



THE
PRINCESS
of a
WHORE
HOUSE

THE STORY OF A SWAMP LOTUS

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Chapter One

As the bus crossed the Bridge of the Damodar River, the driver applied the brakes abruptly on seeing two elephants crossing the road. This made me bang my forehead on the metallic grab rail of the front seat, waking me up from my power nap. A bulk of potatoes came tossing down from a sack that fell in the rear. The bus halted with a screeching noise emanating from its tyres. Perhaps, I would never see them again. It was the first thought that came to my mind when I looked outside at the beautiful plateau of the Damodar Valley from the window. I sat peering out the window, with my chin resting on my hand as the bus accelerated again. The red soil, the sandy loam, the beautiful Rajrappa Waterfall between the Bhairavi and Damodar rivers, the huge coalfields, the flora and fauna, all of them would be left behind. I would miss making wishes at the Mayatungri Temple that always gave me strength in difficult times. The little baby, Aparajita would never get the delightful sight of those wonderful festivals of Sarhul, Karam and Makar celebrated by our tribal groups.

I remembered the golden days when my husband, Ramesh, worked as a miner in Ramgarh coalmines of the mineral rich district. He had always dreamt of sending Aparajita to St. Ann's School ever since she was born. He often taught Aparajita as he had studied till high school in the state government school. Ramesh's best friend,

Anjum, was surprised when Aparajita recited a poem in English on her third birthday.



The Durga Puja celebrations were taking place in the Mayatungri Temple. I went there to offer my prayers in the morning after Ramesh had left for work. The fragrance of marigold flowers created a divine mood inside the temple. The marigold garlands that decorated the temple looked amazing. The chanting of the goddess Durga's mantras enriched the festive atmosphere. All of a sudden, I heard a commotion. Footsteps thumped frantically against the ground. It grew louder and louder. It was the roar of a mob running outside. The stray dogs began barking at a distance.

'Blast! There is a blast! A big blast!' the mob shouted. I held Aparajita in my arms and ran down the stairs.

'What happened?' I asked while gripping the hand of one of the boys running with the mob.

'A major explosion occurred there,' he pointed his finger towards the Ramgarh coalmines and replied. My feet froze, and I felt as if they were glued to the ground.



The sirens of ambulances were audible loudly from a distance as I neared the coalmine. There were several ambulances in the vicinity of the coalmine. Fire engines also rushed towards the coalmine. The site was crowded with anxious people. I shoved shoulders of the packed crowd to cross through. I spotted Anirudh, whom I remembered as a supervisor in the coalmine.

'Sir, have you seen Ramesh? If you remember, I'm his wife,' I asked him with quivering lips.

'Whose wife?' he asked in panic as he could not see my face properly, in the crowd. 'Oh yes! Now, I can recall, that Ramesh. It's a fateful day for us. Ramesh is trapped inside the mine with fifty other miners. The explosion inside the mine led to an underground fire. The rescue operation is in progress. Let's pray for their lives!' he said.

With moist eyes, I prayed and waited helplessly at the accident site even after sunset. The underground fire had damaged the highway. It was the night of the new moon, and it felt mysteriously dark. After the power outage, the fumes from the mine compounded the haziness. I felt my rapid heartbeats. With a murky view, I saw the rescue team taking a few stretchers towards the ambulances. I ran towards them with a great hope. The fluttering fumes made my eyes itch, and the pungent odour of the scorching coal stuffed my nose, leaving me out of breath. As the wind drifted away thick fumes, I saw Anirudh with his shoulders hunched down. He bowed down his head when he saw me walking towards him. My entire body from head to toe became numb when I saw Ramesh's body on a stretcher. I held the stretcher firmly as big tear drops oozed from my eyes.

'Oh lord! Please, please give me strength!' I screamed.



A few weeks later, I sat in a dark room, chewing my fingernails after I got up from my siesta.

'Ramesh was the only breadwinner of our family. Oh damn! Why the heck did my parents compel me to marry at the age of fifteen? I dropped my studies in the middle for marriage. Who will give me a job today? Who will lend me the money when I need it?' these questions echoed in my mind.

Suddenly, my mind drifted when someone knocked on the door. I switched on the bulb in my room and walked towards the main door. It was Ramesh's childhood friend, Anjum.

'Ramya *bhabhi*, I rushed from Varanasi immediately when I heard the bad news,' said Anjum.

In that grim phase, I felt affectionate when he called me *bhabhi*, which means sister-in-law. Aparajita ran to him immediately and wept loudly in his arms as she missed her dad gravely. Anjum hugged her tightly, and I could see that his eyes were moist. He started a casual chit-chat to divert her mind as I went to prepare tea for him.

'The tea does not taste the same as it used to, with Ramesh,' said Anjum as he sipped the tea.

'For us, life is not the same without Ramesh,' I replied with tears in my eyes.

'Unfortunately, we cannot reverse the time wheel. We have to take life as it comes,' said Anjum. 'How will you take care of your expenses and Aparajita's studies? Are you looking for a job?' he asked.

'Who will employ a lady who's a school drop-out? Anyway, there aren't enough jobs for even educated people in our town,' I replied.

‘One of my friends told me that Delhi has quite a few galleries and emporiums that display and sell tribal artwork and they are very popular with the foreign tourists,’ said Anjum. ‘These places often require saleswomen and storekeepers who understand the background of the tribal artworks such as the bamboo artwork, pottery, metallic jewellery, tribal weapons, and so on. And, these jobs pay pretty well,’ he spoke breathlessly.

‘Who’s the guy?’ I asked him.

‘He works as a recruitment agent in Delhi. I can contact him to find a job for you, if you are willing,’ he asked me curiously.

‘Do you mean to say that I should work in Delhi? No, not at all possible!’ I clarified.

‘So, what’s your plan B? Are there other options that do not require relocation?’ Anjum gasped a deep breath and banged his fist on his lap.

‘How can I leave Jharkhand when I have never even stepped out of Ramgarh? I am quite afraid of the fast life in a big city,’ I replied.

‘You should not feel emotional about the place that cannot provide you a livelihood. How will you fulfill Ramesh’s dream to educate Aparajita?’ he asked.

Anjum assured that he would accompany me to Delhi until I settle down, if I trusted him. He considered Ramesh as his brother. He left me in limbo.

After a month, I found a small job as a baby sitter in the Ramgarh Cantonment. The money I was paid was barely enough to sustain my expenses. It was a herculean

task to juggle between the long working hours and the responsibilities of being a mother for petty bucks. I lost the job when I failed to cope with the situation.

One morning, the lineman came to disconnect the power since I hadn't paid the bill for the past two months. Sarala, my next-door-neighbour, was kind enough to pay my bill.

'How long can I continue like this? How will I feed Aparajita?' I asked myself.

I searched for Ramesh's diary in which he used to note addresses and phone numbers. Luckily, I found it in an old chest of drawers. Anjum's phone number was listed on the first page. I went to the nearest phone booth and hoped desperately that his number was still the same. I dialled his number with wobbling fingers.

'Hello, this is Anjum here!' he answered my call.

'I am Ramya calling here from Ramgarh,' I spoke.

'Namaskar, *bhabi!* Glad to hear from you after such a long time. Hope you're doing well. And, how's our little Aparajita doing?' he asked in a cheerful voice.

'Both of us are well! With a lot of courage and uncertainty, I've made up my mind to relocate to a strange land, a thousand miles away,' I said in a steady tone.

'I am glad that you've made the right decision. I will soon search for an opportunity for you. You will hear from me when I have made all the arrangements,' he replied.

This was my last goodbye to the city closely-linked with the ancient history of human civilization, even prior to the great Maurya Empire in 322-185 BCE.

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