

## THE FIX

As part of the Karachi Police's Counter Terrorism department, Omar Shahid Hamid has survived being ambushed by gangsters, implicated by colleagues in a false case, and, as CID chief, barely escaped the bombing of his office by the Pakistani Taliban. In 2011, following the attack on his offices by the Pakistani Taliban, he took a five-year sabbatical to write books and worked as a political risk consultant. In 2016, Omar returned to active duty as a Counter Terrorism Officer. He has been widely quoted and regularly featured in several publications including *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Times*, *Le Monde*, *Reuters*, CNN and BBC. His first novel, *The Prisoner* (2013), was longlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2015 and is now being adapted for a feature film. His second is *The Spinner's Tale* (2015) won the 2016 Karachi Literature Festival Prize. He received the award again for his third novel *The Party Worker* (2017) at the Karachi Literature Festival in 2018 which is now being adapted for a TV series.

Also by Omar Shahid Hamid

*The Prisoner*

*The Spinner's Tale*

*The Party Worker*

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OMAR SHAHID HAMID



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*To Samar, my true north, my Arya and Sansa rolled into one, my love,  
and to all of those fans of an insane game around the world,  
who die a little every time the name of this great sport is tarnished  
by those who peddle filth through their fixing*



# CHAPTER 1

Their odyssey will come to an end, one way or the other, here in Kolkata, the city of endless night. It seems somehow fitting, thinks Sanam Khan, as she takes off her helmet to wipe the sweat off her brow, that the journey that she and her teammates embarked upon six months ago, which has taken them halfway round the world, from the well-manicured parks of Australia and New Zealand to the heat and dust of India, will finish here on the banks of Hooghly river, in a city that was seemingly built for epics, in a stadium with the most romantic name in the world. Eden Gardens.

Sanam is once again stunned by the roar of the crowd. The noise of a hundred thousand people, all willing you to fail, is like a physical force, a malevolent spirit that looms over the two young women standing at the centre of the wicket. This is what Babar sir meant, when he said the game changes completely when there is a full house in an arena like Eden Gardens. Having played all of her cricket in empty stadiums and college grounds with unoccupied bleachers, she never understood the significance of a crowd. After all, who in Pakistan ever came to watch women's cricket?

Sanam had always thought that the game was nothing more than a contest of skill. But here, in this bubbling, seething

cauldron, the only thing that matters is temperament. Who can absorb the pressure of playing in front of a hundred thousand people? Who can overcome the fatigue, the heat, exhaustion and the nagging anxiety – that feeling in the pit of your stomach that makes you want to puke on the pitch? If Sanam Khan wants to be a champion, she will have to do all of these things.

She taps the crease with her bat and looks around the field. She dares not sneak a look at the scoreboard, because she knows that the knowledge of how far behind they are will paralyse her. And she cannot afford that right now. She is all that stands between a marauding Indian team and victory. And the one thing she has been taught, since she first sat in her father's lap as a 9-year-old to watch a cricket match on TV, is that nothing else matters except defeating the old enemy.

The bowler returns to the top of her mark. It is Vasques, the dark-skinned Keralite. She's perfect, like an automaton: never off her line, ball after ball. It's an effort even to try and work the ball around for a single. As she taps the ball and runs, Sanam feels the pain in her side flare up. It's an injury she's been carrying since Australia. The doctors have told her it's because her petite body frame cannot support the stress of fast bowling. They have advised her to be more careful when bowling, to minimize the pain. The doctors talk as if fast bowling is a disease, like diabetes, something to be managed by being a little more careful in your diet and taking your pills every day. Fast bowling *is* a disease, but of the mind. And Sanam Khan has been afflicted by it from the moment she realized that she could hurl a cricket ball at a pair of stumps 22 yards away, faster than any other girl, or boy, she knew. It's her obsession, her *junoon*, a state of being she can never escape from, no matter how much pain it gives her.

She reaches the non-striker's end and doubles over, clutching at her side and breathing hard. But just as she does,



her batting partner, Fatima Shah jogs back to her and shakes her head vigorously.

‘Get up Sanam. We are playing India. Never let them see you hurting. Get up!’

Sanam looks at her vice-captain. Fatima is shorter than her, slightly stocky, and in her protective chest gear and pads, topped with a black bandana under her green Pakistan helmet, she looks, bat in hand, like a Roman gladiator. It would be difficult to call the two of them friends because they are very different sorts, but they have certainly been through a lot together. Fatima has served faithfully as Sanam’s consigliere these past two years. There have been good times and bad; more bad than good, if truth be told. There have been the insults and taunts and the sheer effort of getting anybody to take the Pakistan ladies’ cricket team seriously. Dozens of shouting matches with selectors and board officials who didn’t see the point of investing any time or money in a ‘girls’ team’. And when they finally got somebody willing to play them, there was the terrorist attack on the New Zealand men’s team touring Pakistan, which turned the girls, overnight, into sporting refugees, without a home to play in.

For two years, Sanam and Fatima have borne the brunt of everything thrown their way, because they felt that, as the senior members of the team, it was their duty to shield the younger girls from all the bullshit, allowing them to concentrate on their cricket. And slowly, their determination has succeeded. Sometimes in sport, things fall into place and just click for you. And finally, this year, this team of two veterans and a handful of talented but clueless novices, has caught fire.

The signs were evident in their first match in Australia, six months ago. On a green, bouncy track in Melbourne, the sort of wicket that would have normally seen the team bowled out for about 60, the girls went out and refused to be intimidated. Every bouncer, every yorker, every appeal, was met with an

aggressive response, an offensive shot, a warning that they would not be cowed by the Australian girls. It had started with Fatima bludgeoning a hundred, but everyone else joined in. The teenager Ayesha Mufti stroked an innings of 75 so effortless, it looked as if she had never played on anything but Melbourne greentops. And then, of course, Sanam herself had blasted the Australians out with her fiery fast bowling. That Melbourne game started a run of 15 victories, ensuring that the girls became the first ever Pakistani team, male or female, to return undefeated from a tour of Australia and New Zealand. That tour was followed by a win in a 'home' series, if it could be called that, played in neutral Sharjah, against the English. And finally, the girl's momentum has driven them here to India, to the Asia Cup final.

It has been a never-ending battle. Even on this tour, after all their recent successes in Australia, the affronts haven't ceased. Sanam remembers their arrival in India, the humiliation of being made to stand apart from the other passengers at the airport, having the sniffer dogs go through their kits while everybody else whizzed past them. And then being hustled out by Black Cat commandos bristling with guns, as if they were some sort of high value terrorists being taken into custody. Being made to sleep in the dressing rooms of Delhi's Feroze Shah Kotla stadium, instead of being put up in a five-star hotel like all the other teams, because the tournament organisers cited 'security threats' and felt it would be safer for the Pakistani girls to sleep and play at the same venue.

As Sanam gets to her feet, the bowler returns to her mark, and begins her rhythmic run up to the wicket. Each body motion is a finely calculated cog in a well-oiled machine. There is an absolute economy of movement in Vasques' bowling action. The ball leaves her hand in exactly the same way that it has so many times. It's like something produced on an assembly line,

manufactured to be exactly the same as the one before it. It even pitches not more than six inches from where the previous ball landed; a near-perfect replica. Vasques would be the result if bowlers were produced en masse in Chinese factories.

But cricket is a game of fractions, and Fatima Shah takes advantage of a fractional change in the line, repositioning herself and cutting the ball for four. Betraying no emotion, Vasques turns and walks back to her mark, working on multiple advanced mathematical equations, calculating trajectory and the impact of air pressure on the ball like a supercomputer. Once again, she comes, the action unchanged, and once again she pitches more or less in the same spot. But Fatima Shah is now like a virus, eating through the supercomputer's code. Again, she hops around in her crease, and cuts the ball, slightly finer, for four more. Suddenly, the metronomic Vasques is shaken, almost physically taken aback by Fatima's aggression. Unable to compute what she is doing wrong, she tries to overcompensate with the next ball, changing her line for the first time in her entire spell, aiming for Fatima's toes. Which is exactly what Fatima wants her to do, as she flicks the ball nonchalantly for a third boundary. The hard drive has crashed, the lifeless eyes seem to flutter like a malfunctioning screen, and her captain has to drag Vasques away as she stands staring after the ball like a zombie.

Sanam takes strike for the next over. The Indian captain is the supremely talented Diya Parulekar, and after the damage incurred by the supercomputer, she decides to bowl herself. Parulekar is an icon of the women's game, perhaps the finest batswoman ever. She is also cool as ice, able to absorb pressure with tremendous grace. Parulekar, or DP as she is called, knows the game might be in the balance. India are still ahead, but if the next bowler cracks like Vasques, Fatima and Sanam will bring Pakistan storming through the gates. Sanam's sides feel

like they're on fire, but she sets aside all other thoughts, and focuses solely on DP running in with the ball. The first ball is short and sharp, aimed for Sanam's throat. But she backs away and, with both feet in the air, carves it over point for six. The silence of the crowd is so complete that she can actually hear the ball strike the advertising hoarding 100 metres away.

All of a sudden, 20 runs in the last five balls have made the previously unattainable target a bit more attainable. Another three overs, and 30-odd runs to get. DP's next four balls are very reasonable, but Fatima and Sanam are able to milk them for four singles. For the last ball, she tries something different, slowing the pace to tempt Sanam, who is known to have a penchant for the ultimate glory shot, the big left-handed slog over mid-wicket. It's a completely justifiable risk to take, and one that any canny captain would take, especially after posting three fielders on the boundary on the leg side. And, to DP's credit, she suckers Sanam into the shot. It's just unfortunate for her that the ball lands on the steps of the Calcutta High Court, across the street from the stadium.

As Sanam and Fatima meet in the middle of the pitch to bump gloves, both girls see the fire in each other's eyes, and know that the other will not surrender, no matter what. All the insults, all the little snide comments and haughtiness, will be forgotten if they can win here. The two of them are the team's proverbial odd couple. Sanam is the big hitting, fast bowling all-rounder from Karachi with a privileged upbringing, who perfected her cricket in the women's leagues and universities of England. Fatima is the street-smart foul-mouthed batswoman, a coach's daughter who learned her trade while acting as a ball-boy for her father's proteges among the clubs and practice nets that flourished around Lahore's Minto Park. But what they have proved to be expert in, over the past six months, is snatching victories, often from the jaws of defeat. Here in Kolkata, once

again, both of them get the familiar feeling. No words have to be spoken between them, but they sense that they just might be about to pull off another great caper.

The best cricketers, like predators, can smell fear in their opponents. And while DP retains her Olympian calm, casually taking her cap back from the umpire, apparently oblivious of the fact that her over has cost India 16 runs, Fatima and Sanam can see the doubt creeping into the expressions of the other ten girls. What was once a sure thing isn't anymore. DP tosses the ball to the off spinner, Sangeeta Sajharaka, but for just half a second, Sangeeta hesitates, betraying her lack of confidence. This is enough for Fatima and Sanam. Fatima pots Sajharaka's first four balls like a snooker champion, placing them perfectly in the gaps in the field. Each ball costs two runs, as both girls, buoyed by the hope of unlikely victory, forget their aches and pains and run their legs off. The equation keeps getting easier. 21 runs needed off the last two overs, becomes 14 off 8 balls. Sajharaka's fifth ball is an absolute peach, the perfect off break, leaving Fatima as clueless as a nun at a porn convention. But crucially, the ball, for all its perfection, doesn't cost Fatima her wicket. At the next ball, Fatima once again restores her dominance over the spinner by coming down the track and hoisting Sajharaka in a perfectly straight arc over her head for four. Ten needed from the last six.

What will Parulekar do now? A conference ensues between DP, her wicketkeeper, Vasques, and Sajharaka. Vasques still looks like she is in a trance, and Sanam and Fatima confer quietly at the other end of the pitch. Surely DP wouldn't give another over to Vasques in her current state. Surely not. But DP has limited options, and so Vasques it is who returns to the top of the bowling mark. Except that the old operating system is now completely gone and a new one hasn't booted up. Vasques' first ball is hopelessly wide down leg side, and the wicketkeeper,

despite performing a pirouette worthy of the Bolshoi ballet, cannot stop the ball from carrying to the boundary. Indian heads slump in the field. Even DP betrays a smidgeon of emotion, pursing her lips for an instant. Out of the corner of her eye, Sanam sees a flock of fans wearing blue India shirts starting to leave the stadium. They seem to have accepted that the momentum of the match has shifted irrevocably. At that moment, Sanam decides she is not going to play safe, just tapping the ball around to get five singles in six balls. For her, this match is about more than just winning. It's about making a statement. It's about walking into the lion's den, Eden Gardens filled to the brim with 100,000 people, and beating the old enemy on their own turf, something that the girls' more glamorous male colleagues have never done in a major tournament. This next ball is going to be Sanam Khan's private little middle finger to everyone who has ever doubted her or her team. Even before Vasques has released the ball, Sanam starts advancing down the pitch. She is so far forward that she receives the ball as a waist high full toss. She swings, the connection is good, the sound of wood hitting leather has never been so crisp and the ball travels like an Exocet missile into the top tier of the highest stand. Javed Miandad, step aside, Sanam Khan has finally arrived.