

Malli and the Yellow Stone



RADHA DEEP

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CHAPTER 1

Rangoon (Yangon), August 1988

Sheila held Jasmine in her arms and started towards the ground floor. The smell of mohinga from every apartment wafted up, making her feel hungry. Two-year old Jasmine started crying. “Shush, shush,” said Sheila, as she hurried down the last few steps.

The scene that met her eyes was horrific. It was a couple of days after the 8888 rising. So many people on the road, shouting, waving flags, the police charging at them, squeals, shouts, cries of pain.... Smoke and dust hurt her eyes and throat.

She mingled with the crowd, jostled her way through and reached the church inside the University campus.

Dev, hiding behind the church wall, saw her as soon as she entered, because Jasmine chose that time to start bawling.

All three of them hurried to the quieter part of the city where transport had been arranged. They got into a rickety bus.

“Thank God you came!” Dev said, holding Sheila in a tight embrace. “I’ve brought the stone too,” she said, extracting a small cloth purse from the waistband of her longyi. The yellow stone caught the sun’s rays and burst into a kaleidoscope of colors. She hurriedly put it back before anyone noticed and lifted the bawling Jasmine again, who had been sitting on Dev’s lap.

Dev was the great-great-great-grandson of Veera. Veera and his parents had settled down in the Dehradun Valley and had become successful farmers. The stone brought them so much good luck, that neither Veera, nor those after him, had ever found the need to sell it.

More than three hundred years later, when the stone was handed down to Dev his father had told him, what his father had told him. “Keep this safely, it brings you good luck; give it to your child later.” Dev had stared in awe at the beautifully sparkling gem.

One of his ancestors had got the stone cut, polished and appraised. It was practically priceless! “You could buy a couple of governments with it,” the gemologist had said, half seriously. The stone had remained a closely guarded secret within the family . . .

Dev, a Physics professor at the University, had recently accepted a teaching position in the University of Madras and was looking forward to seeing the land of his ancestors.

“Will you wear a sari in Madras?” Dev asked Sheila, with a smile.

Sheila had been practicing donning a sari. Born and brought up in Myanmar, she wondered how she would relate to the lifestyle in India ...

Before she could answer, a thundering sound assaulted their ears and they were swept into oblivion.

A few hours later... ..

Sheila couldn't move her legs; she couldn't move her hands. Excruciating pain engulfed her whole body. She knew she was dying... So much for the stone that brought good fortune — she thought miserably.... She could not see Dev anywhere. Bodies were strewn all around, Jasmine sat next to her injured mother, crying softly. Sheila removed the cloth purse from her waist and stuffed it into the pocket of the baby's frock.

“Sheila...” She heard Dev's voice, as life ebbed out of her...

CHAPTER 2

Dev, Jasmine, Sridhar

Dev shook Sheila by her shoulders, shouted her name, hoping against hope she would open her eyes. Jasmine kept saying “Mama, mama...” in between sobs.

Dev heard voices and looked up. A group of people, who had miraculously survived the crash, (caused by head-on collision of two speeding buses) was walking towards him.

One among them, an Indian in his early twenties, addressed Dev, “I am Sridhar, come with us,” he said and offered his hand. Dev looked at Sheila. He knew she was dead, but didn’t want to leave her side.

The man gently forced Dev to stand up and lifted Jasmine in his arms. Jasmine looked at the stranger and smiled widely... Dev limped beside him as they reached the group. A few men came up to him, patted his back, tears in their eyes. Almost all of them had lost their loved ones.

“We have to reach the other side of the city,” said one of the men. “Let’s walk fast.” Suddenly Jasmine started crying again and Dev held her in his arms. He felt something hard against his chest; he then saw her bulging pocket. He carefully took the cloth bag and put it in his pocket.

Hardly had he walked a kilometer when he felt a shooting pain in his head. He ignored it and continued walking, but the pain came again... he couldn’t see the road clearly now. His head spun, he could hardly walk. “Sridhar,” he said feebly.

Sridhar, who was a few steps ahead, walked back to Dev. Dev pulled out the cloth bag from his pocket, handed it over to Sridhar and said, “This will keep

■ *Dev, Jasmine, Sridhar* ■

you wealthy all your life. Just look after my daughter well. Take my papers . . . I am ...” Dev fell down with an agonized yell and lay still. . .

Sridhar tried to revive Dev . . . the others were waiting... he found the papers in the bag Dev wanted him to have, the papers that would take the baby to India. While kneeling down Sridhar opened the cloth bag and his eyes widened amazement. He quickly stuffed the bag and the papers into his kitbag and hurried back to the group, carrying Jasmine. “Poor guy; let’s move on,” he told the group.

Once more, Jasmine was in his arms and she came without a whimper. What would the stone fetch him? He wondered

* * * * *

CHAPTER 3

Bangalore, India – 2003

Friday, 7.30 am

The strains of MS Subbulakshmi's Venkatesha Suprabhatam could be heard from the elegant bungalow tucked away in the by-lanes of Sadashivanagar. Jasmine, now called Mallika, rubbed her eyes, and drew the curtains to let in the sunlight. Tanjore paintings on the wall glowed as if illuminated from within. "Malli," she heard Mrs. Sharma shout from her bedroom.

She ran up, saying, "Coming!" The pretty, 17-year old stood in temerity in front of the person she feared most, her heart thudding painfully.

Mrs. Sharma didn't look happy. "You don't have to shout back. Where's my coffee? And make it fast. If it isn't strong, you know what will happen ..."

Malli hurried down to prepare coffee. The decoction had been freshly brewed. Two days ago, she had prepared coffee using an instant mix - and the whole day had gone haywire. Sunita Sharma had hurled abuses at her and had kept her busy up to midnight, while explaining in no mild terms how lucky Malli was, to be living with them.

The bungalow housed a sizable domestic staff; but they were not allowed inside the house before 8 in the morning.

The aroma of coffee was just right. Malli heated the milk and added it to the sweetened decoction. (Once, she had heated both milk and decoction together, and had been punished severely ...)

* * * * *

Friday, 3 pm

The chores were done for the afternoon; Mallika supervised chores in a manner that Sunita would not find fault with her. This was the best time of the day. The Sharmas were at work and the children in school. She could relax without the fear of doing something wrong. Mallika switched on the TV in her room and lost herself in the world of make-believe . . .

An hour later, she settled down to continue her preparation for the forthcoming entrance tests. School had been a welcome reprieve for her. She had always secured high marks, plus a double promotion.

She wanted to be a lawyer ever since she could remember. She wanted to fight for the oppressed; she wanted to free million others, who were victims of abuse. She was preparing in full earnest for the national level exams to enter a prestigious law school.

Sunita, to be fair, had enrolled her in a good school until now, and had also advised her to take a year off to prepare for the entrance tests.

* * * * *

Friday, 8 pm

The family was at the dining table. Supper comprised of hot rotis, dal, salad and yoghurt. The fruit bowl was filled with mango, watermelon and apple slices.

“Why can’t I have the rajma now?” asked Ashok, the 11-year old son of Sridhar and Sunita Sharma. (Rajma is a popular Indian dish of red kidney beans in spicy gravy)

“Rajma, rajma, rajma, rajma” chanted 8-year old Akshata.

“Where’s rajma?” asked Sunita, Sridhar’s wife, smiling at Malli.

Malli’s voice trembled as she said; “It was prepared for lunch. I gave away the remaining.”

Sridhar, who had just returned home from the US, smiled and said, “C’mon Ashok, eat what’s served and I want no fuss!”

Ashok ate sullenly.

Just before turning in, Sunita came into the kitchen where Mallika was helping the cook tidy up. She shoed the cook out, walked up to Mallika and held the young girl’s arm in a vicious grip.

“Next time, rajma better be there when Ashok wants it. Get that?” she said furiously, and walked out.

How much longer was she to take this...? Wondered Malli, miserably. In Sridhar's presence, Sunita was kindness itself. The minute he was away, the torture and reprimands flowed unceasingly. Why didn't her sister-in-law like her? How did she get into this?

Let's go back to the day Jasmine lost her parents, to find out what really happened...

Bangalore, August 1988

Sridhar brought Jasmine safely to Bangalore, India, where he lived with his parents and brother, Srikanth.

The previous week, he had gone to visit his aged uncle, settled in Yangon, and had inadvertently found himself caught in the political apocalypse of Myanmar.

That was when he had met Dev and became the guardian of Jasmine and the keeper of the stone. When his family heard Jasmine's story they welcomed the toddler warmly into their hearts and home. Sridhar's mother, Susheela, was dumbstruck with the beauty of the stone. "Oh my! That's so magnificent!" she said. She placed it reverently back in the cloth bag.

As Sridhar had Jasmine's papers, it had neither been difficult to bring her back to India, nor to initiate adoption procedures. It was decided that Sridhar's parents would formally adopt the toddler. The stone would remain in the bank locker, to be handed over to Jasmine when she turned 18.

November 1991

A couple of years later, when a happily married Srikanth was away in California, and Sridhar's parents were on a cruise with the now 5-year old Mallika, Sridhar met Sunita, at a party, and fell hopelessly in love with her. She seemed so elegant, soft-spoken and popular among the guests.

Soon they were exchanging, contact details, eager to meet once more. A month later, they decided to get married. When Sridhar's parents heard the news, they were elated.

"Congrats! We can't wait to meet Sunita. Please convey our regards to her parents," his father said.

“Will do dad,” replied Sridhar, “and” . . . He hesitated.

“What’s up son, any problem?”

“No, it’s only that Sunita’s mom — she wants an early wedding, I told her you two weren’t in the country. ”

“Oh, is it? Why don’t we set the date soon after our return, for an early wedding?”

Sridhar conveyed this to Sunita’s parents and they were happy.

A week after they had met, Sridhar had told Sunita and her parents, about his ‘sister’ Mallika, when the three visited his palatial home. He had narrated the circumstances that had brought Mallika into their lives, and showed them the child’s photo. Sunita’s parents hadn’t seemed too pleased.

“Was the option of handing her over to an adoption home not considered?” Sunita’s father, Vishal had asked.

Sridhar had pursed his lips and hadn’t answer for a moment.

When he had started to speak, Sunita had interrupted, exclaiming, “What a ridiculous suggestion Papa! I’m sure they all fell in love with the baby as soon as they set eyes on her. Sridhar, that’s such a wonderful thing to do! I already love your baby sister. She’s adorable! When can I see her?”

If there had been doubts in Sridhar’s mind about Sunita’s acceptance of his adopted sister, they melted away that instant, and he knew he could not let this wonderful woman walk away from his life.

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