

## Chapter 1



Anjali was sitting on the floor of her room. Earlier she had not realised what was going to happen to her, but once she had understood, she had wailed and screamed and fought like a tiger with all the women who held her down and forced the ceremonial clothing on her. She lashed out. She shouted.

‘Be quiet!’ a stout female relative said and hit her across the face.

Anjali rubbed her stinging cheek and stared wide-eyed at the woman. The shock of the blow stopped her from protesting, but not for long.

Again she fought.

‘You’ll be beaten if you don’t behave. Better just let us dress you.’

Afterwards, Anjali had leaned against the wall, but her legs would not support her and she had slid down, landing with a thud. A crumpled rag doll in the *sari* and jewels she had worn once before, long ago, as a child bride. She tried to suppress her terror but it was impossible. Another surge of panic erupted like a volcano, making her giddy and sick.

Someone washed her face with cold water and her step-mother, Parvati, forced her to drink some bitter green liquid from a cup, saying it would calm her. In minutes her head felt light and her vision was blurred. The liquid brought tranquillity, making her oblivious to what was going on around her. Other women took over and finished

dressing and decorating her limp body.

She didn't know how long she remained in a state of stupor but some time much later the sound of a bullock cart crunching across the gravel woke her and brought her to her senses. Confused by the silence where before there had been shouting and noise, she looked around and saw that all the women in the room were now asleep. An eerie silence filled the house, broken only by the occasional *mantra* chanted sleepily by the priests.

The numbness wore off and once again the horror of her reality gripped her. Her teeth chattered, and icy shivers ran up and down her spine. Trying to make as little noise as possible, she struggled to suppress the sobbing that rose to her throat. What could she do now? She tried desperately to think. To make a plan. How could she escape? She looked at the only exit from the room. It was blocked by two servants, who slept one on each side of it. Above her head was a tiny window, too high to climb out of and secured with iron bars. There was no way she could run away while the house was full of people. Despite their outward signs of distress, she knew that her mother-in-law and her step-mother were guarding her like hawks. The harsh truth was that there could be no escape.

Would it be painful? She shook her head, trying to dislodge the horrible images that burned in her imagination. Would it take long? She shivered again. How would it feel? As if to answer the question, she stretched out her index finger and placed it in the orange flame of an oil lamp that was placed nearby. *Ow!* She put her stinging finger in her mouth. Just a sharp pain from the heat of the lamp. It was nothing. She trembled as she imagined the huge flames of the pyre, fanned to a fierce heat, licking and hurting and burning her whole body.

She thought of her husband's lifeless form, newly clothed and garlanded, lying on the front veranda, ready to be taken to the cremation grounds at the crack of dawn. They had made her a bride

once again, but this time to accompany him on his final journey when they laid him on the funeral pyre.

‘Why me?’ Anjali had asked a hundred times, willing someone to give her a different answer. ‘Ratna is also his wife. Why does it have to be me?’ She had asked anyone who would listen. Each time she was told the same thing.

‘His first wife, Ratna, has his children to look after. You are a barren woman. You have borne him no children. The least you can do for him is to accompany him on his last journey.’

Remembering, Anjali flinched. At the age of eighteen, branded a barren woman, her life was about to end. Leaning back against the wall, she tried to brace herself for the inevitable. Resting her head on to her knees, she closed her eyes and tried to block out all feelings and pain.

Where would her spirit go once her body was burned? To heaven or hell, should either exist? Would she see her mother there? For the first time in years she tried to remember a young, slender woman with a beautiful smile. She had been only five years old when her mother had passed away, but she still remembered how her devastated father would sit her on his knee, hug her, and tell her how much her mother had loved her.

‘Your mother was a beautiful woman, Anjali. You are the spitting image of her,’ he would say, and there would be tears in his eyes.

‘I will try to grow up to be like her,’ Anjali would reply, saddened by her father’s grief.

But Parvati, her father’s second wife, had changed all that. Three years later, he had married again and his loving conversations with his daughter had ceased because they displeased his new wife. He never took her in his arms in front of Parvati. Then never at all. It seemed he no longer had time for her. Anjali wondered why he had married Parvati when he always looked so wretched. Soon father and daughter were separated further, each in their own quarter of

the house as Parvati's power increased and she enforced new rules. Her final act to sever Anjali's connections with the outside world was to dismiss her teacher. Lilly Garland, an Anglo-Indian lady, who had been coming to the house for years to teach the young Anjali to read and write. Anjali was left with no one.

Anjali was only ten years old when Parvati started nagging her father to marry the child off to her own cousin's son. Initially her father had protested.

'For god's sake, Parvati, Anajli is only a child.'

'Are you blind?' she shouted back. 'Open your eyes and look at her properly.'

But he could not look, nor meet his daughter's gaze.

'Anyway, at the age of ten she is not a child.' Parvati waved her hands dramatically in front of his eyes. 'Do you hear me? She will start her periods any time now, and if that happens before you have arranged her marriage, you will have to hide your face in shame.'

'All right, all right, I will search for a boy.' Her father's voice was meek.

'There is no need to search elsewhere. The right boy is under your nose. Ranjit will make a fine husband for Anjali.'

'You mean your cousin's son Ranjit?' Her father sounded shocked. 'Are you mad? For god's sake, he is already married.'

'Of course he is married, but so what? The point is that his wife can't give him any children.'

'So?'

She grimaced. 'Can't you see, if our Anjali could give him a child, all that property would fall into her hands!'

'Money is not everything, Parvati.'

Her father's voice did not convince.

'You're talking rubbish. Just imagine how you would feel if your daughter could live like a queen.'

A rueful smile came to Anjali's lips as she remembered that

conversation, which she had heard one evening whilst sitting on the back veranda, picking out little stones and husks from a measure of rice – one of the tasks that Parvati had set for her after she had married her father and put an end to her studies. It wasn't difficult to imagine how Parvati had finally persuaded him.

At the age of ten Anjali became Ranjit's second wife and took her place in his house. 'Palace' would be a more appropriate word.

Only then, as she was leaving her own home, did her father finally stretch out his arms and hug her. He clung to her crying like a baby. He was pitiful and his tears provoked tears of her own, tears which she had suppressed for so many years. Together they wept and silently acknowledged how much they had missed each other and how hard this parting was for both of them.

It was midnight by the time they arrived at her husband's grand house. She was tired and sleepy-eyed but remembered travelling in a palanquin, sitting opposite a big strange man, garlanded, dressed in silks and gold jewellery. She wanted to sleep but it was impossible as she had to sit upright, holding a tassel that was dangling from the middle of the roof. The loud rhythmic sounds of the band and the singing of the four men who carried the palanquin kept her awake throughout the journey.

She was glad when all the formalities that accompanied the arrival of a new bride were over and they sent her to bed. She slept like a log next to her step-mother, Parvati, on a feather-soft bed in a huge room. It was only when the next morning dawned that she began to take in and marvel at the grandeur of it all.

Parvati stayed with her for three days before leaving her in her mother-in-law's care.