

# The Midwife

**RABITA SALEH**

It was three o'clock at night and raining as though all hell had broken loose. Thunder and lightning like you had never witnessed before. The narrow lanes of Old Dhaka were flooded with murky water already, and yet the sky continued to wage its war as though determined to obliterate us.

I swear I told my husband I could feel it in my bones – something unholy was brewing that night.

In the midst of this chaos, there was a knock on our iron door. Well, I say knock, but it was, in reality, a thundering of fists loud enough to rival the din of the sky. I was used to late night calls. It was somewhat of an occupational hazard. However, that night, I remember feeling an inexplicable sense of unease. A poor soul was likely in need of my aid though, so I shoved my qualms aside, wrapped my saree around my head, reassured my husband that it was probably the usual call, and went downstairs to answer the door.

It was as I expected. A desperate man, a cry for help – all too familiar. What wasn't familiar, what was completely unexpected, was the sheer radiance of the man standing in front of me. He was beautiful. There was no other word for it. He looked oddly surreal. He was, also, a stranger. I would remember a face like this if I had seen it around.

To top it all off, he was crying. Tears on the face of an angel. My heart nearly broke at the sight, and I'll tell you I've seen some sorry sights in my time. I told him I would accompany him, motioning for him to lead the way. That was when he made the most peculiar addition to his request. He said I would have to follow him to his abode blindfolded.

I gasped. There was no way I would do such a thing. He kept begging but the request was simply ridiculous. I stepped back, and even began shutting the door, when he fell to his knees on the filthy asphalt. He swore he wouldn't ask this of me if it wasn't absolutely necessary.

*"My love is in pain. She will die without you. Please help me midwife. Do me this favour."*

I sighed. My heart softened. I couldn't turn him away. I agreed. He got up then, and swiftly produced a pitch-black blindfold. He tied it around my eyes, and took my hand to lead me onward.

Something strange happened then, for I don't remember the consequent journey at all. The blindfold didn't just seem to impair my vision, it must have deprived me of all my senses, because I don't even recall placing one foot in front of the other. In what had to be just the blink of an eye, we had reached our destination, and I was having my blindfold removed.

For all my excitement at having regained my sight, the house I had stepped into was extremely ordinary. It could have been the interior of any old house. The half-mint half-white walls, the high ceilings with long hanging fans, the wicker chairs, and

the mosaic floors were all utterly commonplace. The bedroom, too, once we had gone inside, was the same. In fact, the iron wardrobe and the four-poster bed could have been taken right out of my own house.

The woman on the bed though, was another story altogether. I had been subconsciously expecting this ever since I met her partner, and yet she still managed to exceed all my expectations. If her mate had been beautiful, she was truly exquisite. Wearing a long white maxi dress, with her lush dark hair splayed over the edge of the bed, she was a vision of absolute perfection.

It was no surprise therefore that it took me a second to register that she was posi-

the man approached me. He seemed to exclude happiness from every cell in his body.

"Midwife, you have done us a great service today. I don't have any paper money for you, but I insist that you go to my kitchen and take as much coal from the stove as you desire."

Before I could overcome my incredulity at being paid in coal, the man continued.

"Once you have taken the coal however, you are to leave immediately. When you step outdoors you will find yourself at the mouth of the street on which you reside. Now this is imperative. Do not look back. Trust me, I say this for your sake alone, do not look back on your way out. Take the

from behind me. With the intention of taking my own small revenge on the couple, I glanced back towards the middle room.

Babies. Not two, but six. A total of twelve wide open, intelligent eyes peered up at me, sparkling with joy. These were not the eyes of any human child born less than half an hour ago. And they didn't just look at me. They giggled, with perfect sets of pearly white teeth, as though immensely pleased to see me. They were so lovely I felt my heart wrench painfully with love. Or maybe it was fear, for they weren't lying down. They weren't sitting either. They were climbing the chairs, the wardrobes, there was even one sitting atop one wing of the



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tively writhing in excruciating pain. Her partner had rushed to her side the minute we arrived, and was now cooing words of comfort in her ear. They were barely audible to me, but from what I could decipher, it didn't sound like any language I had ever heard.

Once the initial shock had passed, I was in my element. Odd though they were, they were just another couple in need of my assistance and I had done this a thousand times. I quickly issued commands to the man, and got to work on relieving the poor angel from her agony. The delivery went as smoothly as ever. Unsurprisingly from her size, she gave birth to twins. Two gorgeous faces, with all forty fingers and toes, who I placed on either side of their mother.

Once he was sure of his partner's health,

coal. And leave. Do you understand me, midwife?"

I nodded my comprehension.

However, as I made my way towards the kitchen, I remember feeling distinctly cheated. This man was probably just taking advantage of their unusual appearance to trick me into rendering him a service free of cost. All this trouble and for what? Coal! I sighed.

Taking two large pieces of coal from the huge stove anyway, since we were in fact out at home, I stowed them within the folds of my saree, and then headed for the door. With my hand over the knob however, I felt this insane rebellious urge.

"Don't look back... for your own good." What codswallop.

There were some soft noises coming

stationary ceiling fan. And to complete this scene of grotesque magnificence – they were all pale blue.

That was when I must have fainted. The next thing I remember is being tucked in bed by my husband, who swore I hadn't gone anywhere last night. Was it all a dream then? I was only beginning to believe that when I heard two loud clangs of some heavy objects crashing to the ground. The pieces of coal I had tucked into my saree?

I bent to pick them up. Only, they weren't coal anymore. They were two solid medallions of pure glittering gold.

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