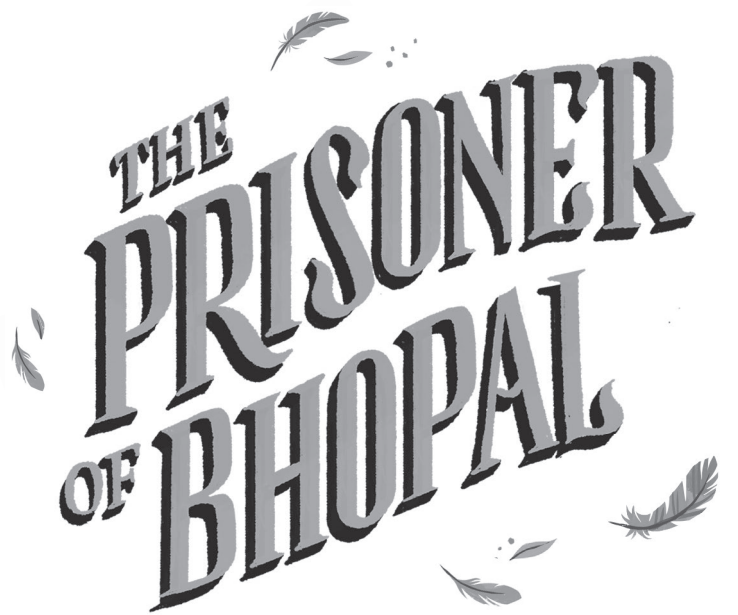

THE
PRISONER
OF BHOPAL

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For Jo



Beneath the starlight of an Indian sky, a boy is running. Others follow him as he twists and turns through the city's streets and alleyways, one clean breath ahead of the poisonous gas cloud which is pursuing them. Seen from above the cloud might seem unstoppable – which indeed it is – like a wave breaking over the seashore. But look closer and there is another story. For just as seawater breaks around every rock and pebble in its path, so every bush, every telegraph pole, every tumbledown shack and temple guides this deathly wind along a course which no one can see.

No one except the boy.

He alone knows where the cloud will falter, where it will speed up or roll sideways, or spiral skyward in the swirling updraft between opposing obstacles. He turns one last time and hurtles towards the advancing cloud. Moments later, as he knew it would, it parts, drawn aside like a pair of sickly yellow curtains to reveal the clear, safe air beyond. But the boy does not reach the other side. At the last moment he falls, and as the dust around him shudders under a thousand stampeding feet, the curtains begin to close.



1

1984: A Hurricane Arrives

On his tenth birthday a hurricane tore the roof off Amil Gujar's house and sucked him into the sky. At least, that is how it felt to him.

He had begun the day as he began every day, perched on top of the telegraph pole which stood outside the tiny two-roomed house which he shared with his mother and father, his two younger brothers and his grandparents. No one in his street owned a telephone, nor had ever used one. But that did not matter to Amil. With his long spidery limbs he would climb the wooden pole every morning before breakfast, and every afternoon after school, staring into the wind for so long that his thick black hair had become permanently pushed back from his face, like the branches of a windswept tree. This was Amil's favourite place. From the top he could see the ancient domed temples of Bhopal, rising like giant golden onions from the old part of the city, and trace the black telegraph cable as it drew long low scoops across the sky towards him. Then, as it skimmed over his head his eyes would follow

the line all the way to the pesticide plant, which lay half a mile in the opposite direction. He never tired of gazing at its towering silver storage tanks, and imagining himself working there one day, alongside his father and his uncle Ravi – his beloved Chachaji. Until then, with a turn of his head he could see India's past and its future, and he was precisely where he wanted to be, right in the middle.

On any normal morning he would have stayed aloft long enough to watch his uncle walk from his house nearby, which he shared with his wife, Maya, and their two young daughters, to collect his father for work. As he approached, his uncle would look up and wave to him. Then his father would emerge from the house wearing his blue overalls and white safety helmet, and together they would set off for the pesticide plant. But this morning his father had not gone to work. Today was a special day. The aroma of warm aloo paratha – freshly baked by his mother in honour of his birthday – drew him back down to earth, and he rushed indoors. His brothers and his grandparents were still soundly asleep in the back room, but his mother and father were waiting for him, stiff and unsmiling. Amil gave his mother a huge birthday grin. She crouched down and hugged him so tightly that he could barely breathe. Then she held him firmly by the shoulders and looked deep into his eyes, as though she wished to climb into his head and hug him from the inside.

'Amil, there is something very important which your father and I have to tell you . . .' But before she could continue, there was a knock at the door. Amil broke away and opened it.

The hurricane had arrived.



2
A Matter of Honour

The shape of a man filled the doorway, black and faceless within a halo of morning light.

'Today is the day, Mrs Gujar,' the shape said.

Amil's heart almost burst with joy. He looked back at his mother, expecting her face to reveal the delivery of a special gift, or some other birthday treat. But she did not look back at him. Her eyes were fixed on the stranger.

'You are too early!' he heard his father cry.

The man stepped into the room. 'Have you not told him yet? You knew this day would come.' Without warning he grabbed Amil's arm and pulled him towards the open doorway. 'I will explain the matter to the boy myself.' Amil screamed and reached for his mother, and she for him. But his father held her back. Amil expected her to break free and launch herself at the man like a lioness protecting her cub, to bite and claw at his flesh until he let him go. But his mother merely hugged her stomach, groaning, as his father held her. They did nothing to save him. They let the man

drag him outside without a fight, as if it were the right and proper thing to do.

Amil kicked and screamed and scratched and bit and tried every way he could to free himself. But the man merely tightened his grip, dragging him further and further down the street, away from his home and his family. None of his neighbours came to his aid. Instead mothers ushered their children indoors whilst their husbands looked on, some even nodding their approval. Everyone in Bhopal appeared to know what was happening to Amil. And why. Everyone, that is, except Amil himself. As they turned the corner the man lifted Amil off the ground and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of flour. He quickened his pace, as Amil continued to scream and lash out with his fists, pummelling the sweat-soaked shirt stretched across the stranger's back like the skin of a plump, over-ripe tomato. But the man appeared barely to notice, and marched on.

Soon, Amil no longer recognised where they were. Through the acid haze of his tears he could see little more than the man's cracked heels in his sandals, bicycle wheels spinning by, cattle hooves and cartwheels and, occasionally, the outstretched hand of a beggar. The man turned into a market, and the view changed. As Amil continued to pound on the back of his abductor, images flashed in front of him: rows of sandals laid out according to size

and colour, precarious pyramids of limes and lemons, pumpkins and potatoes, coconuts, cauliflowers and cabbages, the threadbare backs of half-starved dogs weaving their way through a forest of legs, as a thousand people jostled through the narrow alleyways, kicking up dust. Amil looked up at the passing faces, hoping that one might recognise him and return him to his family. But no one even glanced at him.

They turned a corner, leaving the shops and market stalls behind them. The streets were wider now, but with few stone buildings. Instead they were lined with hundreds of tumbledown shacks made from scraps of wood and rusty corrugated sheeting, crammed together like rotten teeth in a mouth that was too small for them. Rising out of this sea of deprivation, the crumbling facades of two stone buildings stood facing each other across the street, decaying remnants of more prosperous times. The man headed for the double doors belonging to the workshop on the left, above which stretched the words *Kumar & Sons Printers* in flaky, sun-bleached lettering. By the time they reached them, all Amil's tears had leaked into the dirt and his throat felt as though it were full of broken glass. He stopped screaming. There was a jangling of keys, then the discordant creak of one of the doors as it opened. His captor carried him inside, then locked the door behind them and dropped Amil to the ground.

'Sit there,' he commanded. He pointed to a white plastic chair, similar to those which lined the streets outside every tea house in Bhopal. As Amil slid into the chair, the man drew up another, and sat facing him in the semi-darkness. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, and ran it over the wide hairless channel which stretched from his forehead to the back of his neck, dabbing sweat. For a few moments he stared at Amil, drumming the arm of the chair with his stubby fingers. Finally, he leaned forward.

'Listen to me, boy,' he said, waving a finger in Amil's face. 'My name is Mr Kumar, and I am a respectable businessman. I am not kidnapping you, do you understand? This is a matter of family honour.'

Amil said nothing. Perhaps he was still asleep, dreaming. Or, perhaps this was what his mother meant when she told him not to let his imagination carry him away. He pinched his arm hard. Mr Kumar did not disappear.

'Do you know what honour is, boy?' Amil nodded, weakly, so Mr Kumar continued: 'It means doing what is right, so that you may hold your head up proudly among your fellows. There is also such a thing as family honour. Do you believe in the honour of the Gujar family?' Amil nodded again, this time more confidently. 'Sadly, your great-grandfather did not. He brought death and ruin to our family, and heaped shame on his own like a mountain of elephant dung. Look around you, boy. This was once a

thriving business, set in the heart of a prosperous neighbourhood. Now, the place is falling to pieces and we are marooned in a sea of riff-raff. And it is all the fault of your great-grandfather.'

'What . . . what did he do?' Amil croaked.

Mr Kumar's mouth tightened as though he had just bitten into a rotten almond. 'Your great-grandfather left three of my ancestors to die on the battlefield – that is what he did. He betrayed them. He was a coward; a traitor; a deserter; a disgrace to every Indian soldier that fought and died for the honour of this country. The pain that gutless, low-caste Gujar inflicted that day has seeped like a poison through generations of our family, bringing with it nothing but bad luck and hardship. That is why you are here.' He paused to wipe more beads of sweat from his forehead. 'A debt is owed, you see. As we businessmen say, the books must be balanced. For without balance in all things, the world would tilt on its axis and spin out of control.' Mr Kumar returned the handkerchief to his pocket.

'But how can I repay this debt?' asked Amil.

Mr Kumar frowned. 'You cannot properly repay it, unless you can bring back the dead. All you can do is repay a small fraction of it, like your father before you. The stench of shame that clings to your family will take a thousand years to wash away. And hard work is the only

soap. That is why, for the next eight years, you will sleep in here by night, and by day you will fold paper for our customers. And when you are not folding paper, you will fetch, you will carry, you will clean, you will stand on your head in a bucket of chicken guts, if I command it. And one day, when your first-born son is ten years old, he will do the same. Drop by drop, generation by generation, the Gujars will continue to atone for the tidal wave of grief that your great-grandfather unleashed on our family all those years ago. That is how the debt is to be repaid. Is that clear?'

Before Amil could answer there was a knock on the door. Mr Kumar heaved himself out of his chair and opened it. Amil shielded his eyes as a shaft of light struck him in the face, like the sudden glare of an interrogator's lamp. A boy, older and taller than Amil, and with curly hair stretching over his frayed collar, stepped inside, carrying a broom over his shoulder. He strutted confidently towards Amil, his chest puffed out, his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his armpits to accentuate his muscles. Amil drew his knees up to his chest and pressed himself into the back of his chair. The boy circled him, tapping the end of the broom handle against the stone floor with the slow, rhythmic menace of a ticking bomb.

'This is my son, Jalesh,' Mr Kumar explained proudly. 'You will do as he says.'

'He is shaking like a coward, Pappa,' Jalesh observed.

'He is a Gujar,' his father replied, 'what do you expect?' Mr Kumar looked at his watch. 'You should be on your way to school. Where is your school bag?'

His son ignored him. Instead, he crouched down in front of Amil. 'I hope you like rats,' he said, 'because they are all that is left in the workshop now, thanks to your family.'

'School, Jalesh!'

The boy turned angrily to his father. 'What is the point of school, if already my life is cursed by this boy and his family!' He sent the broom clattering to the floor in front of Amil. 'One end is for the rats, the other is for the cockroaches. When you are not fighting them off, you can sweep the floor with it. And you will keep out of my way if you know what is good for you.' As he strode out of the workshop he called back to his father: 'And I am not going to school today.'

Mr Kumar jabbed a finger at Amil.

'See what you have done!' He turned to leave. As he reached the door, Amil leaped up and tried to make his escape. But Mr Kumar blocked his way, batting him aside with his hand, before slamming the door shut behind him. The key turned in the lock. Amil jumped back to his feet and launched himself at the door, kicking it and pounding it with his fists.

'None of it is true! I do not believe you! Let me out. *Let me out!*'

Mr Kumar called to him through the rattling woodwork: 'Control yourself, boy. You will stay in there until you calm down.'

But Amil did not calm down. He had to get back to his mother and father. All morning he pounded on the door, calling for help. And when his hands were so bruised and swollen that he could no longer do that, he picked up the broom and began battering the door with the end of the handle. But no one came. So, he turned his attention inside, examining the workshop for any means of escape. The room was long and narrow. There were just two windows, one each side of the double doors, both crudely boarded over with planks. Gaps in the woodwork allowed Amil to view bright slivers of bobbing heads or shuffling feet in the street beyond. From those same gaps, blades of dust-filled light sliced through the gloom and cast themselves like luminous prison bars on the wall behind him. Amil tried to dislodge one of the boards but it was nailed tightly to the frame from the outside. The only other light in the workshop came from two small ventilation grilles, both beyond arm's reach, secured by screws set solid with rust. At one end of the room a set of wooden steps, little more than a ladder, led to a hatch in the ceiling.

The steps were rotten, and halfway up several were missing entirely, but compared to a telegraph pole they were an easy climb. Amil soon managed to scramble up to the hatch. That too was locked. From the top he began scouring the workshop for anything that might help him escape. But the room was all but bare, with just a few empty cardboard boxes, a long trestle table and a few more of the white plastic chairs. He scanned the floor for trapdoors, drain covers, anything that might lead to the outside. But there was nothing.

Instead, he noticed that even in the half-light the stone floor was splattered with black ink, as though an airborne army of suicidal cockroaches had dive-bombed into the stone. Framed by this inky carnage, several rectangular patches of stone remained unblemished; ghostly footprints of the machines that once stood there. Finally, in the corner just below him, stood an old white sink, supported on four rusting legs and covered in a million tiny cracks, like the veins on a dried-up leaf. Suddenly, Amil realised how thirsty he was. He jumped down and turned on the tap, but nothing but a hiss came from the spout. He tipped his head forward and tapped the pipework hard with his hand in an attempt to coax one or two droplets on to his tongue. But his mouth remained dry. As he straightened up, he heard a noise and turned. There, at the foot of the door, was a metal plate on which stood a plastic beaker of

water and a roti. He ran over to the door and called out: 'Hello. *Hello!*' But there was no answer. Around the edge of the beaker, he noticed several small floury fingerprints. He raised it to his nose and sniffed the water, before gulping it down in one go. Then, as he chewed the bread, he examined the small hatch through which the tray had been placed, quickly concluding that even *he* was not thin enough to squeeze through it. Clearly, he would have to find some other means of escape. But escape, he would. Because he knew that none of what Mr Kumar had said was true. And his father would tell him so.