

THE FORBIDDEN DAUGHTER

An excerpt

*Oh, Lord, I beg of you.
I fall at your feet time and again.
In my next incarnation, don't give me a daughter;
Give me hell instead . . .*

— Folk Song from the State of Uttar Pradesh, India

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April 2006

Today was the day! Today Isha would most likely have an answer to that single question she'd been obsessing about for weeks—ever since she'd found out she was pregnant: Was it a boy, or . . . God forbid . . . a girl?

Nonetheless, she wasn't sure if she *wanted* to know. Even if she did, would her doctor be willing to reveal the fact, since it was illegal to discuss the sex of an unborn child with its parents? For Isha it was a case of mixed emotions and desires. There was a popular Americanism that described her feelings perfectly—*damned if you do and damned if you don't*.

Nervous anticipation made her stumble a little as she stepped out of the car to walk toward her obstetrician's comfortable and well-appointed medical office.

Nikhil, her husband, quickly grabbed her arm to steady her. "Are you all right, Ish?" he asked with a slight frown. He was the only person in the world who called her Ish.

She nodded. "Just a bit tense, that's all," she replied and lifted the hem of her cream chiffon

sari a bit, so she wouldn't trip over the long, trailing pleats while climbing the single concrete step leading up to the front door.

"You're not dizzy or anything?" Nikhil's deepening frown and gently solicitous voice told her he was worried—more so than usual.

"No. I'm feeling fine," she assured him. No point in scaring him by saying she had huge butterflies, the size of bats, flitting around in her tummy. She was jittery enough for both of them.

She stole a brief sidelong glance at Nikhil. Dressed in elegant gray slacks and a blue designer shirt, he was the picture of polished good looks combined with affluence. But he wasn't his usual confident self today. He seemed edgy—almost as much as she.

He kept a protective hand curled around her arm. "Good. Let's keep it that way."

The black and white sign outside the single-story brick building was both prominent and impressive. Karnik Maternity Clinic—a proud testimonial to the doctor's professional success. Beneath it were his name and credentials: *Dr. V. V. Karnik — Obstetrics & Gynecology Specialist*.

Although male OB-GYNs were still rare in small towns, this particular doctor had an outstanding reputation; consequently, he had acquired a large and exclusive clientele.

Isha was at the clinic to get an ultrasound test done—one of the most brilliant inventions in the medical field since the discovery of antibiotics. It could reveal whether the baby was healthy or not, and the most interesting thing was that one could see the fetus as a three-dimensional image on a computer screen. How fantastic was that!

Although she wasn't sure if she wanted to find out the sex, she still couldn't wait to see her unborn child. It would be thrilling to have a chance to be introduced to the tiny person growing inside her.

"Nervous?" asked Nikhil, after they'd announced themselves to the receptionist and settled down on the blue-and-gray upholstered sofa in the waiting room.

“Very.” She searched his face. “Are you?”

He smiled at her, his hazel eyes warming up. “A little, I guess.”

“A *little?*” she asked with a wry chuckle. She knew her husband well. He often covered up his negative feelings with that attractive smile. He rarely fooled her, though. And he hadn’t slept well the previous night. “I think *you* are more anxious than I am.”

He took her hand and rubbed his thumb over the wrist, the laughter fading from his eyes. “Everything’s going to be okay. You’ll see.”

She knew he was trying to reassure himself while doing the same for her. They were both pulsing with tension. There was a lot at stake here.

Twenty minutes later, it bubbled up like a fountain, warm and effervescent—the emotion that could be experienced only by a mother-to-be. Her baby! With damp palms and a racing heart, Isha observed the fuzzy movements on the monitor. The word *amazing* hardly described it. It was like watching a fantasy show on television.

That funny little glob was the living, moving baby in her womb. But even at this early stage of pregnancy, the little arms and legs were identifiable. With its oversized bald head and a protruding forehead it resembled some alien creature in a science fiction movie.

But the elation quickly dampened when other thoughts began to crowd her brain. Oh no! What if . . .? She said a quick, silent prayer. *God, please let it be a boy. Please! If I don’t have a son this time, I’m finished.*

Her in-laws had made such a ruckus about her giving birth to a girl the first time. Her mother-in-law, supposedly an enlightened woman, with a college degree and an interest in music, world affairs and literature, had wrinkled her brow when she had first learned Isha had given birth to a girl. “*Arré Deva, moolgee!*” Oh, God, a girl!

Dr. Karnik allowed both Nikhil and Isha to gaze at the image on the screen for several more

seconds. Isha looked for the small but significant part of the baby's anatomy that would establish its gender. So far there was no indication of it on the screen. Was it something that didn't appear until the fetus grew a little bigger? She studied the image more closely. What she desperately hoped to see wasn't there.

The doctor looked at her and Nikhil by turns. "So, do you want to know the child's sex?"

Isha closed her eyes for an instant. Did she really want to know?

But then she heard Nikhil say, "Um . . . yes." He sounded hesitant.

"Are you sure?" The doctor gave him a pointed look.

Nikhil glanced at Isha and she nodded, albeit reluctantly. Was the doctor serious, or was this his idea of injecting a little levity into a grave situation? But he wasn't smiling. And it was common knowledge that some doctors did manage to reveal the sex of the fetus discreetly, despite what the laws dictated, perhaps to accommodate the parents' natural curiosity.

They exchanged brief glances. It was an unspoken agreement that the three of them would keep this confidential.

Deep down, she already knew the answer. The tiny image on the screen was plain enough.

"It's a girl."

Silence fell over the examination room as Isha and Nikhil tried to digest the doctor's casual announcement. Nikhil stood motionless, his gaze fixed on some unknown spot on the wall.

Another girl! That was all that went through Isha's mind over and over again, although she'd known it in her gut. Official confirmation just made it harder.

Assuming their silence indicated disappointment, Dr. Karnik said, "It is not the end of the world, you know."

Isha rolled her eyes. "Maybe not to you, doctor. My in-laws will be devastated."

Dr. Karnik shrugged. "So . . . we can fix that."

“Excuse me!” Isha stared at the doctor. Had he really meant to say what she thought he’d meant? Or had she misunderstood him? She looked toward her husband, wondering if he had read the same message. All she saw was a puzzled look on Nikhil’s face. “What does that mean, doctor?”

“We can easily perform a clinical abortion,” the doctor replied. “You’re only in the beginning of your second trimester, and it is a fairly simple procedure.”

“Fairly simple!” Isha felt like she’d been punched in the stomach.

“Simple, safe, and fast, with today’s techniques,” assured the doctor.

“No!” Glancing at the screen again, she saw the fetus move. The baby! “That’s not an option.”