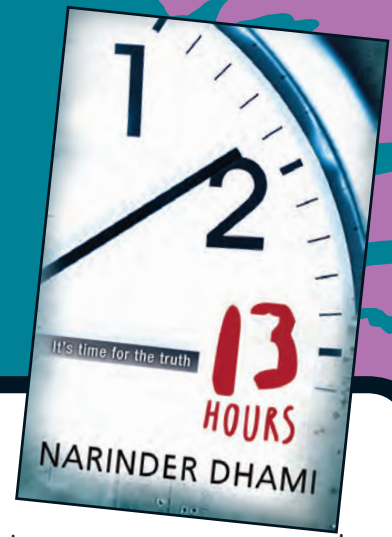


13 Hours

By Narinder Dhama. Extract from p74-79



'I'm going to ask you some questions,' she says evenly. I wonder if she's their leader as she's taking charge and the others aren't arguing. 'Don't shout for help or make any kind of loud noise. Not that anyone will hear you, anyway. Your neighbours are too far away.'

She's right.

'Who are you?' I ask jerkily, trying to control my panicked breathing. 'What do you want?'

The woman ignores me and looks at Mum. 'Do you live here?'

'Yes.' Mum's reply is no more than a faint whisper.

'How did you get into the house?' I ask.

But she isn't answering my questions. She's still looking at Mum. 'Who else lives here?'

I jump in. 'My dad and my three brothers are at work, but they'll be home any minute.' Somehow, the lie comes out smoothly, from nowhere, even though I'm still in a state of shock.

'Oh, great!' the loud woman bursts out explosively. She's shaking her head, a fiery ball of crackling, electric rage. 'That's just great. Wonderful. Our very first chance to prove ourselves and it's over before we've even started!'

'Let's get the hell out of here,' the giant by the front door growls nervously, and my heart leaps with relief. 'I knew this was a mistake. I just knew it was all going to blow up in our faces.'

'Unless, of course, she's lying...' the other man

says in his quiet, considered voice.

I try not to react, but can't help blinking nervously. The tall woman doesn't move. She drills me with her laser stare. 'Don't lie to me.'

'I'm not!'

'If six people really lived here, there's no way we would have been informed that this house was empty.'

The loud woman groans and begins pacing up and down in an agitated manner. I can see her fists clenched inside the black gloves they're all wearing.

'Just stop messing about and tell us who lives here,' she demands. I can almost smell the aggression she's giving off like poisonous fumes, and for a second I think she's going to hit me.

'Leave her alone!' Mum cries, grasping me even more tightly. I can't support even her tiny weight any longer, and my knees begin to buckle. The leader woman bends and picks up the sticks from the floor thrusting them into Mum's hands without comment. I move forward to stand in front of Mum, shielding her as best as I can.

'For God's sake, don't lose it,' the leader warns the other woman. Then she turns back to Mum and me. I find her calmness more threatening than the other woman's out-of-control rage. 'Let's try again. The truth this time. Who else lives here?'

This time she's talking directly to me, and I can see there's no point in lying. I already know from what they've said that someone named Ethan has been watching our house. For how long? Days? Weeks? Why? Nothing I've read has ever prepared me for being plunged into this living nightmare.

'It's just me and my mum,' I explain slowly. 'She was injured in a car accident years ago and she isn't very well. She can't walk without sticks, and she never leaves the house. Look, just take anything you want and leave us alone, please.' My voice trembles and I bite my lip. I'm appealing to their better nature. But I don't know if they have one.

'Christ!' the man by the door exclaims. 'This is getting worse by the second. I think we should just get out of here right now'

The loud woman whirls to confront him. 'And what about all the work we've done?' she spits. 'What about all the planning? We can't give it up, just like that!'

I don't have any idea what she's talking about. But suddenly, through all the terror and uncertainty, my curiosity begins to stir, as if I've just woken up from a deep sleep.

'I know all that' The man swallows the end of the sentence abruptly, stopping himself from giving away the loud woman's name, I think. 'But we didn't expect this...'

I guess he means Mum and me.

'We need to think things over and decide how we're going to move forward,' the leader says. 'Agreed?'

'Agreed,' the quiet man replies. The other two say nothing but she takes their silence as agreement even though the man by the front door is muttering darkly under his breath. I can't catch what he's saying, but I don't think he's happy. He's not the only one.

'What are you going to do to us?' Mum asks. I can hear the desperation in her voice. I know she's realized, as I did earlier, that these are no ordinary intruders; they're not burglars.

The leader does not answer. She gazes around the hall and down the corridors as if looking for inspiration. 'What's that room there?' she asks, pointing at the dim light spilling from the open door of Mum's bedroom.

'It's where my mum sleeps,' I say. 'She can't get upstairs any more.'

'Take your mum in there and sit down,' she tells me, taking the keys from the tall man.

I have no choice. I have to obey, although a tiny spark of anger kicks in at being bossed around by a stranger in my own home. Together, Mum and I begin the slow journey back along the corridor, not knowing what we're walking into. The four intruders surround us like bodyguards. Or a death squad.