young girls here."

I know this voice. It is my American. I squeeze Anita's hand. "It is an American," I whisper. Her eyes go wide. "He is a good man," I say. "He will take us to a clean place." "It's a trick," she says, inching toward the closet. "No," I say. "I've seen pictures.

"The girls there are safe."

She shakes her head. "They are liars," she says. "I beg you. Don't go."

The American is shouting something. I don't understand what he is saying, but I know, somehow, that he is calling out to me. "Please," I beg her. "Come with me. If you stay here, you will die."

Anita is clutching my arm. “Don’t go,” she cries. I cannot move. I cannot go to my American. And I cannot walk away from my crooked-faced friend.

“The new TV is coming any day now,” she says. “Mumtaz promised.” She grips my arm and tries to pull me into the closet with her.

I shake my head. Then, slowly, she lets go of my arm, closes the door between us, and I hear a sad and final sound: the lock sliding into place. I am alone in the hallway. Mumtaz is cursing downstairs. But I can still hear the American. I inch toward the steps. But I am too afraid to go down. The American calls out. I try to answer, but nothing comes out of my mouth. I hear more cursing and the scuffle of feet. He is leaving. My American is leaving. Something inside me breaks open, and I run down the steps. I see Mumtaz, her fat mango face purple with rage, her arms pinned behind her back by two policemen. She lunges in my direction and spits. But the policemen hold her back. I see my American. There are other men with him, Indian men, and the American lady from the picture. “My name is Lakshmi,” I say. “I am from Nepal. I am fourteen years old.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Each year, nearly 12,000 Nepali girls are sold by their families, intentionally or unwittingly, into a life of sexual slavery in the brothels of India. Worldwide, the U.S. State Department estimates that nearly half a million children are trafficked into the sex trade annually.

As part of my research for *Sold*, I traced the path that many Nepalese girls have taken— from remote villages to the red-light districts of Calcutta. I also interviewed aid workers who rescue girls from brothels, provide them with medical care and job training, and who work to reintegrate them into society.

But most touching and inspiring was interviewing survivors themselves. These young women have experienced what many people would describe as unspeakable horrors. But they are speaking out — with great dignity. Some go door-to-door in the country’s most isolated villages to explain what really happens to girls who leave home with strangers promising good jobs.

Some of them — even women who are ill with HIV — patrol the border between Nepal and India on the lookout for young girls traveling without their parents. And some are facing their traffickers in court — where it is often their word against the fathers and brothers, husbands and uncles who sold them for as little as three hundred dollars. It is in their honor that this book was written.