

Chapter One

On a warm summer day in June 2001, Sita Rampal stood by the window of her fourteenth floor office on Madison Avenue and looked down at the world below. Yellow taxi cabs crawled along Madison Avenue, competing with crosstown buses and jaywalking pedestrians for space. Every now and again, the taxis picked up speed, surging forward to fill a gap in the traffic. Then a bigger car, bus, or truck would lumber alongside the tiny car and cut it off. Other times, people crossing the streets either alone, or in groups for safety, would cause the traffic to stop and start, and that pattern would repeat itself throughout the day.

From Sita's vantage point, people scurrying in and out of her building looked like lines of miniature robots, mechanically driven to work more, earn more, and spend more. Many of them carried shopping bags filled with things they had hurriedly bought or exchanged during lunch hour from the numerous designer clothing stores and shoe stores nearby. Others scurried in after buying lunch at the many small catering establishments that sold Chinese food, pizza, or some other ethnic delicacy. The frantic speed of life down on the avenue was broken by the amble of a slouching dog walker trying to juggle five pooches that wanted to walk in different directions.

Across from Madison Avenue was Madison Park—the only patch of green in a concrete landscape made up of tall buildings, shops and busy streets. The big trees in the park seemed to reach up to the skies and join together in a huge umbrella protecting the tranquility within the park. Here children played on the swings, people sat on

benches to snatch a brief respite from the activity around. Tourists walked around taking pictures, stopping by the statues to see what was written about H. W. Seward and Konklin. Older people came here to relax, to enjoy the well-kept garden, to feed the birds, and giggle at the splatter of bird poop on the imposing statues.

The quiet calm of Madison Park reminded her of India. Sita closed her eyes, imagining she was back-home in India. In place of the yellow cabs she saw three-wheel scooter rickshaws spluttering down the street making more noise than movement. No one was scurrying. Obese women swayed about in billowing saris as they shopped at the vegetable market; cows ambled along, and occasionally paused in the middle of the street to decide if that was a good place for a nap.

Every middle class home in India could boast of servants. Mona came every morning to dust and sweep. Squatting on the floor, she pushed the dust around with a broom, moving quickly on her dirt encrusted bare feet. Silver chains glistened against her ebony skin, calling attention to her cracked and calloused heels ripped apart by years of neglect and sheer hard work. After she had finished sweeping, she would mop the floor with a rag, dipping it into a pail of grimy water that got darker with each dip. After squeezing out the murky brew, she would waddle across the floor moving quickly in squatting position, working the mop this way and that way, until she felt the floor looked clean, even if was mostly wet and slippery with moistened dirt. It was also Mona's job to empty the trash cans every day. The trash can was really a blue plastic bucket where all the garbage from the kitchen was deposited. There were no garbage bags, and the plastic bucket was stained and soiled with stale residue that left a lingering stench even after it was emptied.

Sona was another maid. She had been a servant in the family for over thirty years, serving three generations. She had stayed on with the family, first working for Sita's grandma, her Aunt, and now her mother. She could make the choicest fish curries and the best fried chicken, but for herself she liked to eat only lentil and *roti*. She could have found herself another job but she had

grown attached to the family. Sona had accepted her lot in life, attributing it all to karma. She believed she was born to serve, and she bent and touched Sita's mom's feet every month when she got her wages. She would fold the crisp rupee notes into the corner of her sari and tuck it away safely. She had no bank account and lived hand-to-mouth on the wages paid in cash every month. She lived in a makeshift house with a tarpaulin roof held up by four poles. Inside, there was room for a rope bed and a few bundles of clothes. The lavatory was any nook or cranny that could be used to dispose of waste. The kitchen was just an oil stove in front of the tent on which Sona cooked nice hot homemade bread called *roti*, and lentils, sitting cross-legged outside her house and placing the fruits of her labor on a plantain leaf. Then she would sit with her family enjoying the *roti* and lentil salted with street dust, licking her lips as though she had just eaten the finest foods—looking thoroughly pleased with herself as though she knew something others did not—that money could never buy contentment.

The shrill ring of the phone shook Sita out of her walk down memory lane.

“Hullo, this is Sita Rampal in Editorial. How can I help you?” she asked in her clipped English accent that had been learned from the Irish nuns at the Convent School in India.

It was the typesetter. They had received a file that did not have the primary tagging necessary for disk conversion. *Oh dear, Sita thought, so much emphasis on creating a viable web product took away from the editorial pleasure of reading, enjoying, and critiquing a well written article. It was hard to analyze the nuances of a phrase and to edit, if the pressure was on to code accurately. A forgotten code or an extra punctuation mark boomeranged into a monstrous error making it difficult to format the file for the electronic version.*

“Send the article back to me,” she said with resignation. “I’ll look over the coding again.” *Thank heavens it was Friday and the weekend was finally here!* She stepped out of her Nine West shoes and tossed them into the bottom drawer of her desk.

Yes! She could say she had done it. She had a decent job as a senior editor. She liked her work and had a nice office with a view.

She had a good boss, and her work was appreciated. The money could be better, but these days' computer programmers and stock brokers made all the money. Still, she had come a long way. She remembered coming to America many years ago with big dreams, but no plans. Every day almost, she went to employment agencies. Their interest always peaked when she said she had an MA degree.

"No kidding! What university did you go to?"

"St Stephens in India," she would say proudly.

"Then can you type?" was always their next question.

That was history. America was a land of opportunity and she had found opportunity trapped in an elevator with the managing editor of a major publishing company. After the moment of sheer panic she felt when the elevator lights went off, and the elevator stopped, Sita realized she was not alone and there was no need to be so frightened. Someone with a big booming voice whom she had barely noticed before was in the same predicament as she. Glad not to be alone, and happy that the stranger with her knew how to get help, Sita had nothing to do but talk. She struck up a conversation with the owner of the big booming voice. The darkness gave her an anonymity, and she found herself telling this stranger all about herself, how she wanted to find a job as an editor, why she thought she would be good, but didn't know where to begin, and how everyone asked her if she could type, and how she found that terribly frustrating because she knew she could be a good editor. "I would be good, you know," she told the stranger with conviction in her voice. "I use to write for the local newspapers, I have a degree in Literature." She then proceeded to tell him that no one in the family wanted her to work, but she wanted to do something for herself—something that would give her a sense of contributing, of having an identity of her own. She wanted to be more than someone's daughter or niece. She went on and on, rambling along to this total stranger.

Almost twenty minutes later the lights came on, and she found herself looking into the piercing blue eyes set in a kind face. He introduced himself as Mr. Smith and handed her his card. "Give me a call," he said. She looked at the card. She had been

spilling her guts to the Managing Editor of a major publishing company!

“I think I have the right spot for you.”

“You’re asking me to come for an interview,” she said breathless, thinking how hard it had been to get her foot in the door.

“Well, I think we just did an interview, don’t you? The longest one I can remember,” he chuckled. “You’re hired if you can find two references.”

The following day, Sita went out and invested in a pinstriped business suit. It looked great in the store, and made the mannequin wearing it look so professional. But when Sita wore the skirt it was different. It was the first time she had worn a short skirt since her school days. She looked down critically at her legs. They were too thin. The beige of her panty hose was too light, and made her legs look several shades lighter than her face. She had forgotten to shave, and she saw a few stray strands poke their way through the hosiery like a hedgehog’s bristles. The low heeled pumps did nothing for her ankles, and her feet looked like two big boats. She looked so self-conscious, as though the whole world was staring at her legs. *Best to keep them covered* she thought—*like she always had. She would just wear the pant suit with a crisp white blouse, and shiny patent leather pumps, and go see Mr. Smith.*

She was there bright and early the following morning. She stood outside the Met Life building on Madison Avenue and stared upward at the skyscraper that seemed to disappear into the sky. She saw people entering through the revolving door and followed. She hurriedly got into the same section of the revolving door with another person. *Why did her companion seem irritable and push the door so hard?* She winced when the rotating piece behind her, clipped her heels.

She made it to Mr. Smith’s office in one piece. He was there. His kindly face and shrewd eyes had not been a figment of her imagination. He motioned for her to sit down. Mr. Smith told her that she would be starting out as junior editor and would have to work her way up. He saw her worried frown and said, “I’m sure you can handle it, Sita.”

“I can’t type fast enough...What if my computer skills are not up to par?”

“Are you willing to learn?”

“Oh yes! I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Then I don’t see a problem,” Mr. Smith said. “We’ll see you here next week.”

From the first day, Sita worked hard. She stayed late, came in early, and did her utmost to learn everything. She endeared herself to the support staff by trying to do her own filing and Xeroxing to help out. Of course the machine didn’t work right. She put in an article of twenty pages and ten came out; the others were in limbo in the interior spaces of the darn machine, crumpled somewhere in its depths. Everything worked out when she made friends. She learned how to extricate the jammed paper, went on to learn the details of Excel and the magic of Power Point computer applications. She worked hard, to say the least. She was determined to live up to the confidence placed in her by Mr. Smith.

Within a short time she was promoted. *She had done well* she thought, running her fingers over the cherry finish of her desk. She had moved up quickly, and now she had her own office with a window view. She looked at the framed photos of Mom, Dad, and Aunt Priya on her desk. *Why couldn’t they be happy for her? Wish they could appreciate how far she had come.* She wished with a pang in her heart that *just for once they would say they were proud of her.* But all they could think about was how to arrange her marriage and make her forget about a career.

The clock in her office said 5-o’clock. It was time to call it a day. She pulled off her headphones, and made her last stop at the Ladies Room. She looked at herself in the mirror. An oval face with a nutmeg complexion and kohl-lined brown eyes stared back at her. Her hair was swept back in an elegant chignon that showed off her long neck and high cheekbones to advantage, and her lips were stained a translucent rusty orange. She had finally started feeling comfortable in skirts, and today she wore a beige skirt topped by a cream blouse. A navy and cream scarf knotted

around her neck peeked from a navy Ann Taylor jacket, and completed the ensemble.

You are so pretty. We must find you a good man she could imagine Aunt Priya saying. *I wonder when your parents will begin looking for a good man for you.*

She fixed her lipstick and decided to remove her contacts. Her eyes were starting to tear a bit, and she wanted to give them a rest. All done, she went off to get her headphones and got lost in Madonna's, "My, My, My Miss American Pie..." There was a spring in her step as she got off the elevator. She paused for a moment to applaud an Elvis impersonator in the lobby who was dressed in enormous white flares and a flashy belt.

"Love me tender..." he crooned, gyrating to the beat of the song.

Not half bad, Sita thought. *She knew even grandma in India liked Elvis. But then grandma, whom they called nani, always had love and marriage on her mind, so any love song sounded good to her.*

Sita slapped her headphones back on, and hurried to the Union Square station to ride the "F" train that would take her to her home in Jackson Heights. On the way there, she noticed a tractor trailer, and about a dozen tents that had mushroomed overnight.

"Come to the Farmer's Market," was written in bright orange letters. "Try fresh homemade bread, 2 for \$1," the sign said.

Sita was tempted to buy some. The only bread they ever ate was 'roti'. Made from whole wheat flour, the dough was mashed and squished to beat the staleness out of it every single day. Mom's small fingers moved fast, and her dimpled wrists got covered with flour as she molded it into small round balls and flattened it into large pancakes, and cooked it on a griddle until it ballooned to the size of a small ball. *Maybe another day*, she thought. She moved on to the flower stall. *Rose bushes were what she wanted, but how was she going to carry them on the train sandwiched between stinky bodies during rush hour? Perhaps she could buy a couple of pots of dahlias. She couldn't leave them behind!* She also bought some petunias—the wild purple kind that tumbled out of containers

or flower beds in brilliant waves of purple. She imagined them falling over themselves to greet her as she came up the driveway.

The driveway was a narrow strip of fractured tarmac that separated her two-family brownstone in Queens, New York, from the apartment complex next door. It was a fun place for the neighborhood kids, James, Patrick and Edwin, the three musketeers from the apartment complex who had chosen it as their private ball field. It was a clean, safe place for them to ride their bikes, play with water balloons and water guns, and occasionally some baseball. The cracks and craters in the driveway told a story of fast-break pitches and hurtling skateboards. The three human missiles could come exploding out of the driveway onto the avenue at any time. Pedestrians on 32nd Avenue knew not to pass the gates of house number 11 without checking for the three boys who could come whizzing down the driveway at any given moment. Even the “Wa Wa” man, shuffling down the sidewalk beneath the weight of his ninety-four years, never said a word; he simply knotted his brow in pretend reproach that belied the twinkle in his eyes and said, “Wa, wa, wa, go slowly. Don’t knock me down. I’m your friend!”

Sita’s mom did not mind the rattle of skateboards and the swish of bikes. On the contrary, she was always leaning out of the kitchen window and saying, “Here’s a bag of chips. Want a drink too?”

“Oh yeah,” they would nod vigorously, rushing toward the window, their faces flushed with exercise and excitement.

“Thanks,” they said. “You’re nice.”

“Get those brats out of my driveway,” Papa would bellow.

“Hush, Rohit must have someone to play with too.”

“Why do you worry about that brat downstairs? Let his mother worry about him.”

“Now dear, hush,” Mom would repeat in the quiet firm voice that was more effective than all the arguing in the world. It never failed to give her what she wanted, and allowed laughter and fun to continue in the driveway.

The driveway led to the side entrance that had a flight of green linoleum-lined stairs. There was always a lingering smell of

Pine Sol because Mom liked to clean. She cleaned so much that she had scrubbed the green linoleum right off the stairs, and the broken edges curled upward at the corners. It looked like someone had tried to scrub the walls clean, also. It was probably Rohit, her four-year old cousin who lived downstairs. She could hear him tell Mom, "Let me help, oh please, please, please." He must have then taken a sponge and scrubbed an area about four feet above the ground vigorously, getting all red in the face, and sticking his tongue out the way he did when he was concentrating. The fruits of his labor were seen in a circular patch, four feet above the ground where the coating of egg-shell-white was washed away to reveal a hideous green that had been the original color of the stairwell.

Papa had no interest in fixing the stairs on the side entrance.

"Don't fix what's not broken," he bellowed, oblivious to the chipping paint and the worn linoleum. "Besides no one important comes up those stairs."

The front stairs were beautifully carpeted in pearl gray DuPont Stainmaster carpeting that blended perfectly with the marble-tiled hallway. The walls were egg-shell off-white, and tastefully decorated with wall plaques from India. There were two, that Sita liked the most. The one with the Taj Mahal inlaid in brown sandstone, and another, a marble plate inlaid with semi-precious stones in an intricate pattern, a replica of the inlay work inside the Taj Mahal.

As Papa put it, all important people came up these stairs. These included Rita Aunty who lived a block away, and came every Sunday dressed in a crisply starched sari, matching blouse and handbag, and big dark glasses that were in the height of fashion at the time. Up the stairs also came Uncle Vijay wearing Calvin Klein jeans and T-shirt. Ramu dada, another uncle, and Priya Aunty and her son Rohit also walked up these stairs. All these people had one worry in common. They all had to make sure that Sita was suitably married by arrangement.