

## Prologue

It was five minutes before ten in the evening and Harinder Patel was ringing up Mr. Gordon's usual sale: a pack of Marlboro Lights and ten tickets for the lottery. How a man like Mr. Gordon could spend so much on the lottery was beyond Harinder. It was all a load of nonsense, in his opinion. A tax on the poor, on the dreamers of the world who wanted to be rich without working for it. But a sale was a sale and he wished Mr. Gordon luck with his numbers, as he always did. "This week is your week," he always said, though clearly it never was. The man's clothes were old and worn and the smell of cheap wine always drifted off him like sewer breath.

When the door shut behind Mr. Gordon, Harinder began to ready for closing. Another fourteen-hour day behind him, and not enough show for it. A few packs of cigarettes, a few cartons of milk, tickets for the blasted lottery. Not nearly enough. Maybe I should buy some tickets myself, he mused. But he knew he wouldn't. He might have been poor but he was no dreamer. Anything he got in this life he would have to earn.

He had no regrets about having moved to Boston. It was an agreeable city by any standard, other than the weather, and with so many excellent universities, he'd had high hopes that his son Sanjay would enter one of the professions. Sadly, he had not. He was studying marketing communications, if you could believe it—Harinder had no idea where that would lead; neither, he supposed, did Sanjay. But it was an education and maybe a diploma—not even a degree—would help Sanjay find a rewarding career. If nothing else, maybe he would come up with some brilliant marketing scheme to bring more customers into the store. Lord knows we could use the help, he thought. And soon.

He knew he had made a mistake in choosing the location: Somerville, of all places. And on Bow Street, which didn't draw nearly enough traffic, neither on foot nor by car, and so little parking on the street. And would construction on Union Square ever be complete? Always something being torn up and fixed: street, sidewalks, street again for underground pipes.

It had seemed like such a deal at the time: house with ground-floor business for sale. But the house was old and drafty and in constant need of repair, and the business. . . he was so far behind in his payments that if things didn't turn around soon, Harinder knew he would lose it all.

One minute to ten.

He was walking toward the front door to lock up when it banged open and two men came in, backed by a wintry blast of air. As soon as he saw them, he knew they were trouble. Hard-looking men, one of average size and one who was enormous, at least a head taller than his companion.

"Evening," said the smaller of the two. He had long dark-blond hair combed back from his forehead and was smiling, though not in a way that could be described as friendly. Harinder couldn't help thinking that this was how a wolf would smile at its next meal.

No hat or gloves in this weather, Harinder noticed. Who went out like that? Maybe, he thought, the lack of gloves was a good thing.

"Good evening," Harinder replied, his voice sounding high and thin to his own ears.

The man nodded at his larger friend, who turned the *Open* sign in the door to *Closed*, then turned the lock and leaned against it. Clearly the smaller man was in charge.

Harinder tried to keep the panic from rising in him. If they robbed him, so be it. There wasn't much cash in the register; how could there be? But he did fear violence. He knew from reading the *Herald* that the city was full of drug-crazed criminals who would kill you for the change in your pockets.

Thank God Sanjay is not here, he thought. Like all young men he could be something of a hot-head, more inclined to fight than back down from a threat.

“How’s it going, Harry?” the smaller man said. “Okay if I call you Harry? ’Cause I ain’t really sure how to pronounce your name.”

Harinder looked from one man to the other. He had never seen them before—how did they know his name? And why the talk? If they were here to rob him, why not get it over with? “Please. . .” he said.

“Please what? Am I making you nervous or something?”

“No, sir. Not at all.”

“You look nervous.” He turned to his friend at the door. “Don’t he look nervous to you?”

The big man said, “Yup.”

“I bet he thinks we’re holding him up. Is that what you think, Harry? You think this is a hold-up?”

“No,” Harinder said quickly. “Of course not. It’s just that I was about to close for the evening.”

“Ah. Closing time, huh? Long day serving all your customers. Good day today? Lots of people in and out?”

“I can’t complain,” Harinder said.

The big man by the door snorted. “Maybe you should,” he said. The man at the counter looked over at him and the big man said nothing more.

Harinder looked at the clock over the door. Two minutes past ten. What if his wife came downstairs to help him close up, as she sometimes did. Would they panic and harm her? “What can I get for you?” he asked.

“Now that,” the man said, “is the fifty-thousand dollar question.” He walked over to the counter, unzipped his coat and reached inside it.

Dear God, Harinder thought, here it comes. But instead of the pistol he was anticipating, the man took out an envelope and placed it on the counter next to the cash register.

Harinder looked at the envelope but didn’t move to touch it. It seemed thick, as if a letter had been folded over many times.

“Open it,” the man said.

The envelope wasn’t sealed. The flap at the back was just tucked in. Harinder opened it and saw a stack of hundred dollar bills.

“That’s five thousand right there,” the man said. “You want to count it or take my word?”

“I don’t understand,” Harinder said.

“Are you going to take my word or not?”

“Of course. But what does this have to do with me?”

“You could use fifty thou, am I right? In cash, tax-free. I know your situation, Harry. Fifty grand would pretty much bail you out.”

Fifty-thousand dollars? Was the man joking? It was the answer to his prayers. He’d be able to pay his mortgage arrears, the suppliers who were threatening to cut him off, Sanjay’s tuition costs for the next semester. It was as if he had won a lottery prize without even buying a ticket. But how did this man know so much about his finances?

Again he said, “I don’t understand.” Because he truly didn’t.

“Do we have a deal?” the man asked.

“But I don’t know what you want for this.”

The man said, "Does it matter?" He reached into the pocket of his jeans and took out something Harinder couldn't see. He took Harinder's wrist and pressed his thumb hard into the veins there and Harinder's hand opened involuntarily. The man put something cold and hard into his hand and forced it shut. "That's what you get if you turn me down."

Then he turned and walked to the front door. The big man standing there opened it for him and the two of them walked out, leaving the door open as the cold wind blew in again, bringing with it a few flakes of snow. "We'll be in touch," the leader said. "Tell you where you need to be and when."

Only when he had closed the door behind them did Harinder open his hand and stare at the brass bullet and the groove the man's hard thumbnail had left in his skin.

