

## Chapter 1

**I**N the last part of May the simmering heat becomes unbearable on the flat plains of the Punjab. The sun beats down on the growing corn day after day until the green stems wilt to one side and the spreading weeds are all but arrested. Clouds appear and feign rain before moving along to another state, another country. But by mid-June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind, water and thunder. Thrilled children rush out to play and get drenched. The countryside turns an immodest green; boundaries disappear as vegetation takes root and blooms. Wild creepers burst on to the ground and wrap themselves round trees in dalliance.

A light shower had just fallen when Veer Subadar came back to his house. He was tall and clean-shaven with broad shoulders. His cheekbones were high, his eyes dark, and his black hair was combed straight back. He was eager to see his family again, after spending eight long years in prison. Alongside him was his friend Mohan, who had been released on the same day. He was slightly smaller, with a short black beard cut close to his face. They were both not yet thirty.

Veer stared at the house in dismay: it was boarded up in part, the windows were broken, and the late-afternoon light could be easily seen coming through the roof into the front room. The surrounding fields of corn and cotton were dishevelled and overgrown. Balls of cotton lay along the edges of the fields, and some had blown across the dusty courtyard. The well in front of the house had weeds growing all round it, and a steel bucket lay on its side, rusty with clear holes in it. Veer stared for a long time and the sadness grew in his eyes: the scene before him was not what he had expected.