

Prologue

Jeannie and Rani sat across from each other in the doctors' lounge, unaware that one was about to lose her life while the other would begin a new life. Rani was sipping an iced chai after performing surgery to close a hole in the roof of a toddler's mouth when the explosion catapulted her off her chair, launching her across the room. A big boom sounded, followed by an eerie, still silence.

Regaining consciousness, Rani found herself propped next to a sofa. She was missing a running shoe. Although her scrubs were soaked with cold, aromatic coffee, she was hot. She heard a sizzle and a snap. Her olfactory bulbs were in overdrive. She was not sensing the acrid, unforgettable scent of a woman's face etched with acid, a smell all too familiar because of her work as a plastic surgeon in a non-profit maternal and children's health clinic in Mumbai. No, it was something else, a different kind of charring. It was overwhelming, and she tried not to inhale.

The white T-shirt under her scrubs was turning crimson and the scent of fresh blood was overwhelming. Part of her wondered where the red was coming from. But Rani was not alert enough to pinpoint the source. Her head seemed spongy and thick. Her thoughts felt as if they were crystals in a pool of slow-churning molasses.

Rani's sense of smell was unusually acute. Jeannie used to joke that, in another incarnation, Rani could get a job as the canary in a mine. Neither surgeon was joking now.

There was a hum in the air, accompanied by terrifying thuds and plaster raining down from the damaged ceiling onto both Rani and Jeannie.

Rani sniffed the odor of singed electrical cords. Not the thick black cables that take ages to heat up, but thin, plastic-coated wires that gave off a one-two punch, a sweet scent as the plastic burned, and a sharply bitter smell when the wire began to melt.

Rani remembered when she was a little girl and tried to help her mother with the ironing pile. As hard as she tried, the hot iron was too heavy to lift. She knocked the iron over and it burnt a hole into the clean sheet. There was no supper for Rani that night. From the bedroom she shared with her brother, Rani could hear her mother cry. Many years later, she learned that the burnt sheet cost her mother a week's worth of wages and a stern tongue-lashing from the matron whose sheets she carted home to launder and iron.

Rani was overheating. She needed to cool down. She tried to get up. But she couldn't. She wasn't even able to sit upright because she was trapped. She moved forward on her stomach and freed herself, her arms quivering from the effort. When she attempted to stand up, she fell, striking her head against the wooden arm.

She had only one thought. She needed to find Jeannie. She staggered to the other side of the room, lurching forward and stumbling every second step. It hurt to open her eyes. Her ears were ringing from the blast. The linoleum floor was covered with gray ashes and vinyl remnants. They felt rough on her bare foot. Most of the ceiling had collapsed. The air was smoky. She tried not to cough. Drawing on the self-discipline that made her a successful surgeon, she redirected all of her energy and called out to her friend. The only answer she heard came from a set of sizzling wires.

She lay on the floor, as if doing a front crawl on land, but still couldn't find her friend. Her lungs felt as if they were about to burst. Panic began to well up in her throat. There was an image in her mind

of The Hanging Gardens of Mumbai in Malabar Hill and she clung to the picture. The shrubs surrounding the terraces were cut in the shapes of animals. From out of the shrubs, the animals took the form of young women wearing ornate fascinators and designer gowns. The young women headed towards the fountains. Old women wearing simple silk saris whispered loudly and gestured at the young women as if passing judgment on their attire.

Rani saw herself enrobed in a jewel-encrusted sari, wearing a head-dress bedazzled with emeralds and rubies. The thirty-pound headdress made it difficult for her to keep her head upright. She was standing under an arch entwined with yellow camellias, her favorite flower. Next to her was a man wearing a formal tuxedo despite the temperature reaching 135 degrees. She shuddered when he gripped her shoulder tightly as if to claim that part of her body.

The young women returned to the shrubs. Images of the old women gossiping faded from view.

She yelled at herself. *Wake up, Rani!* Drifting between consciousness and an oxygen-deprived numbness, she tried in vain to hold her scalpel. She called for the nurse assisting her, but didn't get a response. *Where is my scalpel? Why am I smelling the scent of burning flesh when I'm no longer in the OR? Something's wrong.* The smoke wanted to engulf her. It would be so easy to let the smoke have its way.

Since she kept falling over, she decided to stay on the floor, hands splayed in front. Her body felt as if it had been anesthetized. Her vision was fuzzy and her motor control was off. She placed one hand forward, slid her knee, moved her foot in the same direction. Her eyeballs had the sensation of having been impaled by tiny shards of glass. They shut almost as soon as she opened them. But not soon enough. The image of fire and smoke was seared in her brain. It would never leave her.

The furniture she bumped her head against was smoldering. She knew she had to get out of the room. But the exit was blocked by licks of flame. And she still hadn't found her best friend. She couldn't leave without her.

Jeannie was her idol. Feisty and opinionated. Rani admired Jeannie's self-confidence and her fearlessness. Rani was in awe of Jeannie's refusal to marry the man her parents chose for her when she was a teenager. As an adult, Jeannie rejected men who did not see her as their equal.

Jeannie had an adventurous spirit and was willing to take risks. She booked holidays all over the world and traveled on her own. She was so unlike Rani, who put duty to parents first. On her twelfth birthday, Rani's parents informed her that she would be marrying a stranger when she turned fourteen. She didn't put up a fight. She meekly acquiesced to her family's wishes, agreeing that her father had been very persuasive when he gave his daughter to the landlord in exchange for free living quarters for the family.

After the marriage, she did exactly what Rajeev, her husband, told her to do. Except when it came to Jeannie. Rajeev couldn't prevent Rani from spending time with Jeannie because the two women were both surgeons in the Little Flowers Clinic, where they reconstructed the mouths of children with cleft palates and tried to give the victims of acid attacks hope by rebuilding their faces.

Jeannie always told Rani that she was too nice, never able to say no. She said that Rani forgave even the unforgivable, that she let people take advantage. Rani listened to her, but halfheartedly. She was afraid of her husband. When Rajeev got angry, he threatened to hit her or turn her parents out onto the street. But she persuaded herself that he wasn't all bad because he'd kept his promise that she could continue her schooling after she was married. He'd even financed her studies to

become a surgeon and let her work, providing she came home as soon as her shift ended. Still, he'd told her she was useless as a wife because she hadn't given him an heir. He'd recently threatened to break every finger in her hands so that she would not be able to perform surgery. He reasoned that there'd be no point for her to leave the house if she couldn't work as a surgeon.

Rani called Jeannie, but her voice was whispery thin. Her throat felt as if she had swallowed the dust from a pad of used sandpaper. She wondered why her friend wasn't responding to her calls. While Rani bellowed her friend's name, part of her worried that the cries might be too faint.

Rani continued to scream for her friend, the high pitch of desperation fighting with the hoarseness of a throat scorched by smoke. She caught sight of Jeannie. Her friend was still, sitting upright at the other end of the sofa. She resembled a doll carefully positioned in place. One hand held a mug. The other rested in her lap. She looked untouched by the blast. Except for her neck. It was impossibly twisted.

Rani commanded Jeannie to wake up. She whispered that they had to get out, now, but Jeannie still didn't respond. Rani tried to turn her friend's neck so that it faced forward, but as soon as she touched it, the unexpected rigidity made her fingers recoil as if scorched by flames. There was nothing she could do to help her friend.

Although Rani wanted to remain with her, she knew what Jeannie would have said. She'd say, 'Rani, be strong.' Rani would respond that she wasn't the strong one.

The smoke was overwhelming, and Rani had to fight the urge to let the smoke take her. She wiped away the tears streaking wildly down her cheeks. She wanted to give up and join her friend. But when she hugged Jeannie's lifeless body, she knew that her friend would be aghast

if she surrendered to the fire. Rani decided she couldn't let Jeannie down. She would have to fight to survive.

Her mouth hurt. She reached in and pulled out a crown that was hanging loose. She threw it on the floor. When she took one last look at her friend, she spotted a glimmer of gold around her neck. The chain was badly tarnished.

She heard Jeannie's voice. "Rani, this is your shot. Take my name. Use my identity. Take the next step. You can be free." Rani gently removed the gold chain from around her friend's neck and replaced it with her own necklace. Tenderly, she stroked Jeannie's hair and promised that she would try to be strong. Rani vowed to take her friend's name and make her proud.

Rani's lungs were filling with smoke. It was time for her to leave while she still could. She said farewell to her best friend.

Rani pushed forward, fighting the smoke, crawling over the debris, grabbing the leg of a table to move closer to the sink. She hauled herself up and wet the tea towel. The weave acted as a filter.

She was exhausted, but kept going. She mourned as she scrabbled through the wreckage and left her best friend behind.

Day One

Chapter 1

Detectives Harmony Harris and Henry Smith were a study in contrast. Harmony was tall and rangy, while Henry was short and compact. Harmony's black hair was long and curly, pulled back severely to meet departmental requirements. By comparison, Henry's head was shaven, a response to the male-pattern-baldness gene he inherited from his mother.

The differences didn't end there. Harmony spoke so quickly that her words sometimes ran together, at times prompting puzzled looks from those who just met her. Henry drew out his words, pronouncing each syllable clearly and waiting for a nod or other sign of a response before finishing a sentence. He'd adopted this way of speaking for two reasons. He was from a rural area with a distinct accent that his teachers in the police academy claimed was difficult to understand. In addition, because his mother was hard of hearing and took longer than most to process what was being said, he'd learned from a young age to speak slowly.

As a little girl growing up outside of Kinston, Harmony had wanted to become not only a police officer, but the head of the police. She did not understand why her father suddenly became silent every time he was pulled over while driving the family car. And she was terrified when her brother called their father to say he'd been detained, taken to the county detention center, and strip-searched after being pulled over because the right taillight on the car wasn't working.

Tired of questioning why these things happened, Harmony vowed to end them once she became a senior officer. Since there were no openings in her hometown, she applied to join the nearby Greenville Police

Department the day after her twentieth birthday. By accepting every opportunity for overtime and by volunteering for everything – from soliciting shoppers for a Toys for Tots donation drive, to doling out turkey and sweet potato pie at a homeless shelter on Thanksgiving – Harmony became the ‘go-to’ person whom the chief could count on whenever he needed a volunteer to represent the department. At twenty-six, she became the youngest detective with the Criminal Investigations Bureau of the Major Crimes Unit. She was well on her way to achieving her goal.

Growing up near Scotland Neck, Henry spent his summers as an unpaid farmhand on his family’s tobacco farm. His early-morning job was to feed the chickens, clean out the chicken coop, and retrieve eggs from the hens’ nests. He was also responsible for separating bullied chicks from their tormentors. Seeing larger chicks plunge their beaks into the skin of smaller chicks made him see the chicken coop as a microcosm for the larger world. There would always be bullies and there would always be a need for someone stronger to rein them in.

When Henry’s parents sold their farm and moved into the city, he decided to become a police officer because it would provide a good-paying job and give him the means and justification to go after those who committed acts of aggression.

During his twenty-five years in the police department, Henry had seen the city of Greenville transition from a rural hub surrounded by farmland to a university town and large health center with forty thousand additional student residents from August to April. While big-city folk from Raleigh might consider Greenville to be a rural stop to drive through on the way to the miles of golden beaches and tony golf courses on the Outer Banks, Henry saw Greenville as a shiny new metropolis springing up in Eastern North Carolina, a beacon of hope for all who embraced the Southern way of life.

Harmony and Henry had been paired together by a police chief who hoped Henry's laconic approach would rein in Harmony's propensity for impulsiveness. Much to the chief's consternation, Harmony and Henry quickly discovered their complimentary styles amplified the traits the chief hoped to dim. Henry, the seasoned detective, picked up his pace slightly. Harmony, the new investigator, learned to ask more questions before acting. The chief was thankful that Harmony appeared to be learning restraint. In her years on patrol, she'd received commendations for bravery. She'd also been cited for threatening a pimp who had taken foster children into his family and forced the girls to sell their bodies on the street. When she transported the pimp to prison, her rough handling of the prisoner as he entered the police car was captured on video and formed the basis for a complaint of excessive force that was later dismissed, but not forgotten. Much to the chief's delight, Harmony and Henry's overriding commitment to identifying the bad actors and arresting them based on solid evidence that would withstand the scrutiny of the court meant that the evidence they collected resulted in the highest conviction rates in the department.

They'd been partners for two years when they were dispatched to investigate a murder at the detention center. The long, squat, tan, brick and white building was situated on New Hope Road, across a field and a block up from the County Public Health building and Agricultural Center on Government Road.

"I hate that place," fumed Harmony.

Henry gave his partner a puzzled look. "I love that place. It's where we put the bad guys. Why do you hate it?"

"You're White. You wouldn't understand."

Henry's response was slow and measured. He guffawed gently, keeping his eye on his partner. "Well, I certainly will never understand if

you don't tell me why you hate the place. You've got to give me something to work with."

"When-I-was-thirteen-my-brother."

"Hold up a minute," said Henry in his measured voice. "I know what you're saying is very important to you because you're talking as fast as the Amtrak train when it's an hour behind and the politicians in Washington are waiting to board it so they can go home. Slow down so that I can take in what you're saying."

"Henry, I grew up in a nice home. My father worked in a textile factory and my mother was a schoolteacher. They were good parents. They signed us up for music lessons and encouraged us to get our drivers' licenses when we were teenagers. I learned how to play the piano and I was in the glee club. My brother was gifted mathematically. Our parents had aspirations for us."

"Harmony, I didn't say, 'Start at the beginning.' I said, 'Slow down.' "

"When my brother was sixteen, he was pulled over on a county road. The cop asked my brother what he was doing out so late in the evening. He said he'd just dropped his girlfriend off at her home after they watched a movie at the cinema. The cop didn't even ask to see the registration papers for the car. He demanded that my brother exit the vehicle. As he was stepping out of the car, the cop pushed him to the ground and held his baton against his neck. The cop warned him that if he said anything, he would snap his scrawny neck in two. Then he cuffed my brother and called his partner to help take him into custody."

"Where was his partner when the cop demanded that your brother step out of his car?"

"My brother said the guy remained in the vehicle. He came out when his partner told him that the driver was resisting arrest."

"What a miscarriage of justice!"

Harmony's voice rose in pitch and she shuddered. "It gets worse. They took him to the county detention center and threw him into a cell. He was strip-searched and left naked and handcuffed to the wall. He wasn't allowed to make a phone call until the next morning. My parents nearly went out of their minds with worry."

"I hope the officers were disciplined."

"They were disciplined for leaving the keys to the car in the ignition. Fortunately, a Good Samaritan stopped the next morning when he saw the abandoned car. He peered inside. When he noticed that the keys were in the ignition, he immediately drove to the closest police station to turn them in and to report that something must have happened to the driver. The officers were never disciplined for how they treated my brother. He struggled for a long time, trying to understand why he was pulled over, strip-searched, and locked up like a dangerous drug smuggler. The incident made me realize that the only way to stop this kind of behavior was by becoming a police officer myself and reforming the police from the inside."

"Whew! I'm sorry this happened to your brother."

"You know, the detention center is located on New Hope Road. But in the Black community, it's known as 'No-Hope Road' because so many of us or our relatives have had bad experiences."

Henry chose a black Ford from the carpool and tossed the keys to Harmony even though it was his turn to drive. She appreciated him giving her something to focus on. Fifteen minutes later, they pulled up to the concrete structure. Several police cars were already on scene, their lights flashing red.

Henry and Harmony pulled out their badges and strode toward the entrance, where Amos Longfellow, the deputy sheriff, greeted them. "The Sheriff is away, so I'm in charge. There was an altercation that

started in the recreation center between one prisoner who is usually very quiet, Johnson Johnson, and another, Byron Brown, known as 'Big Boy.' Brown started taunting Johnson, calling his mother terrible names. It escalated, and Johnson plunged his plastic fork into Brown. My guard intervened. But just as Brown reached his cell, he collapsed, and we found a sharpened wooden shiv in his neck. We have several witnesses who confirmed what happened. It's clear Johnson murdered the prisoner who was tormenting him. He must have got tired of being called names. We've locked down the prison and isolated Johnson, the ringleader."

"Alleged ringleader," said Harmony, correcting the deputy sheriff.

"Of course, everyone is innocent until proven guilty."

"Damn straight they are," retorted Harmony.

"There's no call for swearing in my prison. You debase yourself when you use profanity," said the deputy sheriff.

Henry jumped into the conversation, hoping to defuse the tension between his partner and the deputy sheriff. "Thank you for the briefing. We'll take it from here."

"That's all right. We know what happened. It's an open and shut case. All we need is for you to sign off on the report I'm preparing." Longfellow stood and gestured for them to go forward.

They didn't move. "It sure doesn't look like you're interested in finding out the truth," said Harmony.

"Now, now, honey, I'm just trying to save you some paperwork so that you can go home and prepare supper for your husband."

She interrupted the deputy sheriff. "It's Detective Harris. And it's our responsibility to investigate the crime. We will uncover the truth. Send us your accounting of events when you've finished writing up your report. Right now, though, we need to question the suspect and