

Kala's Choice

Chapter 1

Mumbai India—1994

Kala nursed her newborn son. His tiny, demanding mouth brought tears of pain as if, at two days old, he knew his place in her life. Once satisfied, he slept. Kala changed his diaper, swaddled him in a soft blue blanket, and placed him in the bassinet.

Dim light cast grotto-like curves on her narrow face while she carefully draped a yellow silk sari in the Punjabi style her grandmother had taught her. When her eyes fell on her daughter, Devi, Kala smiled, revealing for a moment the radiant beauty smothered by her arranged marriage.

Staring without focus, Kala plaited her long black hair while a silver barrette waited between her teeth. Engraved on the back with Kala's birth date and name, it was a gift from her grandmother. Kala believed the barrette protected her, as if imbued with Amma's loving energy. She secured the end of her braid with the silver ornament as she had done for as long as she could remember.

Devi opened her honey-gold eyes as Kala slipped a red embroidered party dress over her head. The three year old's bright eyes filled the room with happiness. The child smiled but made no sound. She had learned not to wake her father in the next room.

Kala and her husband, Atal Achara, lived in a mansion in Mumbai owned by the Achara family since the English left India in the 1940s. Atal's brother also lived in the mansion with his wife and young sons. Atal, his brother, and his father were government officials with power over the privileged as well as the indigent. Although they had well-paying government jobs, the bulk of their income came from graft. Kala's husband, the oldest, was nearly as gray as his father. They were tall for Indian men, with copper skin, fairer than most, and a strong family resemblance. Their bushy hair sprung like unruly garden weeds. Menacing ebony eyes revealed the cruelty they were each capable of, but Atal's eyes were golden and even more sinister than his brother's.

Kala's father had arranged the marriage as a business favor to the Achara family. They treated the beautiful bride as they would a worthless bauble, not with cruelty, but with total lack of love, respect, or devotion. Kala gave birth to a five-pound girl nine months after the wedding. Atal and his parents blamed Kala for the unfortunate result. A girl.

From the day she gave birth, Kala walked with Devi in the vast fragrant garden and often napped with the baby on a blanket under an arch of passion flower vines. The girl, small for her age, learned to walk on soft, manicured grass. Kala taught Devi Punjabi words for mama, hello, and bye-bye as well as names of fruits and vegetables.

Although he never struck her, Atal crudely mounted Kala every night, not with passion but with duty. He rolled off as if finishing an unpleasant dental appointment, and rarely spoke to her again until the next coupling. He slept in his own room. When she gave birth to a son a few days after Devi's birthday, Atal was pleased. He dyed his gray hair to look like a younger new father. "Now I have a boy child, get rid of that girl. Leave her at the orphanage!" he commanded, as if Devi were a worn-out plastic toy.

Kala knew her husband's cruelty all too well. One day she had walked by the kitchen just as her mother-in-law's arm swept through the air and splattered kerosene onto Kala's fat, irritating, sister-in-law. Blood chilling screams and the smell of roasting flesh filled the hallway.

"We-must-call-for-help," said the mother-in-law, in a monotonal, unconcerned voice, and she dragged pregnant Kala away from the burning body. As the screams subsided, Atal appeared with buckets of water and put out the fire. The tiled kitchen sustained little damage, but the demanding young mother was dead. Kala saw her husband nod, as a smile rose between the old woman and her son. Now they would find a new bride for Atal's brother and demand a huge dowry.

There was no investigation.

Like a stealth leopard stalking its prey, Kala slipped through the mansion and into the yard with her sleeping daughter on her hip. Her yellow sari and Devi's red dress glowed as she hurried along the illuminated path to the street. The exotic tropical garden and a tall stone wall protected the property from the palm-lined boulevard ordinarily teeming with cars, scooters and auto-rickshaws. At this hour only an occasional taxi passed. The intense perfume of passion flower blossoms filled the air. Kala paused. She hoped the fruity, floral fragrance would evoke loving memories, and Devi would remember how much Kala loved her. She pressed her lips to Devi's forehead.

The opulent wrought iron gate cried like a hungry kitten when they squeezed through. The barrette at the end of her braid flashed with the last glimmer of light as the black metal winked shut. Kala hurried beyond the wall that had safeguarded Devi from the harsh realities of Mumbai. As the fragrant air soured, the echo of her husband's voice reminded her, *Leave her at the orphanage!*

Kala walked for hours, burying her face in her daughter's soft hair and gulping the musky toddler sweetness. Kala's pace quickened through an alley teeming with fat, fearless rats. She hurried beyond the menacing stone wall where a concealed postern window and worn bamboo basket accepted unwanted babies and other donations.

She knew, once inside, no child escaped the orphanage.

She moved aimlessly through dark alleys, passing lavish hotels and putrid slums. As midnight blue replaced the utter blackness of night, she all but stumbled over a pack of children sleeping like a litter of puppies near a fruit wallah's cart.

One of the older children rested her arm over a smaller child. Another spooned against her back. Kala sensed a yellow glow of love among the pack of orphans. The love she sought for her daughter.

Her choice was suddenly clear.

Hunching like a heron in the shadows, Kala unhooked the front closure of her yellow choli and offered her breast. The child suckled until milk trickled from her lips. Kala used her pallu to wipe the sleeping child's lips. Taking the barrette from the end of her own braid she squeezed it in her fist as she had when she was a child. She said a prayer to her grandmother, "Amma, please keep Devi safe for I cannot." She fastened the barrette into her daughter's hair.

Hugging Devi as close to her naked breast as possible, she knelt to place the toddler on the sidewalk, next to the oldest girl. Careful not to wake the other children, Kala lifted the sleeping girl's arm and let it lay over her three year old's red dress.

With her palms pressed together, she silently blessed the small family of orphans and then, she walked away.

Filled with grief beyond tears, scarcely breathing, she forgot to re-hook her choli, leaving only the pallu to cover her round, milk-swollen breasts.

Yellow chiffon glowed around her like a flickering flame about to blow out. When she came to the Arabian Sea, she kept walking toward the rim of the world until the unfolding sari floated above her like a full moon's reflection.