

For Senator Gulzar Ahmed Khan (Bade Abu Jaan)

*“Be who you are and say what you feel,
because those who mind don’t matter,
and those who matter don’t mind.”*

Bernard M. Baruch

Prologue

7:46 a.m. – Lahore

The early morning scent of damp earth and mown grass greeted him as the doors of the overcrowded bus were thrown open. A child, having lost control of his bowels, had caused the driver to make an unscheduled stop. The old bus groaned, its pistons emitting loud whistles as it ground against the curb, the people scrambling out in droves, some muttering, others hurling curses at the child who sat cowering in the soiled seat, his red knickers stained brown. His mother sat beside him, fanning her face with her *malmal dupatta*, a disapproving frown etched between unplucked eyebrows.

The bus conductor simply slid the dusty windows open in an attempt to lure a breeze, ignoring the mess on the seat.

While something like that would usually drive him crazy, it didn't affect Ismail today. He was grateful to step out sooner than planned; it gave him more time to revel in the glory he was bringing his family – his entire village.

Wrapping his shawl around him, he whistled a familiar tune from an Indian film, the one where the actress struck up all manner of provocative poses, causing the movie halls to erupt with hooting.

The tune did nothing for him, but appearing inconspicuous was paramount. Sliding his hand along the rusted bars lining the sidewalk, he strolled toward the great den of activity – the Chowk. In the absence of the thick layer of smog that usually pervaded the city, the Chowk looked almost beautiful in the embrace of sunny

blue skies. The fruit vendors shouted out tempting prices from their carts as they scratched their armpits, cars attempted to make their way through the gathering mess. The traffic wardens were absent, the dysfunctional traffic signal watching over everything like a silent ghost. A tangy smell emanated from the public park beyond, where a group of gardeners were busy with antiquated lawn mowers, bits of grass flying in the air like dust. The blueness of the sky reflected off puddles of water on the pavement, the crisp March breeze stirred his hair. It was exactly the kind of day those foreigner *Goras* called 'beautiful'.

Perfect, he thought, smiling to himself.

Luck proved to be on his side all the way through. The Chowk was packed, and in the midst of the hundreds of people commuting to work or selling their wares, he was as good as invisible. Walking alongside a donkey cart loaded with cheap furniture, he peeped into the residential colony guarded by barricades. The quaintness of the area was a glaring antithesis to the loud, swarming mess of the Chowk. His nose drew him toward the aroma of manure where a pair of black buffaloes idled in an open field littered with garbage.

For a moment, he froze.

Disgusting, but the stench bore the unmistakable stamp of home, of mud walls and open drains, and it was with reluctance that he pulled himself away, shaking his head at the familiar sight of steaming dung, round cakes of which had been plastered on the walls lining the field.

Focusing on the task at hand, he edged closer to the enclosed colony, his eyes searching for the policeman responsible for the morning shift. The policeman in question seemed to be in significant distress, the way his head swivelled in every direction, and his fists clenched and unclenched. Ismail sent up a silent prayer of thanks as he caught him abandoning his post at the most opportune moment, presumably huddling off for a leak

with one hand firmly clutched around his genitals. Who would have imagined that a full bladder would be a catalyst to such destruction?

Don't presume anything. Don't allow overconfidence to swamp you! The words rang clear in his head. *Everything is God's will.* Wasn't this what he had been learning for years now? *Let this be a lesson for the murderers, those traitors who have ravaged the country, uprooted families, destroyed legacies. Let this be a solid punch in the CIA's gut.*

He navigated his way past the concrete barricades like a silent shadow, his muscles taut in case he had to break into a run. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, his empty stomach groaned, but he maintained a clear head, and strolled past the checkpoint without inviting any suspicious eyes in his direction.

He arrived at the junction between the tranquil streets without incident, but even though he had memorised the route, for a moment everything looked the same to him: idyllic streets with concrete and brick houses rising in both directions. This part of the city held none of the rustic allure of his village. Its overreliance on concrete depressed him, made him think of prisons and subservience.

He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes, allowing his mind to guide him in the proper direction. As his breathing calmed, the map of the area lit up like a bulb in the darkness, and he recalled the directions that had been given: *First right, and the third left from there.*

Another ten minutes of suspense, but it seemed that he had at last arrived at the desired place. The dented black gate stood out like an anomaly, quite unlike its shiny counterparts that lined the entire street. It did, however, serve its purpose of shielding the short one-storey building from view. To the ordinary person, it would look like an abandoned place with the white paint peeling off the walls, revealing ugly graffiti.

A clever ruse.

He stepped closer, visualising how the end would be, and a plethora of confusing notions assaulted his mind. How would it feel? Would it hurt? Would he feel the head splicing off his body, and rolling across the floor? Would he even feel a hint of the savage triumph he had been promised?

The voice of their Leader rang in his head again like a drumbeat. 'It will be painless for you, *jihadi*, but the pain of those *kaafirs*, those non-believers, will be unimaginable. Remember, they are not humans; they do not feel. They do not love. You shall be rewarded for this noble deed, my boy, you will go to heaven. Kill those kaafirs!'

Kill those kaafirs. He recited it like a mantra in an attempt to ward off other, more disturbing thoughts. The cocoon of indifference he had created around himself threatened to burst, and reveal something ugly, something forbidden... something that smelled like fear. He felt an urgent need to tear away the shawl, and fling the jacket into the rubbish, leaving the button intact, and the world unchanged. Was this what going to heaven was like, through so much pain, through such cruelty? Did he have to stoop as low as those Goras to exact revenge?

Coward!

These were the workings of *Shaitan*, the Satan. Their Leader had warned him about this. Shaitan will tempt him; try to deter him from the virtuous path to that of sin and cowardice.

He must fight this.

He trudged toward the ancient gate, the breeze drying beads of sweat that had erupted across his forehead. His hand slipped inside the shawl.

Kill those kaafirs.

An ice-cream van approached. The gate to a house on his left opened. A woman emerged, carrying a small child in her arms as the ice-cream van blared the familiar tune that heralded happiness, lighting up the faces of children everywhere.

He paused, waiting for the child to receive his ice cream. He thought the child deserved that much. Ismail watched him as he slurped it down, resting his head on the woman's shoulder. *Possibly her son*, he thought.

Not so long ago, he had done the same... rested his head on his mother's shoulder as his father came back from a hard day's work, smelling of sunshine and well-earned sweat. Not so long ago, he had been innocent too, oblivious to everything happening around him, running alongside the ditches with his siblings, relishing the potent possibility of falling into the black muck. So filthy, and yet so exciting.

Until they had bombed his village.

Killed his entire family while he brought back fried fish for dinner.

Everything lost in a second.

He remembered the polythene bag speckled with condensation falling to the floor with a wet smack, the crusted fish sliding out on the floor. Slick with congealing blood, the floor wore the red colour of shame, the shame of being branded terrorists in their own land. Steam issued from his family's still-warm bodies, dissolving in the cold air, the head of his infant brother lay in the ditch; his eyes wide open in fear or question, he couldn't tell.

That was it; he couldn't take it anymore.

He flicked open the plastic casing that protected the button, and closed his eyes as his thumb punched it hard.