

THE DOWRY BRIDE

An excerpt

Her parents named her Megha, which means cloud in Sanskrit, perhaps because she cast a gray shadow over their lives at a time when they didn't expect overcast skies. She was an unexpected, unpleasant surprise—rather late in their lives. Her father was in his forties, her mother in her thirties. When they were desperately hoping it would at least turn out to be a boy after having had two girls, ages thirteen and eleven, she came along—another screaming infant girl—with all the wants and needs and tribulations of a female—all the burdens of a Hindu Brahmin woman.

Her father never recovered from the disappointment. Her mother quietly accepted it as her destiny. Together they began to contemplate how they would ever manage to put aside enough money to pay three *varadakhshinas*. Dowries.

Some Hindus believe that if you give your child a depressing name, you can keep evil away from it. They often apply a dot of kohl on a baby's face to mar its perfection, so no one will be tempted to put a hex on a flawed child. Megha was told she was an unusually beautiful baby, bright and full of energy. She often wondered if the name Megha was her spot of kohl, guaranteed to deflect the evil eye. When asked about it, her mother said the only reason they called her Megha was because they happened to like the name.

Then there was the astrologer, a man known for his accuracy, who had cast her *janam-patrika*. Horoscope. He had apparently predicted a dark, threatening period in Megha's life, when a large cloud would settle over her head, and *Yama*, the god of death, would pay her a visit. He wasn't able to foretell exactly when...but the menace would come, he'd warned.

It would come. It was bound to come—sooner or later.

Chapter 2

At the age of twenty-one, Megha Ramnath was not only married for a year but was about to be executed. In the damp, foggy darkness of the night, she stood outside the woodshed, her brows drawn in puzzlement, the loose end of her plain blue cotton sari tightly drawn around her slim shoulders to ward off the chill creeping up on her. Had she heard correctly, or was her mind playing strange tricks on her?

Standing on her toes she peeped into the shed's window once again, secretly listening to her would-be murderers whispering, hatching their sinister plan to finish her off.

There was no light anywhere except for the ominous, dull yellow glow coming from the *kandeel*. Lantern. It barely illuminated the woodpile leaning against the wall in the corner and the two tins of kerosene standing nearby. The concrete floor, reduced to a blotchy gray from decades of sawdust, oil stains and dirt, looked grungier than ever.

Icy fingers seemed to creep down the nape of her neck, vaguely telling her something was not quite right. What was it she sensed? That unexplained electric charge that sent chills up and down her spine? Megha continued to contemplate, trying to make sense out of the conversation going on inside the shed.

Kuppu, the fat old calico cat, sat huddled at her feet, shuddering, sending tremors up Megha's legs. Was he experiencing the same eerie feeling she was? Cats could sense danger better than humans. The leaves rustled in the nearby guava tree, making her jump. She looked up, afraid to breathe, but realized it was only some night creature stirring—perhaps a bird disturbed by Kuppu's presence. Just then Kuppu's back lifted in an arch—a definite sign of fear. And Megha's breathing turned ragged.

Then it dawned on her. Her large dark eyes turned wide with alarm. She was going to be

killed! Realization struck her like a punch in the stomach. Terror soon replaced numbing shock, sending her heartbeat soaring.

Oh, God! Could this really be happening to her? And why? She was an ordinary housewife with a boring life; she had no enemies. She was considered pretty, but it couldn't possibly be a reason for anyone to kill her. She had no particular talents and posed no threat to anyone. Although her life meant little to anybody but herself, her death would mean even less.

And yet, she was going to be murdered!