

## Intermission

### Chapter 1

ON THE BALCONY of his seventh-floor apartment, oblivious to the swirl of midsummer dust, the rasping April breeze and the faint voices of his household that rattled behind the French windows, Varun Sarin pretended to read the newspaper. He felt the familiar knot within, an uneasy anticipation which he tried to ignore as he gazed at the pages of the *Hindustan Times*. He vaguely registered the fact that the Opposition party had staged a walkout in Parliament and that a family in a nearby village in Haryana had poisoned their only daughter and slaughtered her lower caste lover; fifteen pieces of his body had been found in a mustard field. The state of the nation and other people's lives did not interest him, at least not at this time of the morning.

He glanced at his watch. 7:30 a.m. Ten minutes late.

Through the great wrought-iron gates of Trafalgar Towers, the daily passage of human and vehicular traffic had begun. The security guards in their blue uniforms, charged with controlling the influx of the outside world and regulating its outflow, had come into their own. They scrutinized the visitors, prepared gate passes on small pink slips and followed with their eyes every vehicle that left the building. Varun noticed a few schoolchildren heading towards the bus stop in front of the building, the smaller kids flanked by mothers or maids, the teenage boys hitching up their baggy trousers and the girls tossing their hair with studied nonchalance. The iron barrier in front of the gates swung up to let out a large gold-colored car. A herd of drivers – thin men of average height, their clothes drooping, their faces heavy with the drudgery of the day ahead – trooped in. A few of the younger men looked aggressively hopeful in bright T-shirts that bore the logos and cheerful slogans of the companies their employers worked for. They gazed furtively at the maids who flocked in twos and threes, like colorful birds in their red yellow orange saris, calling out to one another in animated Bengali. Splashes of vermillion blazed on their bright faces, red and white bangles encircled their wrists.

An old man in a white kurta pyjama plodded along the walking path and three middle-aged ladies wearing sneakers and flowery salwar suits marched along like grim warriors fighting a losing battle against weight and age. The lawns were a patchwork of green and brown. In some places, where the grass had been worn thin by children playing football or cricket, it resembled the tonsured head of a child with a week's growth of scraggly new hair. A young couple froze and unfroze their limbs in the various poses of the Suryanamaskar on yoga mats spread out on the lawns.

He saw her then. Rounding the curve of Tower 1 and stepping onto the path that circled the park, pausing for a second to adjust the ipod strapped to her arm. Varun felt the knot in his chest unravel. She was in a bright-red halter neck T-shirt that scooped her breasts into a rounded prominence, and black track pants. He took in the jaunty arc of her long ponytail, the dip of her waist and the determined swaying of her narrow hips. Her face was indistinct from this distance but he had an impression of delicate bones, a smudged mouth and buttery skin. Of something pure and wholesome within her. It seemed to him that she was being borne along in a shiny bubble, in this world and yet not a part of it, and he wondered, as he had done for the past three weeks, if she was only a part of his imagination. He watched her disappear, then reappear from behind the semicircle described by the four peach-colored towers of Trafalgar Towers. As he watched her, he tried to recall the moment when he had first noticed her, when he had changed from a dispassionate onlooker to an interested observer to an avid watcher. He wondered who she was, what she did in the twenty-four hours between the morning walks, who were the people she claimed as her own. And he wondered why he, Varun Sarin, forty-four-year-old successful entrepreneur, faithful husband and competent father of a sixteen-year-old boy, a man with the stolidity of half his life behind him and the certainty of what lay ahead, should wait every morning for a glimpse of this girl, like a teenager in the first throes of an infatuation.

He would have liked nothing better than to stand there observing how long she walked and where she went afterwards but his morning routine dictated otherwise. He stepped back

through the windows and plunged into a different world. Gayatri, already showered and dressed, juggled a Blackberry and a piece of multigrain toast between her fingers. They had an established morning routine:

Gayatri had to be dropped off at her office, which was on the way to his own, the specific time of departure set for 8:45 a.m. – absurdly early for him but just right for her.

‘Varun, aren’t you ready yet? We’re going to be late. I have an early morning meeting with Jai. I told you yesterday that I had to leave by 8:15 today. If you aren’t ready in ten minutes, I’m leaving.’ He didn’t know if it was a plea or a threat; he read both in her voice.

‘Then leave. I’ll go later.’

‘Fine.’

‘Tell Jagdish to come back here after he drops you.’

‘Fine.’

The words, spat out at him like cherry pits into the wind, carried a faint whiff of accusation.

Gayatri grabbed her handbag, her laptop, lunch bag, Blackberry and sunglasses and slammed out of the apartment. For a moment, Varun was tempted to resume his scrutiny of the park but he was conscious of the presence of the cook, Jhumpa, who had emerged from the kitchen to ask him if he would have some breakfast. The cleaning maid, Bulbul, moved towards him on her haunches, inscribing impatient sloppy circles with a grey mop on the floor, a certain tilt of the head indicating that he should clear the way and allow her to get on with her work.

Solitude in this apartment was a luxury, he had begun to realize in the past few weeks. He seemed to be always surrounded by people. His workday was an endless series of meetings and at home his family and staff hovered around him constantly. He was caught within an orbit of people wanting, needing, giving, taking, sharing, complaining, arguing, doing things that often did not concern him. He wanted nothing more than to be by himself and contemplate the girl in red, to meditate in peace upon the parts that made her glorious whole.

Later, as he stood in front of his bathroom mirror, shaving, he looked at his face, his body, the parts that made him whole. He felt fit, the weekend golf and occasional tennis keeping his

midriff in check, though of late he had begun to watch for signs of an incipient paunch. Running a razor through his day-old stubble, he reflected that the contours of his face were not unpleasant. No one would call him handsome, but he wasn't ugly either. He wondered how the girl might describe him to her friends. That is, if they ever met and if she ever talked to her friends about him.

Varun knew he was growing old, though he didn't feel it. He joked about the increasing threads of silver that colored his hair: he was glad, he said, that he still had some hair left and was not growing bald like some other men his age. A few weeks ago, his ophthalmologist had suggested reading glasses but he had deferred the decision of acquiring spectacles. When he compared himself to the Varun Sarin in the wedding photograph on the bedside table, he could see the difference even though he couldn't identify exactly how he had changed. He knew that he had aged well but the external signs of ageing always took him by surprise, more so as he sometimes recognized in himself the inchoate stirrings of a sixteen-year-old boy. It amazed Varun sometimes to think that he owned and managed a company that employed over two hundred people, that he had sustained a marriage for seventeen years and was father to a teenager. The mural of his life, when he was inclined to think of it that way, was full and vibrant; there were strokes he was thankful for and splashes of color he could look upon with some pride. Yet the picture as a whole seemed to lack something. It seemed to him that there was a part missing that he was only beginning to be aware of.