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CHAPTER 1

2026, Mumbai, India

They'd heard the rumbling coming towards them down the echoing stairwell like a locomotive train. Then all of a sudden it was pitch black, the air thick with dust and smoke. Sal Vikram thought she was going to choke on the grit and particles of brick plaster she was sucking in through her nose, clogging her throat and the back of her mouth with a thick chalky paste.

It felt like an eternity before it was clear enough to see the emergency wall light in the stairwell once more. By its dim amber light she could see the lower flight of stairs was completely blocked by rubble and twisted metal spars. Above them, the stairwell they'd been clambering down only moments earlier was crushed by the collapsed floors above. She saw an extended arm emerging from the tangle of beams and crumbling breeze-blocks, an arm chalk-white, perfectly still, reaching down to her as if pleading to be held or shaken.

'We're trapped,' whispered her mother.

Sal looked to her, then to her father. He shook his head vigorously, dust cascading off his thin hair.

'No! We are not! We dig!' He looked at Sal. 'That's what we do, we dig. Right, Saleena?'

She nodded mutely.

He turned to the others trapped on the emergency stairwell along with them. 'Yes?' he said. 'We must dig. We can't wait

for rescue . . .' Her father could have said more, could have completed that sentence, could have said what they were all thinking – that if the skyscraper had collapsed down to this floor there was no reason why it wasn't soon to fold in on itself all the way down.

Sal looked around. She recognized faces despite them all being painted ghost-white with dust: Mr and Mrs Kumar from two apartments along; the Chaudhrys with their three young sons; Mr Joshipura, a business man like her father, but single . . . enjoyed a string of girlfriends. Tonight, presumably, he'd been on his own.

And . . . another man, standing at the back of the stairwell, beneath the wall light. She didn't recognize him.

'If we move things, we may cause more of it to collapse!' said Mrs Kumar.

Sal's mother placed a hand on her husband. 'She is right, Hari.'

Hari Vikram turned to look at them all. 'Some of you are old enough to remember, yes? Remember what happened to the Americans in New York? Their twin towers?'

Sal remembered the footage, something they'd been shown in history class. Both of those tall, magnificent buildings sliding down into the earth and disappearing among billowing dark grey clouds.

Heads nodded. Everyone old enough remembered, but none of them stepped forward. As if to press the issue, a metal spar above creaked and slid, releasing a small avalanche of dust and debris down on to them.

'If we just wait here . . . we die!' shouted her father.

'They will come!' replied Mr Joshipura. 'The firemen will soon –'

'No. I'm afraid they won't.' She turned towards the voice.

The old man she hadn't recognized had finally said something. 'I'm afraid they won't come for you,' he repeated, his voice softer this time. He sounded like a westerner, English or American. And, unlike everyone else, he *wasn't* coated in dust. 'They won't have time. This building has less than three minutes before the support struts on the floor beneath us give way. Combined with the weight of the collapsed floors above, it'll be enough for Palace Tower to go all the way down.'

He looked around at them, the wide eyes of the adults, the wider eyes of the children. 'I'm truly sorry, but none of you are going to survive.'

The heat in the stairwell was increasing. A floor below, the flames had taken a firm hold, their heat softening the steel girders of the skyscraper. Deep groans rippled and echoed around them.

Hari Vikram studied the stranger for a moment; the fact that he was the only one *not* coated in a thick layer of chalky dust wasn't wasted on him. 'Wait! You are clean. How did you get in here? Is there another way through?'

The man shook his head. 'No.'

'But . . . you were not with us *before* the floor collapsed! There must be some way –'

'I have only just arrived,' replied the man, 'and I must leave soon. We really don't have much time.'

Sal's mother stepped towards him. 'Leave? How? Can you . . . can you help us?'

'I can help only *one* of you.' His eyes rested on Sal. 'You . . . Saleena Vikram.'

Sal felt every pair of eyes in the stairwell settle on her.

'Take my hand,' said the man.

'Who are you?' asked her father.

'I'm your daughter's *only* way out. If she takes my hand . . .

she lives. If she doesn't, she will die along with the rest of you.'

One of the young boys began to cry. Sal knew him; she'd babysat the Chaudhry boys. He was nine and terrified, clutching his favourite soft toy – a one-eyed bear – tightly in both hands as if the bear was *his* ticket out.

Another deep moan from one of the skyscraper's structural support bars echoed through the small space on the stairwell, like the mournful call of a dying whale, or the stress vibration of a sinking ship. The stale air around them, already hot, was becoming almost too painful to inhale.

'We have just over two minutes,' said the man. 'The heat of the fire is causing the building's framework to deform. Palace Tower will collapse, directly in on itself at first, then sideways into the mall below. Five thousand people will be dead a hundred and twenty seconds from now. And tomorrow the news will be all about the terrorists who caused this.'

'Who . . . *who are you*?' asked her father again.

The man – he looked old, perhaps in his fifties or sixties – stepped forward through the crowd, his hand extended towards Saleena. 'We don't have time. You have to take my hand,' he said.

Her father blocked his path. 'Who are you? H-how did you get through to us?'

The old man turned to him. 'I'm sorry. There is no time. Just know that I arrived here . . . and I can leave just as easily.'

'How?!'

'*How* is unimportant . . . I simply can. And I can take just your daughter . . . *only* your daughter with me.' The old man looked down at a watch on his wrist. 'Now there really is little time left – a minute and a half.'

Sal watched her father's taut face, his mind working with businesslike efficiency. No time for *hows* and *whys*. The flicker

of fire was coming up from the blocked stairwell below them, sending dancing shadows through the dust-filled air.

Hari Vikram stepped aside. 'Take her, then! You must take her!'

Sal looked up at the old man, frightened at his strangeness, reluctant to offer her hand to him. Not that she believed in anything beyond this world, not Hindu gods, not angels or demons . . . but he seemed not of this world somehow. An apparition. A ghost.

Her father angrily snatched at her hand. '*Saleena!* You must go with him!'

She looked at her father, her mother. 'Why c-can't we all go?'

The old man shook his head. 'Only you, Saleena. I'm sorry.'

'Why?' She realized tears were streaming down her cheeks, tracing dark tracks on her chalky face.

'You're *special*,' said the old man, 'that is why.'

'Please, you must take my boys too!' called out Mrs Chaudhry.

The old man turned to her. 'I can't. I wish I could . . . but I can't.'

'*Pleeease!* They're so young. Younger than this girl! They have their whole lives –'

'I'm sorry, it's not my choice. I can only take Saleena.'

Sal felt her father's hands on her shoulders. He pushed her roughly forward towards the stranger. 'You take her! You take her now!'

'Dadda! *No!*'

'You take her now!'

'No! Not –'

They heard a deep rumble and felt the floor trembling beneath their feet.

'We have only seconds,' said the old man. 'Hurry!'

'SALEENA!' her father screamed. 'YOU GO!'

'Dadda!' she cried. She turned to her mum. '*Please! I can't!*'

The old man stretched forward and grasped hold of her hand. He pulled her towards him, but she found herself instinctively squirming and twisting her hand to escape his tight grip. '*No!*' she screamed.

The deep rumbling increased in volume, the floor shuddering, and cascades of dust and grit filled the air around them, tumbling down from above.

'This is it!' the old man said. 'Time has come! Saleena . . . I can save your life if you come with me!'

She looked at him. It seemed madness that he could, but, somehow, she believed him. 'Your parents want this too.' His eyes, so intense, so old.

'Yes!' yelled her father above the growing roar. 'Please! Take her NOW!'

Beside his small frame, her mother was screaming, stretching out her hands to hold her one last time. Her father grabbed her, held her back. 'No, my love! She must go!'

Mrs Chaudhry pushed her boys at the old man. 'Please! Take their hands too! Take their hands –'

The floor shook beneath their feet, lurching to one side.

Sal suddenly felt light-headed, as if she was free falling.

This is it, it's falling!

Then the floor suddenly fractured beneath their feet, revealing an ocean of churning, roiling flames, like gazing down into Hell itself. And the last thing she recalled was seeing that one-eyed bear tumbling down through a large split in the stairwell's floor into the fire below.