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Day 1, 21 December, 6.58 am

Outside the front gate of Karachi's Central Prison

A cool breeze blew across the front courtyard of the prison, causing the solitary figure to shudder. The gentle rays of the winter morning sun were breaking through the early mist. The weather was chilly by Karachi standards, although it couldn't have been colder than a particularly crisp November day in London or New York. The balmy climate of the city was such that Karachiites only bothered to take out their sweaters and shawls barely for about fifteen days in a year. This year, however, had been different. A cold snap had hit the city and lasted for most of the month. Temperatures had been the lowest in recorded history.

The man at the gate coughed and stamped his feet. Having been a lifelong resident of the city, he was totally unprepared for the wintry weather. He was a tall man, and his muscular legs had the bearing of an athlete's. He wore a khaki-and-grey police uniform with the badge of the Elite Police Group on his right breast, certifying that he had been a police commando at one time. But his expanding girth and the way his service belt nestled under his paunch underlined the fact that his athletic days now lay in the distant past. Just below the badge

was a black nameplate with the name 'Constantine' etched upon it. Despite his slipping physical form, he was a man who still took pride in the smartness of his uniform. The khaki pants were starched stiff, the tan-coloured boots polished like mirrors, and his ink blue beret fell perfectly on his clipped hair. The shiny silver crescent and star that he wore on each shoulder stated his rank as a superintendent but the lettering next to his ranks said 'Prisons' instead of 'Police'. The only personal touch to his uniform was the small gold cross that he wore around his neck.

'Bloody faujis,' he swore under his breath. Trust an army officer to schedule a meeting first thing in the morning! Constantine D'Souza was definitely not a morning person. Most cops aren't. A policeman usually never leaves the police station before 3 or 4 am and he is not inclined to be back on duty till at least midday. The faujis had fixed timings, clock in at 8 and out at 4. Unfortunately, the point they never understood was that crime doesn't follow a timetable. When the coup first happened, army officers would show up to monitor the police stations promptly at 8 am, expecting to find the In-charges at their desks. Usually, no one except the duty officer and the night sentry were present at that hour. Constantine hadn't met the young army captain monitoring his police station until a good ten days after the takeover.

The inconvenience of the early hour did not concern him as much as the phone call of the previous night. He had been woken by a voice he hadn't heard in years. Nevertheless, he recognized the crisp tone immediately. Colonel Tarkeen had served in Karachi's intelligence establishment for so long that there was hardly a police officer above the rank of inspector who did not recognize his casual, hail-fellow-well-met tone, spiced with just the right amount of steel.

‘Constantine, how are you, my boy?’ Tarkeen was one of the very few people who made it a point to actually pronounce Constantine’s name correctly. Twenty-five years in the Karachi police had seen it bastardized to ‘Consendine’.

‘Fine sir, and you? I heard that you had been posted again in Karachi but I ...’

‘Yes, and I’m *very* disappointed that you haven’t come to see me. All the old boys had come over – Farooq, Waseem, Haider – and I ask them all about you, but they say Constantine doesn’t want to come to Bleak House to pay his respects. They say you’re trying to stay away from me, they say you think you don’t want me to be your *friend*. That isn’t *true* now, is it, Constantine?’

‘Not at all, sir. Nothing like that. I’ve just been busy settling down here at the Central Prison. I came here just a couple of months ago. Nothing like that at all, sir. Farooq and all are just joking with you, sir. I’ll come by tomorrow if you like.’

‘Hahaha. Don’t *worry*, my boy, I know you haven’t strayed. We will meet, and *sooner* than you think, but for the moment, I need your help.’

‘Anything, sir.’

‘I’m sending one of my boys to you tomorrow. His name’s Major Rommel. He will be with you at 0700 hours. I want you to assist him in *any* and *every* way possible. Thank you, Constantine.’

And with that, the line went dead. The fact that the call had come out of the blue disturbed Constantine. Colonel Tarkeen never did anything impulsively. He was the ultimate spook. He had served for seven years with the Intelligence Agencies in Karachi, seven of the most tumultuous years in the city’s history. He had overseen the bloody battles against the ethnic insurgents, the coup which removed the previous Prime

Minister, the events following 9/11 and the ensuing crackdown on the jihadis. Normally, an officer would be expected to serve an average tenure of two to three years in the Agencies, but Tarkeen had been considered so indispensable that his tenure was extended twice. And now, after a short hiatus commanding an artillery unit in some small military cantonment town, he had managed to get himself posted back to Karachi. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the officers of the Karachi Police and an expert understanding of who was good, who was bad, who was corrupt and who was weak. He had often used them to further his own personal agenda, in addition to his official directives. He also understood the intricacies of police work, rare for army officers who usually saw things in black or white. Constantine suspected that Tarkeen had viewed the world in nothing but shades of grey for a very, very long time. If Tarkeen had called him, he wanted something from him. The reference to Constantine's not paying his respects had been deliberate, to corner him. But the most disturbing thing was the last line about giving *any* and *every* assistance. It was the way he said it. He was after something very specific and the underlying message was clear. No matter what it was or what it entailed or how much he disliked it, Constantine had to do it.

It was not uncommon for the Intelligence Agencies to send their representatives to the prison. The place was crawling with informers and turncoats, and everyone was spying on everyone else, like some latter-day Pakistani version of East Berlin in miniature. The Central Prison, or CP, as it was called, was a hive of information and a virtual university for crime. Jihadis, terrorists, activists of all the political parties, along with the average, run-of-the-mill murderers, rapists and robbers – CP Karachi had them all. They were all living together, learning from each other. An offender would be locked up for a minor offence in the CP, and

after spending a couple of years there, he would come out with a Masters degree in criminality. The concept of rehabilitation in prison went out the window with the CP. You came out of there a much bigger, better and more dedicated criminal. When it had been constructed, at the beginning of the last century, it was meant to house between 3000–4000 prisoners. It now housed at least six times that number, in the same area. The only additions to the building had been the system of several layers of boundary walls and innumerable guard towers that isolated the old prison from the main road like some ancient, impregnable Byzantine fortress. Indeed, the front entrance of the prison, where Constantine now stood, very much resembled a medieval castle, with a massive iron gate, set in a yellow brick façade with turrets overlooking it.

Constantine shrugged his shoulders. There was no use worrying about what the faujis wanted. The damn Agencies would do things exactly as they pleased and there was nothing to be done about that. Still, the timing was curious. They probably wanted to come in and question one of the jihadis who was locked up. Little good that would do them. Even if they knew, the jihadis would never talk. Yes. That had to be it. Couldn't be anything else ... unless it was something to do with *him* ... But no, that couldn't be it either. After all, who even remembered *him*?

A bhishti – water carrier – threw water on the dusty ground. Slowly the prison was coming alive. The first mulaqatis, the visitors, having cleared a couple of checkpoints, were slowly making their way towards the final checkpoint and waiting area on the right side of the prison entrance. They would have to wait a couple of hours until the little stall windows on the side of the prison wall were opened, through which they could meet their loved ones and briefly touch them for a few precious minutes. The stalls appeared like some kind of bank

teller's window, behind which the prisoners sat and disposed of the customers in front of them in record time.

A Toyota Land Cruiser approached from the direction of the juvenile prison entrance. Its windows were darkened and it had a police number plate. From behind the spare tyre tied to the back of the vehicle, two telltale wireless antennae were visible. Constantine swore under his breath. The bastards kept one wireless for their own communications, and the other on the police frequency to listen in on them.

The jeep pulled up just in front of Constantine. The passenger door opened and a young man stepped out. He couldn't have been more than twenty-eight or twenty-nine. He was a tall fellow with a very fair complexion, and sharp features which marked him as a Pathan. He also had a luxuriant, jet-black moustache waxed and tweaked to a fine point. He was in shirt and trousers, not in uniform, but his severe, short-cropped hair and Ray-Ban Aviators gave away his armed-forces background.

Constantine cursed the faujis again, and then he cursed Tom Cruise for having made that bloody *Top Gun* movie. Since then, an entire generation of faujis had grown up thinking they could be like him just by buying those cheap rip-off sunglasses for 200 rupees from Zainab Market.

The man returned Constantine's salute with a nod.

'Consendine D'Souza? I'm Major Rommel. I believe Colonel Tarkeen told you I was coming.'

'Yes, sir. Pleased to meet you.'

The small gate of the prison opened, and Constantine led the major into the entrance. They entered a passageway, at the end of which was another gate, which led to the main courtyard of the prison. The passageway served as the administrative nerve centre of the prison. On one side of the passage was a spiral staircase,

which went up to the wireless communications room and the turrets. On the other side was a tinted glass door. Two wardens sat behind a desk in the middle of the passageway with a huge register, logging everyone coming through the gates. Both rose from their chairs as Constantine and the major entered. One of them attempted to hand a pen to the major to sign the register, but Constantine waved him away.

‘No, no, *this* sahib doesn’t have to sign.’ Constantine guided the major towards the glass door. ‘Come this way, sir, this is my office.’

The office was small, narrow and badly lit, with no windows and cheap tube lights adorning the walls. A dirty rug, which must have been red in 1942, the year it was probably placed there, covered the floor. A large, battered desk, upon which was draped a green baize cloth, typical of government offices, dominated the room. Behind the desk was an equally battered cane revolving chair. In front of it were two slightly more modern-looking plastic chairs.

On the wall facing the door hung the standard, government-issue portrait of the Father of the Nation. The old man seemed to be staring down with faint disapproval. Next to him, a large oak incumbency board listed the names of all those who had been posted as Superintendent of the Central Prison since 1895. Whenever Constantine looked at that board, it never ceased to amaze him that all the men the names stood for had been more than happy to fleece hundreds of thousands of rupees from this prison, yet none of them had ever bothered to spend even a little to improve this office. Cheap bastards.

‘I’m sorry about the office, sir. I’ve just recently moved here myself. Haven’t had a chance to spruce it up. Won’t you take a seat?’

‘Yes, you were posted here two months ago, weren’t you?’

Major Rommel eased himself into one of the plastic chairs and opened the file that he had been holding in his hand.

‘That’s right, sir.’ Constantine noticed that stapled to one corner of the file cover was *his* passport-size photograph. The major seemed to be reading from *his* confidential file.

‘Please sit, Consendine. That’s a very unique name even for a Christian.’ Constantine felt slightly irritated at the major’s patronizing attitude. The bloody bugger had walked into *his* office. Who was he to offer him a seat in his own office? And what the hell did he think he knew about Christians? Typical arrogant, immature army officer.

‘It’s actually Constantine, sir. Yes, it’s not a common name, even in the Goan Christian community. But my father was a great cricket fan. Named me after some old West Indian cricketer whom he used to idolize. Always told me he used to hit a lot of sixes. I haven’t seen you around before, sir. Are you new in Karachi?’

‘Yes, I just reported to the I Section five days ago. Tell me, I’m confused. My file shows your rank as a deputy superintendent in the Karachi police. So what are you doing wearing the ranks of a superintendent?’

Although the question was a perfectly legitimate one, Constantine found himself growing more and more irritated at having to explain his position to the major. ‘Yes sir, I’ve been seconded to the prisons service from the Karachi Police. I have not been formally promoted but I have been allowed a shoulder promotion since I am holding the position of Superintendent of the prison.’ Faujis were always obsessed with uniformed ranks, constantly comparing their own to the civil ranks of the police and always trying to lord it over the poor cops.

‘Ah. I see,’ said the major with a faintly disapproving air. He began studying his file without any regard to Constantine. Any

attempts at pleasantries had been dispensed with. There was no doubt that this was an interview, and the file the major was reading was Constantine's dossier.

'Constantine Michael D'Souza. Born 1959, recruited as an assistant sub-inspector in 1981. Promoted to sub-inspector, 1988. Topped the Elite Special Police Group commando course, 1991. Worked with I Section in Operation Clean Slate, 1992. Wounded in a police encounter with activists of the United Progressive Front in 1998. Promoted out of turn as inspector in the same year for arresting Ateeq Tension, a UPF activist who was wanted in seventy murder cases. Promoted out of turn again, as deputy superintendent of police in 2002 for tracing out the Shi'a doctors' killings. Impressive.'

'I can save you the time of going through that lengthy dossier, sir. Just ask me what you really want to know and I'll tell you straight away. I have no problems with the Agencies. You can ask Colonel Tarkeen.'

The major seemed to have picked up on Constantine's annoyance so he changed tack. 'No, I just like to be thorough in my research. Tell me, what is your job description as *superintendent* of the prison?' Up till this point, the major had still not removed his Tom Cruise sunglasses. Now he did so, revealing a horrible scar that ran diagonally across from just under his left eyebrow to the ridge of his cheek. Like some cruel joke, it seemed completely out of place with the major's otherwise handsome appearance. As if on cue, another man entered the room with another file in his hand. He was obviously working for the major and had entered the room on some kind of pre-arranged signal.

'Well sir, I, uh, am responsible for the total administration of the entire prison.' Constantine was a little flustered at the sight of the major's scar and at the unauthorized entry of the major's subordinate into his office. He tried not to show it but a