

## Chapter 3

The phone rang barely an hour after they went to bed. It was Prerna. "Please come!" she said in a scarcely audible voice.

"Is it the baby? Are you ill?"

"Please ... come!"

Sudha dropped the receiver into the cradle and shook Vinay awake. "Hurry! Prerna needs help!"

"Who?"

"Prerna! Subodh's wife!"

"What's wrong with her?" And then he turned white. "Oh no. She's pregnant and the baby is coming."

"I don't know! Hurry!"

"What about Raghu? What if he wakes up?"

"He never wakes up in the middle of the night. But if you want, you stay with him and I'll go. Prerna lives only three houses away."

"We'll both go and then I'll come back," Vinay said, buttoning up his shirt. Sudha grabbed a shawl and flung it over her nightclothes.

The front door to Prerna's house stood ajar. Subodh was sprawled on the floor, snoring loudly. The floor was littered with dirty glasses and empty bottles.

Sudha sidestepped him and hurried into the bedroom. Prerna was slumped beside the telephone. She must have dragged herself out of her bed to make the call and now didn't have the strength to go back. Her face was bathed in sweat. Her long hair had come undone and looked matted into clumps.

"Prerna! Let me help you back!" Sudha turned to the door. "Vinay, come in!"

Vinay lifted Prerna and carefully deposited her on the bed. Sudha helped her turn to her side. She straightened the tangle of bedsheets as much as she could and rubbed Prerna's back. "Have the labor pains started? Have you timed the contractions?"

Prerna mutely shook her head. She looked terrified.

“Who is your doctor? Do you have his number?”

Prerna clenched her jaws together as more sweat poured down her face. Sudha turned to Vinay. “Call the ambulance. We must take Prerna to the hospital!” Vinay rushed out.

The pain eased and Prerna broke into heart-wrenching sobs as she confessed there was no money in the house. “Whatever I had put aside is gone. Subodh stole the money. I found out only this morning. When I asked him, he ... he struck me and went out. The pains started in the evening. I told him to call someone but ... but ...”

“We’ll do something. The ambulance will be here soon. Have you packed a bag for the hospital?”

Prerna shook her head and cried out loudly as another wave of pain hit her.

Sudha would not forget that night for as long as she lived. By an unfortunate coincidence, none of the company vehicles were available. They had all gone to the city to drop employees back home. The dispensary had an ambulance for emergencies but the driver had volunteered to drop a guest who had come in his own car but was feeling a little unwell.

Except for the children who slept soundly in their homes, every man and woman was at the house, all eager to help but not knowing what to do. Subodh had been roused and was weeping in great heaving sobs or being sick. When asked about the doctor and what arrangements he had made for the birth, he would only say that everything was lost now and it was all his fault. He hadn’t paid the doctor for the earlier visits and had quarreled with the nursing home staff.

Someone called up the general manager at his residence. He spoke to the government hospital. “They will send an ambulance. It’ll take some time. They are swamped because of an outbreak of dengue but they will admit Mrs. Subodh.”

Time was what they did not have. The men huddled outside the house. Some were on the phone, trying for another ambulance as the promised one had not turned up even though the hospital said it had already left a while ago. Someone suggested calling a midwife from the nearby village and set off on his two-wheeler. As the inaction became intolerable, two other men said they would try for a midwife in the other villages, as if the man who was on the job would not be able to go on to the next village.

The women were in the house. Except for Deeksha, they were all mothers but none of them knew what to do; they had given birth in hospitals. The little knowledge they had was from TV shows and movies, and it was limited to knowing that hot water and clean towels were needed.

The house was filthy, with dirty dishes piled up in the sink and not a clean cloth in sight. Deeksha, who was pregnant, turned green in the stale atmosphere of the house. Sudha sent her off to check on Raghu. Some of the other women took over the cleaning and the boiling of

water. Two went home to bring clean towels and check on their children. Only Sudha and Jaya remained by Prerna's side.

Prerna was no longer in control of her senses. Her screams rent the night. She was barely conscious of anything other than Sudha. She gripped her hand hard. Sudha did not mind the pain. Helpless to do anything to relieve Prerna's agony, she kept wiping her face with a damp cloth and telling her everything would be all right. Jaya prayed in a corner, softly chanting the Gayatri Mantra<sup>1</sup> and pleading for divine help.

The ambulance and the midwife arrived within minutes of each other. The paramedic staff ruled out moving Prerna. Sudha stayed on, bound to Prerna by unknown ties.

Prerna gave up the fight. It was as if she was waiting to ensure that her child was born. She took her last breath at the first cry of the newborn.

Sudha's back, her shoulders, her arms, every part of her body ached but she could not walk out of the room. She pulled up a chair beside the bed and sank into it. She picked up Prerna's hand. It was cold and clammy but the coldness was not of death. It was the residue of Prerna's struggle to bring her child into the world. Sudha's tears flowed as the hand lay limp and unresponsive in her own.

The midwife cleaned the baby girl. "Hold her," she said and placed the baby in Sudha's lap. Sudha cradled her with her free arm. The tiny mite, all eyes and dark hair, opened her eyes and looked up with unblinking eyes. She uncurled her fist and gripped Sudha's small finger. Bemused, Sudha looked down at Prerna's lifeless hand that still rested on her palm and then at the tiny fingers clutching her with the strength of life.

Gently, she placed Prerna's hand on her chest and took her baby home.

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<sup>1</sup> Ancient mantra from the Rig Veda for enlightenment.

## Chapter 4

Sudha carefully draped the baby in her shawl and came out of the house. The sharp rays of the sun blinded her for a moment. They also brought her back to the present. She quickened her footsteps. Raghu must have woken up long ago. He must be hungry!

“Sudha!” Vinay’s voice made her halt. She watched him detach himself from the group of men. Worry etched his face. “Are you all right? You didn’t sleep a wink.”

“Prerna is dead. She didn’t even get to see her daughter.”

“I know. We’re discussing the funeral. Subodh’s manager is on the way. He’ll take charge of the arrangements.”

“The funeral,” Sudha repeated blankly.

“You’re not yourself. Give the child to someone else and get some sleep. Don’t worry about Raghu. Deeksha has taken him to her place. He’ll stay with her the whole day. Luckily, today’s Sunday so there’s no school.”

“The child’s no problem. She’ll sleep and so will I.”

“Are you sure?” Vinay asked, placing his hand on her arm.

“I’ll be all right.”

Sudha bolted the door from within and leaned heavily against it. The nausea that had built up through the night threatened to overpower her. She gently put the bundled up baby down on the table and rushed into the bathroom. After throwing up, she removed her blood-stained clothes and stood under the shower.

“Why didn’t you tell me!” she cried out, her tears mingling with the water streaming down her face as her pent up emotions burst out. “I would have helped you! Why didn’t you tell me! I would have helped you!”

Sudha dried herself and dressed. She carried the baby into the spare room and put her down on the narrow bed. The infant slept on, a tiny frown wrinkling her forehead. Sudha was exhausted, fatigued in body and mind. Her hand ached as if it was still in Prerna’s convulsive grip. She had told Vinay she would sleep but Prerna’s face, bathed in sweat and tormented with pain and terror swam in front of her eyes. She sat down on the floor beside the cot and rested her forehead on its edge.

Snatches of conversation from outside the window drifted to her as the men discussed what was to be done next. Sudha did not want to hear about the funeral. She wanted the men to move away from the window. At the least, she wanted to get up and shut the window. But drained of all strength, she remained beside the infant and let the words intrude upon her exhaustion.

A few hours ago the men were rushing about contacting doctors and nursing homes, and now they were making preparations for a funeral. Now there was no need to hurry or to panic. The business of death was a straight forward one. The rituals for the cremation were all laid down. The rituals make everything easy. It was like following a manual.

“Who is with Subodh?” someone asked. “He will have to light the pyre. See that he stays sober. The rituals are important. A husband or a son must light the pyre if a married woman’s soul is to find release from the fetters of her present birth.”

*He hastened the end of her life. He will eagerly set her soul free.*

The sound of knocking interrupted Sudha’s bitter thoughts. It was Jaya come to see the child. “Is she awake?”

“She continues to sleep. I’ve been sitting beside her.”

Jaya sighed. “Poor motherless child! What’ll become of her? I never thought Prerna would die. But I suppose it’s the child’s destiny.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Who has heard of women dying in childbirth these days? The midwife says it wasn’t that complicated a birth.”

*Neither her heart had the will nor did her malnourished body have the strength to live.*

“The midwife is preparing the body for the final journey. Meena and the others are helping her. You saw what a mess the house is in. It took them some time to find a suitable sari to drape over the body.”

“Suitable sari? Suitable for what?”

“Suitable for her status as a married woman. It’s her due to be decked out in bridal red, with vermilion in the parting of her hair, and the auspicious bindi<sup>2</sup> on her forehead.”

“Really? Won’t the white garb of a widow be more suitable?”

“Hush! What are you saying?”

“Her husband was dead. Had he been alive, he would’ve taken care of her and not let her die like that! Subodh is alive only in name!”

“What’s got into you? I’ve never seen you so angry!”

*And I’m surprised you’re blaming destiny and not that wastrel!*

“Sudha, Prerna is also to blame. She could have confided in any of us. You are practically next door. It doesn’t do to be so proud.”

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<sup>2</sup> The decorative mark worn on the forehead by Hindu women, especially married women.

“Subodh might have forbidden her.”

“He was away most of the time and he wasn’t locking her in. You tried to visit her. We went to see her, too. She could have told us.” Jaya sighed. “At least she’ll have a proper funeral. Subodh told his boss, Anil Verma, he has no money for the cremation. Anil Verma asked everyone to contribute. A good amount has been collected. The company has made a matching contribution from the staff welfare fund.”

*Subodh’s final humiliation to the woman who had been too proud to ask her neighbors for help.*

Jaya went to the window and inquired whether the preparations for the funeral were ready. “Let’s go,” she told Sudha.

“Where?”

“Shouldn’t we take Prerna’s daughter to pay her last respects to her mother?”

“The child isn’t even a day old!”

“That doesn’t matter. I asked the priest and he said the child should be present.”

“I don’t know. She’s sleeping soundly.”

“Newborn babies sleep like that.”

Sudha wrapped the infant once more and followed Jaya. The crowd outside the house parted to make way. Sudha ignored the sympathetic murmurs and went inside. Prerna was laid out in the front room, buried under a mound of shawls and flower garlands and wreaths. An earthen lamp flickered beside her head. Two priests chanted Vedic hymns. On seeing Sudha, one of them came to her. “The child must take her mother’s blessing,” he said and told Sudha to join the baby’s palms together in a Namaste. He intoned a few mantras. When he sprinkled grains of rice as a token of blessing, Sudha turned slightly so that they did not fall on the baby’s face.

When she moved away, Prerna’s daughter opened her mouth to let out a wail. “She knows,” someone said.

“Nonsense, she’s hungry, that’s all,” Sudha snapped and went to the midwife, to ask what she should feed the baby.

“Cow milk is easy to digest but you’ll have to dilute it first.”

Sudha told Vinay to arrange for some cow milk and went back home. There was so much to do. Baby clothes and napkins. She remembered the feeding cup she had used for Raghu after he was weaned. It was a tiny bowl with a longish spout. Could she use it to feed a newborn?

The baby stopped crying and went back to sleep. Sudha decided to give her some water if she cried before Vinay brought the milk.

In spite of herself, Sudha lifted her eyes to the window as the decorated vehicle passed by. What was the need for all that ostentation? Sudha had seen the empty containers in the kitchen. What had Prerna lived on? The woman who had suffered deprivation of the worst kind in silence was now paraded as a pauper in death.

And now Subodh was a picture of grief. When she had seen him in the room accepting condolences, she had wanted to fly at him and claw his eyes out! To stamp on his smug face! The murderer! Hypocrites, all of them! What peace would Prerna's soul find if he set her on her final journey? The man should have been hounded out of the colony. His boss who was magnanimously collecting money should have dismissed him on the spot!

Sudha took a calming breath and unclenched her fingers. It wasn't like her to get upset. She always laughed off whatever happened. Her aunt liked to say that she was incapable of having feelings; tell Sudha anything and it will be like water off a duck's back.

Then why was she so angry on Prerna's behalf?