

CHAPTER 1

The crystal glass from which Samina Malik was drinking water slipped from her swaying hand. It crashed into tiny fragments on the speckled marble floor of the dining room. Some of the fragments spattered under the mahogany dining table.

“Sorry, I am just so worried about today,” Samina explained to her alarmed seven-year-old, Zaf. She was beautifully dressed in a green-and-white salwar kameez and smiled at him. She had not put on any make-up today, but he could see that with her oval face and slim physique, she still looked sparkling. ‘The woman who has both brains and beauty,’ was how Zaf had heard people describe her.

“Parveen, please come and help,” and their ‘Aya’ Parveen, hobbled in from the adjacent veranda of their newly finished staccato bungalow, with a pan in hand. She was of medium build, with a dark brown complexion and sharp, black, shiny eyes. As usual, she was dressed in a white salwar kameez and sprang, despite her handicap, to pick up the fragments.

Samina had told Zaf that Parveen came from his grandmother’s family village in the Punjab and had joined them four years ago, soon after Zaf’s younger sister Aliya’s birth. She was, Samina had said, the envy of her family for gaining a job in the City and for being able to send money back to her poor brothers and sisters.

“Thanks, Parveen, please lock up after us, turn off the air conditioning, and please let Rafiq know we will not be eating at home today. We’ll be eating at Nani’s”. She gathered her elegant handbag and tucked it beneath her arm.

“And please look after Aliya, give her a snack and try to make her sleep early.”

“Yes, Begum Sahib, and we will pray for your father,” mumbled their cook, Rafiq, who had been listening and now silently entered the room, dressed in his customary grey trouser suit. He was a tall and slim Pathan, with pursed lips and furrowed brow, and although an excellent cook, grunted more than he spoke.

It seemed to Zaf that everyone had been praying for his grandfather’s recovery from pioneering brain surgery in New York, on almost exactly the other side of the world. Zaf had seen him fight hard against his tremors, which had been slow at first and then wild and uncontrollable, and which had finally driven him to seek the operation.

Indeed, wherever they went, they would be asked about Dada’s health, and it made him think how much he missed him.

Dada was an intelligent, articulate man in his late fifties. Zaf had heard that he had been the Income Tax Commissioner for India before the partition from Pakistan, and later, as his mother told him, had been high up in the Pakistan Government. He was well known for his love for cars and had told Zaf that he had been the fourth man in British India to acquire one, a fact recorded in the British Library. He was good at bridge and tennis, and he doted on his four sons and two daughters.

“I wish you would all do as well as Samina,” Zaf constantly heard him say to his children.

“Zaf is always top of his class”, Samina constantly reminded her father and seemingly everyone else, making Zaf cringe and bask at the same time.

He and Dada were special friends, and, more than anyone else, he made Zaf feel important and wise. He thought about how much he enjoyed sitting in the back seat of Dada’s car while he

drove him calmly, despite early body tremors, around the well-tarmacked streets of Karachi, which were clean and wide.

They would pass through shanty towns full of dilapidated shacks where old clothes were hung out to dry on dusty makeshift lines. Bedraggled beggars knocked on Zaf's car window, imploring him to ask his grandfather to hand over some money to them.

He saw the sadness in their eyes but knew he was helpless to do anything for them. Little, barefoot children, some of them with missing arms or legs, would wander disconsolately back to their shacks.

Zaf would find it difficult to put their image out of his mind during the rest of the journey.

They would wind their way through the business districts, past grand Victorian buildings and modern ones, and eventually stop and walk towards a toy shop to buy Zaf a comic or a Dinky car.

He would hold Zaf's hand as they passed by the shopping areas, smelling of fresh, sweet meats and teas, buzzing with vitality, the bazaars full of crisp, brightly coloured cloths and aromatic spices. Zaf would glance at the cafes, ranging from makeshift huts selling refreshing sugar cane juice and Coca-Cola to smart brick-and-mortar cafes serving revitalising iced Nescafé.

Bookshops bulged with Urdu books side by side with English textbooks and best-sellers such as those by James Hadley Chase. Further up the high street, bars and discotheques coexisted happily with mosques and churches.

"Samina, don't worry," said his father quietly, striding briskly into the room. He always looked calm, and Zaf had heard people admire his crisp suits and gleaming shoes. Zaf knew he was a 'Commander' in the Navy.

"Oh, don't say that, Kamal. I've been praying all night."

"Yes, Faisal will call soon," Kamal replied, referring to Zaf's second-oldest uncle, Faisal, who had accompanied his father to America for the operation.