# BE MY ENEMY

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To Enid, as ever.

Author's Note: There is a Palari dictionary
at the back of this book.

# 1

The car came out of nowhere. He thought it might have been black in the split second that he saw it. Black and big and expensive, maybe German, with darkened windows and rain drops like oil on its polished skin. All in the moment, the moment before the impact.

School had finished for Christmas. Games in the morning, then a half day. Rain with an edge of sleet mixed in had been blowing diagonally across the football pitch. Sometimes it had been so heavy that he had to squint to see the action at the other end of the pitch. The rain had driven the cold deep into him. He was all alone on the goal line, banging his gloves together and jumping up and down to try to keep the cold from reaching all the way in to his bones. The pitch was like a plowed field. The players were so muddy he could hardly tell Team Gold from Team Red. He hadn't had to make a save since the twenty-fifth minute and the ball hadn't been in his half of the pitch for ten minutes. Figures moved across each other, a whistle blew, arms went up, cheers, high fives. He squinted through the rain. Goal. Team Gold's goalkeeper picked the ball out of the back of the net and kicked it up the field, but her heart wasn't in it and the wind caught the ball and swerved it right across the pitch and over the side line. Mr. Armstrong blew his referee's whistle three times. Game over. Team Red and Team Gold, whose players looked like members of Team Mud, trudged off to the changing rooms. Three nil for Team Red over their only serious rivals in the Bourne Green Year Ten League was a crushing victory, but he was tired and wanted to be off for the holidays, and he wondered whose dumb idea it had been to hold a match on the last morning of the term, but most of all he was cold cold cold. The hot showers couldn't drive out

the cold. The festival lights for Christmas and Diwali and Hanukkah couldn't warm him. Mrs. Abrahams, the head teacher called everyone into the stifling heat of the assembly hall and wished them a Happy Holiday and See You All In The New Year, but he was too bone cold to appreciate the heat. He had forgotten what it was like to be warm.

After school, he trudged, head down against the stinging sleet, along the alley known as Dog's Delight, dodging the turds. Not all of the turds had been left behind by dogs. He continued across Abney Park Cemetery. The Victorian headstones and monuments were glossy with rain. The stone angels wore small, lacy collars of frozen sleet. Trees branches lashed wildly in the wind, and clouds, low and dark, raced across the sky.

One more Christmas present to get, and it was the hardest. It was a guy thing; none of his friends at Bourne Green had any idea what to get their Mum's either. Vouchers were popular and easy: a couple of clicks and you could print them out at home. Spa treatments, things to put in your bath, and general pampering goodies all rated with the guys. Mums loved those kinds of things. He considered those lazy gifts. This year, Laura needed something special, something chosen by him, for her, with thought and care. The last time he had been in the city to do sushi with Colette he'd passed a new yoga shop. The window was full of mats and exercise balls and healing tea and pale cotton stretchy stuff. He hadn't been thinking Christmas presents then. He hadn't been thinking at all. You don't think when someone who has been the pillar of your life dies. You react, slowly, painfully.

The bike had cost four thousand pounds. It was a forty-first birthday present that his father had given to himself. Tejendra had shown him all the engineering details: the lightweight carbon-fibre frame, the Campagnolo gear train, the aluminium and chrome headset. But it hadn't looked worth the money Tejendra had paid. Laura's eyes had widened at the cost, which would have been enough

to cover a family holiday in Turkey. Tejendra had assured her that it was at the bottom end of the carbon-frame range. They went up to eight thousand. Laura's eye widened even further when she saw Tejendra roll out on to the public roads in tights and hi-viz yellow. MAMIL: Middle-Aged Man In Lycra.

"You're going all the way into college on that?" she'd asked.

"And back again."

And he did, for five months, all through the spring and summer, and even Laura had to admit that her husband started to look trimmer and slept better and had more energy. Tejendra announced that he was even thinking of the hundred-mile Thames Valley Sportive; the physics department was entering a small team.

Then, three days before sportive Sunday, Tejendra came up on the inside of a Sainsbury truck at the traffic lights on Kingsland Road. The truck turned left and knocked Tejendra under the wheels. He had placed himself in the driver's blind spot. Tejendra, a reputable fine physicist and a brilliant man, had forgotten about something as simple as that, and it had killed him. "I couldn't see him," the truck driver said over and over and over. "I couldn't see him." The bike's carbon-fibre frame had shattered like bones. Tejendra had died instantly, in his helmet and yellow hi-viz and bike shorts. It took the ambulance half an hour to make it through the morning rush-hour traffic. Not even the Moon could save him. Up there they could send probes between stars and open gates to parallel universes, but they could not bring humans back from the dead. Maybe they could; maybe they just didn't care about humans enough.

"Up there you can step from one universe to another," Tejendra had said. "Makes you wonder if there's any physics left for us to do." From one universe to another. From world to world. From alive to dead. One step, one moment, was all that separated them. There was no warning, no reason, and absolutely no arguing with it. Dad to no Dad.

He'd been sent to Mrs. Packham, the school counselor. He

played head games with her. One session he would be angry, the next remote, the next sulky, the next plain insane. He knew she knew he was playing games. He didn't want to be an official victim, a Bereaved Pupil. The truth, the things he felt in his heart, the sense of disbelief, the slow understanding that death was forever, that what had happened to Tejendra was insane, an offense against the worldview his Dad had nurtured in him—that the universe was a rational, organized place that followed unbreakable laws—all these he told to Colette. She had been Dad's research colleague and a family friend almost as long as he could remember. An unofficial aunt. She listened, she said nothing, she offered no advice and no judgements. She bought him good sushi and Japanese tea so hot it scalded the taste buds off his tongue.

Dad had died three months ago. The seasons had turned, a new school year had begun, and now Christmas hung over the end of the year like a great shining chandelier, all glints and lights. At the top of the year they would start again. In the long night of the short days, they would move on.

So, he needed to buy presents, good ones. Through the cemetery gates he could see a huddle of people at the bus stop, pressed together out of the rain. He pulled out his phone. The number 73 bus was due at the stop in thirty-eight seconds. Rain smeared the screen. He waved his hand. A map appeared showing the bus as a little animated character ambling along Northwold Road to the terminus. He could see it, one of the new double-deckers looming over the little scuttling cars and the white vans, shouldering its way into the bus lane. The traffic was so quiet since the new fast-charge, high-capacity batteries had come down from the Moon and made electric vehicles cheap, quick, reliable, and must-have. Stoke Newington High Street purred where once it had growled. A double baby buggy crossed his path. He skidded, almost went down. The woman, short and stocky, with dark, lank hair, glared at him.

"Sorry. Okay? Sorry."

For once there was no one parked illegally in the bus lane, and the bus was swinging along. He had to get it. Timing was everything. Miss this one bus and he would miss the shops. The crossing was a hundred meters up the road, but there was a gap in the traffic. It was all about judging relative velocities. Like goalkeeping: ball, goal line, body. The traffic opened. He darted out between the parked Citroen MPV and the old gasoline-powered builder's van.

So he never saw the car come out of nowhere. And when he did see it—black car, black raindrops on its polished nose—it was far too late: it hit him harder than he had ever been hit in his life, hit him up into the air. The car kept moving, and he came down on the top of it, and this second impact now was the hardest he had ever been hit in his life, so hard it knocked everything but sight and consciousness out of him. The car continued forward, sending him tumbling into the street, and that was the hardest of all; it knocked every last sight and thought out of him. Black car, black rain. Black.

Black into white. Pure cold white. He smashed up through the white with a cry, like a diver coming up for air. He was in a white bed in a white room, beneath a white sheet, staring up at a white, glowing ceiling. He sat up, gasping. Since Dad had died, he had been waking up in the middle of the night not knowing where he was, what house, what room, what bed, even what body he was in. After a moment his mind would catch up with his senses. Safe. Warm. At home. This was not one of those moments. If he went back to sleep again, he would not wake up in his bed in Roding Road. This was real. He was here. He hugged himself. He was freezing. The cold was embedded in the hollows of his bones.

Opposite the bed was a window. It was the width of the room. It was black, scattered with lights. The view was like being in a skyscraper at night, looking across at another city skyscraper, a huge skyscraper that filled the entire width of the window. It seemed to curve toward him at the edges. A white object, fast, hard, and shiny,

dropped past the window, almost too quickly for his numb brain to process the movement. It looked like an insect. A plastic and metal insect, with windows in it. It was huge, the size of a Boeing at least.

Alarmed, he dived out of the bed. Instead of crashing to the floor, the sudden movement took him up and all the way across the room in a slow-motion dive to bang hard on the window. He dropped slowly, softly to the soft white floor tiles. His memory flashed back, from white to black, from soft floor to hard street, from strange white flying machine to the hard nose of a black car, the raindrops quivering.

"Where is this?" He stood up. The action carried him half a meter into the air. Again he settled slowly and softly. "Whoa." An experiment. Be scientific about this. He was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, white like everything else in this perfect room. He pulled off the tee, balled it up, held it out at arm's length, and let go. It dropped as slowly as a feather. "Low gravity. Okay." He went to the window and pressed his hands to the glass. His head reeled again. He was not in a skyscraper. This room was on the inside of an immense, dark cylinder. The windows curved away on either side of him. The cylinder must be a kilometer across, he estimated. He looked up. The windows rose up, ring upon ring. Far, far above was a black disk. He made a circle out of his thumb and forefinger and held it up against the disk. He was that far down. Now he looked down. The rings went down. He lost count after forty levels, and still they went down. He could see no end to them. "A bottomless pit," he whispered. "No. Can't be. It's logically impossible. This is engineering." And he knew where he was. A second white insect machine was rising out of the depths of the pit. "I'm on the . . ."

The cold rushed into him. The strength drained out of him. His knees buckled. He put out his hands to steady himself against the glass. And his arms and hands opened. Rectangular patches on the backs of his hands lifted up on plastic struts. Long hatches opened on his upper and lower forearms. The back of each first finger joint

flipped up. There were things inside. There were things *inside* . . . *moving*. Things not his flesh. Things not quite living but not quite machine. Things unfolding and extending and changing shape. He saw dark empty spaces inside him full of aliens, pincers and grippers and manipulators and scanners reaching out of his body.

He screamed.

"Peace." A little old woman stood in the middle of the floor. She closed her right hand in a fist and the panels and hatches in his skin closed. There was no sight of a seam or a scar. "I am sorry," the little old woman said. He hadn't seen her arrive. He suspected no one ever saw her arrive. She had a round face, her hair was pulled back and tied in a bun, and the creases at the corners of her eyes and her mouth made her look as if she were smiling. She wasn't smiling. Neither was she as old as she looked. Her skin was a pale grey with a pearl sheen; she seemed to shimmer. She wore a plain dress and very sensible shoes. Her hands were now folded one over the other, like a new kind of praying. She looked like his Bebe Singh, but this was the most famous little old woman in the world. This was the Manifestation of the Thryn Sentience, Avatar Gracious Interlocutor for the Felicitous Communion of Sentients. Known to the world as Madam Moon.

"Greetings, Everett M. Singh," she said. She spoke with a distinct sing-song accent, maddeningly familiar but unlike any accent of his world. "It is the eighth day of Christmas and you are on the dark side of the Moon."