

DOWNFALL

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Chapter 1

Because the subways in Toronto didn't run early enough, Jember Roshan had no choice but to ride his bicycle to work. His wife, Babita, was not pleased. "In Canada it is dark in November, and you don't even have a light," she'd said when he was getting dressed to leave. She was right, of course, but what else could he do? They needed to buy diapers for the twins, and the rent on their one-bedroom apartment was due in a week. "I promise that I will be careful," he'd told her as he was rushing out the door, but she'd refused to kiss him goodbye. In seven years of marriage, she'd never done that before.

A week earlier, the weather had turned from breezy fall temperatures to freezing cold. Yesterday, there'd even been a heavy early snowfall that had blanketed the city and closed the airport. Last winter, when he'd felt this kind of chill for the first time, Roshan had rushed out to the Variety Village at the nearby plaza and bought a used ski jacket. It wasn't warm enough, and now he wore as many layers under-neath it as he could.

He didn't have gloves, and as he began his thirty-minute ride his hands stiffened on the icy bicycle handlebars. He pedalled hard. This would get his heart rate up and blood flowing to his fingers. Roshan had bought the bicycle at a yard sale for twenty dollars—the man wanted thirty—stripped it down, and rebuilt it from the ball bearings up. He liked to joke with his Somali friends that it was the only engineering work he'd done since coming to Canada.

It was quiet on the streets of the public housing complex where they lived, but once he got to the main road, the traffic picked up. This was the most treacherous part of his route, with noisy transport trucks whizzing past, leaving little space for a man on a bicycle, the acrid smell of their exhaust filling his nostrils. There were streetlights, but they were wide apart. He kept

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riding from light to dark and back into the light, the white steam of his breath appearing and disappearing in front of his face, like some kind of magic act at the circus.

Since his jacket was black, Babita had used her sewing machine to make him a special white T-shirt with reflecting tape sewn onto it. She insisted that he wear it on top of his jacket to make himself more visible, but in his haste this morning, and after their fight, he'd forgotten it. She would be angry with him about that when he got home.

He waved his left arm in the air as he passed through the dark patches of the road, not that it would do any good. The trucks were driving faster and coming closer, spitting up pebbles that pinged against his bicycle wheels.

At last he could see the final light stand before the turn onto the smaller, safer road, the next leg of his journey. A big transport whooshed by and barely missed him. He had become invisible. He had to get to the turn. He pedalled harder. He was heating up. Despite the cold, even his fingers were warming.

Finally he made the turn. Within seconds, the noise and the smell of the big road fell away. The only sounds were the meshing of his bike gears and the heaving of his breath. There were houses on one side of the road, and he could smell the sweet scent of smoke from a fireplace. He could relax. He felt the tension ease out of his body. He looked up and saw there was a hint of light in the dark sky. Allah had given him another day.

He always enjoyed this section of the ride. There was almost no traffic. The road curled along the edge of a riverbank, and now he could hear the rushing sound of the water coming up from the valley below.

In the late spring and early summer, when the sun was up early, he loved the scent of the trees in bloom, the singsong of the morning birds, and the warmth of the humid air. One

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weekend in July, he and Babita had hiked down to the river with the babies and made a lovely picnic on one of the big flat boulders that lined the shore. They'd had a fine afternoon until a group of homeless men and women showed up on the other side of the river, drinking liquor from open bottles, shouting and fighting amongst themselves.

Babita insisted they leave right away. As they climbed up the steep path carrying their two crying babies, she fell and scraped her leg. By the time they got home she was exhausted.

"Why in Canada, where there is so much money," Babita asked him as she unpacked their uneaten picnic meal, "do people live this way?"

"There are shelters, but many of these people won't go," he told her. "Shelters? Where are their families? At home we have poverty, but not like this. Shameful."

She was right. He'd had no answer for her. These were the type of troublemakers he had to keep out of the golf club, where he worked as a security guard. Two days ago, one of them had been found dead at the edge of the property. Roshan heard that the man had had his head bashed in by a liquor bottle. Roshan's boss, Mr. Waterbridge, said it was probably a drunken brawl between two homeless people.

Roshan was interviewed by a polite young detective named Kennicott. He seemed to be the only person who really cared.

A car came up behind Roshan and whizzed past, almost hitting him. He tried to steer his bike farther off the road, but there was no curb or sidewalk, only a few inches of gravel, and then the steep riverbank.

It grew quiet again. He kept pedalling, anxious to get off his bike. In a few minutes he'd be at the club.

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The silence was shattered by a loud rumbling behind him. He swivelled his head to look. A black SUV with large wheels and the driver's seat high up was bearing down on him. Speeding. It seemed to take up most of the road.

He waved his arm, but it was still too dark out. Why hadn't he worn Babita's white T-shirt? The car's front window was tinted, and he couldn't see the driver. As it got closer it passed under a street lamp, and Roshan caught a glimpse of a man driving. He wasn't looking at the road, but at a cell phone in his hand.

Roshan waved again. Frantically. He tried to hug the edge of the road and keep his bike straight without wobbling.

Bang.

He felt the impact as the vehicle smacked him from behind. The back wheel of his bike popped up and, swoosh, he was thrown off his seat toward the river, like a rock jettisoned from a catapult. In the scant light he spotted a massive tree straight ahead. He hadn't been able to afford a helmet, so he threw his hands over his face and twisted his body in mid-flight.

Now he was rolling downhill. The grade was so steep that it was im-possible to stop his freefall. In desperation he grabbed a low-hanging branch and tried to hold on to it, but the force of his descent tore him away.

The sound of the rushing water below grew louder as he plunged down. It was hopeless. In seconds he'd smash onto one of those rocks by the riverside, which would surely crush his head in.

With one final lunge he kicked out at a tree stump. Crack. His knee-cap smashed against it. Pain shot through him like a dagger. "Ahh!" he screamed, even though there was no one to hear him.

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The move slowed his fall. He grabbed for another branch. Please, Allah, please, he prayed as he wrapped his hands around it. For my children, please let me live. He pressed his fingers together to form a grip. Perhaps it was better after all that he wasn't wearing gloves. But his arms weren't strong enough. His knee was screaming in pain. He peered down at the unbroken row of boulders below him. He was slipping.

To one side he could make out something dark and soft-looking. He couldn't tell what it was, but it didn't matter. It was his only hope.

With one last effort, he swung himself toward it as his fingers peeled away from the branch.

"Babita!" he yelled as his body flew in the air, as helpless as a parachutist whose chute had refused to open. He closed his eyes, waiting for contact.

Thud. He landed.

Not on a rock, but on the dark object. It was spongy, like a heavy pillow. He lay still. Breathing. Listening to the river. Feeling the wind on his skin. A faint smell of alcohol hung in the air.

He could hear. He could feel the pain searing through his leg. He could see the brightening sky. He could smell.

Alive. He was alive.

Clutching his knee, he rolled off the thing he had landed on and swivelled around to look at it.

"Oh no," he whispered, a scramble of thoughts and fears rushing through his mind. Although his leg was weak, he willed himself to stand and cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Help!" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

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It was useless down here deep in the river valley, the sound of the rushing water drowning out all hope. His leg buckled underneath him. Still he had to try.

“Please, someone help!” he cried out as he crumbled to the ground. “There is a dead woman down here.”