



DAWN OF MOURNING

Dahanu, India—1984

KAVITA

SHE CAME TO THE ABANDONED HUT AT DUSK, WITHOUT A WORD to anyone, when she felt the first unmistakable pulls deep within her. It is vacant, except for the mat on which she now lies, knees drawn up to her chest. As the next wave of pain shudders through her body, Kavita digs her nails into clenched palms and bites down on the tree branch between her teeth. Her breathing is heavy but even as she waits for the tightness to ease in her swollen belly. She steadies her gaze on the pale yellow shadow on the mud floor, cast by a flickering oil lamp, her sole company in the dark hours of night. She has been trying to muffle her cries until it is unbearable to do so anymore. Soon, she knows, with the urge to push, her screams will beckon the village midwife. She prays the baby is born before dawn, for her husband rarely awakens before sunrise. It is the first of only two prayers Kavita dares to have for this child, wary of asking too much from the gods.

The deep rumble of thunder in the distance echoes the threat of rain that has been hovering all day. Moisture hangs in the air, settling in small droplets of perspiration on her forehead. When the heavens

finally open and the downpour comes, it will be a relief. The monsoons have always held a particular smell for her: raw and earthy, as if the soil, crops, and rain have all mingled into the air. It is the scent of new life.

The next contraction comes abruptly and takes her breath away. Sweat has soaked dark patches through her thin cotton sari blouse, which strains at the row of tiny hook fasteners between her breasts. She grew larger this time, compared to the last. In private, her husband chided her for not covering up more, but with the other men, she heard him boast about her breasts, comparing them to ripe melons. She saw it as a blessing that her body looked different this time, as it led her husband and the others to assume this baby will be a boy.

A sudden fear grips her, the same suffocating fear she has felt throughout this pregnancy. *What will happen if they are all wrong?* Her second prayer, and the more desperate of the two, is that she not give birth to another girl. She cannot endure that again.

SHE WAS NOT PREPARED FOR WHAT HAPPENED LAST TIME. HER husband burst into the room just minutes after the midwife had cut the umbilical cord. Kavita detected on him the sickly sweet odor of fermented *chickoo-fruit* liquor. When Jasu glimpsed the writhing body of the baby girl in Kavita's arms, a shadow crossed his face. He turned away.

Kavita felt her budding joy give way to confusion. She tried to speak, to articulate something from the thoughts swirling in her head. *So much hair . . . a good omen.* But it was Jasu's voice she heard, terrible things she had never heard before from his lips, a string of obscenities that shocked her. When he spun around to face her, she saw his reddened eyes. He moved toward her with slow, deliberate steps, shaking his head. She felt an unfamiliar fear rising in her, tangling with shock and confusion.

The pain of labor had left her body weak. Her mind struggled to make sense. She did not see him pounce toward her until it was too late. But she was not quick enough to stop him from grabbing the baby out of her arms. The midwife held her back as she lunged forward, arms outstretched and screaming, even louder than when she had felt the baby's head tearing her flesh to make its way. He stormed out of the hut amid the cries of their daughter taking her first few breaths in this world. Kavita knew, in that terrible moment, they would also be her last.

The midwife pushed her gently back down. "Let him go, my child. Let him go now. It is done. You must rest now. You have been through an ordeal."

Kavita spent the next two days curled up on the woven straw mat on the floor of the hut. She did not dare ask what had happened to her baby. Whether she was drowned, suffocated, or simply left to starve, Kavita hoped only that death came quickly, mercifully. In the end, her tiny body would have been buried, her spirit not even granted the release of cremation. Like so many baby girls, her first-born would be returned to the earth long before her time.

During those two days, Kavita had no visitors except the midwife, who came twice a day to bring her food and fresh cloths to soak up the blood that flowed from her body. She wept until her eyes were raw, until she thought she did not have another tear to shed. But that turned out to be just the dawn of her mourning, which was punctuated by another sharp reminder when her breasts produced milk a few days later, and her hair fell out the next month. And after that night, every time she saw a young child, her heart stopped in her chest and she was reminded yet again.

When she emerged from her grief, no one acknowledged her loss. She received no words of support or comforting touches from the other villagers. In the home they shared with Jasu's family, she was given only scornful glances and uninvited counsel on how to

conceive a boy next time. Kavita had long been accustomed to having little dominion over her own life. She was married off to Jasu at eighteen and settled into the daily toil of fetching water, washing clothes, and cooking meals. All day she did what her husband asked of her, and when they lay together at night, she succumbed to his demands as well.

But after the baby, she changed, if only in small ways. She put an extra red chili in her husband's food when she was angry with him and watched with quiet satisfaction as he wiped his forehead and nose all through dinner. When he came to her at night, sometimes she refused him, saying it was her womanly time of month. With each simple rebellion, she felt her confidence grow. So when she learned she was pregnant again, she resolved this time things would be different.



CLEAN

San Francisco, California—1984

SOMER

THE MEDICAL JOURNAL DROPS FROM SOMER'S HAND AND SHE clutches her abdomen. She rises from the couch and stumbles toward the bathroom, supporting herself down the long corridor of their Victorian flat. Despite the sharp pains forcing her to double over, she pulls aside her robe before sitting on the toilet. She sees the bright red blood dripping down the pale skin of her thigh. "No. Oh god, please no." Her plea is soft but urgent. No one is there to hear. She squeezes her legs together and holds her breath. *Sit perfectly still, maybe the bleeding will stop.*

It does not. She puts her face in her hands, and the tears come. She watches the red pool spread in the toilet bowl. Her shoulders begin to shake, and her sobs grow louder and longer until her whole body is overtaken by them. She manages to call Krishnan after the cramps have subsided somewhat. When he arrives home, she is curled into a ball on their unmade four-poster bed. Between her legs, she has stuffed a hand towel, once plush and the color of French vanilla, a gift for their wedding five years ago. They selected that particular

hue together—not hospital white, not dull beige—an elegant shade of cream, now soaked with blood.

Kris sits on the edge of the bed and puts a hand on her shoulder. “Are you sure?” he asks softly.

She nods. “Just like last time. Cramps, bleeding . . .” She starts crying again. “More blood this time. I guess because I’m further along . . .”

Kris hands her a tissue. “Okay, honey. I’ll call Dr. Hayworth and see if he can meet us at the hospital. Do you need anything?” He arranges a blanket on top of her, tucking it around her shoulders. She shakes her head and rolls onto her other side, away from Krishnan, who is behaving more like a doctor than the husband she desperately needs. She closes her eyes and touches her lower belly, as she does countless times a day, but this gesture, which usually brings her comfort, now feels like a punishment.

THE FIRST THING SOMER SEES WHEN SHE OPENS HER EYES IS THE IV stand next to her bed. She shuts them again quickly, hoping to recapture the dream about pushing a baby in a playground swing. *Was it a girl or a boy?*

“The procedure went well, Somer. Everything is clean now, and I didn’t see anything that would lead me to think you can’t try again in a few months.” Dr. Hayworth, in his crisp white coat, looks down at her from the foot of the bed. “Try to get some rest and I’ll be back to see you before discharge.” He pats her leg lightly through the sheet before turning to leave.

“Thanks, Doctor,” comes a voice from the other side of the room, and Somer becomes aware for the first time of Krishnan’s presence. He walks to the bed and leans over her, laying a hand on her forehead. “How do you feel?”

“Clean,” she says.

He furrows his brow and tilts his head sideways. "Clean?"

"He said *clean*. Dr. Hayworth said I was clean now. What was I before? When I was pregnant?" Her eyes focus on the fluorescent light humming above her bed. *A girl or a boy? What color eyes?*

"Oh, honey. He just means . . . You know what he means."

"Yes, I know what he means. He means it's all gone now: the baby, the placenta, everything. My uterus is nice and empty again. *Clean.*"

A nurse enters the room, smiling. "Time for your pain meds."

Somer shakes her head. "I don't want it."

"Honey, you should take it," Krishnan says. "It'll help you feel better."

"I don't want to feel better." She turns away from the nurse. They don't understand it's not just the baby she lost. It's everything. The names she runs through as she lies in bed at night. The paint samples for the nursery she's collected in her desk drawer. The dreams of cradling her child in her arms, helping with homework, cheering on the sidelines of the soccer field. All of it, gone, disappeared into the thick fog outside. They don't understand that. Not the nurse, not Dr. Hayworth, not even Krishnan. They just see her as a patient to be doctored, a piece of human equipment to be repaired. Just another body to be cleaned up.

SOMER AWAKENS AND ADJUSTS THE CONTROL ON THE HOSPITAL bed to sit up. She becomes vaguely conscious of canned laughter emanating from a television set in the corner, some game show Krishnan left on before going to the cafeteria. She never thought she could feel this uncomfortable in a hospital, the place she spent five straight years of her life. She used to get a rush of excitement walking down the sterile corridors and hearing the buzz of the speaker overhead. The rituals of slipping on her white coat or picking up a patient's

chart gave her a shot of confidence. It was something she and Krishnan used to share, that sense of purpose and mastery in being a doctor. Now, she knows, this is another thing that will pull them farther apart. She resents being the patient, hates that she can't fix this.

She wasn't supposed to be here yet, in this hospital she chose deliberately for its focus on obstetrics. Eight thousand deliveries a year. Twenty babies born here today. Today, while her dead baby was being scraped out of her. On the floor just below hers, every woman in the ward has a baby sleeping in her room. It seems so easy for everyone else: the mothers she sees in her practice every day, her friends, even the idiot on that game show, waving to her kids in the audience.

Maybe this is nature's way of telling her something. *Maybe I'm just not meant to be a mother.*



NEVER AGAIN

Dahanu, India—1984

KAVITA

ANOTHER PAIN COMES NOW, THIS TIME FROM EVEN DEEPER within her, its dull edges sharpened to jagged blades. Kavita can no longer catch her breath between the waves of pain coming one upon the other. Her thighs tremble, her back throbs, and now she cannot help but cry out in anguish. When this sound reaches her own ears, it no longer resembles a human voice. This body is no longer her body, it is driven by primal impulses that belong to the earth, the trees, the air. Outside, a sudden flash of lightning illuminates the dark sky, and an eruption of thunder shakes the ground beneath her. The branch in her mouth cracks from the pressure of her clenched jaw, and she tastes the bitter flavor of raw green wood inside. The last thing she feels is a wet warmth envelop her body.

When she opens her eyes again, Kavita feels the midwife arranging her legs and positioning herself between them. “*Beti*, you should have called earlier. I would have come. How long have you been here by yourself? As it is, the baby’s head is showing already. It won’t be too long now. The second time is much . . .” Her voice trails off.

“*Daiji*, listen to me. No matter what happens, you must not let my husband take this baby. Promise me . . . *promise me!*” Kavita shrieks.

“*Hahnji*, yes, whatever you say,” the midwife says. “But now, child, it is time to push.”

She is right. Kavita bears down only a few times before she hears a reassuring cry. The midwife works quickly to clean and wrap the baby. Kavita struggles to sit up, pushes the damp strands of hair out of her face, and takes the child in her arms. She strokes her baby’s matted black hair and marvels at the tiny fingers grasping at the air. She pulls the small body close to hers, drinks in the scent, and then places its mouth to her breast. Once the infant begins to suck in a sleepy rhythm, Kavita slowly unwraps the cloth around its tiny body.

No one heard my prayers. Kavita closes her eyes and her body shudders with silent tears. She leans forward, seizes the midwife’s hand, and whispers, “*Daiji*, don’t tell anyone. Go quickly, fetch Rupa, and bring her here. *No one*, you hear?”

“*Hahnji*. Yes, my child. Blessings to you and your baby. You rest now, please. I will bring some food.” The midwife steps outside into the night. She pauses for a moment, arching her back slightly, then picks up her steel urn of supplies and walks away.

AS THE EARLY LIGHT OF DAWN SEEPS INTO THE HUT, KAVITA awakens and feels the throbbing ache in her pelvis. She shifts her body, and her gaze falls upon the newborn sleeping peacefully beside her. Her stomach groans. She is suddenly ravenous. She reaches for the bowl of rice next to her and eats. Satisfied but still exhausted, she lies back down and listens to the sounds of the village stirring to life outside.

It is not long before the door creaks open and bright sunlight spills

in. Jasu enters, his eyes gleaming. "Where is he?" He beckons playfully with his hands. "Where is my little prince? Come, come . . . let me see him!" He walks toward her, arms outstretched.

Kavita stiffens. She clutches the baby to her chest and awkwardly tries to sit up. "She is here. Your little princess is right here." She sees blackness cloud his eyes. Her arms tremble as she wraps them tightly around the baby, shielding her small body.

"*Arre!* Another girl? What is the matter with you? Let me see!" he shouts.

"No. I will not. You are not taking her." She hears the shrillness of her voice, feels the tension flood into her limbs. "This is my baby, *our* baby, and I will not let you take her." She sees bewilderment in his eyes as they search her face for some understanding. She has never spoken to anyone, let alone her husband, with such defiance.

He takes a few steps toward her, then his face softens and he falls to his knees next to her. "Look, Kavita, you know we can't keep this baby. We need a boy to help us in the fields. As it is, we can hardly afford one child, how can we have two? My cousin's daughter is twenty-three and still not married, because he can't come up with the dowry. We are not a rich family, Kavita. You know we can't do this."

Her eyes fill again with tears, and she shakes her head until they spill out. Her breath becomes ragged. She squeezes her eyes closed for several breaths. When she opens them again, she looks squarely at her husband. "I won't let you take her this time. I won't." She straightens her back despite the terrible pain. "If you try, if you even *try*, you will have to kill me first." She draws her knees up in front of her. From the corner of her eye, she sees the door and envisions the five quick steps it will take to reach it. She wills herself not to move, not to shift her fierce and determined gaze away from Jasu.

"Kavita, come, you're not thinking straight. We can't do this." He throws his hands in the air. "She will become a burden to us, a

drain on our family. Is that what you want?” He stands, towering over her again.

Her mouth is dry. She stumbles over the words she has not quite allowed to form except in the distant corners of her mind. “Give me one night. Just one night with my child. You can come fetch her tomorrow.”

Jasu remains silent, looking down at his feet.

“*Please.*” The hammering sound in her skull grows louder. She wants to scream to be heard over it. “This is our baby. We created her together. I carried her inside me. Let me have one night before you take her.” Suddenly, the baby awakens and cries out. Jasu looks up, startled out of his trance. Kavita puts the infant to her breast, restoring the silence between them.

“Jasu,” she says, signaling her seriousness by her uncharacteristic use of his first name. “Hear me now. If you do not allow me even this, I swear to you, I will fix it so I can never have another baby. I will destroy my own body so I will never birth another child for you. Never. Do you understand? Then where will you be? Who will marry you now, at your age? Who else will give you your precious son?” She stares at him until he is forced to look away.