

PROLOGUE

NEW YORK CITY

Watch the ball. Watch the ball on to the bat.

He sees the sunlight glint off the metal surface of the baseball bat as the boy swings it in desperation and, not having heeded his silent admonition, fails to connect with the ball altogether. Asad Haider holds his head and sighs as the dejected Little Leaguer walks back to the dugout. And then he smiles at himself, wondering why it should matter to him whether the boy connected with the bat or not. It's not his boy, nor is it his game. He has never played baseball, only cricket. But there is something about games involving bats and balls that never fails to draw him in. Even at a time like this, as he stands in Central Park waiting for the most important meeting of his life.

In fact, that isn't true. The most important meeting of Asad Haider's life occurred yesterday, when he betrayed the man and the Party that have been his life for the past twenty-eight years. This meeting is simply a follow-up, the claiming of an insurance policy to ensure that he stays alive after his great betrayal. The emotion of yesterday has passed, and Asad Haider doesn't ponder over what has happened. The only thing that is important now is to keep his guard up and be prepared for whatever comes next.

He discards the half-eaten hotdog and walks away from the playing fields in Central Park, towards the 79th Street exit on the Upper West Side. He is a tall man, and he retains the taut, muscular body of his youth, making him look younger than his forty-five years, despite his shock of salt-and-pepper hair. His most striking feature are his eyes, grey-green, almost reptilian, as they dart around scanning the hundreds of New Yorkers who have rushed to the Park today to enjoy the first real hint of spring after a bitter, cold winter.

Even on a day and in a place like this, surrounded by casual revellers celebrating the sunlight by shedding their clothes and inhibitions, Asad Haider stands out, his body a coiled spring, ready to react instantly to any kind of situation.

He pauses at the Park entrance and looks across Central Park West to his destination, the Museum of Natural History. He waits a full five minutes, taking everything in. Then he spots his contact – a slightly overweight Pakistani man wearing a battered old New York Jets jacket – get out of a taxi and walk up the steps of the museum. The man seems a bit puzzled by the location, but that is a deliberate move on Asad's part. He has spent enough time as the Party's chief hitman to not leave anything to chance. He wants a meeting in a place that is guaranteed to be unfrequented not just by members of the Party, but by Pakistanis living in New York in general. Yes, absolutely no better place than a museum. Asad approaches him from behind and taps him gently on the shoulder. The man, surprised and extremely nervous, turns around sharply, bringing him almost face to face with Asad.

'Javed Gringo sent you?'

Despite the sunlight, it's still a cold day, but Asad can see beads of sweat trickle down the man's forehead. 'Yes. Who are you? I mean, are you Asad Haider? How did you know how to spot me?'

Asad frowns slightly. Gringo certainly hasn't sent the brightest operative. The questions are unnecessary and the man should

already have the answers. ‘Your jacket. Gringo said you would be wearing a New York Jets jacket.’

‘Oh yes. Of course, of course. But you are Asad Haider, right?’

It’s at this point that Asad Haider starts to suspect something is not quite right. He doesn’t answer the question but looks around to see if he can spot anything unusual. But the rest of the world seems impervious to their meeting. He looks back at the man, and notices that his hand is shaking. Asad slowly starts backing away from him.

‘Wait, where are you going? Wait, I’ve got something for you here, from Javed Gringo. It’s in my pocket, just wait a second.’ Asad turns his back and increases his pace as the man puts his hand inside his jacket, pulls out a pistol and starts firing, his hand still violently unsteady.

Asad has almost broken into a run by the time he hears the first shot. For a brief instant, he thinks he might just be able to outrun the bullets. But then something hits him with the force of a freight train, and he goes down hard.

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Watch the ball.

‘We have a forty-five-year-old male, South Asian origin, multiple gunshot wounds in the chest and lungs. Heartbeat’s there, but very faint.’

Watch the ball on to the bat.

‘Do you see any retina reaction? Mr Hay-dar, can you hear me? Don’t try to speak, just nod once if you can.’

Nod. Once. You can hear her.

‘We’re going to lift you and turn you round, to see if the bullet has exited. You may feel some momentary discomfort.’

No discomfort. Pain. And not momentary either.

‘Okay, wheel him into the OR stat. Mr Hay-dar, we’re taking you in to operate on you. You have a bullet lodged in your lungs. But it’s going to be fine. I’m just going to insert this IV into your arm and you’ll feel better after that.’

The white light is blinding. Blinding like the sun on that cloudless day in Karachi. Drenching you in sweat. Blinding you. Forget that, just watch the ball. Dark and red and hurtling towards you. And then the ball becomes larger, and darker, and redder, until it blots out everything else.

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WEILL CORNELL MEDICAL CENTER, MANHATTAN.

‘How long has he been up? Why didn’t you call us right away, Nurse?’

‘Detective Russo, he regained consciousness two hours ago but his vital signs are low. He can barely nod his head, leave alone talk. I’m afraid you’ll have to wait.’

‘Ah, Nurse Ratchet, you’re killin’ me. Do you realize that it’s been forty-eight hours since a major homicide incident, a sixty-five-year-old woman is dead, three other people are injured and I haven’t even got a basic statement from the sole survivor and eyewitness? Come on! You gotta give me something.’

‘I’m sorry, Detective. Dr Bose has strictly said that the patient is not yet stable enough to meet police officers. He’ll be back on rounds in thirty minutes. You’re going to have to wait.’

‘Can you at least tell me the nature of his injuries?’ Anthony Russo rubs his forehead with his chubby fingers. The nurse looks positively Amazonian, towering over his short and portly frame.

‘One bullet lodged in his left lung. It was taken out when he was operated on, but his lung collapsed and he still can’t

breathe without a ventilator. The second bullet grazed the left side of his skull, but no permanent damage. And the third bullet went through his right wrist, shattering the bone.'

'That's a total of nine shots fired, if you count the three that hit passers-by, the one that killed the old lady, a stray that lodged in a tree and a live round that was found near the body. It must have jammed and dropped out.' Russo's partner, Carlos Cardenas is a tall man in peak physical condition, an eleven-year veteran of the NYPD and a recent recipient of the coveted gold shield. His well-defined muscles strain against his grey suit. Ten years younger than Russo, his jet-black hair makes a striking contrast to his olive skin. Despite having moved to the United States twenty years ago, his accent is more Puerto Rico than New York.

'What do we have on the other victims?'

'Kirsten Parker, twenty-eight, female Caucasian, a graduate student at Columbia, bullet lodged in her left buttock as she was trying to run away. Murtala Touray, thirty-six, Nigerian immigrant, he has a hot dog stand just outside the museum, bullet shattered his ankle. And Whitney Tesfay, twenty-one, who was in the museum with her family, received a superficial wound on her arm caused by a ricochet. They were all discharged from here on the same day. The dead woman is Nathalie Wlodachek, sixty-five, a professor of Jewish Studies at NYU, got hit straight in the head by a stray. Eyewitnesses say a South Asian or Hispanic man met our friend on the museum steps and the guy pulled a weapon on him. The bullets are from a 9mm pistol, make as yet undetermined. The gunman opened fire indiscriminately, killing Mrs Wlodachek and injuring the other three, and he also shot the victim at close range.'

'Jewish studies, huh? Jeez, that's all we need. On top of everyone crapping themselves about a shooting at the Natural

History Museum, fucking Fox News has set up camp on Central Park West, calling this a race crime. Where's this guy from?'

'I think he's from Pakistan. The other nurse just handed me this box of his personal effects.'

'You think this is a jihadist lone wolf type of thing?'

'I don't know. Our friend seems to have been the target. Let's find out what this guy's all about.'

Carlos Cardenas places the box on the counter of the nurses' station. Although the patient's clothes have been cut up in the ER, the rest of his effects are neatly placed in ziplock bags in the box.

'Okay, let's see what we've got.' Anthony Russo has always enjoyed this part of the job. Trying to put the pieces together without knowing what the final picture looks like. 'One pair of jeans, one white cotton dress shirt, or what's left of them. Label on the shirt says Rizavi Tailors, Karachi. Wasn't he wearing a jacket, or did the paramedics have to cut through that as well?'

'No, here it is, black leather jacket, looks expensive, the paramedics didn't cut it, but it did soak up a lot of blood.'

'It's going to be a pain in the ass getting that stain out at the drycleaners.' Russo chuckles at his own joke but draws no response from his partner.

'Okay, so these were the items inside the jacket. A Pakistani passport in the name of Asad Haider. Date of birth, 12 August 1970. He's got a ten-year valid US visa, issued from the US Consulate in Karachi last month.'

'Where else has this guy travelled in the past three years?'

'He's got stamps for Dubai, Iran, Iraq. Iraq? This guy has been to some shady places. Al Qaeda, you think?' Cardenas hands over the dog-eared green book to Russo.

'If it was Iraq alone, then maybe. But Iran and Iraq together are a Shia combo. Must have gone for pilgrimage. Besides, if it had been, we would have had the Feds and the spooks shitting all over us from day one. And we haven't heard a peep from them.'

‘Hey, you know your Islamic radicals, Tony.’

‘That’s what three years in the counterterrorism intelligence unit will get you, kid. This is interesting. There seems to be some kind of sharpened stud in one of the pockets. Looks like one of those studs that you get on old-fashioned knuckledusters. Remember those? We used to get a lot of punks wearing those in the early 1980s when I was a rookie.’

‘Tony, back then I was in high school in Puerto Rico, man.’

‘Stop reminding me of how old I’ve gotten. What else have we got?’

‘This looks like a ring, with a large semi-precious gemstone embedded in it. Some kind of Arabic inscriptions on the ring. The stone itself is chipped and looks in bad shape.’

‘I’ve got his wallet here. Brown leather, Montblanc. Classy. Contents include \$500 in crisp new \$50 bills, subway Metrocard, and a black-and-white picture of an old woman dressed in South Asian clothes. A mini booklet of what seem to be Quranic or religious inscriptions in Arabic. Another piece of paper that seems to be torn off from a poster, I would guess it’s some kind of political leaflet or flier. Again a lot of printed words in Arabic or Urdu, written under a picture of an orange-and-black flag. It must be some kind of party flag or something.’

‘Wait, there’s something else in the inner pocket of the jacket. It’s a laminated photo ID. Seems old. The plastic edges are frayed. This guy was good-looking in his day. Under the picture, it says Asad Haider, Party worker, United Progressive Front. Party card no. 005. You’ve seen the crime scene, Tony. What does this all look like to you?’

‘Looks like a hit, Charlie. And it seems our friend in the ICU was the target. So until we speak to him, we can’t draw any conclusions about anything. Nurse, when can we speak to the doctor?’

‘Dr Bose has just started his rounds. I’ll bring him to you.’

Dr Bose enters through the ward’s swing doors like a big shot movie director walking onto his set. He is a dark-skinned South Asian man in surgical greens with a slightly receding hairline and extremely hairy knuckles. He rubs sanitizer on his hands before offering Detective Russo a firm handshake.

‘I’m Dr Bose, deputy chief of Trauma Medicine here. The nurse tells me you wanted an update on the gunshot victim in ICU.’

‘Yes sir, Doctor. It’s been forty-eight hours since a major shooting incident in the city, right on the steps of the Natural History Museum, and we believe your patient is the key witness. In fact, we believe that he was the probable target of the assassin. When can we speak to him?’

‘Look, he is stable now. We’ve just moved him from the ICU into a semi-private room. Luckily, none of the injuries were critical. He is conscious, but extremely weak from loss of blood. Plus, he still can’t breathe independently. The ventilator is supporting him till his lung fully reflatates. And even if he could talk to you, there would be a lot of disorientation and some degree of short-term memory loss because of the head injury. I understand your desire to solve this case, but you can take a look for yourself, the patient is in no condition to deal with an interrogation.’

He can see the three men through his half-open eyes. He wishes he weren’t so tired so he could understand better what they are talking about. There is the dark-skinned doctor in his surgical fatigues. He remembers him from the operating theatre. Probably an Indian. The two other men, who, by their bearing, seem to be police officers. Cops are the same all over the world, you can spot them a mile away. They all walk the same way, that self-important strut that presumes that people should move out of their way because nobody’s business is as

important as theirs. It's like a police strobe light for pedestrians. It reminds him of how much he hates cops.

The throbbing in his head returns and he shuts his eyes tight to keep out the pain. The men are still talking, standing by the nurses' station in the corner of the ward. One of the cops, the stockier one, is holding a shiny object in his hands. It takes him a moment to understand what it is. The knuckleduster stud. He shuts his eyes again and lets his mind drift back. To Nishtar Park. Twenty-eight years ago.

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Watch the ball.

Carefully, straight from the bowler's hand. The pitch is a minefield, a crumbling concrete strip with cracks right across the surface, and bits of rubble dislodging every time the ball pitches on it. And the bowler is a magician, a practitioner of the dark art of leg spin. He makes the ball dance like a cobra, darting this way and that, spitting venomously at the batsmen. He's already gotten five of them with googlies and leg breaks and sliders.

Don't think about that. Don't think about anything else. Stay in the moment. Watch the ball, watch it right on to your bat. Make room, and cut it delicately. The bat is a scalpel, not a cleaver. There, see it running down to third man. You can hear the non-striker shouting at you to run, so you respond, but your eyes remain on the ball, admiring your artistry. The fielder races along the boundary, but you know your own skill, you know he will never reach the ball.

It is a hot April day in Karachi. He can still feel the heat searing him two decades later in the New York hospital. The humidity is so extreme, it takes on a life of its own. At noon, you think it is not possible for it to get any hotter, until two hours later, you find that it is. You take off your batting glove

with its torn webbing and rub it in the gravel beside the concrete pitch, just so the dirt can absorb some moisture so the bat won't slip in your hands. The cheap wristbands you bought last month are already soaked through with sweat, so you wipe the rivulets off your brow with the one remaining dry corner of your shirt.

The batsman at the other end, your captain, says something to you but it doesn't register. It doesn't matter, it can only be some inane observation. The bowler returns to the top of his mark, licking his fingers and massaging the red ball. Here he comes again. Watch the ball. It's tossed up. Move forward, bring the bat in a full arc and connect. There, it is now a red dot hurtling through the sky, over the bowler's head, out of the ground for a six. The perfect shot. Suddenly, the heat doesn't matter. Your captain's prattling doesn't matter. The bowler's prior performance doesn't matter. Your name is Asad Haider, you are nineteen years old and you are the best batsman in the world. That is all that matters.

'That Asad Haider is the best batsman in Nishtar Park.'

'Arre choro yaar. That boy can only play on these dead pitches. Besides, he's a bloody charsi. Always high as a kite. No proper coaching either. He wouldn't survive five minutes on a real turf wicket.'

'Still, I've never seen anyone with such a natural eye. And just look at the grace in his shots. And the pitch isn't easy. The old concrete slab is falling apart. It's not easy to maintain your technique on that surface.'

'Arre, who ever heard of a six-foot-four-inch opening batsman. All the great batsmen were short men. Gavaskar, Bradman, Miandad. That's what makes them compact players. This boy should have been a fast bowler with his height. But saala lazy hai. He doesn't want to work hard. Just wants to bat and smoke charas.'

A third voice pipes up. 'He's nothing more than a khatmal goonda. Goes around the area with his little band of khatmals, shutting down shops and threatening the traders every time the Fiqah-e-Jaferia decide to call a bandh.'

'Saale badmaash khatmal thugs. Such are the times we live in, that every time something happens to one of them anywhere in the city, these pups who've barely started shaving start bossing around respectable people. At least, we didn't have this kind of thing when Bhutto was still alive.'

'Bhutto was a Shia too. He didn't do anything to restrain them.'

'Yes, but all this started when Zia put his hand on the mullahs. Then this lot started acting up.'

'It was the bloody revolution in Iran. That's when things started going bad. Besides, these fellows have the biggest mullah. That fellow Khomeini.'

'Don't you dare blaspheme against the Imam! We will tolerate a lot of your rubbish but we will not accept any insult against the Imam. And you better be careful. Half of us living around Nishtar Park are Shia.'

Aleem Siddiqui walks into the small makeshift pavilion that has been set up under a bright red shamiana at the very moment that the cricketing debate turns into a sectarian confrontation. His trademark polyester shirt is plastered to his back and two huge sweat stains expand like ink blots under his armpits. It is not just the heat that makes Aleem sweat. It is fear as well.

Getting between the two offensive debaters, he ensures that neither will be able to deck the other. 'Excuse me, sirji, I am very sorry but can someone please point me to where Asad Haider is? Has he left the ground already?'

The intervention defuses the tension. The Khomeini hater and his friends drift away, while the Shia whose sensibilities were offended points Aleem to the far corner of the shamiana, which the teams have converted into a temporary dressing room, by

scattering various pieces of kit. Sitting just outside the open flap of the tent, with his back to everyone else, is a broad-shouldered young man. His muscular forearms strain against the delicate cotton material of his white cricket shirt. His hair is cut severely short and a carefully maintained stubble growth covers his dark face. His eyes are bloodshot, giving him a dangerous aura. The unmistakable whiff of cannabis emanates from the cigarette that hangs from the corner of his mouth.

‘Asad mian, adab arz hai. Thank God I found you, I have been looking for you frantically for the past couple of hours.’

‘Arre, Aleem bhai, you should be careful about who you’re looking for. Didn’t you just hear, I’m a dangerous khatmal thug.’

‘Actually, Asad mian, that’s exactly the kind of person I need at this moment.’

The sarcastic smile on Asad’s face disappears and he views Aleem Khan with renewed interest. ‘Why, Aleem bhai, what’s wrong?’

‘My friend Mohammed Ali is in trouble. The mullahs at the university want to beat him up.’

‘Who is this fellow? Has he come for one of our nets in the past?’ Aleem is four years older than Asad but despite that, they do cricket nets together every Tuesday at the university’s practice ground.

‘No, no. He doesn’t play cricket. Mohammed Ali, Mohammed Ali Pichkari is his full name. He’s an MComm student at the university and my best friend. But he is very politically active, and the Jamiat’s unit on campus is incensed that he is going to give a speech criticizing them. So they’ve threatened to kill him if he shows his face on campus today.’

‘So tell him not to go for classes today.’

‘Asad, Mohammed Ali is a man of his word. If he has promised people that he will speak on campus today, then he will speak on campus today, and if the intent of his speech was to

criticize the mullah parties, then that is exactly what he will do, to hell with the consequences. He doesn't care about their threats.'

'Sounds like an impressive fellow. So what do you want me to do about it? You know I only come and practise with you guys to tune my batting. I'm not enrolled at the university.'

'I need your help to protect him on campus. Look, the others from our little group have no experience of this sort of thing. They are all intellectuals who can quote Karl Marx verbatim, but they don't know how to be tough. When they heard of the Jamiat's threats, they all ran away. You know student politics. You've been with the ISO. You have a reputation for these things. If you come with me to stand by Mohammed Ali, then the Jamiatwallahs will think twice before doing anything, because they will assume that we are backed by the Shia student groups.'

'This is your same friend whom everyone calls the Don, right? But, Aleem bhai, why should I do this for someone I don't even know?'

'Look Asad, you know me and trust me, right?'

'Sure.'

'Then believe me when I tell you that Mohammed Ali is a special man. He is worth taking a stand for. He has the courage to say the things that have to be said. Trust me on this.'

Asad Haider looks at Aleem and holds his gaze, astonished by the sincerity and passion in his eyes. He takes one final drag of the charas-filled cigarette and throws it away. From his cricket kit bag he takes out a pair of black leather knuckledusters, the metallic studs shining in the sunlight.

'You have your bike, right? You can drop me home afterwards.'

