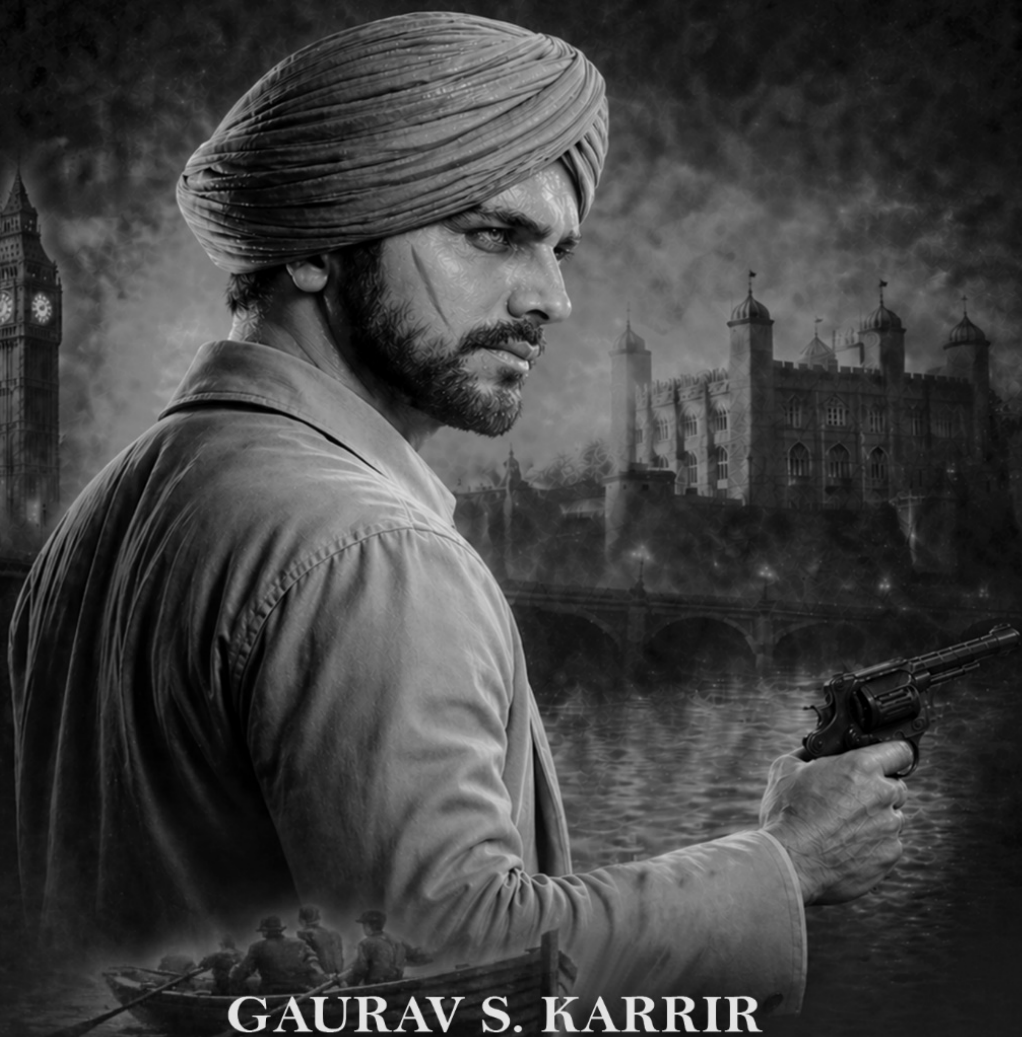


ROOTED IN HISTORY. INSPIRED BY RUMOUR. TOLD AS LEGEND.

THE ROYAL KOHINOOR HEIST

— A 1930s SPY THRILLER —



GAURAV S. KARRIR

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-93-7825-703-2

Cover design: Anuj

Typesetting: Simran

First Edition: May 2026

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gaurav S. Karrir is a live sports broadcaster and former programming director with two of India's foremost radio networks. His career in narrative began in the late 1990s as a crime and court journalist, covering the sensational cases that defined the era. Having seen his first piece of fiction published in *The Hindustan Times* at the age of nineteen, Karrir has spent nearly three decades in the media industry.

Following the release of his debut audio series, *MBBS 1st Year*, on India's premier audio platform, he now makes his foray into historical fiction. *The Royal Kohinoor Heist* is his debut novel—a work designed not only to thrill but to reignite the discourse surrounding the diamond's heritage.

Karrir intends the book to serve as a poignant reminder for the Indian government to pursue this historical matter to its rightful and logical conclusion.

DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organisations, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events, is coincidental.

The novel draws upon certain historical settings, institutions, and artefacts – such as the British Raj, the Tower of London, and the Kohinoor – but the events described herein are imagined.

Yet, history has many silences, and somewhere between those silences and the truth lies this story.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before you begin, a few personal words.

Writing this book has been a deeply personal journey. I write, first and foremost, to inspire my children, **Dhirkrishnaa** and **Parineeta**, that they may find their own voices in time. My deepest thanks go to my wife, **Shivaani**, for her unwavering support throughout the long hours of research and writing.

I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my parents, **Madhu** and **Shanti Prakash**, for instilling in me a love for the written word. In writing these pages, I seek to honour the family tradition and carry our literary legacy forward.

I hope this journey keeps you engrossed, but more importantly, it moves you to take action upon reaching **Annexure 4**.

With Gratitude.

PREFACE

The Kohinoor is no ordinary diamond. It has passed through the hands of emperors, shahs, sultans, and sovereigns, across centuries of bloodshed and conquest. Its brilliance has dazzled royal courts from Delhi to Kabul, Lahore to London. Yet like all jewels, it has its darker side — a legacy of rumour, violence, and bad omen.

History records the stone's passage: taken from India in the mid-nineteenth century, presented to Queen Victoria, and eventually set into the crown of the British monarch. From then on, the story seems straightforward, locked in glass cases and royal ceremony. The official line is unbroken.

But history is never only what is written. It is also what is whispered.

Amongst the circles of Indian revolutionaries in exile during the 1930s, there were rumours — half-stifled, half-romanticised — of an audacious attempt to reclaim the jewel, about a plot to strike at the very heart of the Empire. A name occasionally surfaced in these whispers: Kehar Singh. Elusive, almost spectral. Some called him a patriot. Others called him a dreamer. A few dismissed him as a myth.

No British file confirms it. No trial was reported. And yet... fragments exist.

A passing note in the correspondence of revolutionaries. A set of battered audio reels, said to contain a man's voice, recounting a story so audacious that it could never be believed, and yet never be entirely dismissed. These tapes, once lost, were said to have been rediscovered decades later by a granddaughter searching through old belongings in an ancestral property in Delhi.

The tapes revealed it. Plot. Pragmatism. Patriotism. Could it be true that, only weeks after the proclamation of King George VI on 11

December 1936, the Kohinoor vanished — if only for a single night? That someone carried it in his hands, felt its weight, its history, its curse? That the Empire covered up what would have been its most shattering humiliation?

There is no proof. There may never be proof.

This novel does not claim to provide it.

What follows is a work of fiction — a story woven from the threads of fact and the shadows of rumour. Names, places, and incidents have been imagined, though some are drawn from the real world of 1930s London and British India. It is not history. And yet it lingers in that grey space where history and imagination touch.

Perhaps, the truth lies somewhere in between.

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Prologue

THE FORGOTTEN TAPES

The August sky above Delhi was heavy with possibility—humid, restless, and veined with dark monsoon clouds—when Kashvi Kumari Thapar unlocked the rusted gate to her grandfather's old bungalow in Civil Lines. The house had stood vacant for nearly a decade, its fading yellow paint and shuttered windows whispering stories only time could tell. Ivy clung stubbornly to the outer walls, as though trying to hold on to the past.

At forty-five, Kashvi was a tall woman, her face lined with the creases of a life spent in the pursuit of knowledge. After years of legal struggle, the house and its remains were finally hers. With a determined focus and a sheen of sweat on her brow, her curious eyes were fixed on the task ahead.

Kashvi stepped cautiously through the overgrown garden path, her leather boots brushing against the wild grass. She carried a small rucksack, a notebook, and a camera—standard tools of a historian, and now an archivist of her own family's legacy.

Inside, the house was musty, untouched. Dust danced like spirits in the filtered light slanting through the curtains.

Kashvi had come looking for her grandfather's papers. Ramesh Thapar had been a journalist in London from 1945 to 1966, when he returned to India. He was particularly well-regarded for his investigative pieces on Indian revolutionaries who vanished in the shadows of the British

Empire. But there had always been one story he never published—something he spoke of only in fragments before his death.

A man named Kehar Singh. A stolen diamond. A mission that nearly changed history.

In the store room, amid old trunks, typewritten manuscripts, and tin boxes of fading negatives, Kashvi found a locked wooden case. It bore her grandfather's initials—R.T.—branded into the lid with an old iron press. She cracked it open and found six audio tapes wrapped in muslin cloth, labelled in her grandfather's unmistakable hand: Kehar Singh – Session 1 to Session 6.

Her hands nervously picked one up. The edges of the tapes were brittle, but intact. Tucked underneath was a diary, its leather cover worn smooth. Inside were coded notes, maps, and a scribbled sentence that stopped her cold:

"If truth ever finds a voice, let it be this one."

A chill went up her spine. Her instincts as a historian took over. She carefully collected the tapes. And after exploring for any other literary or journalistic works, Kashvi left the bungalow untouched.

That night, in her rented flat in Defence Colony, she set up her vintage portable cassette player, placed the first tape inside the player nimbly, and played on.

There was a brief whirl, a crackle of static—and then a voice...gravelly, deliberate, and unmistakably Punjabi.

"They thought we would forget. But some things—some wounds—cut too deep. But how could I ever forget? Can you forget Jallianwalla, Thapar sa'ab? You must have closely documented it."

Mr Thapar interjected, "Yes, Kehar. I was very much aware and affected. At that time, I was based in Delhi. Now, you must tell your full name and start your story from the very beginning." There was a

rustling sound before Kehar spoke in a firm, measured and proud tone.

"My name is Kehar Singh. And this is the story of how I tried to steal back what belonged to my country."

Kashvi sat motionless, heart pounding, as the past began to speak.

The forgotten tapes had finally begun to tell their tale.

"I speak now not as a hero, but as a prisoner of time, of silence, of a struggle most have never heard of. I was arrested once, under false names, in a country where I didn't speak the language. I have escaped more suspecting eyes than I can count, eaten leftovers, almost died in the Soviet cold, posed as a trader, a hockey player, even a spy. And I carried with me a single thought through it all—that a boy, robbed of his birthright in 1849, still cries out for justice. That his diamond, our diamond, must come home."

"What I attempted—no, what we attempted—was madness to some, patriotism to others. But to me, it was simply unfinished business. My country bled while its jewels sparkled in London's crown. I could not sleep knowing that."

She had no idea yet where the voice would take her, or how deep into shadows it would lead.

But she did know one thing: her grandfather had meant his work to be discovered, to be made public.

The more Kashvi listened, the more she was convinced the world should hear Kehar Singh's story. It was a story for all generations. It was a life lived so fantastically that belief would have to be suspended.

And Kashvi, staring at the rest of the faded tapes, felt a sudden, unshakable resolve harden within her. The world had to hear Kehar Singh's story—every secret, every close encounter, every triumph.

The Forgotten Tapes

Kashvi knew that silence was no longer an option. By bringing this story to the world, she intended to ignite a firestorm of public debate—one powerful enough to force the government's hand in the fight for the Kohinoor's return.

The following chapters are an account of events, gleaned from the recorded narration by Kehar Singh. Rooted in History. Inspired by Rumour. Told as Legend. The Royal Kohinoor Heist.



Chapter 1

THE FIELDS OF SANSARPUR

Punjab, 1926.

The morning mist clung low over the fields, turning the mustard flowers into a floating sea of gold. In the village of Sansarpur, the day began with the metallic ring of a distant hand pump and the first call of peacocks from the banyan trees.

Kehar Singh, sixteen years old, stood barefoot on the damp earth outside his family's home. His hair was still ruffled from sleep, but his eyes—sharp, restless—scanned the fields as they belonged to him. In a way, they did. His family had worked this land for generations, ploughing the soil long before British officers had started collecting taxes on it.

His father, Gurdial Singh, was already in the cattle shed, binding hay into neat bundles. A man of towering height and shoulders built by years of farm labour, Gurdial moved with a calm precision. He noticed Kehar watching him and smiled faintly.

“You can stand there all day dreaming, or you can help me,” his father said in Punjabi, tossing him a length of rope.

Kehar caught it, grinning, and began tying the calf to its post. “I’m not dreaming,” he replied. “I’m thinking.”

“And what does my son think of, so early in the morning?”

Kehar hesitated, then said, “Of winning. Of being the fastest on the field, the one everyone looks up to.”

His father chuckled, shaking his head. “Hockey again?”

Kehar nodded.

Sansarpur was no ordinary village. It was a hotbed of hockey talent, producing players who represented the United Punjab Province or British India in various tournaments. Even the narrow dirt lanes had makeshift goalposts hammered into the ground. On festival days, matches would draw half the village to the edges of the field, cheering the boys in turbans darting barefoot after a scuffed ball.

By noon that day, Kehar was among them—stick in hand, sweat running down his temples, bare feet pounding the dusty pitch. His speed was uncanny. Where other boys swung wildly, Kehar waited for the exact moment to strike, turning defence into attack in a heartbeat.

“You think you’re *that* Dhyan Chand himself,” teased his friend Balbir as they walked home, their shirts sticking to their backs.

“One day, I’ll be better,” Kehar replied without arrogance, only certainty.

It wasn’t just hockey that made Kehar stand out. In the winter, he joined the older boys in *Buzkashi*-style games, riding ponies bareback, trying to snatch a sack from another rider’s arms. It was dangerous, chaotic, but exhilarating. His father disapproved, saying it was no sport for a farmer’s son. Kehar argued that it taught balance, cunning, and courage. Secretly, Gurdial admired his son’s daring—though he never said so aloud.

But the idyllic rhythm of village life was never free from shadows. That year, word came of fresh arrests in Amritsar. British officers had rounded up suspected rebels, many of them veterans of the Ghadar movement. Kehar’s mother, Harjeet Kaur, kept her voice low when

speaking about it, but Kehar heard enough to understand that the men in khaki uniforms were not saviours, but rulers who took what they pleased.

His first real taste of this came one hot afternoon when a British tax collector arrived on horseback, flanked by two policemen. Kehar watched from the doorway as his father handed over a cloth pouch of coins. The collector didn't even count them before demanding another three rupees in "arrears."

"That's more than we have," Gurdial protested.

The officer shrugged, glancing toward their wheat sacks. "Then sell more grain. Or your land will be marked."

Kehar's fists clenched at his sides. That night, as the family ate a modest meal, he told his father, "I will grow up and take something from them, the way they take from us."

Gurdial gave him a long look. "A man who fights must choose his time and weapon wisely."

Years passed, and Kehar grew into his own—broad-shouldered like his father, but quick on his feet. His reputation on the hockey field spread to nearby villages. Once, after a particularly fierce match in Jalandhar, a visiting schoolmaster pulled him aside.

"With proper training," the man said, "you could play for the Punjab team. Maybe even for India."

The idea lodged itself in Kehar's mind. Sport could be more than sport—it could be a ticket beyond the dusty lanes of Sansarpur.

By the time Kehar turned eighteen, his path seemed clear: excel in hockey, find a way into the cities, and from there, into the wider world. His father had ensured he studied English in school. He believed it

was one of the tools his son should equip himself with in a country governed by English-speaking rulers.

Kehar Singh was getting ready, as of now, for an unspoken purpose. Every ball he struck, every race he ran, was practice for something he could not yet name—a mission that would strike back at those who had made his parents bow their heads.

But another seed had already been planted, one that had nothing to do with glory and everything to do with memory. In 1919, news of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre had reached the village. Survivors came through on their way to other towns, telling of bodies stacked in the square, of General Dyer's guns cutting down unarmed men and women.

He had heard it first from his father, Gurdial Singh, his voice trembling with rage as he described the gunfire that lasted ten minutes but felt like an eternity. How General Dyer had ordered the troops to aim for the thickest parts of the crowd, and how the only escape routes were blocked. The story always ended the same way—with a long silence, and Gurdial staring at the floor as if he could still hear the screams.

Harjeet had wept openly for days. Gurdial spoke little, but when he did, it was to remind his son: "This is what empire means. Don't let their polished boots and kind words fool you."

One evening, standing in the fields at sunset, Kehar confided in his school friend and hockey mate, Balbir, "I don't want to spend my life just harvesting wheat," he said, eyes fixed on the far horizon. "I want to take back something they stole from us—something that will remind them we are not theirs to rule."

Balbir tilted his head. "And what will that be?"

"The Kohinoor," Kehar replied without hesitation.

Balbir frowned. “A diamond? Out of all the things the British have taken—our land, our crops, our pride—you choose a stone? Why not gold, or their ledgers, or something that feeds the poor?”

Kehar’s jaw tightened. “Because the Kohinoor isn’t just a stone. It’s a symbol. It was ours—Punjab’s—before they pried it from the hands of a boy king. They paraded it like a trophy of conquest. Every time the Queen wears it, it tells the world that we were defeated, that we bowed.”

Balbir was silent for a moment. The fading light painted their faces in shades of amber.

“My father told me the story,” Kehar continued, voice low. “Maharaja Duleep Singh was only a child when they took it. They made him sign the Treaty of Lahore, forced him to hand it over himself, as if he was giving them a gift. That diamond is their flag planted in our soul. Taking it back...”—he paused—“...would mean the sun has started to set on their empire.”

Balbir studied him. “And you think one man can do that?”

“One man can start it,” Kehar said quite simply. “And others will follow.”

From that day, as if confiding had given wings to his ambition, Kehar trained harder. He began running before dawn, lifting sacks of grain as weights, honing his reflexes with endless stick drills. And when no one was watching, he would climb to the top of the old watchtower at the village’s edge, imagining himself scaling walls much higher, in places far away.

It was on one such climb, the sky streaked with the last light, that his mother called up to him. “Kehar! Dinner!”

The Fields of Sansarpur

He descended quickly, but not before looking out over the fields one last time. The horizon glowed in shades of orange and gold, like the edge of something both beautiful and dangerous.

Years later, when the chime of the Big Ben of London would replace the calls of Sansarpur's peacocks, he would remember this view. And it would remind him that even the smallest seed, if sown in the right soil, could grow into something unstoppable.



Chapter 2

UNVEILING OF THE AMBITION

1935. Sansarpur, Punjab

It was 11 am. Summer had arrived. Kehar was now twenty-five. Aware, mature, sharp and purposeful. He stood outside the crumbling post office in Sansarpur, reading a smudged *Civil and Military Gazette* that spoke of new ordinances, harsher taxes, and the sudden arrest of two nationalist leaders in Lahore. The British were no longer merely ruling India—they were squeezing it.

“Still reading their lies?” Balbir’s voice came from behind.

Kehar folded the paper slowly. “It’s not lies. Not all of it. But it’s what they want us to see.”

“And you want to show them something else?” Balbir asked, curiosity mixing with caution.

“Yes,” Kehar replied, his gaze distant. “Something they can’t ignore or cover up with another speech in Parliament. Something they’ll have to explain to the whole world.”

Balbir smirked faintly. “Oh, that diamond again?”

Kehar didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. The Kohinoor had become his private obsession. In his mind, its history was intertwined with the humiliation of his people.

He thought of Maharaja Duleep Singh again—the boy torn from his throne, from his mother, exiled to England, forced to smile in portraits beside the Queen, who wore his kingdom's most precious jewel.

Kehar saw in him a reflection of every Indian farmer, soldier, and craftsman who had been robbed of their dignity. If he could take the diamond back, even for a day, it would not just be a theft—it would be a reversal of the ignominy brought upon their forefathers. Drowned in these thoughts, Kehar, along with Balbir, made their way to the village square to meet fellow hockey players.

That evening, Kehar returned home to find his father sitting on the charpoy under the neem tree, mending the plough's handle. The lantern cast a warm circle around him, but his eyes were lost in thought.

"You're late," Gurdial said without looking up.

"I was at the post office," Kehar replied. "News from Lahore."

Gurdial tied the handle's binding, tested its strength, then set it aside. "Bad news?"

"They've arrested Giani Kartar Singh and Master Tara Singh's men. No trial yet. Just taken."

His father's jaw tightened. "That's their way. Detained with no answers."

For a moment, silence hung between them. Crickets chirped in the dark fields. Then Gurdial looked at his son and spoke in a quieter tone.

"Kehar... one day you may lose your father to an arrest like that. Or worse. If it happens, you must promise me something."

Kehar frowned. "Don't talk like that, Bauji..."

“Listen.” His father’s voice was firm now. “If they take me, you must protect this family’s name and honour. Take care of your mother. Take care of the land. And never... never bow to them.”

Kehar felt a lump in his throat. “And what if I want to fight them?”

A small, grim smile touched Gurdial’s lips. “Then fight. But remember that war is not only about guns. Sometimes the greatest battles are fought with patience and symbols. A single act can be remembered longer than a thousand speeches.”

Kehar hesitated, then asked, “What if that act was stealing back something they took from us?”

His father’s brows lifted. He looked Kehar straight in the eyes for a long moment, “You speak of the Kohinoor?”

“Yes.”

Gurdial leaned back, studying his son as if weighing the boy he had raised against the man he was becoming. “That stone is cursed, they say. It has brought ruin to every throne it has sat on.”

“Then perhaps it’s time it brought ruin to theirs,” Kehar replied.

The older man chuckled, but his eyes remained serious. “Kehar, my dear, that was a different time. Our Maharaja was young and defeated. He had no choice. And today, the freedom of our country, from this slavery, is more important than a stone that we can never lay our hands on. What are you even thinking?”

Kehar, “Bauji, if we can take it back, it will be a symbolic victory and a big blow to the pride of Great Britain. What they took from us, we will take back. This will not be for glory. Not for riches. I will do it so that the people of India can see that we can take back what is ours. That the British are not untouchable. Are we not doing the same to get back our freedom?”

Gurdial had moist eyes and a look of pride. He patted his son on the head and put his arms around his shoulder. It was a rare moment of affection and confidence in his son. Kehar had grown up to be a patriot. That was the most satisfying thought for Gurdial. In his mind, the father had given his son to the service of the motherland.

Over the following weeks, Kehar's mind spun faster than the wheels on the village's grain mill. The British patrolled with rifles, their bayonets flashing like teeth in the sun. The markets were full of informers. The Gurudwara committee whispered of raids and arrests.

In the evenings, Kehar and Balbir often sat in the barn, smoke from the hookah curling between them as they talked.

"They'll never let a farmer's son get near the Tower of London," Balbir said.

"Not as a farmer's son," Kehar replied. "But as an athlete... perhaps."

Balbir snorted. "So you'll dribble past guards with a hockey stick?"

"If that's what it takes," Kehar said, smiling faintly. "Hockey is the one thing they respect us for. And it's my one chance to get inside their world without a rifle pointed at my chest."

Balbir shook his head, but there was admiration in his eyes. "You're mad, Singh. But if you pull this off..."

Kehar finished the sentence for him. "...it will be a message no one can forget."

As Balbir left for home, giving him a heavy pat, Kehar thought of the diamond—not as a glittering object, but as a story. A story of kings, betrayal, enslavement and exile. A story that had begun in India and was still unfinished.

And somewhere deep inside, the resolve hardened.



Chapter 3

FIRST WHISPERS OF THE MISSION

By the winter of 1935, Sansarpur had grown used to Kehar Singh's unmissable presence.

He was taller than most men in the village—broad shoulders tapering to a lean waist, every muscle shaped by years of hockey drills, farm work, and long rides on horseback. His skin was the bronze of the Punjab sun, his black hair kept short, and his eyes—dark, direct—seemed to weigh a man's character before he spoke.

But it was the scar that set him apart. A thin, pale mark cut from his right eye to just above his cheekbone, the gift of a hockey stick waved during a heated tackle in a tournament in Lahore. Some said it made him look dangerous; others said it made him look like a man who had seen battle. Kehar knew it was both.

When he walked through the fields, the younger boys whispered. They had seen him play—how he could take the ball from one end of the field to the other, dribbling past defenders with the precision of a surgeon. They had also seen him in the bazaar, bargaining sharply but fairly, slipping in jokes that made even the stiffest trader laugh.

It was this combination—athletic grace, quick wit, and a certain steel in his gaze—that made people trust him. Or fear him.

The air in Sansarpur that December was heavy with rumours. The British were tightening their grip again—new restrictions on gatherings, closer scrutiny of gurdwaras, arrests in Amritsar for “sedition.” The newspapers, when they arrived, carried more announcements than advertisements.

Kehar had been biding his time, gathering fragments—names, routes, possibilities. Now, the picture in his mind began to sharpen. If he were to strike the blow he imagined, he first needed to get out of India without attracting attention.

That meant one thing: disguise.

Not a physical one—not yet—but a disguise of purpose. He could not be a farmer, getting out of Punjab. The authorities were alert. Farmers were being questioned. Students were being watched. Political activists were jailed without trial.

But an athlete... especially a hockey player... could travel. India had won its first hockey gold medal in the 1928 Olympics. And hockey players had earned respect amongst the British.

It was in late December that he rode to Amritsar on a borrowed mare to meet with Balbir, a childhood friend who had moved to Amritsar and an older acquaintance, Ustad Rattan Singh—a former provincial hockey coach who still had friends in Calcutta, Lahore, and even abroad. They sat in the back of a small tea shop near Hall Bazaar, steam curling from the chipped cups between them.

“You’ve still got the speed?” Ustad asked, narrowing his eyes. “I don’t sponsor ghosts.”

Kehar smiled faintly. “You saw me last in Lahore, Ustad. You tell me.”

“Hmm,” the old man grunted. “You were good then. Now?”

Instead of answering, Kehar reached under the table, took out his hockey stick from his satchel, and began rolling the ball from foot to foot under the table. Balbir grinned at the sight—it was the same trick

Kehar had used to distract opponents before a sudden attack. The ball barely made a sound.

Rattan Singh chuckled. “Still sly. Good. There’s a tournament in Lahore in February. Club teams. British officers in attendance. Win there, and you might get an invitation to play in matches abroad.”

“That’s exactly what I need,” Kehar said quietly.

Balbir glanced at him. “Why Lahore?”

Kehar sipped his tea, letting the steam rise between them. “Because it’s a gateway. And because from Lahore, you can reach... places that matter.”

There was something in his tone—measured, distant—that made Balbir narrow his eyes. “What places?”

Kehar only smiled. “The kind that still keep what isn’t theirs.”

Balbir gave a knowing glance, recalling Kehar’s Kohinoor obsession, but before he could press further, Rattan Singh started talking about team formations. Kehar let the subject drift, but inside, his thoughts stayed fixed on a single image—cold, glittering, and far from home.

In the weeks that followed, Kehar trained with a ferocity that startled even those who knew him. Dawn runs through frost-covered fields, stick drills until his wrists ached, and sprints with younger players who could not keep pace. His scar glistened with sweat in the winter sun, and his muscles, already chiselled, seemed carved deeper by the effort.

But his training was more than physical.

He met with traders in Jalandhar who had connections in Kabul. He spoke to a Sikh merchant who once supplied leather goods to the British Indian Army—goods that travelled across borders. He began to understand the invisible lines on the map—the ones that smugglers, spies, and diplomats crossed quietly while others were stopped at checkpoints.

One night, sitting with Balbir on the roof of his house, Kehar laid it out in the barest terms. The moon cast silver on the fields, and the winter air was sharp enough to sting the lungs.

“I’ll play in Lahore. From there, I’ll get to Afghanistan.”

“And then?” Balbir asked.

“From there, Europe. I’ll use hockey, contacts, whatever I must.”

Balbir studied him for a moment. And blurted out mischievously, “And for what exactly? Are you eyeing a place in the Olympics? Berlin is just months away.”

Kehar’s eyes held the faintest glint. “Yes, why not? Watching hockey in Berlin can be a great story if I can reach that far and in time.”

Balbir tilted his head in exasperation. “Oh, your Kohinoor obsession. Can you realise the impracticality of it all, and have you ever thought that you may never live to see your homeland again?”

“I have decided to go ahead, even if it means sacrificing myself for the objective.”

There was a weight in the last sentence, something that made Balbir respect his friend and feel fearful about his well-being. But before he could say anything, Kehar had already turned away, looking out over the moonlit fields as if measuring a distance only he could see.

By January 1936, Kehar put his plans’ first stage in motion. Rattan Singh secured him a place with a combined Punjab side headed to Lahore. His name on the roster was enough to make British officers glance over him with mild respect, rather than suspicion.

Still, there were risks. He knew the Criminal Investigation Department had eyes on many nationalist circles, and his occasional visits to Amritsar and Lahore would be noted. That was where his mental agility came in—always having an answer ready, always moving between different groups so that no one saw the whole picture.

At the same time, he began practising a different kind of skill—listening without revealing, steering conversations without seeming to. Whether it was bargaining with a leather seller or talking with British sports officials, Kehar had a way of making others believe they were in control.

This, he knew, would be as important as any hockey match. Dealing with people, convincing them and getting them on his side would be critical for his ambitions.

The night before leaving for Lahore, Kehar's father found him packing an old leather kit bag.

"You've trained hard," Gurdial said, leaning against the doorway. "Play well."

Kehar looked up. "I will, Bauji."

The older man's eyes lingered on him. "And remember—fire burns both ways."

Kehar smiled faintly. "I'll remember."

But as his father left, Kehar tightened the strap on his kit bag and let the silence settle around him. His mind was already thousands of miles away, in a city of stone and iron, where something taken long ago still lay under foreign guard.



Chapter 4

THE PACT

The train from Sansarpur to Lahore was crowded with winter travellers—merchants hauling bales of cotton, soldiers on leave, families visiting relatives for the festival of *Lohri*. Kehar sat by the window, his kit bag on his lap, watching the plains roll past in shades of gold and brown. Every so often, his fingers tapped an invisible rhythm on his knee—a habit from years of stick drills.

The train chugged into Lahore junction by noon. The players carried their kit bags with stomachs churning and feet itching to go for practice. As they scampered onto *tongas*, the city buzzed about them. The air was heavy with the smell of fried pakoras and the faint tang of the Ravi River.

Coach Rattan Singh had made arrangements for the boys at a friend's guest house, where they had lunch to their heart's content and a nap before the hockey practice at 4 pm.

Kehar's plan was already in motion. He had set up a meeting with Balbir and a group of revolutionaries. After wrapping up practice and a strategy session with the team, Kehar excused himself and headed into the city once again.

The late evening in Lahore was wrapped in a thin fog that blurred the gas lamps along Anarkali Bazaar. Hawkers still called their wares, though the winter chill muted their voices. Kehar kept his head low

beneath a woollen cap. He wove through the crowd with the ease of a man accustomed to slipping into and out of places unseen.

The haveli at the end of the narrow lane bore no signboard, only a brass lion-head knocker dulled with age. He knew the code: three precise taps, a pause, and then two more. The door creaked open.

Inside, a faint smell of sandalwood and ink greeted him. A hurricane lamp burned on a low table in the back room, casting a pool of amber light over the faces gathered there.

Balbir was at the head of the table—broad-shouldered, his once-jet hair now streaked with silver. To his left sat Hari Lal, the wiry pressman whose clandestine newsletters had already earned him three warrants. Nand Kishore, the trader, leaned against the far wall, his thick wool coat draped over the chair beside him.

“You made good time,” Balbir said, gesturing for Kehar to sit.

Kehar took his place, and Balbir poured steaming tea into small steel cups. A couple of rounds of tea had already taken place, reminding Kehar that the trio had sat long to discuss his mission. For a while, they spoke of nothing—weather in Punjab, the difficulty of finding good leather this year, the price of wheat. It was the old dance: to let casual words flush out any listening ears.

Finally, the door to the street was bolted, and the conversation shifted. Nand Kishore spoke first, “We have all heard your intention from Balbir. Now we must hear it from you—clear, without evasion. So we can decide if we stand with you.”

Kehar set his cup down, his dark eyes steady in the lamplight. “I am going to Britain,” he said. “Not to study, not to settle, but to take back what they stole eighty-six years ago. The Kohinoor. And if God gives me the strength to bring it home.”

The words fell into the silence like stones into still water. No one flinched—but their gazes sharpened.

Hari Lal's voice was low and concerned, "You understand what you're saying? That stone is guarded more heavily than their crown."

"I know," Kehar said. "It's kept in the Jewel House at the Tower. Behind glass, behind guards, behind their arrogance. But it is ours, and its presence there is a flag planted in our soul. As long as it sits in London, it mocks us."

Nand Kishore leaned forward. "You'll need more than anger to get you there, Kehar. You'll need papers that can stand scrutiny at any port. And men who can vouch for you in places where our flag does not fly."

Kehar looked at all three men. With a steely resolve and a firm voice, he started, "For the last 10 years, I have been preparing for this moment. This mission has been running in the background of my life. Balbir knows it. Once he mocked me, but he has seen my preparation. I have been playing hockey, training in horse riding, combat skills and developing relationships across so that I can fulfil the objective of my life. I seek you for guidance, for blessings. If you still have any doubts, you can test me in your own ways, but be aware that any time we have is precious. So I leave it to you to make me part of your network and give me the support I will need all the way to London."

The trio had collected in Lahore for a reason. This was no ordinary decision. But Kehar's words were all they needed to hear in person. Balbir gave a glance towards Hari Lal and Nand Kishore, then reached into his pocket and pushed an envelope towards Kehar. "Here is a list of contacts in Peshawar. From there, Nand's people can take you across to Kandahar—under the name of a leather merchant supplying British regiments. In Afghanistan, you'll find Karim Khan. He will see you till Herat, and then Hari's connections with the Azad Hind Fauj will guide you through Russia until Berlin. Beyond that... you will need your wits. But you have the secret names, codes and signals at each of the places. Study them and remember them before you burn these papers."

Hari Lal tapped the edge of the table. “We’ll also keep you fed with news—British troop movements, political shifts, anything that might help. But we can’t send letters openly.”

Kehar nodded. “The chain will run through coded messages in trade documents, yes?”

“Exactly,” Balbir said. “A single word in a wool shipment’s manifest can carry an entire paragraph to those who know how to read it.”

Hari Lal added, “From Amritsar to Lahore, Lahore to Kandahar, Kandahar to Moscow, and then on to Berlin or wherever you land. Across three continents, the line will remain unbroken. But you must guard it like your own life.”

Kehar’s mind ran ahead, already mapping the journey. He would ride in the Buzkashi fields of Kabul to earn the Afghans’ trust, learning the chaos of the game and the honour code of the riders. In the Russian lands, he would vanish into the shadows of bazaars, passing as a leather trader moving from outpost to outpost. And in Europe, hockey would be his passport—entry into clubs, changing rooms, and circles where suspicion gave way to camaraderie.

Kehar was already envisaging a roadmap for himself, well aware that a perilous adventure of this sort could come to a full stop if a single step went awry or a message was not decoded correctly.

The talk grew more detailed. They discussed the cover stories for each border crossing, how to pose as a hockey player in Berlin, and which safehouses to avoid in London because they were known to British intelligence. They debated whether Kehar should make contact with expatriate Indian revolutionaries in Britain at all, or keep to himself until the final phase.

Nand Kishore reached into his coat and produced a small packet wrapped in oilcloth. Inside was a thin gold chain, unadorned except for a single black bead. “Our signal,” he explained. “Wear it in public

when you are safe. Remove it when you are in danger. Any of our people will know.”

For a long moment, the four men studied one another in the lamp’s glow. The enormity of what they were setting in motion was not lost on them.

Balbir’s tone softened. “Kehar... once you step onto that path, there is no coming back the same man. If you succeed, you will be hunted. If you fail, you will be a ghost no one can name. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Kehar said. “And still, I go.”

A thin smile touched Balbir’s lips. “Then so be it.”

They drank the last of their tea in silence. Outside, the market had begun to wind down, shop shutters clanging shut in the night.

At last, Balbir stood. “This meeting never happened. The walls of this room are the only witnesses. From this night on, you are one man in the eyes of the world, and another in ours. That second man carries the weight of a country’s pride.”

Each of them clasped Kehar’s hand in turn—Hari Lal’s grip quick and dry, Nand Kishore’s firm and warm, Balbir’s lingering, as if sealing an oath.

The last words came from Nand Kishore. “May the channels remain open, may the lines hold, and may you one day return with the thing that will remind them we have not forgotten.”

As they opened the door for him, Nand added quietly, “Before you go—there’s news from Amritsar. You’ve been selected for the Punjab State Hockey XI. They want you for the winter tournament in Delhi next month.”

Kehar felt the tug of two worlds—the arena where sticks clashed, and goals roared, and the shadow path that would lead him far beyond any stadium. “I’ll play,” he said finally. “And then I’ll go.”

He stepped back into the chill of the bazaar. The fog had thickened, wrapping the streets in secrecy. In his coat pocket, the envelope and the gold chain seemed to weigh more than they should, as if already carrying the burden of the journey ahead.

He walked alone to the station, past the call of chai-sellers and the scent of roasted peanuts, past the flickering light of oil lamps. His thoughts turned briefly to Sansarpur, to Gurdial's voice in the quiet of their home, and to the green fields he might never see again.

But he did not look back.

From tonight, the pact was sealed. Across oceans and borders, in whispers and coded words, they would be watching, listening, ready to send what he needed.

And one day—if fate allowed—he would bring the Kohinoor home.



Chapter 5

THE LAST LOOK AT PUNJAB

Delhi in February 1936 was gripped by a fever that had nothing to do with the cold season and everything to do with hockey. The Berlin Olympics loomed just months away, and the nation's favourite sport was on every lip. The Irwin Stadium, newly built near India Gate, became the epicentre of that frenzy. Every match there felt like an audition for glory.

Kehar Singh walked into the stadium grounds as part of the United Punjab Province squad, his hockey stick tucked under his arm, the air thick with the smell of damp earth and linseed oil from freshly polished sticks. His scarred cheek caught the sunlight, and his broad-shouldered frame made him stand out even before the whistle blew.

Their opening match was against the formidable Punjab Police team – a side notorious for its aggressive tackling and sheer physicality. Kehar knew many of them by name, some from his days as a junior. There would be no friendly exchanges here; they were out for dominance.

From the first whistle, the game was a battle. Kehar's position at centre-half demanded he be everywhere – intercepting, passing, turning defence into attack in seconds. Twice in the first ten minutes, he took hard blows to the shin from swinging sticks. There were no shin guards then, only the sting of wood on bone, and the purple marks that rose under the skin were like badges of war.

The crowd was electric. British officers in blazers and Panama hats watched from a special enclosure, their wives fanning themselves against the winter sun. The Indian crowd in the open stands roared with every dribble and cheerfully jeered at every foul.

Kehar's control of the midfield was surgical. He anticipated passes before they were made, slipping into positions that cut off attacks and launching his own with quick, decisive strokes. Late in the second half, with the score tied 1-1, he intercepted a dangerous break from Punjab Police, threaded through two players, and delivered a cross that set up the winning goal.

After one particularly hard-fought win against the Bombay team, a tall British official approached him near the changing tents.

"Splendid play, Singh," the man said, his accent crisp. "Ever consider playing for a club in Europe?"

Kehar's eyes flickered for the briefest moment. "Europe?"

"Germany is hosting the Olympics. Clubs are looking for talent. A chap like you could make a name for himself."

Kehar smiled politely. "For now, sir, I play for Punjab. But who knows where the game will take me."

The tournament stretched over several days, with United Punjab Province storming through each round. By the final, the atmosphere was thick with tension and anticipation. Their opponents, the Bengal team, came with a reputation for a fast and aggressive style. The match was bruising — Kehar collected fresh welts on his legs and a near-split knuckle from an awkward deflection. But his calm command of the field anchored the team, and in the closing minutes, they scored the winning goal.

By the time the final whistle blew, the roar from the stands was deafening.

When the trophy was presented, the applause rolled like thunder under the winter sky. For Kehar, though, the glory was muted. Each cheer only reminded him that this public triumph was merely a curtain for another, far riskier journey ahead.

In the dressing area, still wiping sweat from his face, Kehar noticed the same British official from the previous round approaching. "Singh," the man greeted, extending his hand. "Another fine performance. I wasn't wrong about you."

Kehar smiled faintly. "Thank you, sir."

The officer glanced around, then drew an envelope from his coat. "Consider this... a token of appreciation. It's a recommendation letter. If you ever decide to play professionally, Germany needs players like you. It might open a few doors for you in Europe. There are some from England, too, who are plying their trade there. In an Olympic year, you can earn well, too."

Kehar took the envelope, feeling the weight of the paper inside. "That's generous of you."

The man's smile was thin. "Generous? No, Singh. I like to think of it as an investment in talent. I am their scout in India. The name of the club is in there. So, you are doing me no favour. Once you've made up your mind, contact me. Best of luck, Singh."

And that's how luck favours the brave, thought Kehar Singh. The signs for his mission were promising.

Two days later, Kehar stepped off the train at Sansarpur station, greeted by a biting wind and the sight of familiar fields stretching under the pale afternoon sun. Word of his Delhi performance had reached ahead of him, and a small crowd had gathered — neighbours, school friends, old hockey mates. They cheered and clapped his back, peppering him with questions about the stadium, the crowds, the British officers.

At home, his mother embraced him tightly, her face creased with joy. "You've made us proud, Kehar," she whispered. His father, Gurdial Singh, sat in the courtyard, eyes glistening with quiet pride.

That night, after the visitors had gone, his mother insisted he sit with her in the kitchen while she kneaded dough for the next day's bread. The faint smell of ghee and woodsmoke hung in the air. "You've been a good son, Kehar," she began, her hands working the dough slowly. "Even as a boy, you stood up for others. Remember the time you jumped into the canal to save that neighbour's child? Or when you carried wheat sacks for old Gopal during harvest because his back was failing?"

Kehar smiled at the memories. "I just did what anyone would do."

His mother looked at him — really looked — and for a moment her hands stilled. "You're going far this time, aren't you? This is not just Lahore." Word had reached her that Kehar was going to another hockey tournament.

After a week, Kehar was supposed to play another tournament in Amritsar, but it was an excuse for his great escape to Europe. He needed some time to regroup for his mission.

Kehar felt a tightness in his chest. He forced a playful shrug. "It's only another tournament, Ma. Nothing more."

But her eyes lingered on his face, reading what he couldn't say. Finally, she gave a small nod, as if accepting the answer she knew was only half the truth. "Then take care, my son. Wherever you go, take our honour with you. And come back to us."

He reached over and touched her flour-dusted hands. "Always, Ma."

Gurdial Singh was late for dinner. He had just returned from an underground meeting with a revolutionary group that was organising a protest march in Amritsar. He freshened up and looked at his son and the packed luggage. "So, finally, going for another hockey

tournament or going on a mission.” Both stole a look at Harjeet, who was busy baking *rotis*.

Kehar gave a clever reply,” Who knows when a hockey match becomes a mission and a tournament that one plays for the last time, Bauji.”

Gurdial understood. It was time for his son to fulfil what his heart desired. He was just a proud father, letting go of a son in the service of the motherland.

Kehar knew these might be some of the last few meals the three of them would be having together before it's time for him to depart. And he just looked at his mother and father eating in peace. They would miss him in a few days, and he would, too. But he had already crossed the mental barrier and was looking forward to the plan unfolding.

Warm Send off

It was a cold morning, and the air at Sansarpur station was heavy with farewells. His mother pressed a small cloth packet into his hand — *parathas* wrapped in muslin. Harjeet Kaur was a strong woman, but today she let go. Her emotions got the better of her, and she hugged her son tightly, looked at him and kissed his forehead. Gurdial had taken a break from his farming duties and held Kehar's shoulders with his big hands. His eyes glistened with unshed tears, yet his face bore a proud, resolute expression. Gurdial drew his son into a fierce embrace, acutely aware it might be their final moment together. Such were the days: every Punjab household gave what it could—grain, cattle, or its men and women—to the cause of freeing India from British rule.

The moment lit up when friends from the village hockey field came to see him off. There were jokes and back slapping in the midst of quick embraces and encouraging words. Balbir, his boyhood teammate, gripped his shoulder. "You have much to look forward to. Win this one, too, Kehar. And come back with stories. May Waheguru be with you".

By now, Kehar could no longer hold back his emotions, and he gave a collective hug to his friends. The boy had become a man, and the world was waiting for what he could achieve.

As the train hissed and the whistle blew, he stepped aboard, leaning out of the doorway for one last look at his family and the mustard fields beyond. His mother's eyes were wet, his father's face wore a restrained smile.

The wheels began to turn, and the platform slipped away. Apart from blessings, Kehar was also armed with the British officer's recommendation letter in his coat pocket, its crisp folds pressing against his chest. In Lahore, it would be the first of many tools for the road ahead — a road that would wind far beyond hockey grounds and into the very heart of the empire.



Chapter 6

THE BUZKASHI TRAIL

The air in Lahore hung thick with the late-summer heat, but Kehar Singh felt no sweat upon his brow. His mind, sharper than the narrow gullies of Mochi Gate, moved with mechanical precision. The railway clock at the station was approaching the hour, and with it, the last chance to disappear before eyes began asking questions.

He had left Sansarpur at dawn, taking a small branch-line train to Amritsar, and by the time he changed for Lahore, the dust of Punjab still clung to his turban folds, a deliberate choice — to pass as yet another trader from the villages, unremarkable and easily forgotten.

In a cramped tea stall near Anarkali Bazaar, he met two old acquaintances — men who had survived enough seasons under the British to know the worth of silence. One passed him a folded scrap of brown paper, no bigger than a matchbox cover, sealed with a dab of ghee so that only someone who knew the trick could open it. Inside was a list of names — not complete names — just initials, trading codes, and fragments of addresses. Kehar's brief was to memorise and destroy.

A second man, his hands marked by the black dust of the rail yards, pushed across a small cotton pouch. Inside, Kehar Singh felt the cold weight of sovereigns and silver rupees — the kind that crossed frontiers more easily than paper notes.

“You’ll find no trust beyond Quetta,” the man said quietly. “The tribes take coin, not promises.”

Kehar Singh nodded, sliding both pouch and paper into the concealed lining of his kurta. Apart from these, Kehar was also carrying the envelope and gold chain given by Nand Kishore and Hari Lal during his last visit to Lahore.

It was time to embark on a journey of a lifetime. Measured steps, being ordinary and staying sharp, were his brief. Kehar had been warned: the British paid more to their spies than to those who served them. The farther northwest he travelled, the more eyes followed. He had to appear harmless yet move with purpose. The sooner he escaped British India, the safer he would be.

The train north to Peshawar left at dusk. He sat in a third-class carriage, the scent of coals and oil mingling with the chatter of farmers, pilgrims, and soldiers returning to their regiments. Somewhere behind him, two plainclothes constables in ill-fitting khaki sat too still, speaking too little. Whether they were watching him or another man, Kehar Singh could not be sure. The uncertainty was deliberate — a tool the British had mastered.

By the time he stepped off in Peshawar, the night wind carried the chill of the frontier. The great arc lamps of the station threw hard shadows, and beyond them, the mountains loomed like a wall. Here, the rail ended; the rest of the journey would be made in silence and dust.

At the caravanserai outside Khyber Gate, a horse waited — a sturdy, weathered *Kathiawari* gelding, its ears sharply pointed, bred to endure the passes. His contact in the city, a wiry Afridi with a beard streaked white, said nothing more than, “He knows the road better than you do.”

Kehar Singh mounted without farewell. The road west wound like a scar through the Khyber Pass, its ridges watched by unseen rifles. The

British maintained their outposts here, but beyond the range of their heliographs lay the lands of other laws — where a man's survival depended on the coin in his pouch, the steadiness of his hand, and the loyalty of the one riding beside him.

Two days later, when the mountains fell away into the harsh terrain of northern Afghanistan, Peshawar appeared on the horizon — low, sun-baked, and ancient. It was a place where empires had bled themselves dry for centuries.

The contact awaited him at a mud-walled compound on the city's northern edge, a man in a woollen *chapan* with eyes that measured everything and trusted nothing.

"You've come far," the man said in Persian, his tone neither warm nor hostile. "And yet your journey has only begun."

The man led him inside, past a low archway hung with fraying camel-hair rope. The compound smelled of tallow lamps and cardamom. In a corner, a brazier glowed red, throwing thin shadows against the mud-plastered walls.

Kehar Singh sat cross-legged on a coarse felt rug, his host pouring green tea from a battered samovar. No words passed until the cups were drained — the custom here, and also a test of patience.

Finally, the man reached beneath his *chapan* and drew out a sealed envelope, the paper thick and slightly brittle from its journey. Its surface bore no address, only a faint watermark of the East India Company — old stock, stolen years ago from a Calcutta warehouse.

"This," the man said, placing it before him, "is the only reason the next gates will open to you."

Kehar Singh examined it without touching. In neat copperplate, the salutation began: *To the Custodian of the Jewel, Tower of London*. Nothing more could be read without breaking the seal — and that would forfeit its use.

“It will pass through fewer hands if it looks official,” the man explained. “Inside are the words your sponsors chose. The one who reads it will not know whether to obey it, fear it, or destroy it. That doubt is your shield.”

Kehar Singh’s eyes lingered on the faded crest impressed in wax — a crown and lion, imperfect but convincing. He imagined the journey this letter would make: carried in his saddlebag across hostile passes, slipped into the grasp of a trusted courier in Mazar-e-Sharif, and from there, onward to Germany, always an insurance against doubters loyal to the Empire.

Outside, a wind swept in from the desert, rattling the wooden shutters. The host leaned forward, his voice dropping.

“The British police in Lahore were already sniffing. They know someone left Sansarpur and did not return. By the time you reach Mazar-e-Sharif, they will know more. The letter will not save you from them — but it may let you walk through the gates where they cannot follow.”

Kehar Singh slid the envelope into the inner lining of his saddlebag, fastening the leather strap twice. It was not the weight of the coin pouch that he felt now, but the far heavier pull of the mission that lay ahead — a mission that would carry him, step by step, eventually into the guarded heart of London itself.

The Buzkashi Trail





Chapter 7

THROUGH THE SOVIET VEIL

Kabul – The Departure into Silence

The day Kehar Singh left Kabul, the air was still, the kind of brittle cold that seemed to freeze sound. The Hazara muleteer, whom he had been told to trust by a single line on the Lahore list – *“Follow the man with the river stone at his throat”* – stood by a mule saddled with rough blankets and a small pack of food. The stone, a smooth grey oval threaded on a leather cord, swung lightly against the man’s chest as he tightened the girth.

They left before the city fully woke. Kabul’s narrow alleys were empty but for a few dogs nosing at refuse, their breath steaming. Past the gates, the road narrowed, curling along valleys where the shadows clung stubbornly even at midday. Twice they passed small Afghan patrols – men in mismatched coats carrying Lee-Enfield’s slung across their backs – but the muleteer never broke stride.

At night, they stopped in a village where the wind howled through the eaves. The muleteer spoke only enough to tell Kehar Singh when to eat, when to sleep, and when to walk. That silence was, in its own way, part of the protection the Lahore friends had described: *“The less he says, the more he keeps you alive.”*

By the second day, the sharp ridges softened into wide plains dusted with snow. Far ahead, Mazar-e-Sharif shimmered in the pale light – blue domes under a sky the colour of pewter.

Mazar-e-Sharif – The First Hand-off

The city smelled of woodsmoke and dust. Market stalls, half-empty in the winter season, still offered pomegranates, walnuts, and bolts of coarse cloth. The muleteer led him down a side street to a low shop with rolled carpets stacked high against one wall.

The rug merchant inside was balding, with a close-trimmed beard and eyes that gave nothing away. Kehar Singh presented the cloth packet he had carried from Kabul – an ordinary piece of cotton, save for a stitched knot pattern at the corner. In Lahore, they had shown him that pattern on a scrap of muslin and told him it meant *safe passage with border help*.

The merchant felt the cloth, nodded once, and unrolled a thick woollen shawl from a back shelf. Folded within was a border pass stamped faintly with the seal of the Afghan administration at Hairatan. “This will be enough for you to reach Krasnovodsk,” the merchant murmured. “Do not linger. And when you meet the man in the grey tunic, tell him the apricots were sweet this year.”

That last line – “*The apricots were sweet*” – had been on the Lahore list too, under *Trader’s Greetings*. It was more than a pleasantry; it was the confirmation to the next man that Kehar Singh was expected and had to be taken care of.

Termez – The Oxus Crossing

The Oxus was a frozen mirror in places, broken by jagged seams where the current fought the ice. Across the bridge loomed the first of the Soviet watchtowers, its red star faded but still unmistakable.

The customs shed was hot with coal smoke, and the air was damp from melting snow tracked in by soldiers. An NKVD officer, his face pale and pinched, examined Kehar Singh’s papers with deliberate slowness. “Textiles?” he asked in Russian, rolling the word in his mouth.

Kehar Singh opened his mouth to answer, but before he could speak, a man in a worn grey tunic stepped forward from behind the counter. “He is on the Tashkent list, Comrade,” the man said, his tone as flat as the surrounding plain.

The NKVD officer grunted and tossed the papers back. As Kehar Singh reached to collect them, the man, possibly part of the *Azad Hind Fauj* network, tapped the counter twice with his fingertips. In Lahore, the friends had shown him that very signal: *Leave now. Don’t look back.*

Samarkand – The Shadow in the Bazaar

The train rattled north over frost-bitten rails, every jolt making the coins in his belt pouch shift. In Lahore, they had told him to keep the silver in a sewn pocket rather than in the bag – bribes, if necessary, should never require unpacking in view of others.

Samarkand was beautiful even under a veil of winter: blue domes and tiled archways rising against a pale sky, minarets standing sentinel over the bazaar. He wandered the market until he found the bakery described in the Lahore notes: “*The baker whose son rides the iron horse.*” Kehar found an iron horse statue outside the bakery. He pushed the door open, the bells jangled, and so did the attention of a portly Uzbek woman taking an early morning snooze.

One look, and she knew a messenger was here. She gave a brief smile and signalled a coin flip. Kehar knew what to do. He took out a silver coin, which had the Devanagari script inscribed on it. It was enough for the baker woman to reach for a flat round of bread, and beneath it, a folded slip of paper: *Krasnovodsk – freight west – 3rd carriage from rear.*

Two men in civilian coats, feigning an argument over dates, lingered near the stall. They followed him for half the walk to the freight yard, their boots crunching on the frozen mud. A railway mechanic – whose name and description had also been in the Lahore contact sheet –

appeared from under a boxcar. “Hey, I’m Suleiman. Follow me!” They headed toward a covered wagon marked “Machinery.”

Inside, the mechanic closed the door, sealing out the wind. “Your name is now Karim the rug buyer,” he whispered. “If anyone asks about Samarkand, tell them the bread was fresh.”

And just like that, another connection, another sympathiser of the *Azad Hind Fauj* and the Indian cause appeared at the right juncture with the right guidance.

Krasnovodsk – The Edge of the Caspian

The freight run from Samarkand ended in a tangle of sidings above the frozen bay. Krasnovodsk was a place of coal smoke, salt air, and faces that never seemed to smile. The Caspian stretched away in muted steel-grey, its surface rippling under a wind that cut straight through wool and bone.

Kehar Singh stepped down from the wagon under the mechanic’s watchful eye. They didn’t shake hands – not here, not with NKVD men pacing the platform. Instead, the mechanic pointed lazily toward a row of warehouses, his finger lingering just long enough for Kehar Singh to note the third building from the end.

Inside that warehouse, among crates stencilled with Russian Cyrillic, a dock foreman in a grey tunic leaned over a clipboard. He wore the crimson kerchief of a Party worker but spoke in the clipped Dari of a Kabul merchant. The Afghan contact had warned Kehar Singh about this man’s test: *He will ask about your cargo. Tell him the apricots were sweet.*

When the phrase passed Kehar’s lips, the foreman’s shoulders eased. “You take the night ferry to Baku,” he said quietly. “Keep to the lower deck – the upper is for officers.”

The Caspian Crossing – The Fire Inside

That night, the ferry groaned under the weight of its cargo: barrels of oil, sacks of grain, and the invisible burden of watchful eyes. Kehar Singh huddled on the lower deck, wrapped in the thick woollen shawl from Mazar-e-Sharif, breathing in the sour mix of fuel oil and wet hemp rope.

The cold gnawed at his fingers, and for a moment, he let himself imagine what would happen if he turned back. Kabul was far behind, Lahore farther still, and ahead lay only more borders, more interrogations, more faces that might turn him in.

But then, as he gripped the shawl tighter, he remembered the Lahore room where this journey had begun – the dim lamplight, the smell of ink and chai, the map of London spread out on the table. His hand had rested on the mark where the Tower stood. In that moment, the Kohinoor had been more than a diamond; it was a tether to history, to his people, to everything which was taken and never returned.

The thought burned hot enough to push back the Caspian wind. He was not enduring this cold for coin or for glory. He was enduring it to walk into London and lay his hands on the stone that had outlasted empires. That fire would keep him moving when the frost threatened to still his blood.

Baku – The Oil City

Baku reeked of petroleum and ambition. The derricks on the horizon clanked and swayed like skeletal giants, while the streets bustled with workers, sailors, and Communist Party officials. Here, the Lahore codes shifted to a new set of hands: a young Azeri railway clerk with ink-stained fingers and an exaggerated limp.

Kehar found him near the station ticket booth. “Karim the rug buyer,” the clerk said under his breath, not looking up from the ledger. He

slid a folded schedule across the counter. Inside, in place of train times, was a set of station names: *Tbilisi – Rostov – Kharkov*.

“This train,” the clerk added, tapping a random entry, “is prone to delays. You should be patient with it.” The last word – *patient* – was on the Lahore code sheet as a warning: there would be extra inspections along the way.

The Caucasus – Tightening Shadows

The train from Baku wound through the Caucasus passes, snow swirling around black pines. In Tbilisi, the inspection teams came aboard with dogs, their boots squeaking on the wooden floor. Kehar kept his satchel open, the border pass from Mazar placed on top of the textiles. His fingers itched to touch the envelope sewn into the lining – the one meant for London – but he didn’t dare.

At Rostov, the tone changed. Men in long NKVD coats stood in pairs, scanning faces as passengers disembarked for tea. Asking for identification was an excuse to find travellers without documents and ask for bribes. One stepped toward Kehar, but before the man could speak, an older passenger with a weathered Cossack face clapped Kehar on the shoulder and loudly said, “Come fast, your wife is shouting, she seems unwell.”

The Cossack was no relative, but his name – and his likeness – had been sketched on the Lahore contact list. They walked away together, the NKVD man losing interest as if the moment had never happened. The duo exchanged glances. The Cossack patted his back. Trust signalled.

Soviet Ukraine – The Last Hand-off

By the time the train reached Kharkov, the air smelled different, a drop in temperature revealing a change in environment. The Cossack handed him over to a railway porter who spoke halting Punjabi, which he had learnt years ago from Sikh labourers in Odessa. “Berlin,” the

porter said in a low voice, “will be easier than Moscow. Too many eyes here.”

He pressed a German transit document into Kehar’s palm — a forged worker’s pass marking him as a textile specialist travelling west under Soviet-German industrial exchange. It was the final gift from the Lahore network, the end of a chain that had begun in the narrow streets behind Anarkali Bazaar. He had been on the road for fifteen days, braving the changing terrain on horses, on foot and in trains. For Kehar Singh, the journey had been incident-free due to the goodwill earned by India and the *Azad Hind Fauj*. But danger was lurking at every turn, and he knew a moment of carelessness could change his fortune.

German Border – The Breath Before the Next Storm

The snow was thinning now, the land turning to wet earth and dark grass, but Kehar felt no relief. The closer the train drew to the Soviet frontier, the heavier the air inside the carriage became. At Brest-Litovsk, a station bristling with guards and barbed wire, the hiss of steam was drowned by the sound of boots on metal steps.

Two NKVD officers entered, their faces pale and expressionless, eyes sharp as bayonets. They worked the carriage methodically, checking papers with clipped questions. When they reached Kehar, the older one studied his documents with intent.

“You travel far for a trader,” he said in slow English.

“Business in the west,” Kehar replied, keeping his voice steady.

“And what do you trade? Secrets?”

The younger officer smirked, and without further word, they motioned him out. His satchel was taken.

In a squat grey building, they sat him beneath a single bulb that swung slightly, casting a sickly cone of light. The hours dragged, punctuated

by bursts of questions – his route from Kabul, his stay in Tashkent, his contacts in Samarkand. The interrogators circled back again and again, looking for cracks. Kehar's cover story, drilled into him in Lahore, held... barely.

When they left him alone, the silence was worse than the questioning. He imagined a cold cell in some far-off camp, his mission dead before it began.

The door opened without warning. A civilian in a fur hat stepped in, carrying the smell of snow and tobacco. He spoke in a low voice to the officer at the desk, slid across a folded document stamped in red. The officer's jaw tightened. A short pause. Then, with obvious reluctance, he nodded.

Moments later, Kehar's satchel was returned. No explanations. No apologies. Only a curt, "Go."

Outside, the train was already hissing to depart. Kehar climbed aboard, his pulse still ragged. He never saw the civilian again, but he knew what had happened: Lahore's codes had reached into the heart of Soviet steel. Somewhere, in some back office, Bose's name still meant movement, still meant doors opening.

Kehar's final train journey would take him to Breslau and then Berlin.

As the train lurched westward, Kehar sat in the dim corridor, the cold iron of the border drawing nearer. He had been very near to vanishing forever.

The last leg to the German border was a blur of soot and silence. The Soviet guards at the checkpoint leafed through his pass without a word, the red stars on their caps dulled with dust. Beyond them stood a German officer in a grey coat, clipboard in hand, the smell of diesel heavy in the air.

Kehar stepped forward, his face a mask of fatigue. The officer looked him up and down, and then his gaze went up to the scar on Kehar's

face. With a nod and a curt movement of his gloved hand, the German officer gave his permission. The road from Lahore had been long and bitter, but he had crossed mountains, rivers, and the Soviet veil itself. And he would not stop until his hand closed around the stone that had been taken, and which he had come to take back.



Chapter 8

BERLIN SHADOWS

It had taken Kehar Singh nearly two months to cross the continent from Sansarpur to Berlin.

Two months of rail journeys across uneasy borders, nights curled in dimly lit safe-houses, and tense exchanges with men whose trust had been purchased years earlier through Punjab's underground network. Every stage of his journey was stitched together with the invisible threads passed to him in Anarkali Bazaar's backrooms — names, codes scribbled on tobacco paper, stamped letters, with the promise that someone would be waiting in each city if he knocked on the right door.

By the time he reached Berlin in May 1936, the city was undergoing a profound transformation. The XI Olympic Games were only three months away, and the fever had taken hold. From the newly paved Unter den Linden to the workers clanging steel on the Olympiastadion's terraces, everything seemed to be rehearsing for an audience not yet seated. Red banners hung in measured intervals, swastikas snapping in the breeze, their shadows pooling across pavements where uniformed men strolled with studied casualness.

The Network's Hand

The foresight of Lahore's comrades became clear within hours of his arrival. A letter, hidden in the false bottom of a cigarette tin, had been handed to him in Kabul with a simple instruction: "*Show this to the man at Café Heller, Charlottenburg.*"

The man in a grey coat at Café Heller barely glanced at the paper before passing him a key with the address written in German.

“No questions. Rent paid for three months,” he said, voice low, eyes darting past Kehar to the street. And then he left without a handshake or farewell, dissolving into the May evening.

It wasn’t easy. For a turban-wearing, brown-skinned Asian man to navigate the streets of Berlin asking for directions did not get polite answers. But requests for directions at bus and tram stations, showing the address written in German, finally brought Kehar to his destination.

The room was small, tucked above a disused tailor’s shop on the first floor. Its lone window looked onto a side street where bicycles outnumbered cars. In the corner, a radio hissed with the latest proclamations from the Reich. A narrow bed with linen bedsheets and an unmarked pillow were comfort for sore eyes. Kehar had not seen such luxury since leaving home in Sansarpur. An unbelievable journey with amazing fortune had ended. And after two months, he had comfortable bedding but not the luxury of home. Tomorrow, a hockey club will be his refuge until fate takes him to London.

A City of Festivity and Suspicion

Before starting, Kehar exchanged his silver coins for 100 Reichsmarks at the grocer’s. Under blue skies, Berlin was alive with a buzz but underpinned by a current of suspicion. The crowds in Alexanderplatz bustled with shoppers and street performers, but Kehar quickly learned that not all smiles were innocent. In the reflections of shop windows, he caught the same faces reappearing too often. On trams, the leather coats of the *Geheime Staatspolizei* seemed to absorb all sound around them.

Kehar walked the city with a practised neutrality, never lingering too long anywhere, yet always taking mental notes. And still, the scent of fresh-cut grass at the Olympiastadion grounds tugged at an older

memory – the feel of turf under his shoes, the sting in his forearms from a hard strike, the cheers of a Punjab crowd as a goal was scored.

The Lead from an admirer

Kehar still carried the letter of recommendation from the British officer in Delhi. He was an admirer and had given a recommendation letter for SCC Berlin, where Mr Gunther was to be his contact. For Kehar, this was a perfect cover coming from a ranking British officer.

After a frustrating hour of asking directions, Kehar found the club grounds. The SCC Berlin hockey fields were neat, almost too perfect – the grass clipped to an exact measure, boundary lines freshly chalked. German coaches paced along the touchlines, barking instructions with military precision. The young men in crisp white jerseys moved with discipline, their drills precise, but their style lacked the instinctive flair Kehar had grown up with.

He watched from the periphery for an hour. And when a ball came close, he gave it to the player and asked for Gunther. When the game finished, the tall German, possibly an assistant coach, came over. He listened to Kehar, took the letter, and after reading it beamed a smile. “You have been a good player and highly recommended, too. Maybe you can join our team for practice. Improve them and help prepare for the contests ahead.” Kehar nodded with a smile, one of the first in a long time. Within an hour, he was handed a spare stick and invited to join the session.

Kehar’s job was to stand in the midfield, trap and push to the forwards to score running goals. It took Kehar scarcely a minute to acquaint himself with the hockey stick and ball. Though issued with hockey boots—and thus denied the familiar kiss of grass beneath his feet—this in no way diminished the felicity of his play or the sheer joy of the game.

Those ten minutes were seamless training for the SCC Berlin strikers. They were being fed immaculate passes at the right pace. At the end

of the session, there were nods of acknowledgement and a handshake by the coach with the words. “ Come tomorrow at the same time.”

While walking back to his room, Kehar could scarcely believe his good fortune. He had made it all the way to Berlin and, as per plan, had ingrained himself as a hockey player. The Almighty was truly with him. With these thoughts, he bought a warm bun and coffee. Just enough to keep his stomach full for a peaceful night of sleep. A rare occurrence for a traveller on the road for two months.

The Bar near the Club

Kehar was back at the club the next day. On time. And ready. The mission was at the back of his mind, and the joy of playing hockey had taken over momentarily.

Kehar wore the club’s green-and-white training jersey, blending into the players around him—yet somehow, he seemed apart.

Today, they made him the stopper who stops the penalty corner pushes and paves the way for the move for the goal. Kehar performed well in this role also. The German national team’s selections were still four weeks away, and the club sides were fine-tuning their preparations and helping their players to become ready for the trials. Kehar was a talent they were happy to work with.

For Kehar, it had become a routine. The practice games at SCC Berlin were something he looked forward to. But he knew time was running out, and he had to find a way to reach London. On one of these days, when the practice session ended, the coach invited all the players for drinks at a nearby bar not far from the club grounds – a low-lit place with dark wood panelling, smoke curling under the ceiling, and the muted hum of a gramophone in the corner.

It was here that Kehar met the spotter. The man was in his mid-forties, clean-shaven, wearing a tweed jacket with elbow patches, the sort of attire that could pass for either academia or sports administration.

"I've seen you at the edge of the field," the man began in perfect English. "Not many here can trap a ball like that. You've played at a high level."

Kehar took a measured sip of his drink. "District leagues. Punjab."

The man's eyes sharpened. "India. Your team took gold in '28 and '32. Berlin will be... interesting this year."

"You're quite the find," the man said in perfect Hindi.

Kehar froze.

The man smiled. "Don't worry. I'm not here for trouble. Just... an offer."

The Englishman introduced himself as an officer with British intelligence, travelling under diplomatic cover. "Your name has floated up in a few curious places. Berlin isn't as silent as it pretends to be. You're in the right city. At the right time. But perhaps... for the wrong reasons."

Over coffee, they spoke—delicately, cautiously. The officer introduced himself as Paul Langdon, working under the British diplomatic umbrella but assigned to intelligence coordination. He ordered a strong black brew, lit a cigarette, and leaned in.

"Let's not waste time," Langdon said quietly. "You play a mean game of hockey. That got you noticed. But what got you remembered were the questions you asked in locker rooms and the way you moved around the city. We need men who can navigate easily, unnoticed—men like you."

Kehar raised an eyebrow. "And in return?"

Langdon nodded. "Passage to London. New documents, a legitimate cover, and perhaps a foot in places most men only read about. You'll listen, observe, and pass on what matters. You'll do what you're already doing, but this time, it counts."

Kehar stirred his coffee slowly. "And if I say no?"

"Then we both go our ways. No report. No file. No contact. But you'd be turning your back on the one ticket that could take you right into the Empire's vault. You've come this far, Mr Singh."

Kehar looked out the window. A snowflake traced the glass. He let silence stretch, playing his part.

"I'll think about it," he said at last.

Langdon smiled. "Do. But not for too long. In this game, hesitation buries everything."

Kehar nodded, then left. But the moment he stepped outside, he knew what he had to do.

He would accept.

Not because he would serve the British, but because it was the only way to set foot in their fortress. If he could walk in as an agent, he might walk out with the diamond.

At last, he would be on enemy soil. His mission gleamed in his eyes like steel beneath moonlight.

Through Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Termez, and across the breadth of Europe, that fire had never dimmed. In the dead of the Berlin night, as the city rehearsed for the spectacle of August, Kehar Singh rehearsed his own part — one that would not end in applause, but in a reckoning centuries in the making.



Chapter 9

THE MAKING OF AN AGENT

Paul Langdon and Kehar Singh met again two evenings later—not near the club, but in a quiet café on Kantstraße. The place smelled faintly of coffee and damp newspapers, the street outside humming with trams. Langdon ordered two cups, then leaned across the table.

“I know you’re not here in Berlin for the beer and sausages or the hockey,” he said. “And I think you know that the British Empire—though you may not care for it—has interests that align, for now, with yours.”

Kehar’s gaze didn’t waver. “What are you asking?”

“I’m offering,” Langdon replied smoothly. “A chance to serve... in a different way. You’ve got the perfect cover—an athlete, foreign but not suspect. You move freely, unnoticed. In a city like Berlin, that’s gold. I can teach you to use it.”

“And in return?”

Langdon smiled faintly. “You learn to play another game, one far more dangerous than hockey. The stakes are higher. The rules... flexible. But if you play it well, you walk away alive. Perhaps with more than you came in with.”

There was a long silence, broken only by the hiss of the espresso machine. Finally, Kehar spoke.

“I’ll listen.”

By the time Langdon finished, Kehar Singh realised a new life was waiting for him. He was being asked to work for one side and play for the other. The British spy agency will be his master, and Germany will be his playground. It was a perilous game. He was answerable to both, but none would own up if he failed to live up to expectations.

The training began the next night.

By day, Kehar's routine stayed the same—morning runs along the Spree, practice drills at the SCC Berlin grounds, occasional scrimmages with the reserves. He kept his movements ordinary, even dull. In the evenings, the transformation began.

They met in Langdon's flat, a discreet two-room apartment on the top floor of a building whose ground level housed a shuttered barber shop. From the outside, it was just another quiet residence. Inside, it was a classroom for espionage.

The first lesson was observation.

Langdon placed a collection of objects on the table: a matchbox, a folded tram ticket, a leather glove, a half-burnt cigarette, and a German theatre programme leaflet. He covered them with a scarf.

"You've five seconds to look, then tell me what you saw."

Kehar frowned. "That's all?"

Langdon nodded. "In this line of work, the smallest details can save your life—or cost it."

They repeated the exercise until Kehar could recall not just the objects, but their positions, the angle of the matchbox lid, the smudge of lipstick on the cigarette.

Next came shadowing.

One cold evening, Langdon took him to Alexanderplatz. The square bustled with vendors, tram conductors, and shoppers under the glow of street lamps. Langdon pointed to a man in a grey overcoat.

“Follow him. Don’t be seen. Meet me back here in twenty minutes.”

Kehar trailed the man through crowded streets, learning to keep his quarry in sight without drawing attention. Twice he nearly lost him—once when a streetcar rumbled between them, and once when the man ducked into a bakery. Both times, Kehar adapted, circling through side alleys until the target reappeared.

When they reconvened, Langdon gave a tight nod. “Better than most on their first try. But you breathe too heavily when you close in.”

Other nights were devoted to codes—simple substitution cyphers at first, then more complex letter shifts hidden in the rhythm of English poetry. Kehar learned to send messages inside harmless correspondence: a hockey match report to a “cousin” in Lahore that, to the trained eye, contained the location of a meeting or the name of a contact.

Weapons training was trickier. Langdon insisted on subtlety over brute force.

“This isn’t a battlefield, Singh,” he said one night, handing him a fountain pen. “The pen isn’t mightier than the sword—it *is* the sword, if you know where to put it.”

He demonstrated how to drive the pen’s point into the soft tissue beneath an attacker’s chin, how to fold a newspaper around a length of lead pipe, and how to use a shoelace to disable a man from behind.

They also worked with maps of Berlin. Langdon had him memorise street layouts, tram lines, and sewer access points.

“You can’t afford to get lost,” he said. “Not here. Not now.”

Between these lessons, Langdon fed him fragments of the bigger picture. Berlin was a nest of spies—German, Soviet, British, American—each moving in overlapping circles, each playing games within games. With the Olympic Games just weeks away, the city’s feverish energy was the perfect cover for covert operations.

“Your role,” Langdon explained, “is to be two men at once. Kehar Singh, reserve hockey player. And Kehar Singh, the eyes and ears of His Majesty’s Service.”

At first, the dual life felt unnatural. By day, the rhythm of stick and ball, the camaraderie of the team. By night, the silence of backrooms, the scrape of pen on cypher sheets, the low murmur of coded exchanges. Yet slowly, the two roles began to mesh. Kehar found himself scanning crowds at practice, noting who lingered too long by the fence, who left before the final whistle.

One evening, after a particularly gruelling shadowing exercise, Langdon poured two glasses of whisky.

“You’re learning fast,” he said. “But remember—speed kills in our business. You make your move when the other man thinks you’re still in the first act.”

Kehar took a slow sip. “And if the other man’s faster?”

Langdon’s smile was thin. “Then you don’t get to ask me that question again.”

The weeks slipped by in this rhythm. The city shifted around them—posters for the Games appeared in every window, construction crews polished the stadiums, and crowds swelled with athletes and officials from across the world. For them, it was a festival; for Kehar, it was survival. Living one more day, in preparation for a mission he was determined to achieve. Financially, Kehar was able to break even through the club’s transport and food allowance, while Langdon had promised a lump sum once training finished.

One night, as they left the flat after a lesson in hand signals, Langdon paused at the doorway.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “we begin live exercises. You’ll pass your first message. Real drop. Real pickup.”

Kehar felt a slow current of anticipation in his veins. The training had been relentless, but this—this would be the first step into the real shadows.

And as he walked back through the lamplit streets of Berlin, the stick over his shoulder and the feel of coded paper hidden inside his jacket, he understood something new: the line between the player and the spy was gone. From now on, he would play both games at once—or lose them together.



Chapter 10

THE LAST TRAIN OUT

The August sky over Berlin was the colour of old steel, bruised with clouds that promised rain. Kehar Singh stepped onto the SCC Berlin training turf with a tiredness he had never felt before. The coach was already barking instructions, his voice cutting across the pitch like a whip.

“Singh! Warm-up—*schnell!*”

Kehar nodded, tucking his stick under his arm and jogging across the grass. He still moved with the easy grace of a seasoned defender, but his mind was elsewhere. For weeks now, the rhythm of his days had been torn in two — daylight hours belonged to hockey, to drills and scrimmages, to shouts in German and the sharp crack of stick against ball. Night belonged to Langdon and the shadows.

Langdon’s training was nothing like the camaraderie of the field. It was quiet, exacting, and merciless. He taught Kehar to spot the shadow in the doorway before it moved, to recognise the faint scent of a particular cigarette brand as a marker for a specific operative, to read lips from across a café. He drilled him in microfilm handling, coded telephone phrases, and dead drop protocols so subtle that they could pass as clumsy littering.

It was a double life, and it was beginning to tear him apart.

The SCC Berlin coach, Herr Weiss, had grown more insistent with each week. “You have talent, Singh,” he had told him after one match.

“But talent is nothing without discipline. We need you full-time. No more vanishing after practice.”

Vanishing. That was the word. Kehar’s absences after sunset had not gone unnoticed. Weiss assumed it was a job, maybe a woman. The truth was far more dangerous.

Tonight, as rain began to drizzle over the turf, Weiss cornered him after a practice match.

“You weren’t here yesterday. Again.” Weiss’s voice was low but tense. “We can’t keep a man who gives half his time. Decide, Singh — the club or... whatever else it is you’re chasing.”

Kehar forced a smile, murmured something about personal obligations, and left. But he knew the decision had already been made for him.

That night, Langdon was waiting in their usual safe flat, a single desk lamp cast long shadows across the room.

“You’re burning both ends,” Langdon said, before Kehar could speak. “And both sides are starting to smell the smoke.”

Kehar slumped into the chair opposite him. “They want me full-time. No more slipping away.”

“You knew it wouldn’t last forever.” Langdon lit a cigarette, watching him through the curl of smoke. “And now I’ve got worse news.”

Kehar’s jaw tightened. “Go on.”

Langdon stubbed the cigarette out half-smoked — his tell that something serious was coming. “Berlin’s network has been compromised. Two of our cut-outs have gone dark. The Abwehr, German intelligence, may not have your name yet, but they know there’s a foreign asset moving between the sports circuit and the British network.”

The words landed heavily. Kehar thought of Herr Becker, the wiry man who was a spotter for the German national team. He had been a regular at practice and had once complimented his hockey skills. Was Becker feeding on both sides?

“You need to get out,” Langdon said firmly. “Tomorrow night. Train to Hamburg, then steamer to Southampton. Once you’re in England, we can set you up under your new cover.”

Kehar leaned forward. “And if I stay? There’s still more I can learn here—”

“You’ll be learning it from a cell. If you’re lucky.” Langdon’s tone left no room for argument. “Your training’s done. You can operate anywhere now. But here? Every extra day increases the odds they pick you up.”

Kehar looked down at his calloused hands, still smelling faintly of turf and linseed oil. “The club will think I’ve disappeared. No word. No goodbye.”

“That’s the price,” Langdon said quietly.

The rain had thickened outside, turning the streets into slick mirrors of gaslight and shadow. Kehar walked back to his quarters in Charlottenburg, avoiding the tramlines and keeping a watchful eye. Every passer-by felt like a tail. Every turn felt watched.

He lay awake most of the night, listening to the rain drum the window, replaying every face from SCC Berlin — the goalkeeper who always hummed before a match, the winger who swore in three languages, the coach whose gruffness hid genuine pride. They had given him a sense of belonging without question. And now, he was leaving without answers. The club had paid him a stipend just two days ago, and if he left now, it would be a great betrayal, Kehar kept thinking. But he had received orders to leave Berlin, and he wanted to make the best of his last hockey practice in Germany.

The Last Train Out

The next day, he went to the club for what would be his last practice. He moved through the drills with perfect form, his body acting on muscle memory while his mind catalogued the moment – the smell of damp turf, the slap of the ball, the distant cheer from a youth match on the adjoining field.

Kehar performed much better than in the last few days on the turf. When practice ended, Herr Weiss clapped him on the shoulder. “You did well today, Singh. See you tomorrow, ok?”

Kehar smiled, but didn’t answer. In the changing room, Kehar met the players warmly and hugged those who had been welcoming to him. He looked back at the ground before saying a silent goodbye. It had started raining, and he had to get ready now for the train out of Berlin.

By evening, the city was preparing for a speech by Chancellor Adolf Hitler the following day. Posters were being put up, and barricades were being dropped from military trucks. It was a nervous Kehar Singh who stood at the window of his narrow room in Charlottenburg, watching the water streak down the glass. Each drop felt like a second ticking away.

At precisely 8:15 p.m., a soft knock came at the door – two taps, pause, three taps – Langdon’s signal.

Kehar opened it just enough to see the Englishman’s face, pale in the dim hall. “We have to move,” Langdon said without preamble. “Now.”

“What happened?”

“They picked up one of our watchers near the club. He won’t last under questioning. You’re in the wind before they can connect dots. We cannot wait for the early morning train. We have to catch the one leaving in an hour.”

Kehar grabbed his leather case – the one Langdon had packed the night before – and stepped out. The hallway smelled of boiled cabbage

and old coal dust. They moved quickly, descending the stairs without meeting the concierge's eye.

The street outside was slick and dark. Langdon hailed no taxi; instead, they ducked into a narrow side street lined with shuttered shops. "Trams are too obvious tonight," Langdon muttered. "We'll take the U-Bahn to Zoo station."

They walked in near silence, their footsteps softened by the rain. Twice, Langdon stopped mid-stride, head tilting ever so slightly – a listening posture Kehar had come to recognise.

"Two back," Langdon said finally. "Both in coats, one smoking. They've kept a distance since we left."

Kehar's pulse quickened.

Langdon led him into a U-Bahn entrance, the stale warmth and tang of iron rails wrapping around them. They boarded the next train, standing near the doors. Kehar stole a glance at the platform as they pulled away – the smoking man had just stepped aboard the next carriage.

"Stay casual," Langdon murmured.

Three stops later, Langdon pushed them out into the crowd, weaving fast toward another platform. They switched lines, rode two more stops, then climbed back into the wet night. The rain had eased, but the city's breath was still damp and heavy.

Zoo station loomed ahead, its clock tower glowing faintly through the mist. Langdon quickened his pace.

Inside, the station was a hive of action – travellers, porters, uniformed railway men shouting destinations. The air smelled of wet wool and coal smoke. Langdon guided them toward Platform 4, where the Hamburg train waited.

That's when Kehar saw him — the other tail, not the smoker, standing just beyond the ticket barrier. His eyes flicked up, locking on Kehar with a predator's calm.

"Keep walking," Langdon hissed.

They reached the barrier. The ticket inspector took Langdon's papers with bored efficiency, stamped them, then turned to Kehar.

"Your ticket?"

Kehar slid it across. The inspector looked from the paper to his face, his brow furrowing. He said something in German that Kehar didn't catch.

Langdon leaned in, his German smooth. "He's with me. British national. Passport in order."

The inspector hesitated, glancing past them — toward the man in the overcoat, who was now moving closer.

Langdon's smile hardened into steel. "We'll miss our train."

At last, the stamp came down with a thud. Papers handed back. They stepped through.

The platform smelled of hot metal and rain. Steam hissed from the engine. Langdon walked briskly, but not too fast, Kehar matching his pace. Behind them, the sound of quickening footsteps.

They reached their carriage. Langdon shoved the case into Kehar's hands and climbed aboard.

"Go!" he snapped.

Kehar jumped up, nearly colliding with a porter. Through the open door, he saw the smoking man appear on the platform, scanning the carriages.

The whistle blew. The train lurched forward. The man's eyes locked on Kehar's for a heartbeat before the platform began to slide away into the mist.

Langdon exhaled sharply. "Too close."

Kehar's grip on the leather case was so tight his knuckles ached. "If they knew enough to follow us here—"

"They'll know more by morning," Langdon finished grimly. "Which is why we're gone."

Berlin's lights receded into the wet darkness. Ahead lay Hamburg, then the cold, open sea. Kehar sat back, heart still hammering, knowing this was not an escape. It was a beginning — and his enemies now had a face to put to the name.



Chapter 11

THE CROSSING

The wind coming off the Elbe carried the briny tang of the North Sea as the SS *Biarritz* eased away from Hamburg's darkened quay.

Somewhere beyond the warehouses and cranes, Berlin lay cloaked in rain, already receding into memory – but its shadows clung stubbornly to him.

Kehar Singh stood on the lower deck, collar turned up against the cold, watching the harbour lights slide past in shimmering bands on the black water. Kehar's recruiter, Langdon, had retired to the upper deck first-class quarters. His words from the night before still rang in his mind: *"Germany is no longer safe ground. England will give you time – nothing more. Use it."*

The steamer's horn bellowed once, long and mournful, and the vessel swung into the shipping channel. Dockworkers shrank to silhouettes on the quay. A cluster of gulls came close in an arc, seemingly flapping goodbyes before soaring into the mist.

Kehar had never been on such a ship before – not the great ocean liners that graced picture postcards, but sturdy, weathered, and built for commerce and passengers alike. Its iron bones creaked faintly with the swell; the air smelled of coal smoke, wet rope, and distant storms. He pulled his coat tighter, feeling the vibration of the engines through the soles of his boots.

In the lounge inside, a few passengers were settling into the comforting mix of cigarette smoke and brandy, their voices muffled through the whipping waves. Kehar preferred the solitude of the open air. He needed the wind in his face to clear the tension brewing in his head.

Berlin had been a trial by fire. The long days at the SCC Berlin grounds – perfecting drills for a team he could never represent – and the longer nights in Langdon’s cramped flat, poring over maps and codes, learning the arts of silence and deception. That life now seemed half a world away, yet the skills he had absorbed in those nights would travel with him like an invisible weapon.

At sea, Kehar felt alone and nostalgic about life lived in Punjab. He wondered if the autumn wheat in Sansarpur would be heavy by now, stalks bending under their own weight. His father would be at the farm at dawn, evaluating the crop for taxes. His mother? Well, she must be desperate for some news about him. Had they heard the rumours? That Kehar had vanished in Europe? That his fate was uncertain? The link to his world had all but broken. A new life awaited.

The wind stiffened as SS *Biarritz* left the shelter of the Elbe. Waves slapped against the hull with a heavier rhythm, sending a faint sway through the deck. Kehar turned from the rail and went inside.

The passenger quarters were modest but clean – varnished wood panels, a narrow berth, a washbasin. He set his precious leather case on the bunk and sat beside it. For the first time in days, there was no hurry, no one watching his every move, no coded rendezvous. The sudden slackening of tension made him uneasy.

He thought of what lay ahead. London – not as a sanctuary, but as a stage for the most improbable and dangerous of missions. The Kohinoor. A jewel that had passed from empire to empire like the heartbeat of history itself, now locked in the Tower of London under the Union Jack. To touch it would be to jar the nerve of the British crown.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture the Tower. Langdon had described its layers of stone, the Yeoman Warders with their halberds, and the regimental guards whose eyes missed nothing. And yet Langdon had also spoken of flaws – narrow service passages, blind corners in the Jewel House, the predictability of ceremonial routines. The challenge was not brute force but the precise choreography of time and movement.

The *Biarritz* ploughed on through the night, the engines' throb gradually lulled Kehar to sleep. It was rest well-earned.

The following morning was grey and damp. Kehar ate little at breakfast, nursing a strong coffee while a group of German businessmen argued the safety of their investments in London.

In the quiet hours that followed, Kehar walked the length of the promenade deck, hands in pockets, letting the ship's slow rhythm sink into his body. The Channel crossing from Cuxhaven to Southampton was not long, but it felt like a space suspended between worlds – Germany behind, England ahead, and no turning back in either direction.

By the second evening, the air carried a softer smell – damp grass and mud mingling faintly with the salt. England was near. The outlines of the Isle of Wight emerged from the dusk, a low shadow against the horizon.

Kehar woke up refreshed and lingered on the deck, observing the dawn. A new life awaited, the hockey player-revolutionary turned double agent. Accompanied by seagulls, the *Biarritz* threaded its way up the Solent, the lights of Southampton glimmering ahead. Fishing boats bobbed on the tide, their lanterns swaying. Somewhere inland, a train whistle echoed faintly.

The closer they drew to port, the heavier grew the knot in his chest. London was no Berlin; it would not offer the camouflage of foreign crowds. Here, the British police and intelligence services were in their

own fortress. He would walk the streets as an alien, just like Indians and Caribbean people, but always under the gaze of watchful eyes.

Docking was a slow business — ropes tossed, engines reversed, the bump of hull against pier. Passengers gathered their bags, voices rising in anticipation. Kehar waited until the first wave had gone before descending the gangway.

The morning air in Southampton was cool and damp, tinged with the smell of coal fires from the town. Kehar dished out the passport given by Langdon and rehearsed stock answers in his mind. He walked through the customs shed, replied to routine questions in measured English, and got his passport stamped with mechanical indifference. Yet he felt the gaze of authority on him — an instinct, perhaps, born from weeks of evasion in Berlin. But Langdon was always close by, in case he needed help with officials.

Once outside, Langdon gave Kehar fifty pounds, loose change, and an address in London, written on a folded bond paper. As it was Kehar's first day in Great Britain, Langdon had arranged for a private taxi—a rarity in those days—to convey his asset comfortably to the safe house selected by the agency for Kehar.

A meeting between the two was fixed for two days from now. Saying goodbye, Langdon left, leaving Kehar Singh in a country that would fulfil his life's mission.

Once ensconced in the taxi, Kehar reached into the inner pocket of the case and drew out the folded paper Langdon had given. The note, in Langdon's small, neat hand, had two things: a list of names — each only a surname and an initial — and a set of meeting points scattered across London. Some were places a newcomer would never stumble upon by chance: a tea shop off Commercial Road, a churchyard in Lambeth, a bench in Regent's Park whose paint was said to be peeling in the shape of a crown.

London awaited — sprawling, watchful, and unknowingly guarding the prize he had come for.



Chapter 12

FIRST DAY IN LONDON

The taxi from Southampton rattled northward through a drizzling morning, past sodden meadows and hedgerows heavy with rain. Each mile pulled Kehar Singh deeper into the heart of an empire he had learned to hate in whispers and footnotes. The leather seat smelt faintly of tobacco and wool; the windows filmed over with mist. Outside, the countryside blurred into rows of cottages, church spires, and finally the grey breadth of the city.

London arrived not with a skyline but with a weight of stone, soot, and silence. By the time the taxi crossed London Bridge, the Thames rolled beneath like a sheet of dull iron. Warehouses and steeples hemmed the riverbanks, and beyond them rose the great sprawl of the capital. Kehar leaned forward, his eyes narrowing against the drizzle. Somewhere in this fog, his next life would begin.

Langdon's instructions had been exact. "*You are expected,*" the note had said, followed by an address scrawled in a tight hand: **No. 17, Walcott Street. Lambeth. Second floor. Paid till the month's end.**

The driver swung through a tangle of narrow lanes until the cab pulled up before a terrace of soot-darkened houses. Kehar stepped out and stood for a moment beneath his umbrella, letting the rain settle on his coat. The London air smelt of coal smoke and wet brick. Above him, laundry flapped listlessly between windows.

He pressed the bell beside a faded enamel sign: **Rooms to Let – Weekly or Monthly.**

After a pause, the door opened. A stout landlady appeared, her apron patterned with a fading Union Jack, her expression brisk but not unkind. Kehar handed over the slip Langdon had given him. At once, her brows lifted in recognition — or at least acceptance. Without a word, she led him up a narrow stairwell that creaked with every step.

The rented room Langdon had found for him was on the second floor of a narrow brick building, tucked into a row of working-class lodgings. His quarters were simple: a small bed with an iron frame, a wooden desk pushed beneath the window, a chest of drawers that smelled faintly of mothballs. The wallpaper was peeling in places, patterned with faded roses, and the floorboards creaked like restless bones.

A kettle sat on the hearth; Langdon had even arranged for a few English books, and a folded map of London was left on the desk. The spy's touch, no doubt. The man had thought of everything.

From the window, he could see chimney pots crowding like sentinels and, beyond them, the Thames glistening in the morning sun.

Yet to Kehar, it was more than four walls. It was a foothold in the empire's capital, a vantage point from which the greatest gamble of his life would begin.

After months of border crossings and coded letters, here at last was stillness — the kind that felt earned.

Kehar sat at the desk and opened his briefcase. Inside, the documents Langdon had provided—papers that said he was Arjun Singh, clerk for a trading firm with colonial ties. There was also the folded paper with coded directions to his contact points. He ran his thumb over its edges, feeling the weight of it.

Kehar packed the briefcase and stored it below the bed. Taking off his shoes, he stretched out upon the bed, staring at the ceiling where the pattern of roses dissolved into the plaster. He had slept in far worse: mud huts in Afghanistan, barns along the Volga, station wagons in the Caucasus and a one-room lodging in Berlin. This space, humble

though it was, offered anonymity — and in anonymity, safety. Langdon had secured it through some London backchannel, no doubt under a false name, and insisted it would remain a safe place so long as Kehar kept to simple habits.

For now, he was stricken with thoughts of home. He wondered what word, if any, had reached Punjab of his wanderings. Did Sansarpur whisper of him as vanished or dead in some skirmish with the British, or did his old teammates still speak his name at dusk by the hockey ground? A pang of homesickness struck him, sharp as the cold of English rain. He fought it until it subsided, just like the London rain had.

That night, he barely slept. The city's sounds — a policeman's whistle, the clang of tram wheels, a drunk's distant song — each sound felt foreign yet strangely fated, like the heartbeat of a machine he was meant to infiltrate. He lay awake, counting the chimes of the brass clock until the sky began to pale.

The morning broke low and grey. London's streets steamed from the night's rain, the air thick with coal dust and the tang of bacon from street vendors' carts.

He washed and changed into clothes that would make him blend with the general working population.

The noises of the housing block filtered up — footsteps on the stairs, a kettle whistling somewhere below, a gramophone murmuring from another room. For the first time since leaving Berlin, Kehar felt himself alone and unobserved.

He studied the small slip Langdon had written before his departure:

"First contact: H. Atkinson. Café, Commercial Road. 10 a.m. Wednesday. Follow through to the next address. Trust the chain, not the man."

He read the line twice, folded it, and slid it into his breast pocket. He took out the coins. He identified the pounds, shillings and pence, so that there would be no hesitation in counting and paying in public.

Kehar was determined to show the people he met that he was a resident of London and conversant with the city's ways.

Kehar left his lodging just after nine, the brim of his turban shadowing his face. The walk to Commercial Road took nearly half an hour, through a maze of alleys, tramlines, and shopfronts waking to the day. He had the assistance of the map and the well-maintained signage on the streets, but it was slow-moving, so Kehar cross-checked the directions twice, first with a newspaper vendor and then with a taxi driver.

Slowly, Kehar found his confident gait and aware look- the rhythm that he had practised in Berlin. He moved like one accustomed to watching and being watched. Each mirror, each windowpane reflected not curiosity but calibration — angles, distances, routes of escape. Langdon's drills had made it instinctive: never the same road twice, never pause under a lamp, never think someone isn't watching beyond a held newspaper.

The café appeared exactly as the description implied — narrow, discreet, its windows fogged by steam. A small brass bell above the door chimed as he entered.

Inside, the air was warm, thick with the smell of strong tea and butter. A few dockworkers hunched at tables, spoons clinking in saucers. Behind the counter stood a woman in her late forties, her apron dusted with flour, her hands quick with orders.

Kehar asked for tea with milk in a typical Indian accented English, developed over the months, and took a seat near the back, where he could watch both door and counter. He placed his case at his feet and waited. The rules of contact were simple: if Atkinson were real, he would know how to find him. If not, then Kehar must rise calmly, pay, and vanish.

The minutes dragged. He stirred his tea without drinking, listening to the scrape of chairs and the cough of a dockworker. He felt nervous

for the first time after setting foot in London. Had he been followed from Southampton? Was this place a net cast by unseen hands?

Then the bell tinkled again. A man entered — tall, with a stoop to his shoulders, his overcoat speckled by rain. He carried no umbrella, only a folded newspaper tucked under one arm. He glanced once around the shop, then approached the counter.

“Milk in first, always,” he said to the woman. His accent was clipped, almost rehearsed.

The woman smiled knowingly. “Then you’ll be wanting the strong Assam.” She poured and handed him a cup, throwing a look at Kehar’s corner.

The man turned and let his gaze brush the room. When his eyes passed over Kehar, they did not linger — but the faintest tilt of his chin marked recognition. He crossed to a nearby table, opened his newspaper, and sipped his tea.

Kehar felt a tension ease from his shoulders, though not fully. Contacts were one thing; trust was another.

After several minutes, Atkinson rose, left his half-finished tea, and departed without a word. As he passed Kehar’s table, however, a slip of paper fluttered to the floor. Kehar waited until the bell tinkled shut behind him, then bent to retrieve it.

The note bore a single line:

“Lambeth Churchyard. Noon.”

Kehar folded it and slipped it into his coat pocket. The chain was intact.

Langdon had planned Kehar’s first few days with precision.

Day 1: Settle, find your bearings, and complete a minor assignment. Retire for the night. Feel the pulse of London.

Day 2: Major assignment and meeting with Langdon. Get briefed.

As per the plan, Kehar Singh then decided to retire to his quarters at Walcott Street. He purposely walked back to his new home to get acquainted with the city, its people, and spot any fellow Punjabis he could connect with.

It was a walk without incident as he reached his base, ruminating over the plan for the next day.

The division of time was deliberate – Langdon had explained it well in Southampton. The noon meeting with the unknown contact was a test of passage, a ritual of entry into the shadow world of London's networks. Only if Kehar handled that meeting cleanly could he then step into Langdon's circle at one o'clock.

After a quick bite of apple pie and bread, he picked up from the street below, Kehar settled down for the night. He removed his turban with careful hands, folding it neatly on the chair. In the cracked mirror above the washbasin, his own eyes met him – darker, sharper, etched with more years than his age would allow. A man made by journeys, now remade by choice.

Tomorrow, then, the double game would begin in earnest. He was no longer merely a man in transit, shuttled between foreign stations. He had been brought to London, and the Bureau would go to any lengths to ensure the right man gets into the inner circle.

The Kohinoor – the diamond he had been raised to know as Punjab's lost soul – lay only a few miles away in the Tower, encased in layers of vigilance thicker than stone. The thought electrified him; the chase fuelled his adrenaline.

First Day In London





Chapter 13

THE CHURCHYARD TEST

London's August morning was neither bright nor cheerful. A silvery mist clung to the rooftops, coal smoke drifted from chimneys, and the Thames rolled sluggishly under the weight of industry and tide. To Kehar Singh, stepping out from his boarding room in Lambeth, the air smelled of iron, soot, and anticipation.

Today was no ordinary day. Today was his first test as a spy in London.

He dressed plainly, in a dark wool jacket and worn trousers, with a flat cap to soften his distinct outline. His turban would wait for another time; for now, Langdon had advised anonymity. Kehar did not like the concealment — it felt like a betrayal of self — but in this game, survival meant more than pride. He carried nothing but his wallet, a handkerchief, and the slip of code words Langdon had pressed upon him. Kehar studied the map of London provided by Langdon. He could not be seen asking for directions to St. Mary at Lambeth. He needed to be seen as a resident.

The city had fully awakened now — carriages rumbling, trams screeching, clerks hurrying under umbrellas. Each face he passed could have been ordinary, yet in every ordinary movement, he sensed layers of purpose. London did not shout its secrets; it carried them like whispers between bricks.

The churchyard at St. Mary's, Lambeth, was chosen for its very ordinariness. People hurried past it daily, rarely glancing through its

black railings. By the time Kehar reached the gate, the bell was striking the quarter to noon. He walked in with a measured pace, pretending to admire the graves, but his eyes worked ceaselessly, scanning.

He noticed him almost at once — a man seated on a bench near the path, holding a newspaper upside down. The absurdity was plain. Kehar felt the hairs on his neck stir. *A spotter. A decoy. Or perhaps a warning.*

Another man leaned against a stone, smoking a pipe, and Kehar's instincts told him that none of these figures was accidental. He kept moving, slow and deliberate, as though searching for a particular headstone.

Then the moment arrived. A tall man in a bowler hat stepped from behind the church, walking briskly but with that air of deliberate nonchalance that spies cultivated. He paused by a grave half-covered in ivy and spoke in a low tone, almost conversational, as Kehar drew near:

"The fog clears by noon."

Kehar's mouth was dry, but he forced the answer out steadily.

"But the river stays murky."

A brief flicker passed through the man's eyes — acknowledgement, perhaps even relief. He nodded slightly. "Good. Now follow."

They left by a side gate, blending into the London foot traffic. The bowler-hatted stranger did not introduce himself, and Kehar did not ask. They walked two blocks in silence, but Kehar's senses prickled. Behind them, he caught glimpses in shop windows: the newspaperman trailing clumsily, trying to look inconspicuous.

When the bowler turned into a narrow alley between a bakery and a bookshop, Kehar followed, the tread of his boots quickening. The stranger spun and spoke at last, his voice clipped, hard.

“You are the Punjabi Langdon mentioned. Name?”

“Kehar Singh.”

“Then hear me, Singh. This city is a maze of eyes. You will need to—”

Kehar cut him off with a low urgency. “We are being followed. A man with a newspaper. He holds it wrong, inverted, watching us since the churchyard.”

The stranger’s gaze sharpened. He darted a glance to the alley mouth, then back to Kehar, reassessing him. “You noticed?”

“Yes. He pretended to read, but his shoes were polished military style. He shifts weight like a drill-trained man. He may be shadowing us.”

The bowler man studied Kehar for a beat longer, then let out a breath through his nose — half amusement, half approval. His voice softened by a fraction.

“Good eyes. That was part of your test.”

From inside his coat, he slipped a folded note into Kehar’s pocket with a deft hand. “Take this to Langdon when you meet him at one o’clock. Please do not open it. If you had missed the tail, you’d be on the next steamer home. But you noticed. That buys you your place.”

Kehar inclined his head but said nothing, the weight of the paper in his pocket strangely heavy.

The man straightened, tipping his bowler. “Remember: in this city, the watchers are everywhere, not just in the churchyard. Fail once, and you vanish.”

With that, he walked out, merging into the crowd as if he had never existed.

The bells of Big Ben were tolling the hour when Kehar entered the discreet café near Waterloo where Langdon had asked to meet. It was busy with clerks and secretaries on their luncheon break, the clatter of cups and murmur of conversation providing the perfect shield.

Langdon was already seated in the corner, posture casual but eyes sharp as ever. He wore a grey suit that blended seamlessly into the cityscape. A pot of tea steamed between them as Kehar slid into the chair opposite. They were meeting after two days, but it seemed like a long time. Kehar did feel a bit nervous but confident of having done well in his first test in London.

“You’re on time,” Langdon said. His voice was mild, but there was steel beneath it. “How did Lambeth treat you?”

Kehar kept his expression calm. “I met him. He gave me this.” He reached into his pocket and produced the folded note, placing it discreetly under the teapot.

Langdon’s eyes flicked down, then up again. “Unopened?”

“Unopened. But I told him of the follower — a man with a newspaper held upside down. It seemed careless, and it seemed a signal.”

For the first time, Langdon allowed himself the ghost of a smile. “Atkinson will be pleased. That was his snare. Many fail it.”

He slipped the note into his jacket, untouched. The smile vanished as quickly as it had come.

There was a pause. Then Langdon leaned back, looking at Kehar with a strange mixture of appraisal and something almost like pride.

“You’ve changed since Berlin.”

Kehar’s jaw tightened. The memory of the Berlin chase — the shadows in the night, the sweat of escape, the sound of boots behind him — still burned in his nerves. “I have had no choice but to change. Each day since then has been survival.”

Langdon’s eyes softened a fraction. “Survival, yes. But survival sharpens a man, or it breaks him. In your case, I see steel.” He poured the tea, pushing a cup toward Kehar. “Drink. You’ll need your wits.”

Kehar accepted the cup. The warmth steadied his hands. For a moment, they drank in silence, the clinking of Bone China cups around them filling the gap.

Finally, Langdon set down his cup. "Now listen carefully. You're close to being accepted formally. But I cannot hand you the keys to the London office until you've proven more than just good eyes. One final assignment lies between you and that threshold."

Kehar leaned forward. "What assignment?"

Langdon's voice lowered, barely audible over the chatter. "After your initial introduction at the Bureau, you will be given an assignment. Prepare for it. It will entail tracking a courier, which should not fall into the hands of German sympathisers here. You will be followed, tested, and perhaps even approached by others claiming authority. If you falter, the network dies. If you succeed, you step fully into our ranks."

Kehar felt the tea turn heavy in his stomach. "And if I fail?"

Langdon's gaze did not waver. "Then you never existed in London. You will vanish, just as others have vanished."

The words chilled Kehar, but at the same time, a strange fire rose in him. This was the very path he had chosen, the razor's edge where life and cause intertwined.

Langdon leaned closer now, speaking almost with warmth. "You remind me of myself, years ago. A man far from home, carrying more than his weight. Berlin showed me your resolve. London will decide your destiny. Do this right, and the office door will open for you – formally, irrevocably."

Kehar nodded slowly, determination hardening in his chest. "I will not fail."

The Churchyard Test

Langdon gave a small, approving nod. “Good. Then eat well tonight, sleep if you can. And tomorrow, we will meet again and plan the next step for you, Singh.”

They finished their tea in silence, two men bound by secrets in the heart of a city that would never know who they really were.



Chapter 14

LONDON AND LOOT

The morning light broke softly over London, glinting faintly against the slow roll of the Thames. Kehar Singh stepped out of his rented room in Walcott Street, buttoning his overcoat against the lingering chill. The city was waking, its narrow streets filling with carts, clattering horses, and early workers rushing with bread still warm under their arms. He walked without hurry, his eyes absorbing the face of the empire at its very heart.

He had read of London in schoolbooks and overheard tales in Punjab of this city where rulers lived like gods. But no tale had prepared him for the sight of its monuments rising like polished trophies of conquest. The great dome of St. Paul's cut into the grey sky; further across, Parliament stood like a fortress of carved stone, its Gothic spires blackened by coal smoke yet still majestic.

Kehar paused at Westminster Bridge, leaning on the railing as Big Ben tolled the quarter hour. Each strike rang through him like a reminder of the machine-like order of the British world. Behind him, men in bowler hats moved briskly, their umbrellas tucked under their arms; women in tailored coats crossed briskly with heads held high. It was all precision, all poise.

But Kehar's thoughts were not of admiration. They were of blood and loot.

How many bricks of these buildings, he wondered, had been laid with the sweat of India? How many stones of Parliament had been bought with grain stripped from Bengal during the famine? How many jewels, how much gold, how much silk from looms in Banaras, had been shipped across oceans to fund this grandeur? Even the very clock that now tolled—was its upkeep paid for by taxes wrung from villages like his own, where farmers bent under the sun, and soldiers marched in foreign wars?

“London,” he murmured, half to himself. “A city built on loot.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, picturing Sansarpur’s fields—ripe wheat swaying in the wind, his mother drawing water at dawn, his hockey brethren laughing at the canal’s edge. Did they know he now stood at the centre of this empire, breathing the same coal-thick air as their rulers? Would they ever know why?

Kehar thought of the ships that plied it daily—steamers groaning with goods from Africa, China, India. The Empire’s arteries all converged here, pumping riches into London’s veins. Somewhere in the vaults of this city lay the Kohinoor, taken from Punjab’s last Maharaja, polished, caged, and displayed as if it had always belonged to the Crown. That diamond had never been just a jewel. It was a wound. And Kehar was here to reopen it.

He straightened, pulling his coat tighter, and began walking along the embankment. Newspaper boys shouted headlines of politics and horse races. Dockworkers smoked pipes as they waited for the day’s loads. Police in dark uniforms moved with a casual arrogance, nodding only to the better-dressed. Kehar kept his face neutral, learning the rhythm of this city, letting its sounds and silences soak into him.

At every turn, he measured its wealth against the hunger he had seen back home. The red buses rumbling past him gleamed with fresh paint. The shops along Whitehall displayed silk dresses, silver cigarette cases, and fine boots that shone like mirrors.

The English lived with a confidence born not of self-sufficiency, but of plunder.

Kehar's jaw tightened. Every sight hardened his resolve. He was no longer merely a man in a foreign city. He was a knife that was gaining a razor's edge for the mission.

By mid-morning, he looped back toward Lambeth, his stride more purposeful now. The memory of the Soviet close shave, Berlin's shadows, and the Abwehr's hunt still lingered. London felt different—less overtly oppressive, but no less dangerous. Here, the surveillance wore gloves instead of boots. And somewhere in its polished corridors awaited his true assignment.

At precisely one o'clock, as agreed, Kehar slipped into the café off Fleet Street where Langdon preferred to meet. The place was a haunt of journalists and clerks, loud enough to drown conversation but discreet enough to host a dozen quiet exchanges.

Langdon was already seated, trench coat draped across the chair, a cigarette smouldering between his fingers. His eyes lit faintly when Kehar entered—not warmth exactly, but recognition, a soldier's acknowledgement of a comrade who had survived the same fire.

"Berlin seems a lifetime ago," Langdon said as Kehar slid into the seat opposite.

Kehar allowed himself a tight smile. "Some memories don't age quickly. I still remember the shadows. And the boots."

Langdon chuckled softly, shaking ash into the tray. "And the chase across Alexanderplatz. We gave those men a fine run. I half-believed you wouldn't make it out."

"I had no choice but to make it," Kehar said.

Langdon's gaze narrowed, studying him. "No. I suppose you didn't. Which is why we're here."

They ordered coffee—thick, black, unsweetened. The clatter of cups around them gave cover to their low voices.

“You’ve done well,” Langdon continued. “The assignment yesterday convinced Atkinson. He’s not easy to impress. That means you’re ready to be moved up. No more half-measures. No more drifting.”

Kehar leaned in slightly. “And where does that move take me?”

Langdon’s hand went to his coat pocket. He pulled out a folded slip and slid it across the table with deliberate casualness. “Here. Your final directions. Tomorrow morning, you’ll present yourself at this address. Discreetly. Arrive at nine sharp. Wear your grey suit, nothing flamboyant. Tell the desk clerk you’re here on a clerical appointment. That’s all. From there, you’ll be guided further.”

Kehar unfolded the slip beneath the table. A river-side address, innocuous on the surface. But the code was unmistakable. This was the entry to the Bureau itself—the vault of the very enemy he had sworn to rob.

Langdon exhaled smoke and gave a thin smile. “You’ve played the student long enough. Tomorrow, you step into the real game. They’ll test you again, of course, but less crudely. Don’t falter. Remember—confidence passes more doors than keys.”

For a moment, silence hung between them. Then Langdon leaned back, voice softer. “One more thing. Once you walk through that door, there’s no retreat. Not for you, not for me. Whatever loyalty you hold—to India, to anyone—you’ll need to bury it deep. They’ll smell hesitation like blood.”

Kehar’s fingers tightened on the slip of paper. He nodded slowly. “I understand.”

“Good.” Langdon stubbed his cigarette, rose, and adjusted his coat. “Tomorrow, then. Nine sharp. Don’t be late.”

He folded the paper carefully, slid it back into his briefcase, and let his breath steady. Whatever waited at that address, whatever trials the agency still had for him, he would endure. He had come too far to falter.

For Sansarpur. For Punjab. For every grain of wheat and every drop of blood that had built this city.



Chapter 15

THE HOUSE OF SHADOWS

The address Langdon had pressed into Kehar's palm the afternoon before seemed, at first glance, ordinary: **21 Queen Anne's Gate.**

The morning was bright, the air crisp with a faint tang of smoke from the Thames. London bustled around him with omnibuses creaking past and gentlemen in bowlers heading to their offices. Kehar walked steadily, his polished shoes tapping the cobbles, bowler tilted forward as Langdon had advised. The cut of his charcoal suit was modest but neat, the turban tied tightly in deep navy.

Yet even as he strode through Westminster, his mind drifted. The elegant townhouses, the granite facades of Parliament, the clean-paved walkways—every brick and stone, he thought, had been paid for in part with India's blood. The diamonds pulled from Golconda mines, the shiploads of spices and silks, the taxes wrung from farmers who watched their crops rot while British traders sold grain abroad. The Kohinoor itself glittered in the Tower, torn from Lahore's treasury to crown a queen.

For a moment, bitterness surged. But then he steadied himself. He could not let anger guide him—not yet. Anger was noise; he needed silence, precision, and patience. His time would come.

He reached the address. Before him stood a respectable Georgian townhouse, its pale brickwork identical to its neighbours. Brass knocker polished, lace curtains drawn. Nothing in its appearance

suggested intrigue. A small brass plate read: **Metropolitan Statistical Bureau.**

Statistics, Kehar thought with a faint smile. Numbers were one thing the British could always hide behind.

He mounted the steps and rapped twice, exactly as instructed.

The door opened to a maid in a stiff uniform. Her expression betrayed no curiosity. "Your name, sir?"

"Kehar Singh."

She nodded and led him inside through a dim corridor lined with oil paintings of dreary landscapes. At the far end, she opened another door—and the air changed instantly.

Gone was the genteel hush of a townhouse. Here, light poured through tall windows onto rows of desks. The clatter of typewriters, rustle of files, and steady hum of voices filled the room. Walls bore maps of Europe and the Empire, pins and strings crisscrossing like veins of some hidden body. A faint smell of tobacco and damp paper lingered.

Kehar paused. This was no Bureau of Statistics.

Heads turned. Some eyes were raised, some eyebrows, and others lingered longer. The bowler hat, the brown skin—he could almost hear unspoken questions. Kehar's jaw tightened, but he forced his stride to be calm. Let them look. He had walked into clubs in Berlin with worse stares upon him.

Then Langdon appeared. In pinstripes now, trench coat gone, he looked every bit the establishment man. Yet his half-smile was the same—the smile that hinted he knew things no one else did.

"You made it," Langdon said warmly, clapping his shoulder. "Good. Punctuality is the first rule here. Come."

Together, they crossed the office floor. Clerks glanced up, conversations faltered, then resumed. Langdon led him to a heavy oak door and knocked once. Without waiting, he pushed it open.

Inside sat three men and a woman around a polished table. On the wall behind them hung a large map of India, peppered with pins.

Langdon's voice carried confidence. "Kehar Singh. Our fresh recruit."

The man at the head of the table leaned back, hawk-nosed and severe. "So this is the fellow from Berlin."

"Yes, sir," Langdon replied smoothly. "And alive, against some odds."

Kehar inclined his head. "Honoured to be here."

One of the others, plump and ruddy, cleared his throat. "You'll forgive our directness, Mr Singh. The Service rarely recruits... outsiders."

Kehar met his eye, "Britain has made India its business for two centuries. Do you not think we, too, understand the business of Britain?"

The woman, in her forties with sharp spectacles, tilted her head as if appraising a specimen. The hawk-nosed chief gave a grunt—not approval, perhaps, but interest.

"Very well," the chief said at last. "You'll begin as an observer. Surveillance, codes, reports. Nothing more until you prove reliable."

The plump man slid a folder across. Kehar opened it. Photographs of London docks, lists of names, shipments marked as 'machinery' but suspected to be German arms.

"German agents are crawling through the docks," the woman said crisply. "Dockers, clerks, even shipping agents. We need eyes that can blend in. No improvisation. Watch, record, report. Understood?"

Kehar closed the folder carefully. "Perfectly."

“Good,” the chief said. “Mr Langdon, see that he is placed and briefed.”

Back in the corridor, Langdon exhaled. “Well handled. Atkinson doesn’t warm easily.”

“ That was Atkinson!?”

“Yes, the name has a face, finally! This hawk-nosed fellow is suspicious of everyone. But you passed his first gaze.”

They walked down to the main office. Langdon gestured to a desk at the far end, beside a window overlooking Queen Anne’s Gate. It was modest—a chair, a locked drawer, a blotter with an inkwell, and a typewriter. The neighbouring desks were occupied by young clerks in their twenties, with their sleeves rolled and tapping out coded reports.

“This will be yours,” Langdon said. “You’ll spend mornings here: learning our cyphers, filing surveillance notes. Afternoons will be drills. You’ll shadow senior watchers, practise tailing in the streets, and run exercises in memory recall. We’ll test how many faces you can recall from a crowd, how long you can follow a mark without being spotted, how swiftly you can code a message.”

Kehar nodded, taking it in. The desk was plain, yet to him it felt like a gate into another world.

“And training?” he asked.

“You’ll rotate under three agents,” Langdon said. “Clarke will handle codes—dull fellow, but thorough. Evans runs surveillance teams; he’ll have you trailing half of London by week’s end. And there’s Miss Hughes—the lady you saw just now. She runs deception drills. Observe her. She’ll teach you how to wear lies like a second skin.”

Kehar let the names settle in memory. Around him, the office hummed, clerks hunched over files, the air heavy with smoke. He realised he would be the only brown face here. Every stumble would be noticed, every mistake magnified.

But he also knew something else. The Service thought they were recruiting him. In truth, he was recruiting them into his mission.

Langdon leaned closer, lowering his voice. "One more thing. This place remembers everything: every silence, every hesitation. Speak only when you must. Write clearly. And walk carefully."

Kehar studied him. "And if I walk too carefully?"

Langdon's smile flickered. "Then they'll call you a shadow. And in this house, shadows survive longest."

That evening, as clerks filed out and lamps dimmed, Kehar remained at his desk a little longer. He looked at the folder on the docks, then out the window where London's lamps were flickering alive. Somewhere beyond, the Tower stood with its vaults and jewels.

He pressed his palm flat on the blotter. He would write their codes, file their reports, and sit in their drills. He would play their game, patiently, until the day came to strike his blow.

The House of Shadows had admitted him and was yet to accept him. And from within its walls, he would watch, learn, and bide his time.

Clarke and the Codes

The following morning, Kehar discovered that the Bureau's days began not with coffee or pleasantries but with drills.

He was led to a smaller chamber, walls lined with locked cabinets. Clarke awaited him there, a man with thinning hair and an expression permanently apologetic.

"Mr Singh, is it? Well then, we'll begin. The Service lives and dies by its codes."

On the desk lay a set of cypher wheels, substitution charts, and thick ledgers marked *Top Secret*. Clarke placed one before him.

“German agents do not wait politely while we fumble with the alphabet. You will practise until you can encrypt and decrypt without pause.”

For two hours, Kehar laboured. A plain English sentence was transformed into rows of numbers and letters, shifted by key phrases from Shakespeare to nursery rhymes. His wrist cramped from writing, yet Clarke demanded speed and precision.

At first, Kehar stumbled. The jumble blurred before his eyes. But gradually his mind adjusted, like a musician learning scales. Symbols became rhythm. He surprised Clarke by recalling entire strings without notes.

“You’ve a good memory,” Clarke muttered, half impressed. “That will serve you.”

Kehar only smiled faintly. Memory had kept him alive in Berlin.

Evans and the Streets

That afternoon, Evans arrived. A broad-shouldered Welshman with a voice like gravel, he wasted no time.

“Come, Singh. London will be your classroom.”

They took a tram to Charing Cross and began walking. Evans pointed discreetly to a tall man in a bowler entering the Strand.

“Your mark. Tail him. Don’t get close. Don’t get lost. And if he spots you, you’ve failed.”

The man set off briskly. Kehar followed, adjusting his pace. Crowds jostled; hansom cabs rattled past. Twice, the man glanced over his shoulder. Kehar veered into a tobacconist’s doorway, pretending to examine pipes. When the man stopped suddenly to tie his shoe, Kehar turned to buy a newspaper.

Evans shadowed at a distance, watching both.

The chase wound through alleys, across a market, into Covent Garden. Kehar's pulse quickened, but his face remained calm. Finally, the man vanished into a theatre. Evans clapped Kehar's shoulder.

"Not bad. Most greenhorns walk straight into the fellow's back. You've done this before, eh?"

"Berlin has trained me enough," Kehar explained.

Evans chuckled. "We'll test you harder tomorrow. Perhaps with two marks, or one who tries to lose you. Always remember—on London's streets, you are the hunter and the hunted both."

Miss Hughes and the Lie

The most unnerving was Miss Hughes. She summoned Kehar to a narrow office with drawn blinds. On her desk sat only a glass of water and a blank sheet of paper.

"Mr Singh," she said coolly. "We shall practise deception. Sit."

He obeyed.

"Tell me," she began abruptly, "what did you eat for breakfast?"

"Toast and tea," Kehar replied.

Her eyes pierced his. "Liar. You had porridge in the canteen."

Kehar felt a flicker of irritation. "Then why ask?"

"Because a lie is not only what you say. It is how you say it. You spoke too quickly. You avoided detail. A good liar offers embroidery—crumbs on the tablecloth, the curl of butter on the toast. Shall we try again?"

For the next hour, she forced him to invent stories: where he had been, whom he had met, what he carried in his pocket. Each time she pounced on hesitation, on the flicker of an eyelid, the stiffening of a hand.

At last, she sat back, satisfied. “Better. But remember—your greatest weapon is not words. It is your belief. If you believe the lie, so will others.”

Kehar left her chamber unsettled. Yet a thought glimmered: he, too, lived a lie every day. To these people, he was a recruit of the Crown. In truth, he was their enemy. Miss Hughes had only polished the mask he already wore.

Evenings in the Bureau

Each evening, Kehar returned to his desk. He filed surveillance notes in the Service’s terse style—time, location, behaviour, nothing more. He practised the Service’s cypher until the numbers danced before him in sleep. He overheard clerks whispering of German sympathisers, Irish rebels, and Communist cells.

Now and then, someone’s gaze lingered on him too long, as if doubting his place here. But the longer he stayed, the less he was a novelty and the more he was a fixture.

Yet inside, Kehar’s mind remained split. He was learning their craft, but every lesson he bent inward, measuring how it might serve his true cause. Codes could conceal messages to comrades. Tailing drills could aid in tracking India’s enemies. Deception—ah, that he already knew, but now it had been refined.

The Quiet Word

One evening, after most clerks had gone, Langdon found him still at his desk.

“You’ve taken to it well,” Langdon said softly. “Clarke says you have a cypher’s brain. Evans says you move like a shadow. Even Hughes, though she’d never admit it, calls you promising.”

Kehar closed his file. “I do what is asked.”

Langdon studied him for a long moment. “Do more than that. Learn. Absorb. But never forget—this Service watches its own more closely than it watches the enemy. You understand?”

“I do.”

Langdon’s eyes narrowed, a glint of warning—or was it encouragement? “Good. Because in this house, trust is the rarest currency. Spend it carefully.”

Then he left, leaving Kehar alone with the map of India pinned to the wall. The pins stabbed like needles into Lahore, Delhi, Calcutta. His homeland was reduced to dots and threads.

Kehar touched the map lightly. They had given him codes, streets, and lies. But in truth, they had given him something far greater—the tools to wound them, one day, from within.

And so his training in the House of Shadows began. Kehar was given two months to settle in his training, complete assignments and be ready for bigger spy work by November.

It had been an eventful year for the intelligence community and more was in the offing, especially closer home.

After ascending the throne in January, King Edward VIII declared his intention to marry Wallis Simpson, an American divorcée. Since the King is also the titular head of the Church of England, the government and Church reeled at the prospect of a queen consort whose former husband still lived, which was against the Church’s strictures.

This had created a situation where the coronation in May 1937 had become a question mark. These were months of uncertainty for Great Britain’s internal affairs, and with the German war machine growling in Europe, Kehar Singh found himself focusing on the job at hand as the months kept rolling by.



Chapter 16

ASSIGNMENT BY THE THAMES

It was September 1936. The morning broke with a thin drizzle, soft enough to blur the outlines of the opposite street. Kehar Singh stood by the narrow window of his room, the sill cool beneath his hand. He had grown used to waking early in this city, though London never seemed to sleep—its heart beat steadily, even in the small hours, as though it thrived on the weight of centuries and the commerce of empire.

Below, Walcott street was already stirring. A milk cart jolted past, the horse's hooves sending up clods of damp mud. Teenage boys, their caps too large for their heads, shouted the names of newspapers and waved their bundles through the mist. Across the way, an old woman dragged a bucket toward the communal pump, her shawl drawn tight, her back stooped. Life continued with its rhythms, grey and unchanging.

Kehar saw more than the street. He saw, in the outline of soot-blackened chimneys, the fields of Punjab emptied of grain to feed Britain; in the polished church spires, the melted gold of temples carried away as trophies; in the smooth stone façades of government offices, the sweat of labourers who had toiled for wages that never fed their families. London, to him, was not merely a city. It was a monument to theft. The wealth glittering in its shops, the tea steaming in its parlours, even the rails that carried its trams—all were built on the drained veins of his country.

He stood watching longer than he intended. It was not idleness but an instinct for remembering. Every sight mattered, every impression counted. His teachers in the Bureau had spoken of training the eye—of turning each street corner into a map, each stranger's walk into a file to be recalled at need.

On the chair lay his wool coat. He reached for it and felt the folded slip of paper handed to him the day before. "Not your first assignment" as Atkinson had styled it in clipped tones, but rather a map—an ordinary street plan of London, yet with faint pencil marks along the southern wharves. Evans had pressed it into his hand with the advice: *learn the lay of the land before you walk it.*

Kehar had spent much of the previous months tracing those lines with his finger, memorising alleys, imagining the rhythm of footfalls on the cobbles, the smells of the dockside air.

He tucked the map securely, straightened his collar, and left the room.

The House of Shadows, as the Bureau was nicknamed, received him without ceremony. Atkinson's briefing was short: there was a courier from Hamburg, a small valise, suspected contact with Irish intermediaries, and Kehar was to tail him. No confrontation, no mistakes. Observe, remember, report. The words were simple, but Kehar heard the menace beneath them: failure would not be forgiven.

From the Bureau, he set out on foot, then boarded a tram that clattered eastward. The rain had thickened into a fine veil, coating the air with the smell of coal smoke and wet rope. By the time he reached the river again, the bustle of the docks swallowed him whole.

Ships hunched at the piers like beasts resting after battle. Stevedores shouted orders, ropes creaked, gulls screamed as they circled overhead. The Thames rolled sluggishly past, a wide grey mirror reflecting chimneys and cranes. Kehar moved among the crowd as though he belonged, shoulders square, hands easy in his pockets, eyes taking everything in.

The ship from Hamburg had already begun to empty its passengers. Families clutched trunks, merchants barked for porters, and sailors laughed too loudly. Then Kehar saw him: a thin man in a dark overcoat, hat pulled low, carrying the small black valise with brass corners. He walked briskly, like one anxious to be done with public view.

Kehar drifted after him, neither too near nor too far, the lessons of training pulsing in his mind. The man paused once to light a cigarette, his glance sharp over the shoulder. Kehar bent as though tying a shoelace, back turned. When the man resumed, Kehar rose and followed again, using the crowd of dockworkers for cover.

They moved through the wet lanes lined with warehouses and beer houses. The smells here were harsher: fish gone to rot, tarred planks, smoke that burned the eyes. Kehar's heart beat steadily. He was in the game now, his senses tuned to every step, every angle.

The man finally entered a public house called *The Red Gull*. Its windows glowed dim through the rain, promising warmth to sailors and dock workers. Kehar followed, letting the door close almost against his back.

Inside, smoke coiled thick in the rafters. The air was sour with ale and damp wool. Kehar ordered a half pint at the bar, his voice quiet, and turned so that his gaze seemed casual.

The courier had taken a corner table. Within minutes, another joined him: broad-shouldered, scarred across the jaw, his manner rough but confident. They leaned close together. Kehar watched their gestures, not their lips. The valise shifted beneath the table. The scarred man slid a packet wrapped in brown paper across. The courier nodded. An exchange had been made.

It might have ended there, but then Kehar noticed in the far corner, a man sitting with a newspaper raised too deliberately. The hands holding it were steady, yet the paper trembled faintly. Too neat, too

polished for this place. When Kehar allowed his gaze to pass briefly over the man's shoes, he saw they were blacked to a shine no dockhand could afford.

A second watcher.

Kehar forced himself to drink slowly, to leave his glass half empty. When the courier rose, Kehar did too, leaving coins on the counter. Outside, the drizzle had thickened to rain.

The courier walked swiftly, hugging the valise. Kehar followed, keeping a van between them. Once, the man halted sharply, forcing Kehar to duck under an awning, pretending to shake water from his coat. When he lifted his eyes, he saw movement farther back: the newspaper man, trailing, careful but not careful enough.

The three of them threaded through alleys slick with rain, past doorways smelling of fish guts. Then the courier hailed a hansom cab and climbed inside. Kehar cursed silently but raised his hand as another cab rattled by. "Follow that carriage," he ordered, and the driver, used to dockside intrigues, cracked his whip with a grin.

The pursuit became almost theatrical: the courier in the first cab, Kehar behind, the newspaper man in a third. Rain streaked the windows, turning the city into a blur of lamps and silhouettes. Kehar leaned forward, his breath fogging the glass.

At last, the courier's cab halted by a warehouse near Limehouse. He descended quickly, valise in hand, and slipped through a side door. Kehar dismissed his own driver with a coin and melted into the shadows. Moments later, the third cab stopped farther down the street. The newspaper man emerged, collar high, expression unreadable.

Kehar's skin prickled. Was this Bureau, after all, testing him? Or German, or Irish? He could not tell.

Circling the warehouse, he found a rear window and crouched beneath it. Through the grimy glass, he saw three figures at a table: the

courier, the scarred man, and a bespectacled third. Papers lay spread across the wood—maps, unmistakable even at a distance. Kehar's chest tightened when he recognised the outlines of India's coastlines, shipping routes traced from Bombay and Calcutta outward.

The sight burned him. These were the veins of his country, charted for profit, contested by foreign hands while his people starved. For a moment, he forgot he was an observer and felt only rage. But training prevailed. He steadied his breath, fixed every detail in memory—the shapes of faces, the clock on the wall showing quarter past three, the way the courier tapped the valise nervously.

Footsteps scraped nearby. Kehar ducked lower. The newspaperman was rounding the corner. Their eyes met in the half-light. For a heartbeat, both were still. Then the man deliberately looked away, turned, and walked on.

Kehar remained frozen until the sound of his boots had faded. Only then did he exhale, the cold rain seeping through his coat.

When the courier finally emerged and took another cab, Kehar let him go. He had seen enough. His task was not to seize, only to see.

By the time he trudged back toward the river, his limbs were heavy, not from exertion but from the weight of what he carried in his mind.

At the Bureau, Atkinson listened to his account with narrowed eyes, jotting notes sparingly. He did not praise, but nor did he condemn. Langdon stood by the door, arms crossed, gaze unreadable. Only a faint nod suggested approval.

That night, back in his room, Kehar lay on the iron bed, coat still damp, boots by the door. The city outside roared with indifferent life. He closed his eyes and replayed the day: the smell of the docks, the scar on the jaw of the second man, the rain dripping from the courier's hat brim, the faint tremor of the newspaper held too long.

Most of all, he remembered the eyes. The brief look in the rain, the silent recognition. Whoever that man was—Bureau, rival, or something else—he had seen Kehar, had measured him, and then had chosen to walk away.

It was mercy or warning. Perhaps both.

Kehar stared at the ceiling, hearing the Thames in the distance, its waters carrying the history of conquest and the whispers of resistance. He knew sleep would not come easily. He had stepped into London's shadow world, and shadows, once entered, did not let go.



Chapter 17

PARTY AT MAYFAIR

London woke to a soft drizzle that morning, the kind that hung in the air like breath rather than rain. From his window, Kehar watched the wet sheen over the cobblestones of his narrow street. Carriages rattled past, now fewer and fewer as motorcars pressed into dominance. The smell of damp coal smoke drifted between the rows of brick houses, curling against the iron railings and soot-stained facades. Somewhere in the distance, the bells of St. Pancras tolled the hour.

He had slept little the night before. The words of Langdon's last briefing still rang in his mind: *"You will step higher this time. These salons are not just parties, Kehar. They are the nerve-rooms where ideas ferment, where alliances are tested over wine and cigars. Our friends whisper there, and so do our enemies. Listen, but never appear to listen."*

The thought unsettled him more than the surveillance drills or the tails he had shadowed across London's streets. In the anonymity of pubs and docks, he could vanish into the murmur of a thousand strangers. But in a drawing-room scented with roses and brandy, under the piercing eyes of lords and ladies, his brown skin and accented English would be lanterns pointing directly at him.

Still, the fire inside him refused to flicker out. This was not just the Bureau's assignment—it was his path forward. Each step brought him closer to the Kohinoor, closer to London's guarded vaults, closer to avenging what had been looted from his homeland. He tightened the lapel of his plain but well-tailored suit, the kind Langdon insisted he

wear, and turned from the window. Tonight would demand both discipline and daring.

By dusk, a carriage hired from a discreet service deposited him at the corner of Curzon Street in Mayfair. Here, London seemed to shed its grime. The houses loomed tall and immaculate, their white stone fronts polished by generations of servants. Gas lamps cast halos over the pavements, and the air carried the faint perfume of horse leather, expensive tobacco, and cut flowers. Men in tails and women in glittering dresses arrived in quick succession, stepping from polished cars as uniformed footmen swung open the doors.

Kehar lingered for a moment on the opposite pavement, drawing breath. He imagined the lives behind these façades: fortunes fattened on tea and opium, ships that had sailed from Bombay and Calcutta, and the sweat of countless Indian labourers distilled into chandeliers and marble staircases. *The plunder of India*, he thought bitterly, *has built this Mayfair night*.

He adjusted his bow tie—awkwardly, still not used to its stiff clasp—and crossed the street. The townhouse door, painted a glossy black, opened before him as though he were expected. A servant in livery took his coat with a bow that was both polite and faintly condescending.

Inside, the air shimmered with light and sound. A chandelier glittered overhead, sending fractured rainbows across gilded frames and tapestries. A string quartet played softly in the corner while glasses clinked and conversations hummed like an undercurrent of bees.

Kehar's presence drew immediate notice. Heads turned, some with curiosity, others with the sharpened interest of suspicion. A lady in emerald silk whispered into her companion's ear. A man with a monocle regarded him as though examining a specimen. Just then, a hostess, tall and imperious, swept forward with professional grace.

“Mr Singh, I presume,” she said, pronouncing his name as though tasting it. “You are most welcome. Lord Whitcombe has spoken of you. Hockey, isn’t it? We do hope you’ll feel at home.”

Her words carried both courtesy and an unspoken reminder: he was here because he had been invited, vouched for. Not because he belonged.

The evening unfolded in measured steps. He was handed a glass of champagne he did not drink, smiled at remarks that cut close to an insult, and allowed himself to be manoeuvred between conversations. Men in tailored coats spoke of Germany’s rearmament in tones ranging from admiration to alarm. A baronet with silver hair praised Hitler’s ability to restore “order and pride.” Another whispered about trade routes, using phrases that sounded innocuous but hinted at coded meaning—“summer shipments,” “harvest investments,” “the Rhine’s promise.”

Kehar listened, his mind working quickly to store fragments. At times, he drifted closer under the guise of curiosity. At others, he stepped back, careful not to appear too intent.

The sharpest test came midway through the evening. A tall man, his cheeks ruddy with drink, fixed Kehar with a smile that was anything but warm.

“And what brings an Indian gentleman to our little gathering?” he asked, voice pitched just high enough for those nearby to overhear. “A student of empire? Or do you seek to instruct us on how to govern your people better?”

Laughter, brittle and complicit, rippled through the circle. Kehar felt his jaw tighten but forced a polite smile.

“I come to learn, sir,” he said evenly. “To listen, as you so kindly permit. After all, London is where decisions ripple outward—to Delhi, to Lahore, to the far corners of empire. It would be folly not to pay attention.”

The man raised an eyebrow, half-amused, half-disconcerted. The circle moved on. Kehar had neither flinched nor retreated, and in that poise, he sensed a sliver of respect—even if grudging.

Near the close of the evening, he saw him. Across the crowded room, by the mantelpiece, stood a man not dressed in silk or tails but in a plain dark suit. His face was lean, his eyes burning with unmistakable intensity. The gaze locked with Kehar's for the briefest second—recognition sparking like flint.

It was the same man who had met his eyes in the street on his first assignment at the docks.

Kehar's pulse quickened. What was he doing here, in Mayfair's glittering nest of empire loyalists and German sympathisers? The man gave no sign, turned away, and melted into the throng. Kehar knew better than to pursue. For now, he filed the moment away like a cypher waiting to be solved.

Later, as the guests thinned, Kehar found himself cornered again—this time more dangerously. In a quiet corridor outside the drawing room, he paused by a side table to study a painting. A voice rang sharp behind him.

"You linger too much, Mr Singh."

It was the monocled man. His face was pale, his lips thin. "Men who linger often listen too well. And you are not one of us."

The words cut, a naked accusation. Kehar's mind raced. To deny would inflame. To confront would expose. So he smiled faintly, placed his untouched champagne flute on the table, and inclined his head.

"On the contrary," he said softly, "I am exactly what I appear—a guest in this house. No more, no less."

The monocled man studied him, then gave a brittle laugh. "Careful, Mr Singh. In London, a misstep can cost dearly."

Kehar walked away without hurry, though his heart pounded.

When at last he stepped out into the cool night, the drizzle had stopped. The lamps shone on emptying streets, the hush of Mayfair restored. He exhaled deeply, as though surfacing from underwater.

On his way home, the image of the mysterious man's eyes returned again and again, haunting him with their unspoken message. London was not just the Bureau's battlefield—it was India's, too. The struggle had reached here, among salons and drawing rooms, as surely as it raged in Punjab's fields.

The following morning, Kehar sat once more in the Bureau's discreet offices. Langdon listened without interruption as Kehar recounted every fragment of overheard conversation, every coded phrase, every shift of mood in that Mayfair house. When Kehar finished, Langdon leaned back, fingers steepled.

"You did well," he said at last. "Very well. The monocled man—he suspects too easily, but his suspicion is useful to us. Let him chase shadows."

Kehar nodded, though his thoughts were elsewhere. He could still feel the heat of that Indian's gaze.

Langdon's tone shifted. "The Bureau has decided your next step. It will seem... unusual, but it is necessary. You will make contact with circles we have watched for years—Indian radicals in London. The Free India Club, on Highgate. They gather there under the guise of scholarship and fraternity, but their aims are sharper. We need an ear inside."

Kehar kept his expression neutral, but inside, the fire roared. This was the turn he had hoped for, the door that would bring him to his own people, his own cause.

Langdon slid a slip of paper across the desk with an address and a time. "You begin tomorrow."



Chapter 18

FREE INDIA CLUB

The fog that clung to London the next morning was heavier than usual, a slow-moving pall that blurred the outlines of spires and chimneys. Kehar tied his turban carefully, smoothing the folds with almost meditative care. He had not tied one like this since leaving Punjab, the cloth, feeling both like armour and like memory, wound tight against his skin.

Today was no ordinary walk into the city's veins. Today, he would step into a place he had only heard whispers of—Free India Club, the home of students, exiles, and dreamers who had sworn themselves to the cause of freedom.

Langdon's slip of paper lay in his pocket. Just an address, nothing more. Yet Kehar could feel the weight of it as though it were a summons written in iron.

The bus rattled through the city, and Kehar let his eyes drift over the streets. Clerks rushed toward offices, mothers pulled children along, hawkers shouted about fish and coal. The smoke of London's engines stung his nostrils, and he thought of Sansarpur mornings—of wheat fields catching the sun, of the smell of damp soil after the canal waters had run. That world seemed impossibly far away, yet every face of an Indian he passed on these streets brought it back in a rush.

What would they be doing in Punjab now, he wondered. Does the harvest look good? Has the police shadow lifted from the villages? Do the men still

gather under the Peepal tree whispering of Azadi, or has silence fallen under the lash of British cane?

He pressed the questions down. They hurt too much to linger on.

By the time he reached Highgate Hill, the morning mist had begun to lift. The street was quieter here, lined with tall plane trees and orderly terraces, a world away from the raucous markets nearer the river. Kehar paused at the corner, scanning the houses. They stood in rows, respectable and sober, their doors painted in dark colours. Only one seemed alive with subtle energy: a modest building with a brass plate that read - "*Free India Club.*"

The windows were curtained, yet from within came the faint hum of voices.

For a moment, Kehar hesitated. His heart beat harder than it had when shadowing strangers through alleys, harder than when slipping coded notes beneath tablecloths. This was different. To be judged by the British was one thing—predictable, even—but to be judged by Indians, his own, whose suspicion might cut sharper than any foreigner's, was another trial altogether.

Still, he stepped forward, lifted the iron knocker, and let it fall.

The door opened after a long pause. A young man, spectacles perched on his nose, studied him with sharp eyes.

"Yes?"

"My name is Kehar Singh," he said, keeping his voice steady. "I was told... I might find fellow countrymen here."

The man's gaze flicked to Kehar's turban, his trimmed beard, his tailored suit. He nodded curtly, then stepped aside.

Inside, the hallway smelled faintly of ink and tobacco. Posters lined the walls—portraits of Lala Lajpat Rai, Tilak, Gandhi, Bhagat Singh. Handwritten notices about lectures and meetings crowded the bulletin board. The air itself seemed charged, alive with talk and urgency.

Kehar followed the young man into a larger room where perhaps a dozen men and women were gathered. Some leaned against the mantel, others sat cross-legged on the carpet, a few hunched over papers at a long table. The hum of conversation slowed as eyes turned toward him.

Here, in this unassuming London house, he felt the full force of being both insider and outsider. The language was his, the faces were his, the fire of India burned in the room—yet he was a stranger in their midst, arriving unannounced.

The man who stepped forward to question Kehar stood taller than most in the hall, his presence felt before his voice was heard. Rajendra Dayanand Verma was a figure difficult to ignore—broad of shoulder, with the upright carriage of one accustomed to both physical discipline and intellectual authority. His face was angular, the jaw sharply defined, softened only by the trimmed moustache that framed his upper lip. His skin carried the deep bronze of the north Indian sun, though softened now by London's pallor, and his dark hair, combed neatly back, bore the faintest streaks of premature grey at the temples, which lent him gravitas rather than age.

His eyes were his most striking feature—deep set, dark, and unblinking, with the weight of a man who measured every word before allowing it to escape his lips. They studied Kehar not with hostility, but with the sharpened suspicion of one who had seen infiltrators before and would not allow sentiment to blind him again. When those eyes fixed upon him, Kehar felt as though his very intentions were being sifted, grain from chaff.

Verma wore a well-pressed brown woollen suit, tailored but modest, his tie a sober navy. A heavy overcoat, draped carelessly over one arm, suggested his habit of moving briskly through London's streets regardless of the weather. Around his wrist glimmered a simple steel watch, worn but carefully polished, while in his other hand he carried

a leather portfolio thick with papers—manifestos, petitions, minutes of meetings.

When he spoke, his voice was low, resonant, and deliberate, each word falling with the measured certainty of a man used to being obeyed. It was not the voice of a firebrand rabble-rouser, but of a strategist—one who believed revolution required patience as much as passion.

He was not merely a tall man. He was the embodiment of the gravity of the Free India Club itself: disciplined, vigilant, and unwilling to waste even a breath on the frivolous.

“And who have we here?” the man asked. His accent carried traces of Punjab, roughened by years abroad.

“Kehar Singh, from Sansarpur,” Kehar replied. “I have been in Berlin. Now I am in London.”

Murmurs rippled. Berlin was a word heavy with meaning in 1936. Suspicion sharpened.

“And why are you here?”

Kehar took a breath. “Because India is here. Because even in London, our struggle lives. And because I could not pass the door without knocking.”

The tall man studied him in silence. Then, to Kehar’s shock, he stepped closer. Their eyes met—and in that instant, recognition struck. This was the man from Mayfair. The same burning gaze that had pierced him across a crowded drawing room.

The man’s lips curled into something between a frown and a smile.

“So...it is you.”

Whispers rippled through the room. The tall man motioned, and two others—students, perhaps—moved subtly to block the doorway. Kehar understood: this was no polite visit. He had walked into an interrogation chamber disguised as a drawing room.

“You were seen in Mayfair,” the tall man said. “Amongst them. Amongst the oppressors who sip champagne on India’s bones. What business does a Sansarpur man have in such company?”

Kehar’s jaw tightened. “Sometimes a man must walk in shadows to know how thick the darkness is.”

The tall man’s eyes narrowed. “And sometimes a man walks there because he belongs to them. Which are you?”

Kehar held the gaze, steady. “I belong only to the soil of India. And I am here to serve her cause, if you will allow it.”

A sharp laugh came from the corner. “Fine words. But fine words have fooled us before.”

The questions came harder now, voices from different corners of the room.

“What do you know of Berlin?”

“Whose orders brought you to London?”

“Do you write to your family in Sansarpur?”

“Why should we not throw you back into the fog and forget your name?”

Kehar answered each as carefully as he dared, weaving truth with omission. He spoke of Berlin’s salons, of overheard words in German and English. He admitted he had been *observed* by the British, though he did not name Langdon. He confessed to carrying loneliness for Punjab like a stone in his chest.

At one point, the young woman, in trousers and a shirt with chopped hair, leaned forward. “If you miss India so much, why do you not return?”

Kehar’s throat tightened. The memory of wheat fields, of his mother’s voice calling him for dinner, rushed over him. “Because return means

prison. Or gallows. Or exile within my own land. Here, at least, I may still breathe and move. Here, perhaps, I may be useful."

The tall man tapped the table with one finger. "Useful how?"

Kehar spread his hands. "You are students, speakers, writers. You wage war with words. I... I have lived among spies. I know how to listen unseen. I know how to carry messages without being noticed. I can go where students cannot—into pubs, into docks, into clubs where men in bowler hats discuss the empire's next theft. Use me for that, and I will serve."

The tall man studied him for a long moment. Then he leaned back slowly. "Perhaps. Or perhaps you will serve another master with equal conviction."

The tension broke slightly. A few mutters, a few sidelong looks. The tall man gestured to a chair. "Sit, Singh. You will attend tomorrow's gathering. Say little. Listen much. Prove yourself with silence first."

That night, when Kehar left Free India Club, the fog had lifted entirely, revealing a pale wash of late sunlight over Highgate. He walked slowly down the hill, his mind still in that room. Pride swelled in him—the pride of hearing his countrymen speak boldly, without fear, of freedom. Yet suspicion lingered in their eyes, suspicion that mirrored his own.

The Bureau wanted him inside the Club as an ear. Free India Club wanted him as a silent guest, perhaps a pawn. And Kehar himself wanted something else altogether—access to networks, to secrets, to a path toward the diamond locked away in the Tower of London.

At the edge of the street, he paused. A motorcar passed, headlights flashing briefly. For an instant, he thought he saw a silhouette watching from across the road—the shape of a man, still and intent. By the time Kehar blinked, it was gone.

He pulled his coat tighter. In London, as in Berlin, every door opened onto both refuge and peril.



Chapter 19

ACCEPTANCE

The fog had returned like a memory, soft and implacable, wrapping the lamp posts and the plane trees in a slow, revealing hush. Kehar tightened the fold of his turban with fingers that wanted steadiness more than style, and he went down his Walcott Street dwelling with the careful, measured step of a man who has learned to make entrances that do not startle. The city behind him— Lambeth's messy terraces, the great glassy face of the Thames beyond—receded into its usual anonymity. Atkinson's brief was to be a listening post at Free India Club, and today was his second attempt. He had let a day pass in introspection and preparation. Kehar had to be careful not to be seen as defending a story or appearing too interested in the affairs of the Club and its residents.

Tonight, he came with a different air, less like a suppliant and more like a man who had rehearsed a role until its notes had settled into his bones. The Bureau had approved his presence. However, approval from the India Club and winning Verma's confidence would be the actual reward for his effort.

The door opened almost at once. The young man in spectacles who had watched him so closely yesterday inclined his head and let him pass without a word. Inside, the room had been transformed. Lamps threw honey-coloured light onto the polished mantel; somebody had laid a garland of marigolds beneath a framed photograph of Bhagat Singh, the petals like small suns. A folded tricolour rested beside the

picture, its colours vivid in the lamplight—an image too dangerous to display in some parts of the world, but here, in this elegant house in London, it was venerated with pride.

There were voices already rising and falling in that particular cadence of comradeship—plain words that meant more than their sound. Students clustered in ragged coats; a woman in a sari moved among them with quiet energy; older men, who had been exiles for years, listened with the thin patience of those who keep long, watching vigils. The space smelled of ink, ginger tea, and that faint, constant tang of London coal. It felt like a home that had been lived in. It was cosy. Members knew where to sit, how to pass a note, how to place a cup so a conversation might begin and then melt into something else.

At the centre of the room, beyond a small table stacked with pamphlets and a battered iron box, sat Rajendra Dayanand Verma. He was a man whose presence demanded respect. He had the quiet gravity of one who had spent more time making plans than making speeches. When he rose, the room quieted not out of awe but from the habit of listening to someone whose calm carried consequence.

“Comrades,” Verma began, his voice spare and deliberate, the edges of his words honed by years of speaking in rooms that required careful diction. “We have come together in a time when the empire tightens its fist and pretends it is embracing. They steal and call themselves a great civilisation. We know it for what it is—extraction dressed as benevolence. Tonight we are together to listen, to share, and to decide.”

It was a formal beginning, but the hearts in the room met it with an immediate heat. Someone at the back shouted, “Azadi,” and the word threaded through the listeners like a chord struck in the dark. Kehar felt the word like a name on his tongue.

Verma did not waste time on rhetoric for its own sake. There were reports: a strike in Bombay, raids on presses in Calcutta, a crackdown

in Punjab where an informer had named several young men and police raids at dawn had scattered households into ash. He read, with a steady hand, a letter from a village committee—no name, only the seal of a small local group—and its content drew a hush: they spoke of milk hidden beneath mud floors to keep fuel for the revolutionaries, of grain stacked in non-descript boxes, of the old woman who had kept secret the men who passed through her home.

“You hear that?” Verma asked, not in accusation but in a low, sharpened affirmation. “That is not defeat. That is the stubborn, grudging provision of people who will feed the movement even when their bellies are bare.”

The room answered with a murmur and low clapping. A thin young man with freckled hands had tears in his eyes. A woman tightened her sari at the shoulder and breathed as if to make her chest iron. A group of men at the flanks had joined hands and clenched their fists.

To Kehar, these were not theatrical gestures; they were heartfelt, inspiring, warm and courageous acts of defiance and unstinted support for the independence movement.

After the announcements came the collection. The battered iron box began its circuit from the head of the room, passing through a sequence of eager hands as coins and folded notes were slipped quietly inside. Kehar Singh watched closely. Some gave only pennies, yet they gave with trembling hands, as if the small sum cost them more than a few meals. Others dropped pounds without hesitation, students whose allowances still trickled from home. Each clink of metal into the box was equivalent to an oath the members took once a month.

Kehar felt the box come to his hand and turned the iron weight as if to weigh his own contribution against the room. He had an allowance from the Bureau, a neat stipend that was enough to make ends meet. He also had other things they had given him: lodging, a gun, and an identity that half-claimed him.

At the moment, for the cause, he wanted to give something that would matter—not a theatrical donation, not a traceable act that might show him later under bright light. He folded two banknotes and slid them into the box. It felt correct—the size of the offering matched the size of his life in London.

The speeches that followed were practical as much as they were passionate. A young scholar from Calcutta spoke of the need to distribute pamphlets in the working quarters and of printing presses that could not be traced; another from Gujarat spoke of networks of farmers prepared to delay harvest sales to spite the agents who set prices. There were lists read of names—people to avoid, people to trust, a catalogue of small safe houses set up in neighbourhoods where a sympathetic landlady might risk more than her rent for the cause.

At one point, a grey-bearded man whose hands had the slow, careful motions of a bookbinder rose and cleared his throat. “We must decide,” he said, “how to aid those inside without drawing threads that lead back to each of us. Money alone will not suffice. We need couriers, men who can pass between London and the continent, who know ports and will not be stopped. We need people embedded in clubs, in the offices of shipping firms, who will listen without preaching. We need eyes at the docks.”

Kehar felt the words like a lamp being held up to his own design. His training with the Bureau had given him exactly those capabilities. Every lesson in tailing and in codes, every hour spent watching the river and watching men who moved along it, now aligned into a single axis. The knowledge came with a bitter aftertaste—he was, by right of training, precisely the thing they were searching for.

Verma’s eyes swept the room, gathering the attention back. He spoke of the world in small, brutal phrases—of hunger, of jails, of the need for careful timing. “We will send three loads of pamphlets to Bombay disguised as tea shipments,” he said, and a few faces hardened. “We will place operatives in worker clubs in the docks, and when the time

comes, we will raise the call to action. But this will not happen without funds. We must collect and hide sums that cannot be traced. We must—" And Verma carried on.

The plans that fell into place were modest and realistic: lists of sympathisers to be approached for small loans, a few men who could ferry packages under the cover of legal trade, a named contact in Paris who would receive encrypted letters from Britain and hand them to agents for forwarding to India. When the time came, men who had sat around that room tonight would be the ones expected to risk imprisonment for every line sent.

Kehar listened, and his chest felt both tight and lit. Pride rose in him—pride at the artistry of their resistance, at the way the poorest gave the most. Yet suspicion circled, too. These were people who had been hunted, who had tasted betrayal. They watched newcomers with the old, precise wariness of those who had seen informers embedded in their cells. He had felt that suspicion on his first visit; tonight it knifed deeper because he had been the one to accept the Bureau's nod to attend. He was straddling two worlds. Here, any favour he owed to white men had to be kept under wraps. He would not betray them, at least not yet. He had reasons that bent toward a longer horizon.

When the circle quieted, Verma spoke his name. "There is one matter I must bring up. Last evening, a man entered our house who carried himself in the careful way of a man who has been watched. He answered my questions, though with a skill that made me listen twice." His hand gestured toward Kehar, and the room leaned inward, like a tide.

"You were in Mayfair," Verma continued, voice steady. "You sat among the lords and ladies who sip comfort on the backs of our villages. You were also seen—on other streets—shadowing men whose names are known to us now. That is a strange path for a man who would walk into our hearts."

The room did not remain quiet only for theatricality; suspicion curled in conversation like smoke. Kehar felt its heat and held himself as still as the photograph on the mantel. He had expected this cross-examination; indeed, he had in some ways steeled himself for it. He had rehearsed the words that would neither burn him nor reveal the whole secret. He would be cautious, but he would not be a liar whose face betrayed evasions.

Once Verma paused, Kehar spoke, "I was in Mayfair because a man must learn the manners of the house that built his shackles. To understand the game is to play it, sometimes to fool yourself into thinking the table is not stacked. I will not pretend it was noble. But I will tell you this: I left that drawing room with my loyalty to India as true as the salt on my tongue."

A young woman asked the question that hovered. "And what do you want, Singh? Not from us. From yourself. Why do you step into the dark with us now?"

He did not speak of the Kohinoor. He would not yet. The name was a coal he kept close for fear it would fall and burn what bridges he needed. He spoke instead of the land and the hunger and the calling.

"I have been a servant of many sorts," he said. "I have been a player and a watcher. I can carry messages where others would be stopped. I can move in clubs and at docks, and I can listen without being noticed. If you need such a man, I ask to serve. If you require someone to bring information from the halls that think they own us, let me be that ear."

Verma considered him like a farmer would a new seed. The tall man's face betrayed nothing but the habit of judgment. He asked a few more brisk questions—who did Kehar know in the docks, could he get men hired as porters, did he understand shipping logs—questions not of rhetoric but of tradecraft. Kehar answered carefully, naming what he had learned and what he had yet to learn. He did not mention Langdon. He did not mention the Bureau's exact contours. He spoke

only of abilities, of the network of streets he had walked, of names he could not write down yet because to write was to invite a copy of a ledger into someone else's hand.

At last, Verma rose, walked to the narrow window, and after a long minute returned to the centre. He turned to the circle and said, "We must decide how to accept him. Trust is not given. It is earned. But we do not make decisions only on fear. Comrades, I will say this plainly: there are men with tools, and there are men who know places. We need both. Singh has walked in the places we cannot. Perhaps he is a true comrade we can count on. Perhaps. But first we shall test him."

He stepped forward, took Kehar's hand, and with that modest public gesture did something small but immeasurable—he vouchsafed acceptance in public. "Welcome," he said, and the room murmured a small, cautious welcome in return. Kehar rose and offered a quiet *Namaste* to the assembled gathering.

Kehar felt his throat tighten. The warmth that moved through him was almost like relief, but it was edged with the knowledge that acceptance here came with obligations that might sever other loyalties. Still, he allowed himself to hold the moment. Let him be one of them, his heart whispered. Let him be counted, and let that count be used as a path toward the things he sought.

Later, when clusters had thinned and coals cooled, Verma joined him by the garlanded portraits of freedom fighters. His voice was softer, less like an interrogation and more like a counsel.

"You speak well," Verma said, almost gently. "Do not let words make you soft. Actions are what bind us. When the time comes, you will be asked for small acts at first—deliveries, listening posts, a note taken from a hand at a station. Do these. If you do them well, we will place you where we must."

"And if I wish to be of use in other ways?" Kehar asked, not yet saying what he meant, but allowing the question to expand.

Verma regarded him long. “Then tell me in time which of your pathways is for us and which is only yours.” The caution in his voice was a hand on Kehar’s shoulder. “We do not like double games. But we do like double courage, when it bends toward the cause.”

Kehar bowed his head. He thought of Langdon’s face, of the Bureau’s ledger, of the Tower’s cold vaults. He thought of the Kohinoor like a small bright bitter star, distant and fixed. He thought, too, of the men who hid grain in their thatch roofs and of the student who had cried in the circle. If he could thread the Bureau’s tools into the House’s channels—if he could ferry small truths and little favours—then perhaps the blow he planned could be sharpened by their need and their willingness.

When he left Free India Club that night, the fog had thinned to a glossy mist. Highgate was a string of dark lights. Verma’s words repeated in his ears like a refrain. Be careful. Be useful. Name the path you will take.

He walked slowly, palms tucked into his coat, the warmth of belonging odd and unfamiliar. In the undercurrent of that warmth, he thought of Langdon’s stern face and of the Bureau’s impatience with sentiment. He thought of the Tower and the cold glass that held the Kohinoor’s impossible greed. He had two masters now, perhaps three if one counted his own conscience. He would wear them all like layers: a public coat, a private lining, a hidden thread running through both.

Before Kehar reached his lodging, he paused under a streetlamp and allowed himself a corner of truth that was almost a prayer. “If I am to serve two worlds,” he said, barely audible to the cold night, “let the work of my hands be for the one that feeds my mother’s mouth and not for the marble mantels that count her hunger as profit.”

Verma’s public endorsement had given him entry to a family of belonging; Langdon’s nod had given him entry to the mechanisms of power. Between them, he would fashion a route.

Acceptance

Tonight, he would sleep with his hand on the map of London in his pocket and the iron weight of the collection box's memory in his breast. He had been introduced to the Circle as a brother. He would answer their call. And when the hour came to act against the jewel the empire kept in its chest, he would hope that the passages he had learned in the House of Shadows and the House of India would meet like two hands and pull the diamond into history's reckoning.



Chapter 20

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

The London morning began in a pale wash of light, the kind that crept slowly over the slate roofs and damp brick walls, dissolving the last of the mist that clung to the Thames. From his narrow window in Walcott Street, Kehar Singh watched the river's sluggish roll, silvered by dawn. Barges drifted on its surface like beetles, and further off, the Gothic spires of Parliament loomed dark against the growing glow of the east. The toll of Big Ben marked the hour, steady and resonant, as if the city's heartbeat pulsed through the very air.

He stood there a long while, arms crossed, trying to quiet the unease that gnawed at him. London, for all its grandeur, unsettled him more than Berlin or the Soviet borderlands ever had. Here, the enemy's power was not only military but monumental: stone embankments, bridges heavy with statues, palaces built from the loot of a hundred colonies. He could not look at the Houses of Parliament without thinking of the gold drained from Bengal, the diamonds wrenched from Deccan mines, the Kohinoor itself locked in the Tower. The polished stone of this city was, to him, mortared with blood and grain stolen from India.

Yet he also could not help but admire it. The city was vast, confident, ceaseless. Carriages rattled over cobblestones beside the newer motorcars. Policemen in blue tunics and tall helmets paced their beats. Clerks hurried with papers tucked under their arms, while milkmen rattled bottles onto doorsteps. London was alive in a way he had never

seen in Sansarpur or Lahore, and it was this centre of the Empire that he had come to infiltrate.

His mind strayed back to the night at Free India Club. He could still hear the fervent voices raised in the cramped drawing room, the recitation of telegrams from Calcutta, the pledges of money for revolutionaries hidden in the Punjab granaries. Names had been spoken carefully, some wrapped in code, others shouted with reckless passion. They had embraced him at the end, after Verma's stern interrogation, introducing him as another brother in the cause. The warmth of that declaration had touched him more deeply than he cared to admit.

And yet, he reminded himself, he was no man's servant—not Langdon's, not Verma's. His mission remained his own: to reach the heart of the empire and seize what was stolen. Still, the overlapping currents of loyalty pulled at him, and he felt himself carried between them like driftwood on the Thames.

At quarter past eight, Kehar turned from the window and dressed as per the outdoor assignment. His instructions from Langdon had been plain: report at ten o'clock. He chose a dark suit, recently pressed, and tied his collar stiffly. If the Bureau wished to test him, they would find him ready.

Langdon's office was buried in one of those unassuming stone buildings near Whitehall whose very anonymity gave them weight. A brass plate on the door named it only as a "Civil Exchange Office." Inside, the corridors were quiet, lined with file cabinets and telephones. A single secretary, brisk and expressionless, ushered Kehar down a passage to a small chamber panelled in oak.

Langdon was already there, seated at a plain desk. The faint smoke of a cigarette coiled around him, and his eyes, pale grey, flicked up as Kehar entered.

"You took your time," he said without warmth. "Sit."

Kehar obeyed.

For a long moment, Langdon studied him in silence, drumming his fingers on the blotter. Then he said, "Tell me about the Free India Club meeting."

Kehar forced his face into calm. He had rehearsed this moment, editing the night's events in his mind. "It was crowded," he began. "Young men, mostly students. They spoke of India, of independence. Speeches about tyranny, about famine. A collection was taken—coins and notes, passed in a box."

Langdon's expression betrayed nothing. "Names?"

"None that I recognised. They were cautious. Some called each other 'brother,' nothing more. The tall man who spoke most—Verma, I think—asked me questions about Punjab, about Sansarpur. I answered enough to satisfy him."

Langdon leaned back, exhaling smoke. "And they accepted you?"

"They did."

There was a pause. Langdon tapped ash into a tray, then leaned forward sharply. "Listen to me, Singh. You walk a knife's edge. The Bureau will tolerate your... dalliance with Free India Club for now, because it gives us eyes. But make no mistake: your loyalty lies here. If you hedge, if you falter, you will find London a very cold city indeed."

Kehar met his gaze steadily. "I understand."

"Good." Langdon slid a slip of paper across the desk. "A name. Watch him."

Kehar picked it up. It read: **Arjun Das, Free India Club associate. Seen at the docks, near Limehouse.** It was accompanied by a photo.

Langdon's voice hardened. "We suspect he is ferrying information to foreign agents. Perhaps Berlin, perhaps Moscow. Follow him. Confirm

what you can. Report back in three days. No improvisation. No foolishness.”

Langdon stubbed his cigarette out with a sharp twist. “Dismissed.”

Kehar found Langdon uncharacteristically stern, unlike his usual nodding approvals and encouraging words. Kehar realised he would need to be very careful and deliver on the assignment.

The docks of Limehouse smelled of tar and salt, fish guts and coal smoke. The cries of gulls tangled with the shouts of dockworkers heaving crates from the ship to carts. Kehar blended among them in a workman’s cap and rough coat, purchased second-hand from a stall.

Arjun Das was easy to spot: a slim young man in spectacles, carrying a satchel, speaking quickly to a sailor in Bengali. Kehar saw him first from a distance, standing near a warehouse painted with the fading letters **LLOYD’S & CO.** He leaned against a bollard, notebook in hand, scribbling as crates were unloaded.

Kehar kept to the shadows, pretending to study shipping notices pasted to a wall. His senses strained—every cough of a dockworker, every roll of cart wheels seemed magnified. He rehearsed the lies he might need if confronted: a Sikh sailor looking for work, a trader waiting on a shipment, even a casual loafer hoping for day wages.

On the first day, Das did little but meet another Indian student, exchanging hurried words before disappearing into a boarding house. Kehar loitered nearby, memorising the address. Kehar spotted him with other dock workers, exchanging pleasantries and notes. He had built a network, to what objective, was what Kehar had his eyes on.

The second day revealed more. Kehar trailed Das to a freighter newly docked from Antwerp. He watched as the young man spoke to a sailor in hushed tones, slipped coins into his palm, and received a small brown packet wrapped in oiled paper. Kehar’s fingers twitched with the urge to snatch it, but he held himself still. Too soon, too dangerous.

He followed as Das walked briskly back into Limehouse, ducked into a narrow alley where laundry flapped overhead, and emerged minutes later without the packet. Kehar prowled the alley after him, searching, but found only damp cobblestones and the stink of stale beer.

On the third day, the game grew sharper. Das moved with unusual caution, glancing over his shoulder often. Kehar trailed from further back, ducking behind carts and market stalls. He even bought a string of onions from a vendor, pretending to haggle in broken English, while his eyes followed Das, turning toward the river. Kehar knew, Das would return. He took the opportunity to draw the route, places, ships and eating places visited by his quarry.

But Kehar's cover was blown in the afternoon. At the edge of the docks, Das paused beside a stack of barrels. Kehar shifted position, lowering his head, feigning interest in the barge ropes. And then it happened. When he risked a glance, he found Das staring directly at him.

The moment stretched like a drawn bowstring. Kehar forced his face blank, turned as if to light a cigarette, and walked slowly away. Behind him, he could almost feel the burn of those sharp eyes.

That evening, he returned to Langdon's office, reporting only the barest facts: "Das frequents the docks. He passes packets. Likely a courier. He has two regular customers. Two bars he frequents and takes tips in coins."

Langdon listened, eyes narrowed. "You're certain?"

"As certain as a man can be who has received training from you," quipped Kehar.

A thin smile crept across Langdon's lips. "Good. Very good. Keep your eyes open, Singh. I suspect we'll need you again."

But Kehar's troubles were not over. Three nights later, a discreet note summoned him back to Free India Club. He went reluctantly, sensing the storm awaiting him.

Rajendra Dayanand Verma—was waiting in the upper room, arms folded, gaze sharp as steel. The others fell silent as Kehar entered.

"You have been seen," Verma said without preamble. "One of our brothers tells me you linger near the docks. Following Arjun Das."

Kehar's stomach tightened. "I was near the docks, yes. But so are many men. Limehouse is no secret place."

Verma stepped closer. "Do not toy with me. Was it curiosity—or were you sent?"

The silence in the room was heavy. Kehar could feel the eyes of a dozen young men on him, weighing his soul. He chose his words carefully, each one laid like a stone on a crumbling bridge.

"I was sent to live among the English," he said slowly. "To learn their ways, to see their strength. If I watch one of our brothers, it is because I must judge the dangers that surround us. Do you think the empire is blind? They watch you already. If I am near, it is to shield, not to betray."

Verma's stare did not soften. "Shield, you say. Convenient words."

"Test me," Kehar said quietly. "Ask me about Punjab. Ask me of the men who bleed there. I am no stranger to sacrifice."

The room murmured. Finally, Verma raised a hand. "Enough." He studied Kehar a moment longer, then turned to the others. "Brothers, mistrust is the poison the British thrive upon. If we let it fester here, we are already beaten. Singh will remain among us. But know this,"—he fixed Kehar with a final look—"a single misstep, and the Free India Club will cast you out."

Then, to everyone's surprise, Verma placed his arm around Kehar's shoulder and announced, "We trust you, Singh. And to those here, let it be known we have a brother loyal to our cause. Singh of Punjab stands with us."

The room erupted in approval. They crowded around, clasping his hands, welcoming him again into the fold. Kehar forced a smile, though his heart pounded.

Inside, he felt chains tightening. To Langdon, he was an informer. To Verma, he was a comrade. But in truth, he was neither. His true purpose lay elsewhere, burning in his chest: the diamond, the empire's jewel, waiting in its vault.

As the gathering dissolved and he stepped back into the foggy London night, Kehar wondered which side he would have to betray to achieve his mission.



Chapter 21

STEPPING INTO THE TOWER

The morning rain washed London in a sheen of grey, softening the outlines of bridges and spires, and muffling the rattle of carts across the wet cobbles. In a discreet office off Whitehall, far removed from the bustle of Westminster's public halls, two men sat with their backs to the misted windows. The air was smelling of tobacco and paper.

Langdon leaned forward in his chair, elbows planted on a desk cluttered with coded telegrams. His cigarette burned low, ash trembling over the tray. Opposite him sat Atkinson, the senior Bureau officer whose face rarely betrayed more than a hint of emotion. His hair, steel grey and cropped close, framed eyes as pale as river ice.

"You saw the report?" Atkinson asked without looking up.

"I did," Langdon said. His voice was tight, as though he carried a stone in his throat. "Singh was spotted at Limehouse, following Arjun Das. Das noticed him. And now the word has travelled to the Free India Club. They've begun whispering suspicions."

Atkinson tapped the end of his pipe against the arm of his chair. "Good. A test worth its name should bruise the subject. If Singh can endure their mistrust and still hold his position, he's of use. If not, then we cut him loose."

Langdon's lips thinned. "He's valuable. Resourceful. Berlin proved that. But the Indians are sharp-eyed, and Verma, in particular, is no fool. If Singh falters, they'll cast him aside—or worse."

“And what of Das?” Atkinson asked.

“Courier, certainly. Possibly tied to Antwerp or Moscow lines. Singh trailed him, confirmed enough. But he overstepped. That boy noticed him.”

Atkinson exhaled slowly. “It may yet serve us. The more Singh feels the noose of suspicion, the harder he’ll cling to us. That is the way with assets who believe themselves cornered.”

Langdon frowned, rubbing his temple. “You speak of him as though he were nothing more than a pawn.”

“And what would you call him?” Atkinson’s voice was flat. “He is brown-skinned, foreign-tongued, and ambitious beyond his means. Men like him believe they use us, when in truth, we choose how long their candle burns. If Singh wishes to play a double game, then let him learn the cost of walking both sides.”

Silence stretched, broken only by the ticking of the mantle clock. Langdon finally ground his cigarette out with unnecessary force.

“What do you propose?”

Atkinson stood, moving to the window, where the fog still clung like cotton over the street. “Enough play-acting. The Bureau is finished testing in alleys and parlours. If Singh is to prove himself, it must be on the inside. Give him a real assignment. One that cuts into the marrow of the empire itself.”

Langdon’s brows rose. “The Tower?”

Atkinson turned, a thin smile ghosting across his lips. “Yes, that should do. He will walk its stone corridors, learn its choke points, and feel the weight of its gates. He will learn what fate some of his brethren have faced. Let him go to the chamber and find out for himself. Then he will understand the impossibility of the task before him. That will either temper his ambitions—or break him.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” Langdon asked quietly.

“Then he will make mistakes, and that will be the end of him.”

The summons reached Kehar that evening in the form of a folded note slipped beneath his door. The message was brief: Report at nine. Civil Exchange Office. Urgent.

When he arrived, Langdon was waiting with his usual cigarette smoke wreathing him like a veil. His expression was harder than Kehar had ever seen it, stripped of the faint geniality that sometimes softened his words.

“You’ve drawn too much notice,” Langdon said without preamble. “Free India Club murmurs against you. Verma watches. Das has marked your face. In such circumstances, lesser men might run. But you didn’t.”

Kehar inclined his head, his pulse steady though his chest burned with unease. “That’s my job. I won’t disappoint. You called in urgent?”

Langdon slid a sealed envelope across the desk. “Inside, you’ll find a pass. Tomorrow morning, you’ll go to the Tower of London. We have arranged a cover for clerical duties with the Registry Office. There is an assignment my officer will brief you about as he accompanies you inside. You’ll move through corridors few outsiders tread. Consider it a privilege, Singh.”

“The Tower,” Kehar repeated softly. The word coiled through him like a serpent. He had dreamed of that fortress for years, its image etched in every account he had read of empire and plunder. To step inside was to approach the very heart of his mission—and the most dangerous threshold of all.

Langdon’s eyes narrowed. “Treat it as training. You will complete the assignment when you reach. Atkinson himself suggested this. Think of it as your final examination.”

Kehar tucked the envelope into his coat, bowing his head in what looked like obedience.

“I will be ready.”

For a fleeting instant, as the paper brushed against his chest, he felt a giddy, almost childish sensation—as though he had stumbled into a dream. This was the breakthrough he had longed for, the very step that might bring him within breathing distance of the Kohinoor. A voice in his mind whispered, “Pinch me, is this real?”

But the thought soured as quickly as it came. Suspicion crept in. How could it be so simple? The Tower was a vault of empire. No Indian, no colonial subject, could just stroll through its doors on official business. Perhaps this was a trap, a test staged by Atkinson and the Bureau to probe his loyalties.

He steadied himself, masking unease behind a still expression. Perhaps it is routine after all, he told himself. An office assignment draped in grandeur. Do not reveal eagerness, do not falter. Thoughts were racing in his mind.

Langdon’s steady gaze met his own, and the faintest nod passed between them. Kehar inclined his head once more, and the matter was sealed.

The following morning, London greeted him with a pale, smoky dawn. His sleep had been restless, haunted by visions of jewels glinting behind bars and of the guards’ shadows lengthening across stone floors. Now, stepping out of his lodging, he felt the weight of history pressing upon his shoulders.

The air smelt of coal and wet stone. Horse hooves clattered along the Strand, omnibuses rumbled, and newspaper boys shouted headlines that vanished into the fog. Kehar moved briskly, yet every step seemed drawn toward inevitability.

Soon the Thames appeared before him, broad and grey, its current curling beneath bridges like a restless serpent. He paused a moment by the parapet, hands on cold stone, and gazed at the water. How many treasures of India had crossed this river, unloaded at the docks, carted into palaces and vaults? Gold from Kolar, silks from Banaras, gems

from the Deccan. The very river seemed to whisper of plunder. And among them all, most infamous, most cursed—the Kohinoor.

The walk resumed. Gradually, the city's bustle gave way to a looming presence. At first, it was a silhouette in the mist, then towers, then walls. The Tower of London rose like a brooding sentinel, its battlements weathered, its stonework scarred by centuries. Ravens croaked overhead, black against a washed-out sky.

He was met at the outer gate by a uniformed officer, a wiry man with a clipped moustache and eyes that never seemed to blink. "Singh?" the officer said, checking the pass issued by Langdon. "This way. Stay close."

Kehar nodded, falling into step beside him. The presence of the officer lent him a borrowed legitimacy, and the Beefeater at the gate merely gave a curt nod as they passed. Kehar marked it—association mattered more than face.

The duo made their way over the moat, the tower gate and the passage to the interior. The courtyard opened wide, stones worn smooth by generations. The White Tower loomed at the centre, pale and imposing, while smaller structures huddled around it like wary children. Soldiers strode about with purposeful rhythm; keys jangled, boots rang sharp against stone.

The officer led Kehar through a series of chambers—storerooms lined with racks of muskets, narrow corridors where the walls seemed to press close, vaulted halls where banners hung limp in the still air. Each step was purposeful. "These are the armouries," the officer said briskly, pointing out pikes, swords, and matchlocks stored with military order.

Kehar's eyes flicked constantly, not just at weapons but at doors, locks, and patterns of movement. Two guards at the entrance, one stationed at the stairwell, another at the far arch. Kehar was making mental notes at a feverish pace.

They passed the Chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula, where stone effigies brooded over ancient tombs. Kehar felt the weight of centuries here too—the executed, the imprisoned, the blood soaked into the very soil.

But as they moved from chamber to chamber, Kehar realised a pattern. They were shown much, yet not everything. His eyes sought the one place he most desired—the Jewel House. And yet, as though by invisible design, their path skirted it, never closer than a distant glimpse of its roofline.

The officer opened the Bureau's chamber, a stone's throw away from the Jewel House. Inside was a lobby and a big room with rows of cabinets. There was a section for records marked 'Incognito'. The officer asked him to review the files and compile a list of the names featured in them. As Kehar got down to the task, he wondered if it was a deliberate move to send him here. The files had the names of Indian men who had been arrested for various reasons. Their alleged crimes were listed along with the punishment, and the prisons they were sent to were also clearly marked. Kehar had to note the names and make a list to be handed over to Langdon. While the officer stood guard in the lobby, Kehar was experiencing goosebumps. So many of his brethren had been arrested in England, ending their life and their mission to liberate India. Kehar understood. The assignment was meant for him to realise that, for his own good, his allegiance should remain with the Crown.

At length, the officer came by. "We can move out now," he said curtly, handing Kehar a file cover to put the list in, along with the keys to the Bureau's office to be handed over to Langdon.

As they left the Bureau's small office chamber, Kehar tried to move toward the Jewel House direction. But the officer cautioned him.

"Any further access must be cleared through the Bureau."

Kehar inclined his head, hiding disappointment. "Of course."

The officer left, leaving Kehar, heart pounding, in a dilemma.

He made the decision quickly. He drifted back toward the Jewel House with measured casualness. Tourists were gathered in clusters, murmuring in excitement, pointing toward the building. Guards stood at its entrance, halberds gleaming, eyes keen.

Kehar adjusted his coat and walked as though he belonged, his pace confident but not hurried. For a moment, it worked. One guard glanced at him, seemed to recognise his earlier escort, and looked away. He drew nearer, the great wooden door almost within reach.

But then—

“You there!”

A voice rang sharp. The second guard stepped forward, blocking his path with the halberd’s haft. His eyes narrowed. “Pass?”

Kehar feigned mild surprise. “I was inside earlier, with an officer,” he said smoothly.

The guard’s face did not soften. “Pass for the Jewel House,” he repeated, voice clipped. His eyes lingered a fraction longer on Kehar’s brown skin, his turban.

The weight of empire pressed in those seconds—centuries of suspicion compressed into one gaze. Kehar met it evenly, but the truth was plain. He had no pass. No entry.

“I see,” Kehar murmured, bowing his head slightly. “Another time.”

The guard gave no reply, only shifted back into place, the halberd firm in his grip. Kehar turned, walking away with steady steps, though his heart thundered in his chest.

That night, back in his room, Kehar sat at his desk, the lamplight pooling over scattered notes and sketches. He replayed every detail—the keys, the guards, the routes. But the truth gnawed at him.

Even with a Bureau escort, he had been kept from the Jewel House. Even with calm confidence, he had been turned back at the door. Not even a glimpse of the diamond had been permitted.

He leaned back, exhaling sharply, eyes tracing the cracked ceiling. It will not be possible this way, he thought grimly. Not with passes, not with notes, not with stolen moments.

If he were ever to stand before the Kohinoor, let alone claim it, he would need more than guile. He would need a hand from inside the fortress—someone the guards would never question. A man of title. A noble. Or an English face with the weight of rank behind it.

He would also need support outside the Tower. Hands, legs and faces that can make the mission possible.

That was the key. Without it, the Tower would remain impregnable, its treasure forever locked away.

And what about the assignment given by Langdon? What was the purpose of getting him to sift through the files of Indian prisoners? Did they want to frighten him forever from associating with the cause of India's independence or even the idea, should he ever entertain, to plan any revolutionary act? Or did they impose such trust on him because they felt he was an able servant to the British Empire? There were many questions, no answers.



Chapter 22

LADY LUCK

The fog pressed heavy against the windows of Kehar's room on Walcott Street. He sat at the desk, head bowed, ink scratching across a scrap of paper that bore no meaning, just the restless scribbles of a man searching for direction. The failed attempt at the Tower had haunted at him all night.

He had walked so close—so close to the vault where India's rightful lay encased—only to be turned back with the single word, "Pass." The memory of the guard's flat, suspicious gaze replayed endlessly.

But now, in the still hours of morning, another thought had crept into his mind. *If the Bureau will not give me entry, perhaps my brothers will.* Free India Club stood not only as a gathering place but as a sanctuary where connections were brokered, where whispers from Calcutta and Lahore found new life. There, among his own, he might stumble upon the ally he needed—a man or woman with whom he could walk past guards without a second glance.

By the time the bells of St. George's tolled nine, Kehar had made his decision. He folded his coat around him and stepped into the fog, his stride steady with purpose.

Free India Club was alive when he arrived, its corridors echoing with footsteps and hushed voices. Posters lined the walls—"Azadi," "Boycott British Goods," "Down with Imperialism." A bulletin board carried news clipped from newspapers: unrest in Punjab, arrests in Bombay,

hunger strikes in Madras. The smell of ink and cheap tobacco hung in the air.

Men gathered in clusters, debating strategy over tea poured from dented kettles. Their eyes lit with fire when India was mentioned, but always flickered with suspicion when Kehar passed. He knew the look well. They saw him as a man with one foot on either side of the fence—a dangerous place to stand.

Rajendra Dayanand Verma was in the library, a tall figure outlined against shelves crowded with pamphlets and tattered books. Verma's presence was commanding; his flat cap sat sharp upon his head, and his voice carried authority. When he saw Kehar enter, he gestured for him to sit. It was less an invitation than an order.

"You return to us," Verma said slowly. "After your wanderings with English friends."

Kehar met his gaze evenly. "I return because the cause is not forgotten. It cannot be."

Verma studied him, eyes narrowing. "Fine words. But words do not weigh much here. Action does. We are not poets in this house—we are soldiers, though we carry no rifles."

"What do you ask of me?" Kehar said.

The question seemed to please Verma. He leaned closer, lowering his voice. "A test. Not for your strength, but for your loyalty. There is a man—an Indian—held at Wandsworth Prison. His name is whispered among us, though the papers say little. We need to know his condition. Is he alive? Is he broken? The British keep him out of sight. Too many of our men have vanished behind those walls."

"And you want me to find out."

Verma nodded, passing over a small piece of paper with a name. "Yes. You, who walk in their offices, who drink in their cafés. You will not

be questioned as we would. Do this for us, and perhaps we will believe you when you say you are one of us.”

Kehar kept his face calm, though unease tugged within him. *This is dangerous. Too direct.* Yet to refuse was worse. It would close the only door that might lead to his goal.

“I will try,” he said.

Verma’s lips curved into the faintest smile. “Good. Then perhaps the motherland has another son yet.”

The task was delicate. Kehar knew he could not simply ask about prisoners; it would raise alarms. He waited two days before slipping the matter into conversation with Langdon, framing it as translation work.

They sat in the Bureau’s side office, maps spread across the table. Kehar kept his voice casual. “There was a name that came up yesterday in a pamphlet,” he said, fingering the edge of a page. “One of the revolutionaries here asked me to explain it. They spoke of a prisoner—Indian, perhaps political. Wandsworth Prison.”

Langdon’s cigarette froze halfway to his lips. For a moment, only the tick of the clock filled the silence. Then, carefully, he exhaled.

“You have interesting ears, Singh,” he said. “What concern is that to you?”

“None,” Kehar replied smoothly. “But if I am to translate their speeches and notes for you, I must know what they mean. The name came up. I did not know how to answer.”

Langdon studied the note that Kehar had passed on and looked at him for a long moment, then stubbed out the cigarette. “I’ll make inquiries. You will have your answer tomorrow. And Singh—don’t mention it again. Not to anyone.”

The next day, a folded note was left in Kehar's pigeonhole. *Alive. In solitary. Broken ribs. Watched closely.* No name, no signature. Just facts, as cold as stones.

Kehar carried the news to the Free India Club that evening.

Verma read it in silence, then folded the slip into his pocket. His eyes lingered on Kehar with new weight. "You delivered," he said. "Perhaps you are not the Englishman's shadow after all."

The words lingered like smoke, hanging in the cramped, dimly lit parlour of Free India Club. Verma's voice had softened after the initial taunt, but the weight of the phrase remained, as if it were a test laid before him, another layer of scrutiny from a man who trusted no one easily.

Kehar drew a slow breath. He had delivered the information Verma wanted—details of the Indian prisoner lodged in Wandsworth, a name whispered among the revolutionaries as one who had carried letters and messages across oceans. It had taken him three days of carefully chosen words, artful silences, and well-placed questions in Langdon's office to secure what he needed. Langdon had not suspected—or had pretended not to suspect—why Kehar asked about the prisoner's welfare. The fact that Kehar had returned with a note of certainty about the man's condition had shifted the balance in Verma's eyes.

"I am a son of Punjab before anything else," Kehar replied, letting just enough earnestness seep into his tone. "I have seen too many good men swallowed by foreign prisons. If I can be of use to brothers here, I will be."

Verma studied him with that unsettling stillness of his—the tall man's broad frame leaning against the fireplace mantel, his sharp eyes catching every flicker of expression in Kehar's face. Then he inclined his head, as if acknowledging that, for the moment, Kehar had passed.

Silence filled the room, but it was a silence rich with unspoken bargains. Kehar felt his pulse steady. This was the moment he had been building toward.

He leaned forward slightly. "Brother, there is something I must ask of you. I have given what I could. I will give again if needed. But for the work I have been sent to do—the work that will sting the Empire in its pride—I need a door opened."

Verma's brow furrowed. "A door?"

"Yes," Kehar said carefully. "There are places in London where an Indian face alone will not be enough. The guards, the clerks, the officials—they look at me and see only suspicion. To pass, I need someone who carries weight in this city. A name. A presence. Perhaps among the old houses of India's nobility, someone who mingles with the British on their own terms, who receives their invitations and holds their trust. With such a companion, I might walk through where otherwise I would be stopped."

Verma tapped his finger against the mantelpiece, the rhythm steady, almost thoughtful. The men gathered around the room had fallen into watchful quiet, their pipes sending up little curls of smoke. For a long while, Verma said nothing, only studied Kehar with that hard gaze of his. Then at last he spoke.

"You ask for much, Kehar Singh. Such introductions are not handed like coins across a counter. But..."—his tone softened—"you have shown loyalty. You kept your word. That weighs with me. Perhaps it is time you are seen by others who walk in both worlds."

He straightened, his height casting a shadow across the room. "There is a lady...of noble blood. She belongs to Punjab as much as you or I, though her life now is woven into this city's fabric. She is from the House of Patiala—Lady Simar Singhji. Her presence is accepted in drawing rooms where even Englishmen bow. If she chooses, she can open doors in London that none of us could dream of."

A ripple passed through the men nearby. The name carried its own weight. For an Indian noblewoman to maintain such a standing in London was remarkable.

Kehar's heart quickened, though he kept his face measured. This was the kind of connection he had been hoping for. "And would she look kindly on one such as me?" he asked.

"That will depend on you," Verma said with a faint smile. "She has her own judgments, her own eyes. But I will take you to her. We will see what she makes of you."

Kehar inclined his head. "For that, I am grateful."

The meeting was arranged three evenings later. Verma insisted they travel together, in a hired motorcar rather than by foot or omnibus, for appearance mattered. Kehar wore his best suit—well-brushed, though a little too modest compared to London's high fashion—and a neatly pressed turban. His reflection in the carriage window showed a man who carried the dust of Punjab in his bearing, yet was striving to appear at ease in the heart of the Empire.

They drove westward, through districts where the streets widened, and the houses stood proudly behind wrought-iron gates. The glow of electric lamps shone on polished stone facades, their tall windows lit with the promise of comfort. Here, the city seemed a world apart from the grimy alleys of Whitechapel or the teeming docks.

Verma leaned back in his seat, his hands clasped over his walking stick. "Remember, Kehar Singh, she is no common sympathiser. She was raised amid courts and treaties. She knows the way of kings and viceroys. Speak plainly, but with respect. She will listen, but do not expect her to pledge allegiance at once. Nobility moves with its own caution."

Kehar nodded, storing the words. His mind churned with anticipation and unease. Would this lady see in him a brother for the cause—or merely a rough-hewn provincial out of place in London's salons?

The car turned into a quiet crescent lined with plane trees. They stopped before a tall townhouse of cream-colored stone, its windows glowing warmly, its brass knocker gleaming in the lamplight. A liveried servant admitted them, and Kehar followed Verma into a high-ceilinged drawing room where chandeliers glittered, and Persian carpets softened every step.

And there she was.

Lady Simar Singhji rose from a carved oak chair with a fluid grace that seemed rehearsed by generations. She was tall for a woman, her bearing straight-backed, carrying the unmistakable poise of someone born to command attention without ever needing to raise her voice. Her features bore the fine chisel of Patiala's lineage—an oval face, high cheekbones, and a straight nose that lent her a quiet authority. Her skin carried the warm duskiness of Punjab's plains, softened by the glow of London's lamplight, and her eyes—large, almond-shaped, and dark—were both welcoming and searching, as though they could unpick the fabric of a man's words before he finished speaking them.

Her lips curved into the faintest of smiles, but it was a smile of reserve, not indulgence. The pearls at her throat glimmered with each subtle turn of her head, their sheen offset by the deep emerald-green silk of her sari, embroidered with delicate gold thread that caught the chandelier's light. A matching shawl was draped around her shoulders, its folds arranged with the same care as the ornaments in her hair: a neat, low bun pinned with a slender golden clasp, from which a thin chain trailed to her ear.

Her hands, slim and tapering, rested lightly on the arm of the chair as she moved forward to greet them. She extended one, adorned with a cluster of rings—neither ostentatious nor plain, but chosen with the taste of someone who knew the language of jewels as well as of politics.

Everything about her presence was a balance: refinement without ostentation, warmth edged with scrutiny, beauty sharpened by

intellect. She looked every inch the daughter of a royal house who had learned to carry Punjab into London without letting either world diminish her.

Her presence was both regal and approachable, her eyes dark pools that studied Kehar with curiosity as much as welcome.

“Brother Verma,” she said, her voice lilting with polished Punjabi softened by years in London. “And this is the friend you spoke of?”

Verma bowed his head. “Yes, Lady. Kehar Singh of Punjab. A man who comes here with purpose. He has travelled far.”

Kehar bent respectfully, touching his chest. “It is an honour to be received, Lady Simar Singhji.”

“Sit,” she gestured gracefully. “Tell me, Kehar Singh, what brings you to my table tonight? Verma says you are not a man content with silence.”

Kehar measured his words carefully. He spoke of Punjab, of the weight of foreign chains, of the yearning of men who longed for dignity. He did not speak of jewels or towers—those were thoughts kept for another day—but he allowed just enough of his need to surface.

“There are doors in this city,” he said, “that remain shut to those of us who wear our land upon our faces. Yet sometimes, for a cause, for a purpose, such doors must open. I seek no luxury for myself, Lady. Only a chance to walk through when the hour demands it.”

Lady Simar listened intently, her head tilted slightly, her fingers tracing the rim of her teacup. “Many come to me with requests, Kehar Singh—few with your frankness. But tell me—if such a door were opened, what would you carry through it? What would you do once inside?”

Kehar’s heart thudded. He chose his words with care. “What must be done for honour. What the motherland whispers. I do not seek to trouble your conscience with details tonight. Only to ask if, when the

time comes, you might allow me the grace of a second meeting. Alone.”

The air hung heavy after his words. Verma glanced between them, curious but silent.

Lady Simar’s eyes searched Kehar’s face, as though weighing the unspoken beneath his measured tone. At last, she smiled faintly. “You ask not for favours, but for the chance to ask again. That is wise. Very well, Kehar Singh. When the time comes, we shall meet again. And then, perhaps, you will tell me what door you wish to pass.”

Relief and anticipation swirled in him, though his face remained composed. He bowed his head. “Your generosity humbles me, Lady.”

The evening wound down with talk of Punjab’s food and London’s weather, of shared memories of monsoon rains and golden harvests. Verma seemed content, though a spark of curiosity lingered in his eyes as he watched Kehar.

When they finally departed, the night air outside felt crisp, but comforting. The car carried them back through the wide streets toward the east. Closer to his new home.

Kehar sat in silence, his thoughts racing. He had planted the seed. Lady Simar had not turned him away. Another meeting awaited, and with it, perhaps, the key he needed.

Verma broke the quiet at last. “You held yourself well. She is not easily impressed. But remember—nobility is cautious. She will weigh you again before granting more. Be patient.”

Kehar inclined his head. “Patience, I have, Brother Verma. What I do not have is time.”

As the car rattled back toward the darker quarters of the city, Kehar gazed out at London’s lights and let his thoughts race ahead—to doors unopened, to jewels unseen, to the path that would soon demand everything he carried within him.



Chapter 23

BREAKTHROUGH

The news came quietly, as such things always did, whispered in half-sentences and broken looks before anyone dared put it into words. By the time Kehar Singh arrived at Free India Club that grey morning, the atmosphere had already thickened into silence. Men sat with papers clutched in their hands but unread; women in faded shawls huddled in the corner near the old coal stove, their eyes rimmed red. Someone had brought garlands of marigolds strung from the East End market, their colour startlingly bright against the gloom of the cramped hall.

The Indian prisoner was dead.

No official announcement had been made; no coroner's report was circulating, at least not yet. But word travelled quickly in London's underground Indian circles. The man—one of their own, a revolutionary whose name was whispered in the Punjab countryside and smuggled into student hostels in Calcutta—had died in custody in Wandsworth Prison. The cause, the officials would say, was illness. The truth, everyone here suspected, was neglect and deliberate cruelty.

Kehar stood just inside the door, watching the room. The heavy curtain of grief was palpable. The air smelled of damp wool and tobacco, of men who had not left their chairs since dawn. A thin candle burned before a small framed photograph of the dead man, its flame wavering each time the door creaked open.

Verma stood at the centre, his presence commanding without effort. His angular face looked sharper in grief, eyes glinting not with tears but with the cold burn of fury held tight. His voice, when it came, was low and steady. "They will write that he died of fever. They will say it was a weakness of the body. But we know what broke him. It was the chains, the damp walls, the endless nights of silence."

A murmur rippled across the room. Heads nodded. Some fists clenched in mute solidarity.

Kehar moved forward, laying a hand briefly on Verma's arm. "I am sorry," he said, voice carrying enough to be heard by those near them. "He was a son of India. His name will not be forgotten."

For a moment, the tall man studied him, searching his face as though weighing sincerity against expedience. Whatever conclusion he drew, he gave no sign, merely inclining his head in acknowledgement.

The sombre gathering lasted through the morning. Announcements were made: a resolution was passed in the name of the deceased, pledges of funds were made for his family in Bengal, and promises that the struggle would not falter. A student stood and recited lines of Tagore, voice cracking halfway but steady at the end. The flame before the photograph flickered stubbornly, refusing to die.

By noon, the assembly began to break. Men and women rose slowly, exchanging hushed words, some leaving with fists clenched as if carrying the dead man's spirit in their palms. Kehar lingered, letting the tide of grief move around him, being part of it but apart too. His mission, his secret purpose, could not be voiced here. Yet the death struck him deeply; he thought of Punjab, of men like this one, who had vanished behind bars, whose names surfaced only in whispers after they were gone, and whose mothers waited endlessly. He wondered if Sansarpur villagers had heard already, if word had travelled across frontiers the way sorrow always did.

Verma approached as the crowd thinned, his long coat brushing against the chairs as he walked. His voice, though weary, was controlled. "You came to pay respects. That matters."

"I could do little else," Kehar replied. He hesitated, then added quietly, "Verma-ji, I will be meeting Lady Simar Singhji again this afternoon. This time alone."

For a fraction of a second, the older man's eyes narrowed. Then, with the faintest smile, he said, "So the noble lady has agreed to receive you privately. Good. You may find doors opening through her that none of us could force with a battering ram."

Kehar inclined his head. "That is my hope."

Verma's hand gripped his shoulder firmly. "Go then. Speak well. Carry yourself as you must. And remember—every step you take among them is a step for us, too."

"Of course."

"Go—" Verma's gaze softened for a fleeting moment—"best wishes."

Now, as Kehar stepped onto the street, the weight of that blessing—or was it a test?—still pressed upon him. The late-afternoon air was muggy, heavy after the drizzle, and the cobblestones shone with the reflected light of gas lamps already being lit. His boots struck the stones with measured steps, but even as he walked, a chill ran down his spine.

Someone was behind him.

He had learned to trust that instinct long ago, in Punjab's villages and in the crowded streets of Lahore, when the sudden silence of sparrows or the pause of a neighbour's glance could betray danger. Here in London, the signs were subtler. A flicker in a shop window. The rhythm of footsteps that matched his own for too many turns. The faint reflection of a figure in the polished brass of a carriage lamp.

Kehar did not turn his head. He adjusted the brim of his turban and slowed briefly to look at the newsstand. The man selling papers barked headlines—“*Edward Confides in Baldwin!*” “*Who is Wallis Simpson?!*”—but Kehar barely registered the words. Instead, he used the glass pane of the kiosk to glance behind.

A man in a dark overcoat, hat pulled low. His posture was casual, too casual, the way only professionals carried themselves. He pretended to study a cigarette case at the corner tobacconist, but when Kehar moved again, so did he.

The realisation struck Kehar with a bite sharper than the English air: he was being followed. Whether by Langdon’s people, testing his loyalty, or by British security men who already doubted him, he could not know. What he did know was that he had little time left to play games.

By the time he reached the townhouse in Kensington where Lady Simar Singhji resided, Kehar’s resolve had hardened. The building was graceful, its white façade washed clean by the recent rain, its iron railings gleaming. Flower pots overflowing with trailing ivy on the steps, and a faint scent of roses drifted from a garden within. For all the world, it looked like a haven. To Kehar, it felt like the next battlefield.

The butler admitted him, his expression betraying neither welcome nor suspicion, and led him into a drawing room where the light of a late sun filtered through tall windows. Lady Simar was already there, seated with the poise of one accustomed to courtly company.

She wore a gown of pale ivory silk with a subtle shimmer that caught the light. A string of pearls rested on her collarbone, and her dark hair, streaked with a dignified silver at the temples, was swept back. Her eyes, dark and steady, carried both warmth and calculation.

“Kehar Singhji,” she greeted him, rising with a rustle of silk. “It pleases me that you have come alone. It suggests seriousness.”

He bowed slightly. "I did not wish to waste your time, Lady Simar."

She gestured for him to sit. A servant brought tea, the porcelain cups clinking softly, the steam carrying the fragrance of Darjeeling leaves. For a moment, Kehar allowed himself the luxury of warmth in his hands.

"I have thought about what you asked last time," she began, her voice low but firm. "Access is not a simple matter. Doors in this country open only with keys of rank, reputation, or wealth. We, as exiles, must barter for each step."

Her words struck him with the clarity of truth. He listened as she continued.

"I have lived in this city long enough to know its rhythms. They smile at us, host us in their salons, and flatter us with talk of India's jewels and palaces. But when it comes to power, true power, we are outsiders still. Even I, with my lineage, my connections, must bow to their protocols." She sipped her tea, her gaze not leaving his. "If you seek access—to circles, to places forbidden—you must plan not only your path in but your reason to be welcomed."

Kehar felt the urgency pressing at his chest. The memory of that shadow trailing him through the streets would not leave him. He could not afford delays, not anymore.

"Lady Simar," he said slowly, weighing each word, "I will not disguise the matter with courtesies. I require access to a place in London—highly guarded, closely watched. I cannot speak of its purpose, for I do not wish you to bear a burden not yours. But I need an entry. Someone of noble standing, someone with the acceptance of this society, must be my bridge."

Lady Simar tilted her head slightly, her dark eyes never leaving Kehar's face. "So," she said, her voice steady, "it is not a salon or a club you wish to enter. It is something else. Something older."

Kehar met her gaze and then let it slide away toward the window, where the light of the November evening sun lay soft across the rooftops. “Yes,” he said slowly, “something older. Something guarded. A place that will not open for a man like me unless someone who belongs to their world takes me in.”

“The Tower,” she murmured, not as a question but as a statement. Her lips curved slightly, neither in mockery nor in surprise. “I had guessed as much when you first danced around your words. Men of your ambition do not come to me for garden parties.”

Kehar did not confirm it. He kept his tone flat, controlled. “I will not name it. I will not burden you with details. But I will need your presence — as a shield, as a pass. One day soon, I will tell you the hour. I will meet you outside, and we shall go in together, as visitors, no more than that.”

Lady Simar regarded him for a long moment, her fingers brushing the edge of the porcelain teacup before her. Then she inclined her head once, gravely. “I understand, and I have also thought about that many times. I have seen it with my own eyes.”

There was a long pause where Kehar Singh let the moment sink in. Lady Simar looked out of the window at the sunset. Kehar looked down at the ornate carpet and his unfinished tea. Finally, Lady Simar spoke, “Very well. You will tell me when. But remember, Kehar Singh, there are lines even I cannot cross. If you use my name, you use my honour. I expect you to tread carefully.”

“I will,” Kehar said, bowing his head, though inside his pulse hammered. The opportunity he had dreamt of was finally taking shape — a way to cross the threshold, to breathe the air of the fortress where the diamond waited. Yet the very ease of it unnerved him. The path was opening too smoothly. Who had laid it? Who watched from the shadows?

He rose, exchanged farewells, and left the house.

On the street, the twilight had thickened. Gas lamps blinked to life along the pavement, and the last flush of sun glowed faintly above Westminster's towers. Kehar walked briskly, his collar up, his briefcase in hand. He felt the weight of unseen eyes even here — the same pressure he had sensed when leaving Free India Club, the same tread that had lingered a step too long behind him.

At the corner, he paused, pretending to study the traffic. A man in a brown hat stopped half a street away, lighting a cigarette that did not burn. Kehar turned again and moved toward the river, his heart steady, his stride measured. If it was Langdon's men, then the message was clear: his every choice was under scrutiny. And if it was not Langdon — if it was Verma's watchers, or someone else entirely — then the game was already far more dangerous than he had reckoned.

By the time he reached his room near Lambeth, he had made the decision. He had done the right thing in not naming the jewel aloud, in keeping Lady Simar a step removed from the exact nature of the mission. Time was a luxury he no longer had; the noose was tightening, and every movement now had to serve the mission.

He set down his briefcase, leaned against the shuttered window, and let the thought harden in his mind like steel:

The Tower would not wait. And neither would those who followed.



Chapter 24

FATEFUL DECEMBER

1st December 1936, London

December had come to London like an old coat drawn tighter around the city's shoulders. The plane trees along the Embankment stood bare and black against the low pewter sky, their branches etched with frost like veins of glass. The flower beds near Trafalgar Square lay subdued under a crust of rime, only the iron railings glistening faintly with dew that refused to thaw. The air was dense with the smell of coal smoke and damp stone, laced with the distant hiss of rain on cobblestones. Even the fog, when it rolled in from the river, felt heavier now—less a veil than a slow tide, swallowing lamps and footsteps one by one.

To other Londoners, December meant endurance. To Kehar Singh, it meant concealment. The season dimmed everything—the crowds moved slowly, the lamps came on earlier, and shadows merged easily with the smoke that lingered over the streets. That obscurity suited him; yet, it carried its own unease. He felt it as a weight in the air, a cold that seemed to sharpen the mind even as it numbed the fingers. Every echo on the pavement, every passing hansom, pressed against his nerves like a warning carried in the wind.

The week opened with a piece of news that landed like a stone in still water, sending ripples through the small communities of Indian exiles. The arrest was sudden enough to be brutal in its simplicity: Arjun Das — a young man whose pamphlets and blunt speeches had become a familiar, aggravating presence both in Free India Club and at the docks

— had been apprehended near Limehouse. The reports were short: seditious material found, arrest for incitement, removed to custody. In the circles where the British press dared to use euphemisms, the word “agitator” was used. In the Free India Club, men used comrade.

Kehar heard it first from the street vendors, a thin-voiced paper seller calling the headlines in the rain. He paused at the curb, bought a paper, read the lines twice, and felt his head spin. He had spoken to Das only days ago — about pamphlet distribution, about stirring the dockworkers with righteous anger. Das had been reckless; he wore his convictions like a banner. The arrest felt inevitable, and yet the inevitability did nothing to soften the blow.

That evening, Free India Club was quieter than usual. Curtains were drawn against the drizzle. Gathering voices were lower; where there had been confident, angry banter the week before, there were now measured statements and careful looks. The main room’s single gas lamp threw shadows that looked too sharp against the walls lined with old manifestos and posters. Men stood in small knots, speaking in undertones.

Verma, tall and carved like a statue, took command of the room as if it were a stage. When he spoke, his words dropped like heavy coins.

“They have taken one of ours,” Verma said. “Not because they outwitted him, but because they seized the chance. They are cleverer now than they want us to believe.” His jaw worked, and a dozen pairs of eyes followed his movement. “We must be smarter.”

A student rose, face flushed. “Someone must have led them. Das was not careless; he trusted the wrong person.” The accusation was more than a whisper; it had teeth.

The question swept the room in a cold wind. Kehar felt the gaze of several men thicken upon him, as if suspicion were a physical thing they could push toward him. For a moment, he felt his own breath audible in his ears. He had learned in Berlin and during his

intercontinental crossings that silence was a good strategy; he used it now.

He spoke only when Verma turned his sharp gaze on him. “We mourn Das,” Kehar said slowly. “We grieve, but we should also be careful not to let grief turn to parochial suspicion. The Empire constantly watches the docks; plain surveillance can catch a man where he stands. We must plan our defence, but do not tear our circle from within.”

Verma’s face was unreadable, then softened just a degree. “We will plan. We will gather funds; we will send word to Calcutta and Lahore about these persecutions. But remember this: if the police have infiltrators, if the enemy listens from our own rooms, then the very way we operate must change.”

The talk moved on to logistics — fund collections, petitions, contact lists — but Kehar left with the impression that the arrest had made the community more watchful and more suspicious. It had sharpened the knives of doubt. And between Verma’s glance and a few quieter murmurs he’d heard in the hall, the image that remained was of him standing on a thin ledge, the wind pressing cold at his back.

Two days after Das’s arrest, Langdon summoned him.

The Bureau’s rendezvous was at a private room behind a tea shop near Russell Square. The restaurant smelled of boiled breakfasts and the faint melancholy of old paper. Langdon waited at a corner table, his sleeves rolled, spectacles perched halfway down his nose. He did not rise when Kehar entered; instead, his pale eyes slid up and measured the man who stood there.

“You look gloomy,” Langdon said, as if it were a remark about the weather and not on Kehar’s appearance.

Kehar sat. He let the warm cup of tea go to his lips, and the steam steadied him. “It has been a long week,” he admitted. “Das’s arrest—there is unease at the Club.”

Langdon nodded, slow and composed. “Yes. Troubling news for them. They will make much of it. And talk breeds paranoia.” He folded a paper between his long fingers. “And you—you have not yet become suspicious enough for your companions. You will learn that it can be a useful thing.” His voice was not unkind but precise, like a scalpel scraping a wound.

Kehar bristled inwardly. “I do not betray men. I understand what loyalty means.”

Langdon’s mouth lifted briefly. “Do you? Or do you merely play at loyalty because the theatre requires it?” He let the question sit, then added, almost conversationally, “We are at a curious juncture. Your value lies in being in both spaces: the offices of the Bureau, the gatherings of Free India Club, and yet you must not be visible as an instrument in either.”

Kehar chose his words. “If I must move between them, I will do so with care.”

“You will have to,” Langdon said, leaning back. “For now — and I mean this practically — we need information. We want leads on another young man. Not Das; he is taken. Rather, someone called Subroto Sen. He is younger, quieter, and often seen at Limehouse and Wapping. We suspect he ferries packets for a network we are trying to map. Watch him for three days. Note who he meets, which piers he goes to, and whether he pockets letters. Bring me names, times, and routes. No heroics. No entanglement.”

Langdon’s delivery was simple, but Kehar felt the weight: a test, yes, but also another rope to hold. “Why me?” he asked.

Langdon’s eyes were patient. “Because you are there. Because you have acquaintances. And because if you fail, we will know you failed not out of cowardice but through lack of will.” The smile that followed was thin. “Bring us proof. Anything else can be pieced together.”

Kehar accepted the envelope Langdon pushed across the table. It contained a simple photograph and a note. The meeting left Kehar a little shaken. Langdon had not talked about loyalty and suspicion so openly. There was a message within a message, and it had been delivered well and had hit the mark. Kehar Singh's life straddling two boats was on the brink of being rocked.

On the street outside, rain gathered on the brass lamp-posts, and Kehar's collar rose with the wind. As he walked out into the evening, the city's light felt colder. St. Paul's dome pushed white against a sky moving toward dusk, and the crowds thinned. Kehar was all eyes, and he noticed the same man he had glimpsed on the way to Lady Simar's house earlier, now across a side street. There was that woman at a bus stop who lingered long enough to watch him pass. The observers were practised. They did not jostle, nor did they step forward. Instead, they became part of the furniture of the city: a paper seller at the corner, a carriage tied at a post that never left. They seemed to have his coordinates more often than not.

Kehar tested them with small moves. He turned back at Drury Lane and watched who followed. He slipped into a tobacconist and out the side door. A man in a bowler walked his poodle slowly. Another hummed a tune by the fountain.

The surveillance was layered: one pattern suggested orderly, trained watchers—Bureau tradecraft; another pattern revealed men who had grown up watching and learning at Free India Club—Verma's people. Neither revealed themselves. Neither made an obvious move.

What unnerved him most was the thought that both sides might now watch him, each for their own reasons—Langdon wanting answers, Verma wanting assurance that he was not a planted agent. Between them, he was like the wheat being ground in the rollers.

Yet the assignment lay open in his pocket, and duty—if he could call it that—pulled him forward. He began to stalk Subroto Sen as Langdon

had requested. The young man's gait was quick, his shoulders hunched like someone perpetually ready to move. He liked to stroke his beard during conversations. He favoured the docks and the small boathouses where men smoked in the gaps of brick walls.

Over three days, Kehar catalogued meetings, times, the small exchanges of folded paper, and the way Sen's eyes watched the river as though he were memorising its currents. The notes were dry facts, but each one built a mosaic. Sen met a woman on day two – perhaps a lover or a courier – and on day three, he watched a stevedore pass him a sealed packet.

Kehar's reports were sober, careful, never dramatic. He handed them to Langdon at the assigned hour. Langdon read the lists, his fingers tapping, and then nodded. "Good," he said eventually. "You did precisely what was required. Keep at it diligently."

Even as Langdon praised the work, Kehar felt the net close tighter. The praise carried with it the price of compliance: the more he delivered to Langdon, the more the Bureau expected. The more he moved for the Bureau and his own mission, the more Free India Club sniffed mistrust. The island of his freedom was shrinking each day.

At Free India Club, the atmosphere remained wary. Men spoke of reprisals and lawyers; women wrapped themselves in shawls and spoke softly of lost sons. Verma did not accuse him openly in the next meeting, but his pauses were loaded, and so were the questions he directed.

"Singh," Verma asked at one point, "you will be meeting a noblewoman who knows the city. Will you say you are acting for the cause?"

Kehar chose his wording. "I will meet her as one who seeks to restore what was taken, and I will act in the cause of India." He did not say more. It would not do to tell Verma that Langdon's office had already

placed him to follow another man – the Bureau did not like its methods shared.

Outside, the watchers continued their choreography. One night, as he walked back from a late assignment, he paused under a lamppost and deliberately crossed three streets in odd patterns, watching for anyone who adjusted. A man with a limp changed his direction half a block later; a woman with a child lingered. They were always just far enough to be plausible; never far enough to be plucked from the street by a single accusation. The subtlety of their craft suggested danger: whoever paid them wanted deniability.

Back in his small room, he would sit by the single lamp and make careful lists. He wrote down names he'd heard – the steward who served at Lady Simar's last reception, the clerk at the registry who had once shown him a door – and he drew crude maps of the Tower's approach and the timing of guard rotations he had memorised on his previous visit.

The Kohinoor sat like a footnote in his mind, more imagined than seen now, a jewel that had passed hands and histories to glint in a case under glass.

Time, he felt, had shifted from being a friend to being an enemy. The arrest of Das reminded him how quickly the British could move when they wanted to break a network. Langdon's instructions made it clear that the Bureau wanted actionable intelligence; whether their reasons were wholly pragmatic or intentionally manipulative, he could not say. Verma's wariness meant his allies were thinning. Lady Simar's willingness to be the hand that opened doors was just the support he was relying on. She had said she would come, and that she would be careful whose cause she touched, but she had also made it clear that her favour would be given only if the purpose honoured India.

He lay awake that night listening to the rain drum the rooftops. He thought of Arjun Das, of his face in the dusk as the police took him,

mouth open in protest. He thought of the Tower's stones, the way its inner rooms would smell of wax and old metal, the way the guard's eyes were trained to catalogue not only faces but the tiny, telling gestures of those who did not belong. He thought of how he would move when the day came: how he would walk beside Lady Simar as if they were merely two visitors admiring relics, how he would breathe the same air as the Yeoman Warders, how he would watch the glint of diamonds and find the Kohinoor's cold, inevitable light.

"Time is running out," he told himself aloud in the dark, feeling the small room answer with the soft hiss of the street below. "Move quickly, move carefully, and above all, survive."



Chapter 25

SEEING THE LIGHT

London in the first few days of December 1936 was a city holding its breath – the King’s decision to forsake his crown for Mrs Simpson had cracked open the empire’s composure. Newspapers shouted scandal from every corner; ministers whispered of duty and ruin; and yet the streets went on in their weary rhythm – trams clanging through the fog, coal smoke rising like unanswered questions. For Kehar Singh, the turmoil in the Palace only mirrored the tremor within. The British Empire was uncertain of its monarch, and he of his mission. Beneath the frost and flickering gaslight, shadows still tracked his every step. The only question was whose they were.

On a grey Thursday morning, he stepped out of his modest Walcott Street lodging, straightening his coat against the cool air that carried the faint perfume of Hellebore blossoms from nearby Gordon Square. The light had that peculiar London quality—watery and pale, yet unforgiving in how it showed every crease, every doubt on a man’s face. He knew his next encounter with Langdon would be a decisive one.

The walk to the service offices was deliberate, unhurried. The streets bustled with clerks and newspaper boys crying headlines about unrest in Europe, German threats, and Mussolini’s boasts. Kehar thought of Arjun Das, whose arrest had shaken the Free India Club like a storm. He had already prepared what he would say, measured to the ounce: neither too little nor too much.

Langdon was waiting inside the Bureau's back room, a cup of tea steaming before him, his pale eyes fixed on the door even before Kehar entered. There was no preamble this time, no half-smile. Instead, Langdon looked him over and said, "You look wearisome, Singh."

Kehar was straight with his reply. "Long nights in a foreign land with doubting eyes have that effect."

Langdon listened without replying and gestured for him to sit. The desk between them was bare except for the tea, a fountain pen, and a single folder turned face down. That folder was no accident. It was a message: *We hold the papers; you provide the words.*

"I trust you've heard," Langdon said, his voice steel, "that Das is in custody."

Kehar inclined his head. "Yes. The talk at the Free India Club has been... unsettling. Some whisper betrayal. Some look to London's hand. I do not know which weighs heavier."

Langdon tapped his pen against the folder, the click sharp as a pistol cocking. "And where do their eyes fall when they whisper betrayal?"

This was the test. Kehar kept his gaze steady, his tone level. "Suspicion drifts like smoke. It touches everyone. Even me." He leaned back slightly. "I let it drift past. If one stands too long in smoke, the eyes burn."

Langdon studied him, perhaps amused at the cryptic deflection. "And yet you continue to walk into their halls."

"They allow me still. That means I remain useful to them—or not yet dangerous." Kehar let the pause hang. "What matters is that I hear what is spoken, and I bring what I can."

Langdon's fingers stilled on the pen. "And what have you brought me today?"

“Only this: they grieve for Das, but the fire does not die with one man. Funds flow still, speeches grow harsher. They speak of the empire’s weakness, of Germany arming, of opportunities. Their hope is not buried.”

Langdon exhaled slowly, and for the first time, his gaze softened, if only slightly. “You play a careful game, Singh. Careful games can end suddenly.”

Kehar leaned forward, his voice low but edged. “So can careless ones. Perhaps that is why we are both still here.”

For a moment, the silence between them was a blade. Then Langdon flipped the folder open and scribbled something on a scrap of paper. He slid it across. “Your assignment remains. Observe. Especially one Rajendra Verma. His movements interest us.”

Kehar’s pulse quickened, but his face gave nothing. “I will watch.” He pocketed the paper without looking at it. Then he rose, bowed his head fractionally, and said, “Until next time.”

As he walked back into the London air, he felt the wire inside him draw tighter. Langdon knew too much. Or pretended to. Either way, the room had been a duel, and neither man had sheathed his blade fully.

That afternoon, Kehar made his way to Lady Simar Singhji’s residence off Kensington. The December sky had cleared a bit, revealing that luminous blue that London sometimes offered after rain, though the breeze still carried a sharp chill. His step was steady, but his heart thudded with anticipation. This meeting mattered more than Langdon’s games.

Simar Singhji received him in a drawing room softened with Persian rugs and faint sandalwood fragrance. She wore a flowing gown of ivory silk with a subtle green border, her long hair pinned elegantly, a single emerald at her throat. She had the poise of someone used to courts and courts’ intrigues, her every gesture deliberate.

"You look burdened today," she said as he bowed. "Though perhaps I flatter myself, imagining I can lift a man's burdens."

"On the contrary," Kehar replied, "this house is one of the few in London where a son of India feels less foreign."

She studied him for a moment, then motioned him to sit. Tea was poured, quiet as a ritual. Only when both cups were steaming did she say, "You hinted at your mission during your last visit. Speak plainly now."

Kehar hesitated, then let the words fall like stones into water. "The Tower of London."

Her hand paused on the teacup. Her gaze sharpened. "It's a grim fortress of kings and traitors. And what plan do you have in mind?"

"I seek only entry," Kehar said carefully. "Not alone. Respectably, as any visitor might, yet with... smoother passage. Your name, your presence, can open doors that might close for me."

She leaned back, considering. "The Jewel House, then."

Kehar did not confirm, but his silence was answer enough.

Simar's eyes softened, though her brow furrowed. "The Tower is no easy place. Guards at every turn. Records kept. Faces remembered. And you—" she gestured delicately at his brown skin, his turban—"you do not pass unnoticed in their halls."

"I know," Kehar admitted. "That is why I ask. Alone, I stumble at the gates. With you, perhaps I cross a threshold."

For a moment, neither spoke. Then she set down her cup. "I have lived in this city for two decades. Exile has its masks. I smile at their dinners, nod at their arrogance, but with each step I take, I remember Punjab, my ancestors' court, the jewels they took and caged here. I know the weight of stolen pride."

Her voice lowered. "If your purpose touches India's pride, if it even flickers for her freedom, then I stand with you. I will not ask what lies beyond. But know this: to walk into that fortress is to walk into the lion's jaws. One misstep, and you will be crushed."

Kehar bowed his head. "I accept the risk. I only ask for the chance."

Simar studied him a moment longer, then nodded. "Very well. We shall go. Let me know the date and the hour. I will see to the rest."

Relief swelled in him, though he kept his face composed. "Thank you, my lady. I will send word soon."

As he rose to leave, she touched his sleeve lightly. "Be certain of yourself, Kehar Singh. The Tower swallows men whole."

Her words followed him out into the cool evening like a benediction and a warning.

The First Sight

The date was set: the second week of December, passes were obtained by Lady Simar, which permitted a guest to be accompanied through the Tower's gates.

On the eve of it, Kehar sat by his narrow window, watching the lamps flicker to life across London. The city smelled of rain and coal smoke, the Winter Jasmine beginning to fall like pale confetti on the streets below. His heart was heavy with contradictions—curiosity at last to set eyes on the Kohinoor, trepidation at what would follow, pride in his mission, and the cold knowledge of danger.

As he folded his turban carefully for the next day, he whispered to himself, "It begins now."

The morning carried the chill breath of December fog, thick enough to blur the edges of buildings and swallow sound whole. London lay hushed beneath a low, pewter sky, the pavements slick with frost and the Thames glinting faintly like liquid metal. From the river came the

moan of a barge horn – long, mournful, and quickly devoured by the mist. Somewhere behind the haze, church bells tolled, their echoes rolling through the streets.

It was a city holding its breath. The abdication crisis had left London raw – the gossip of Wallis Simpson and Edward’s folly still whispered in tea shops, and tram stops alike. The crown wobbled on uncertain ground, and in that uncertainty, Kehar Singh felt both hidden and exposed.

He stepped from his Lambeth lodging into the sullen light, his collar turned high, his boots crunching over the frost. Every passing shadow tugged at his awareness – a man pausing by a lamppost, a cab idling too long at a corner. Habit made him catalogue them, one by one, until the rhythm of his own heartbeat drowned out the city’s noise.

Kehar kept walking, hands deep in his pockets, every sense alive to pursuit. Somewhere beyond this morning’s veil, a name and an address waited for him.

The Dance with Shadows

The first indication of pursuit came quickly. Near Russell Square, a man in a bowler hat lingered too long by a tobacconist. He adjusted his gloves, glanced into the window – yet when Kehar moved on, the man fell into step behind him. His tread was deliberate, matching Kehar’s rhythm.

Kehar slowed, bending over a newspaper stand, feigning interest in headlines about Stanley Baldwin’s government. In the reflection of the glass, the bowler-hatted man waited awkwardly.

A second shadow appeared near Aldgate: a woman in a dark overcoat, her cloche hat pulled low, her face tilted away. Yet twice she appeared in the periphery – once on his left, once behind him in a coordinated move.

Kehar decided to test them. He doubled back near Leadenhall Market, entered a café, ordered tea he had no intention of drinking, then slipped out through the rear alley. Under the shelter of an archway, he waited. Sure enough, the bowler-hatted man came hurrying by, scanning both directions.

Kehar stepped out deliberately into his line of sight. Their eyes met. Kehar tipped his head, almost courtly, his mouth curved in a thin, dangerous smile.

The man faltered, face stiffening, then hurried off, boots splashing on the wet stones.

The woman he handled differently. By Tower Bridge, Kehar paused at a bookseller's cart, lifting a volume of Shakespeare. Without turning, he spoke softly, his voice barely audible:

"You are too obvious. Go home before your masters lose patience."

The woman stiffened. For a second, her hand tightened around her handbag. Then, without a word, she turned sharply and vanished into an alley.

The point was made. They knew he knew. And now, as he approached Tower Hill, the ground was clear.

The Lady by the Railings

Lady Simar stood near the moat's railings, a grey scarf around her shoulders, her figure distinct against the pale walls of the Tower. Ravens hopped along the grass below, black feathers slick with rain. The ancient fortress loomed behind her, its stone mottled with centuries of weather, its turrets ghostly against the iron-grey sky.

"You are late. You don't keep a Lady waiting," she murmured, though it was hardly more than five minutes.

"I was entertaining company," Kehar replied, scanning the square. "Two followers. They will trouble us no more."

Her eyes darkened. “Langdon?”

“Or Verma. Or the Empire itself. Too many hands in this game to name one. But I made certain they understand: I see them.”

“You play with fire, Kehar Singh.”

“I’m used to it now, Lady Simar.”

She studied him, her expression half-admiration, half-worry. “And is it truly worth the risk? To step into that fortress today, not merely as a visitor, but with a secret purpose?”

“If it touches India’s pride, then yes,” Kehar answered after a pause. “But I do not act today. I only look. A soldier never strikes blind.”

Simar’s voice softened. “If this truly serves India, then I will stand with you. Even if it draws us both into shadows.”

Kehar inclined his head in gratitude. Her presence steadied him.

The Fortress Within

They crossed the drawbridge, the moat yawning below, the Byward Tower’s gatehouse rising above them, bristling with stone murder-holes. A Yeoman Warder checked their pass. His eyes lingered on Kehar, a fraction too long, suspicion etched in his brow. Kehar noted the guard’s stance, the jangling keys at his belt, the angle of the pike resting by the gate.

Inside the outer ward, Kehar slowed his pace, as though admiring the view. In reality, his eyes swept the layout:

Guard towers at each corner, sightlines intersecting.

Narrow staircases winding into turrets, choke points that could trap or defend.

The moat, empty now but still an obstacle, its bottom muddy with weeds.

Tourist flow, steady but controlled, funnelled by iron gates and rope barriers.

Every stone spoke to him. A fortress was not merely a monument; it was a living organism with arteries, nerves, and blind spots.

They passed under the Traitor's Gate. Kehar felt the weight of its history – men and women dragged here by the river, never to leave alive. He thought grimly: *If I fail, this gate may be my fate.*

The Jewel House

The White Tower, sitting centrally in the courtyard of the fortress, was temporarily hosting the Jewel House. It was the last stop for visitors as they toured the area. Guards, in scarlet uniforms, flanked its entrance, their boots polished to a sheen. Two carried rifles, two stood unarmed but with eyes alert as hawks. Kehar's gaze swept the locks on the doors – heavy brass, reinforced with steel. Above, narrow windows allowed no entry.

Inside, the air was cool and faintly metallic. Display cases gleamed beneath spotlights, their glass thick as prison walls. Visitors shuffled forward in a single direction, urged on by signs and by guards.

"Keep moving, ladies and gentlemen," one intoned. "No stopping in front of the cases."

Kehar obeyed outwardly, but inwardly, he was cataloguing everything.

Locks on the display cases – modern, reinforced, built into steel frames.

Guards' patrols – one stationed at each corner, another circulating silently.

Alarm bells, small brass fixtures high on the walls, ready to be rung if danger arose.

Escape routes – a main exit at the far end, a side door half-hidden by drapery. And an entry at the side, a corridor away from the Bureau’s chamber.

The Kohinoor

And then he saw it.

The Kohinoor, set in the Crown of Queen Elizabeth, lay on a velvet cushion within a crystal case. Light caught its facets, sending shards of white fire across the chamber. Visitors whispered, some gasped softly, but for Kehar the world fell silent.

Smaller than legend suggested, yet infinitely larger in meaning.

His breath caught. His chest tightened. In its cold brilliance, he saw centuries: the Kakatiyas, the Delhi Sultans, the Mughals, Ranjit Singh, the betrayal after annexation, the humiliation of Lahore. He saw Sansarpur, his village, men whispering around lamps, their voices filled with longing and bitterness. The diamond was all of it – beauty, conquest, exile, pride.

He stepped closer, his reflection joining the diamond in the glass. A soldier and jewel, bound by fate.

Behind him, Simar whispered: “There it is – the empire’s most prized heart. And yet... does it not belong to its rightful owners?”

Kehar’s fists clenched, nails biting his palms. *Not yet. Not today.*

A guard’s cough broke the spell. The line moved. Reluctantly, Kehar let himself be carried onward. But in that moment, he had measured everything – the angle of the glass, the case’s hinges, the guard’s reaction time, the choke of the crowd. He had committed it all to memory.

Exits and Blind Spots

As they reached the exit corridor, Kehar slowed imperceptibly, his gaze flicking left and right. He noted:

A side passage leading to the guard's quarters. Locked, but perhaps with a standard Yale key.

A stairwell up to the White Tower, narrow and steep, could be blocked with one overturned bench.

The thickness of the walls — escape would not be through them.

Most crucially, he marked the *time*. Guards rotated every half-hour, changing places with brisk efficiency. That half-minute gap — small but real — might one day prove the only opening.

Outside Again

When they emerged into daylight and past the raven's nest, he noticed a big door covered with foliage on the left side, beyond which was the outer wall and the main exit, which overlooked the Thames.

Now out of the White Tower House precincts, Kehar's blood still thrummed with the fire of the diamond's brilliance. The ravens croaked overhead, indifferent. The drizzle had ceased, leaving the air damp, the cobbles glistening.

Simar touched his arm. "You saw it, finally."

"I did."

"And now?"

Kehar exhaled slowly. "Now, I plan. Every angle, every guard, every door, every exit. Nothing is impossible once the terrain is mapped."

"You frighten me sometimes, Kehar Singh," she said, though her voice carried pride as well as fear. "Yet if this is for India's dignity, then I will not turn away."

He looked at her with a rare softness in his voice. “You will not be asked to risk more than you already have. But your presence... it shields me. Without you, this fortress would have been closed to me today.”

Lady Simar Singhji’s eyes lingered on him, filled with an emotion unspoken. “Then do not waste the chance you have been given.”

Kehar expressed his gratitude to Lady Simar, “This may be our last meeting. You have played your part, and now I have to repay the debt of my motherland.”

Lady Simar Singhji’s eyes were moist, but she lowered her hat to hide her emotions.

The Resolve

As he walked toward Tower Hill, Kehar glanced back one last time. The Kohinoor was still there, behind stone, steel, and glass. But no prison was perfect.

The Empire might think it is invincible. Yet Kehar Singh now carried in his mind a map of its weaknesses, its blind spots, its rhythms.

Time is running out, he thought. And the moment is drawing near.



Chapter 26

A PACT BY THE THAMES

London in the last month of 1936 was a city wrapped in fog and suspicion. For Kehar Singh, each step across its cobblestones carried both purpose and peril. Subroto Sen had vanished—slipped away as though London itself had swallowed him whole. At first, it was a whisper in the halls of Free India Club: Sen had not been seen at the docks, not at the cafés where revolutionaries usually gathered, not even in the dim-lit halls where debates raged about Swaraj and sacrifice. Then the whispers hardened into mutterings, accusations lurking behind narrowed eyes. Kehar could almost feel them following him, tugging at his coat as he passed.

“Where is Sen?” they seemed to say. “And what do you know of it, Kehar Singh?”

He asked the same questions of himself, but no answers came. The city was skilled at swallowing men, particularly those who had chosen to play the great and dangerous game against the empire. Still, Kehar suspected something darker: Sen had either been picked up by Scotland Yard or silenced before he could speak of what he had uncovered. That thought gnawed at Kehar’s chest like a restless rat.

One evening, a letter was slipped under his door, written in Verma’s strong hand. “*Come tonight. Alone. Free India Club. We must speak of Sen.*”

Kehar folded the paper carefully, slid it into the fire, and watched it curl into ash. He knew what awaited him would not be a friendly

conversation. Verma was shrewd, fiery, and above all, loyal to his cause. To stand before him without answers was to stand before judgment itself.

The Confrontation

The room where Verma waited was lit by only a few candles, with their flames throwing jagged shadows against the high plastered walls. Around him stood half a dozen young men—faces taut, eyes filled with suspicion. Some clenched their fists, others crossed their arms as if to bar Kehar's entry into their circle.

"Kehar Singh," Verma said at last, his voice calm yet edged like steel. "You know why you are here."

Kehar gave a single nod, stepping into the room without flinching. "Because Sen has disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Verma repeated. "That is too gentle a word. He was last seen walking with you near the Strand. And since then, nothing. Men vanish in London, yes. But when one of our own vanishes, the trail must be followed. Do you deny walking with him?"

"I do not," Kehar answered evenly. "I saw him last week at the Limehouse, ferrying packets. I have not seen him, since."

"And you expect me to believe that?" Verma's eyes narrowed. "When the very men in this room whisper that you are too comfortable in the company of English officers, too silent when questions are asked?"

The murmurs of the young men surged like a tide. Kehar let them wash over him, his gaze fixed only on Verma.

"What do you think I am, comrade Verma?" he asked quietly. "A man who would betray his own blood? Or a fool who walks blind in the lion's den without knowing where the claws lie?"

"Perhaps both," Verma shot back. "Unless you speak truth tonight."

For a moment, silence thickened the air, pressing on their lungs. Kehar allowed it, knowing the weight of silence could be as powerful as any word. Then he said, "If I had betrayed Subroto Sen, I would not be standing here. The British are not merciful enough to leave their accomplices free."

One of the younger men muttered, "Perhaps you are bait." His hand hovered near the knife tucked in his belt.

Kehar's eyes flicked toward him, sharp as a blade. "If I were bait," he said, "you would already be dangling on the hook."

The room bristled. Verma raised his hand to still them. He studied Kehar's face, seeking cracks, seeking a falter in his voice or a tremor in his eyes. But Kehar stood unmoving, unyielding.

"We shall see," Verma murmured. "But understand this—my patience wears thin."

The Assault

The confrontation ended without resolution. Kehar left feeling the venom lingering in the air. London's streets were heavy with fog, muffling the sound of his boots. He knew better than to think he was leaving alone.

The footsteps began near Holborn, at first faint, then closer. He turned a corner into a narrow lane, where gas lamps flickered weakly. Two shadows lengthened behind him.

"You walk boldly, Kehar Singh," came a sneering voice.

He stopped, turned, and saw them: two young men from Free India Club, their eyes burning with fury, their fists itching for blood. One carried a length of pipe, the other a small blade, glinting in the lamplight.

"Where is Sen?" the taller one demanded.

“Ask the British,” Kehar replied coldly. “They are more skilled at making men vanish.”

“You think you are clever?” The shorter one lunged, the knife slashing through the fog. Kehar sidestepped, his hand snapping onto the attacker’s wrist, twisting until the blade clattered against the stones. A fist swung toward his jaw—he absorbed the blow, staggered, then drove his elbow into the man’s chest.

The second youth rushed him with the pipe. Kehar ducked low, his shoulder striking the boy’s stomach, sending him sprawling. The scuffle was quick, brutal, and silent but for grunts and the scrape of boots.

Kehar stood over them, chest heaving, eyes alight with restrained fury. “You think me a traitor?” he hissed. “If I wished to harm the Free India Club, I would not bother with knives in alleys. I would hand you over bound to Scotland Yard. Remember that.”

But before the fight could resume, another figure appeared. Verma. He strode forward, voice sharp. “Enough!”

The youths froze, shame flickering across their faces. Verma’s gaze was colder than the London night. “Back home, both of you. If I see another stunt like this, I will cast you out myself.”

Grumbling, they slunk away into the fog. Kehar wiped blood from his lip, his chest still rising hard. Verma looked at him a long while.

“You fight like a soldier,” Verma said quietly. “Not like a clerk or a spy. Who are you really, Kehar Singh?”

The Revelation

They walked together along the Thames, where the lamps shimmered against the black water. For a time, neither spoke. Then Kehar halted, leaning on the cold stone railing.

"I will tell you," he said, his voice low. "But once you hear it, there is no turning back."

Verma's brows furrowed. "Speak."

Kehar turned his gaze to the water, as though the river might carry away the weight of his words. "I did not come to London for speeches or pamphlets. I came for something greater. The Empire holds in its grip not only our land, but also the very symbol of its plunder—the Kohinoor."

Verma blinked. For a moment, he thought he had misheard. "The Kohinoor?"

"Yes. I have studied its path, its prison in the Tower, locks, guards, and the rituals. And I mean to take it back."

Verma gave a short, incredulous laugh, but Kehar's expression was stone. The laughter died on his lips.

"You are serious," he whispered.

"I have never spoken more seriously in my life. I have even seen it during a tour with Lady Simar. I know what I'm doing."

Verma paced, hands raking his hair. "Do you know what you are saying? The Tower is no common vault. It is the heart of their arrogance, their pride. Men have tried lesser things and been hanged within a week. This is suicide."

"Perhaps," Kehar admitted. "But it is also destiny. Imagine, Verma—the Empire waking to find its crown robbed of its brightest jewel. Imagine the cry across India. It will not win the war, but it will strike the blow that proves they are not invincible."

Verma stopped pacing. His eyes gleamed with a mixture of terror and fire. Slowly, he nodded. "If you succeed, Kehar Singh, your name will be carved into the marrow of our history. And if you fail—"

"Then I will face the wrath of the Empire," Kehar finished.

Verma's expression demanded more answers, and at this time, Kehar decided to reveal his back story. How he came to England via Germany, and how the English started using him for spying errands. Kehar's life in London and how he reached out to the Free India Club to aid him in his mission. Verma's expressions had settled by now, and he understood the journey of Kehar Singh. It was no ordinary one. For Kehar, it was a big relief. Finally, one person in the world knew his complete story, and that gave him the confidence to share his ambitions and to reveal his real mission to be in London.

The Pact

They sat together on a bench by the river, the fog curling like smoke around them. Two men bound by a pact to serve the motherland and protect each other's secrets.

Getting back to the matter of the royal heist, Kehar spoke of what he had seen: the guard rotations at the Tower, the heavy doors of the Jewel House, the narrow passages, the iron locks that gleamed even in the dim light. He described how visitors were herded, where distractions might be made, how an escape route could be carved through the outer walls and into the city.

Verma listened, his revolutionary mind adding possibilities: safe houses where Kehar could vanish, forged papers to mislead the police, and distractions staged by fiery young men at crucial moments.

"You will need allies inside," Verma said.

"I already have one," Kehar murmured, thinking of Lady Simar and the access her presence had granted. "But I will need others on the outside. That is where Free India Club comes in and you, comrade."

Verma's jaw tightened. "Then we are bound, you and I. This is no small theft—it is war by another name. We will meet in a few days and firm up the plan in greater detail. Let me bring in some trusted people skilled at this job."

They clasped hands, rough against rough, sealing the pact. The fog swirled around them, carrying away the last remnants of doubt.

Relief

When Kehar finally returned to his quarters, dawn was breaking faintly over London. The air smelled of coal smoke and river damp. His body ached from the fight, his lip still stung from the blow, but his spirit was lighter than it had been in months.

For the first time since arriving in this city of spies and shadows, he was not alone. Verma had stepped across the threshold from suspicion to collaboration. Together, they would strike at the Empire's heart.

Kehar stood by the window, staring eastward. In his mind's eye, the Tower of London loomed, its ancient stones bristling with guards and secrets. And within it, caged in glass and steel, lay the Kohinoor—waiting for the hand bold enough to take it.

He whispered into the morning air: *"Now the countdown begins."*



Chapter 27

THE PLAN

17 December 1936, London

The city had sunk into the brittle stillness of winter. The streets glistened under a thin film of frost, the lamps burning low through veils of smoke and mist. The air smelled of wet coal and stale fear – the kind that settles when empires begin to doubt their own endurance. Edward VIII was gone, his abdication still the only thing Londoners spoke of in half-hushed disbelief. The new King, George VI, had been proclaimed, yet the mood in the streets felt fractured, the royal crest hanging above newspaper kiosks like an unanswered question.

Kehar moved through it all with quiet precision. Beauty had drained from the city; even the holly wreaths on Kensington doors looked sombre beneath the weak light of afternoon. The roses and chestnuts of summer were long gone, replaced by blackened branches that clawed at the fog. Yet beneath the city's mourning calm, a different current moved – whispers in clubs, coded notes exchanged in cafés, men who watched without seeming to.

He had felt their eyes more than once since that afternoon at the Tower with Lady Simar Singhji. The sight of the Kohinoor – caged under glass, surrounded by centuries of triumph and theft – still burned behind his eyes. It was not merely a diamond now, but his destiny.

It was with this urgency that Kehar made his way to the Free India Club that evening. He had sent word to Verma discreetly, not wishing to attract the attention of the younger men who had misleading thoughts about him. The corridors of the house were quieter than usual; many residents were out at meetings or missions, and those who remained spoke in cautious tones, still unsettled by Subroto Sen's mysterious disappearance.

Kehar found Verma in the library upstairs, a place that had always given the elder man a sense of authority and calm. Shelves of books lined the walls: treatises on history, law, poetry, and politics—all in a jumble of English, Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi. Verma was seated in an armchair, his tall frame bent slightly forward, a newspaper folded in his lap. He looked up as Kehar entered, his deep-set eyes alert behind the thin spectacles.

"I hope you are ready with your thoughts about the plan. Time is of the essence, Verma ji," Kehar started the conversation without any pleasantries.

Silence stretched. Verma's lined face revealed nothing, yet his eyes glimmered with conflicting thoughts. "Yes, I have been thinking. But I first want to know your version. Every detail. Leave nothing out."

Relief flickered across Kehar's face. He sat opposite Verma and began carefully. "The Jewel House lies beyond the outer walls of the Tower, accessible to the public during set hours. Visitors queue in long lines. The warders usher them in groups, ensuring that no one lingers too long before the crown jewels. The Kohinoor rests in a case alongside other regalia, lit by overhead lamps. The glass is thick, but not impenetrable. I noted three guards inside the chamber, and more stationed at the doors. The crowds can create a distraction, but the watch is constant."

Verma exhaled slowly, rubbing his forehead. "You describe it with such simplicity, as if walking out with an apple from the market. Do

you have an alternate plan in mind? What about the escape? Suppose you laid hands on it—how would you leave the Tower?”

Kehar leaned forward, lowering his voice though they were alone, “I have been to the Bureau’s office in the Tower. I can hide there and, when the time is right, break into the Jewel House and steal the diamond.” Kehar replied nonchalantly.

“I know it is not simple. That is why I needed more than my own eyes. In my visit with Lady Simar, I noticed the rhythms of the place—the hours when the warders change shifts, the way the Jewel House is locked at dusk, the corridors that connect to the inner wards. With this knowledge, with your strategy, and with my resolve, the plan can be finetuned and executed.”

Verma studied Kehar, seeing not just the fire of youth but the steadiness of a man tempered by trials across borders and continents. At last, the older man spoke.

“So that was the purpose of meeting Lady Simar. Very well. If we are to attempt this madness, then we must make it less mad. We must study every corridor, every guard, every lock. We must plan timing, escape routes, signals, and disguises. We must recruit carefully—men and women whose silence is as strong as their courage. And above all, we must decide not only how to seize the jewel, but how to vanish with it afterwards. Without that, the act becomes suicidal.”

Kehar’s lips curved in the faintest smile. “That is why I came to you.”

Verma returned the smile, thin but real. “Then let us begin. We will sketch the Tower as best we can, recall every step you took with Simar, and mark where chance favours us—or where death lies waiting.”

Kehar rose, bowing his head slightly in respect. “You will not regret this, Vermaji.”

“Perhaps not,” Verma murmured, his eyes drifting to the shelves heavy with books. “Or perhaps history itself will. Either way, we shall leave our mark.”

The two men clasped hands, a pact sealed in silence. Outside, the winter fog deepened, and the city was in deep slumber. Yet within the walls of the Free India Club library, a conspiracy, an audacious plan was taking shape that could shake the very foundations of the empire.

Verma produced a sheaf of papers — receipts, the names of trusted sympathisers, the addresses of safe houses, a hastily compiled list of men who would do as told without questions. He moved among these elements like a conductor, arranging and rearranging possibilities as if finding the aces in a pack of cards.

Kehar watched him, thinking of the younger men who had half-struck him in narrow lanes. The revolutionaries had courage, but too often that courage wanted spectacle; what he needed now was quiet, unshowy loyalty. “Choose the older men,” he said. “Men who have been around longer and with a longing to defy the British, not for glory but for the motherland. They know how to hide what they know. They speak little and can hold a false face for years.”

“Ramesh and Ali,” Verma supplied quickly, naming two who had earned their trust in other work: the first, a former dock hand who kept his mouth closed about everything except tea and the weather; the second, a tailor with a steady hand and skills to save lives. “They will do. They are discreet. They can be trusted to deliver.”

Verma’s mind spun out contingencies in the old revolutionary way — not with mechanical precision but with a kind of moral algebra: who could be trusted with a secret, who could be sacrificed, how an action could rebound on the movement. “We cannot promise them glory,” he said, “only bread and the knowledge of why they act. They will not have medals. That is the bargain.”

Kehar accepted the proposal with a gravity that weighed heavily on him. He thought of the men who carried letters down shadowed corridors and were never named in histories. They would be essential; he would owe them everything. He made a mental inventory of debts to be repaid in other, quieter ways — sanctuary, safe passage for families, extraction from danger zones if needed. All this would not be possible without the Free India Club and its extended network.

They spoke of Lady Simar not as a dramatic heroine but as a critical cog in the wheel. The visit to the Tower greatly helped the cause. Kehar was able to use the luxury of time to study the jewel encasement and exit points. Above all, he could plot the distance between the Bureau's small office and the Jewel House.

Simar's counsel, as recounted by Kehar, had been striking in its impact. "Use theatre, not force," Simar had said when he had parroted back his observations.

Considering the inputs, the two men decided that the operation must strike a balance between courage and invisibility. It must be dramatic enough, in its symbolism, to resound throughout India, yet quiet enough to evade the immediate dragnet of an empire. That paradox shaped every suggestion and every veto in their nightly discussion.

The planning took form as a ladder of decisions, each rung buttressing another: the role of the hero (Kehar), the local accomplices (Ramesh, Ali), the signal patterns (slick but shrouded in the mundane), the speedboat and sailboats for getaway and backup (Verma as the resident coordinator), and the safehouses that would swallow a man in the dark for days.

There was talk of Langdon. Even in these private rooms, Langdon hovered like a smell. He had smiled in meetings and said kind things and then asked the right question at the wrong time. The Bureau man's shadow complicated everything: if Langdon's curiosity hardened into action the following week, the whole delicate scaffold

could collapse. Verma and Kehar agreed on strict discretion—messages to Langdon would be consistent, business as usual.

At one point, Verma walked to a tall window and drew back the curtain. Through the pane, the Tower's outline blunted the horizon. For a moment, Verma's talk turned philosophical. "Even if this fails," he said, almost to himself, "the attempt will be an inspiration. Men will measure the distance between us and the jewel and know that a hand reached. They will not measure the failure first. They will measure ambition."

Kehar felt the truth in that. Symbolism mattered. A failed attempt closed down space, but a bold attempt might open it in other ways: fundraising for prisoners, outrage that could force compromises from the empire, and the emboldening of comrades who would find belief stronger than ever. The diamond was an object, but in the narrative of colonised peoples, it stood for dignity.

Days went by in a rhythm of small tests, false departures, and rehearsed nonchalance. Verma and Ramesh would proceed to the docks at low tide, secure a motor launch moored near the Tower, and position a speedboat farther up the Thames as backup. Verma had already arranged for a trusted friend's sailboat to stand by beyond the estuary, ready for the final leg to open water. The plans were being finalised with rehearsals spanning from 6 pm to 2 am.

Finally, as December pressed deeper into its grey chill and the echo of the abdication still shuddered through London, they agreed the scaffolding was ready.

No date was fixed. Verma would not name one while the country still gossiped over the fallen king and the American woman who had undone a throne. But the machinery of the plan had begun to hum, quietly, beneath the city's din. They would wait for the lull — that fragile pause when public outrage would harden into weary acceptance, when the watchers' vigilance dulled.

Walking home on one of these nights, Kehar felt the gravity of it all as if a wave was carrying him with uncertainty. For now, there was waiting: for the right night, for the day when the quiet, careful choreography they had rehearsed would become a single, decisive motion.

The Kohinoor still gleamed unrepentant in its case; London slept on. But beneath sleep, the city had been marked by a plan, a conspiracy that would either become a legend or a rumour. The only thing left was the final choice of day or night.



Chapter 28

EDGE OF THE RAZOR

20th December 1936, London

The morning wore the colour of ash. A cold drizzle drifted through the city, blurring the outlines of Westminster and flattening the sound of traffic into a low, steady murmur. The Thames moved sluggishly under the bridges, a ribbon of tarnished steel beaten by rain. Across St. James's Park, the last of the leaves clung to their branches like half-burnt paper, shivering in the wind. London felt suspended – a city between rulers, between uncertainties, its mood as grey and brittle as the sky above it.

Kehar Singh walked briskly, his shoes striking sharp notes on the wet pavement as he cut through Whitehall. The air smelled of soot and rain, and the faint metallic tang of the river. He turned his collar up against the chill, though the damp had already wormed its way through the wool and into his skin. He walked briskly, and so did a swarm of thoughts race through his mind. The aftertaste of those final days at Free India Club, the coded meetings behind closed doors, and the weight of decisions that could no longer linger in talk but demanded motion.

The abdication had cracked something open in the empire – not just the throne, but the illusion of control. And somewhere within that fracture, Kehar sensed his own chance, or his undoing.

The summons from Langdon had arrived with almost theatrical precision, as though the Bureau had timed it to unsettle him. Kehar knew enough now to understand that nothing in this city of shadows was a coincidence.

The building he entered was plain, its facade blending easily into the government quarter. No signs, no plaques—just a polished brass doorknob that caught the watery light of the morning. A uniformed clerk led him silently up two flights of stairs, each step echoing faintly against stone. The corridor smelled faintly of ink and damp wool, lined with closed doors that seemed to listen as he passed.

The knock at *Private* was answered at once.

Inside, the atmosphere shifted. The office was functional but carried the weight of authority: heavy oak desk, shelves stacked with files, the soft glow of a green-shaded lamp. Langdon sat behind the desk, pen in hand, spectacles slipping low on his nose. He looked up with that same half-smile Kehar had learned to distrust—a smile that promised nothing and hid everything.

But it was the man by the window who set Kehar's nerves on edge.

Atkinson.

They had met before, months ago, when Langdon had first drawn back the curtain and introduced Kehar to the circle of men who truly pulled the strings. Even then, Atkinson had struck him as the most dangerous: tall, broad-shouldered, with an air of absolute control. He had the kind of memory that pinned a man to the wall—every gesture, every hesitation stored away for later judgment.

Today, Atkinson stood with his back to the rain-streaked window, hands clasped behind him. He turned as Kehar entered, his expression unreadable.

“Punctual,” Langdon remarked, setting his pen aside. “I was beginning to think London's fog might swallow you whole one of these days.”

Kehar inclined his head, forcing composure. "I have learned to walk the fog, sir. It does not swallow a man who knows his path."

Atkinson's mouth curved in a faint smile, though his eyes were cool. "Good. That's what we look for. A man who doesn't lose himself."

Kehar was directed to a chair across from the desk. He sat with deliberate calm, hands resting on his knees. Outside, the rain tapped against the glass like restless fingers.

Langdon folded his hands on the desk. "Tell me," he began, "how do you find your acquaintances at Free India Club these days? Still as agitated as before?"

Kehar kept his gaze steady. "They are restive, yes. Men far from their homeland often are. They speak much of India's suffering and of Britain's duty—or failure, as they would call it. But words alone do not make revolutions."

Atkinson's voice cut in, smooth but sharp. "And yet, words have a way of becoming weapons. You've been seen keeping company with them frequently. Particularly with one Rajendra Dayanand Verma."

Kehar felt the shift in the air. Verma's name was not dropped lightly. He leaned back slightly, careful to look neither alarmed nor too casual. "Mr Verma and I share common roots, sir. India binds us. It is natural we should speak of what weighs on us both."

Atkinson studied him, grey eyes narrowing the way a hawk narrows its focus before the dive. Then, almost idly, he added, "And Lady Simar Singhji—how does your friendship with her fare?"

The question landed like a blade sliding across Kehar's throat. He had not expected her name to be mentioned or brought up so openly. It proved what he had long suspected: they had been watching, noting every movement, every meeting.

He forced a mild smile. "Ah, Lady Simar. We share roots, you see. Punjab is far away, but when two exiles meet in a strange land, they

talk of the same dust, the same air. We have common memories. That is all.”

Atkinson tilted his head, eyes narrowing. “Common memories are powerful things. They can be a bridge... or a trap.”

Kehar let out a chuckle, as though amused by the solemnity. “I know my place, gentlemen. The Lady is of high stature, and I am but a soldier far from home. If we meet, it is to share what is common among us, reminiscences. Nothing more.”

Langdon’s gaze lingered, assessing. “Good. Then we shall say no more on that—for now.”

Inside, Kehar’s resolve hardened. *No more meetings with her, not even in an emergency*, he told himself. If they had eyes on Simar, she must be shielded. He could not risk dragging her deeper.

Kehar let the silence stretch, forcing them to break it.

It was Atkinson who did. “You know we are impressed with you, Singh,” he said, his tone as flat as stone. “You have delivered almost every time. It is time you consider crossing the line. Either be one of us, or decide one way or the other. In our business and in the Empire, loyalty is everything. I hope you understand what I’m getting at?”

Kehar nodded. He had gone a bit cold. Atkinson was onto something, but what? He could hardly read him. Could he ever? He was pinned down in his seat. And now it was Langdon’s turn to press on.

Langdon leaned forward, sliding a file across the desk but not opening it. “We have a statement from one Subroto Sen.”

The name struck Kehar like a bolt. He kept his face impassive, but his chest tightened. Subroto Sen, who had once walked freely into the Free India Club, who had argued fiercely against British rule, who had vanished suddenly a few weeks ago.

Langdon's voice was soft, almost sympathetic. "Sen is in custody. He spoke freely. According to him, Verma is no mere dreamer. He coordinates funds, channels messages, and arranges safe houses. In short, he is a kingpin. And we cannot afford to leave such a man unchecked."

Langdon and Atkinson spoke as though Sen's words were gospel.

Kehar lowered his eyes as though in shock; his thoughts were racing. Sen's arrest meant more than danger—it meant betrayal, pressure, the possibility that everything at Free India Club was now exposed.

Atkinson's tone hardened. "Your task, Singh, is simple. Bring us clarity on Verma. Watch him closely. We trust your access. You can move where our eyes cannot. Move in and document him, Singh."

For a moment, the rain filled the silence, a steady patter on glass. Kehar took a few more seconds, then lifted his gaze and replied, "I will give you what clarity I can. But men like Verma do not reveal themselves so easily. It will take time and patience. I need to protect myself in the process, as you can understand."

Langdon inclined his head, as if satisfied. "Patience, we have. What we lack is certainty. Deliver it, and your place here will be assured."

The words landed with the weight of a promise and a threat entwined. Kehar bowed his head slightly, acknowledging the task. But inside, suspicion curled like smoke. They had named Lady Simar, paraded Sen's confession, and circled Verma as the next target. Was this trust—or a trap carefully baited?

As he rose to leave, Atkinson added quietly, "Remember, Singh, in this city shadows are always longer than they appear. Walk carefully."

Kehar nodded once, then stepped out into the corridor. The door closed behind him with a sound that felt too final.

The drizzle had thickened into rain by the time he emerged into the street. He paused beneath the awning, watching carriages and

motorcars hiss past on the wet pavement. His reflection stared back from a puddle at his feet: hat brim low, eyes dark with thought.

The rain followed him through Whitehall like a curtain of needles. Kehar walked fast, not caring that water seeped into his shoes, that his coat grew heavy with damp. Each step carried him further from Langdon's office, but not from the weight of their words.

Lady Simar.

Verma.

Subroto Sen.

Three names bound together like threads in a snare.

He ducked into a small café near Charing Cross, the kind where clerks and minor officials lingered over coffee, dissecting the day. The windows fogged quickly from the heat of wet coats and steaming cups. Kehar found a corner table, ordered tea, and sat without removing his hat.

The Bureau had made its position clear: Verma was under suspicion. Sen had confirmed it—or perhaps had been forced to. Simar was being watched. And Kehar himself had been tasked with bringing “clarity.”

A neat word, *clarity*. But it meant spying, betraying, choosing between two worlds.

He stirred the tea slowly, though he had no appetite for it. His mind replayed every detail of the meeting: Atkinson's measured stare, Langdon's careful tone, the way they had tested his reaction to Simar's name. They wanted to see if his mask would crack.

It hadn't. But the effort had left him drained.

The truth was more dangerous than they imagined. Yes, he met Verma often. Yes, Simar had offered him trust. But what none of them knew—what could never reach their ears—was that he had already crossed the Rubicon. The Kohinoor was no longer a dream; it was a plan.

And Verma was at the heart of it.

That evening, Kehar walked to the modest house in Bloomsbury where Verma had taken rooms under an assumed name. He had been careful to shake off any agents or followers in his trail.

The neighbourhood was quiet, the drizzle now reduced to mist. He rapped softly on the door and was admitted without question.

Inside, the room smelled of tobacco and ink. Papers littered the table, some maps, some letters half-burned in the grate. Verma himself stood by the hearth, sleeves rolled to the elbow, a glass of whisky untouched beside him.

"You're late," Verma said, though his voice carried no reproach, only weariness.

"I was detained," Kehar answered.

He removed his coat, hung it on a peg, and walked over. "The Bureau called me in."

Verma stiffened. "Langdon?"

"And Atkinson."

A silence fell, broken only by the pop of coal in the grate. Verma turned, eyes sharp. "What did they want?"

Kehar hesitated for a heartbeat. Then he told him—everything: the questions about Free India Club, the probing about Verma himself, the mention of Simar, and the revelation that Subroto Sen had been taken and had spoken.

Verma listened without interruption, his face carved from stone. Only when Kehar finished did he pick up the glass of whisky and drink it in one swallow.

"Sen," he muttered. "I feared as much. They must have broken him."

He set the glass down hard enough that it rang against the wood. "And they think I am the kingpin? That is almost flattering."

Kehar's tone was grim. "It is dangerous, not flattering. They want me to watch you. To bring them clarity."

For a moment, Verma said nothing. Then he gave a low, humourless laugh. "And will you, Kehar Singh? Will you deliver me to them in neat reports, like a clerk?"

Their eyes met. The tension between them was a live wire. But Kehar did not look away. "No. I told you why I came here. I did not cross half the world to become their errand boy. I came for the Kohinoor."

The words hung in the air, heavy, irrevocable.

Verma blinked once, then exhaled slowly. "Time is running out. We must go through the plans again and set the date for the heist."

They began at once.

The table was cleared of its litter, and in its place, Kehar spread the detailed plan: sketches of the Tower drawn from memory, notations of guard rotations, fragments of overheard conversations during his guided visit with Simar. She had pointed out things almost in passing—how the Yeoman Warders locked one door at dusk and opened another at dawn, how the Jewel House keys were held on a chain at night, how the outer gates were patrolled in twos.

At the time, it had seemed casual, even playful. But Kehar had remembered everything. And now, every detail mattered.

Verma leaned over the sketches, his brow furrowed. "While we have planned the exit and the backup plans outside, let's go over the inside movement plan. Remember, the Jewel House itself is the heart. The Kohinoor lies within, in its glass case, bolted and locked. But before that comes the outer wall, the Byward Tower, the Bloody Tower gate. Each stage is another layer."

“Layers can be peeled,” Kehar said. “With timing, with precision.”

They worked into the night. Kehar spoke of an approach through the river—slipping along the Thames in a hired boat, docking near Traitors’ Gate where shadows would hide them. Verma countered with the dangers: water patrols, tide schedules, and the risk of discovery by fishermen or constables.

“Better the landward side,” Verma argued. “Through the crowd. Tourists, Londoners—blend with them by day, linger until nightfall.”

Back and forth they went, each testing the other’s reasoning, discarding one idea, refining another. By midnight, a framework had begun to take shape:

- **Entry:** two possible routes, river and land, both studied, both kept as options depending on the chosen night.

- **Inside:** a trusted accomplice—perhaps one of the Indian students who worked as a guide’s assistant—could provide a key distraction, luring a guard away or misdirecting a Warder.

- **Timing:** the night watch shifted at the hour past midnight, when one set of guards left their posts, and another had not yet fully settled. A gap of perhaps twelve minutes.

- **Escape:** a carriage prepared in advance near Tower Hill, its driver paid to ask no questions. From there, a safe house in Stepney or Limehouse. And if the chase gets hot, use the getaway boat to escape to the high seas.

Verma added his own refinements. “We need signals. If one plan fails, we fall back to another. A birdcall in the dark, a homeless man hitting steel pipes on the road. No shouting, no panic. And if the worst comes—if we are trapped—we must have a way to destroy any trace that links us.”

Kehar nodded grimly. “Letters, maps, names—all burned before we move.”

By the time the fire burned low and their voices grew hoarse, the plan was more than an idea. It was a living thing, coiled and dangerous, waiting only for the night to strike.

Yet when Kehar finally returned to his lodgings, exhaustion could not quiet his mind. He lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

The Bureau believed him loyal. Verma believed him to be committed. And Simar—her trust was the most delicate thread of all, one he dared not test further. He could not meet her again; Atkinson's words had made that clear.

Every choice carried risk. Every path was shadowed.

But as the clock on the mantel ticked toward dawn, Kehar's resolve hardened.

The Kohinoor had been carried from Punjab under duress. Soon, if fate allowed, it would pass through his hands—whether into India's or into the fire of history itself, he did not yet know.

But it would not remain forever in the Tower.

That night was nigh.



Chapter 29

LETTER TO MOTHER

December 23, 1936

London had sunk into a winter that seemed to echo its own unease. The nights came early now, thick with fog and the smell of rain-soaked soot. Along the Thames, gas lamps flickered weakly through the mist, their halos trembling over the slick cobblestones. The air held the taste of change — sharp, metallic, untrustworthy — as if the city itself was holding its breath after the king's departure.

Kehar Singh felt that same stillness inside him, the kind that comes before a blade drops. The empire's glitter had dulled overnight; its certainty fractured. Yet in that fracture lay his path — narrow, perilous, and final. The Tower loomed somewhere beyond the fog, ancient and watchful, as if it alone understood what was to come.

The Letter

That night, in his modest Walcott Street lodging, Kehar sat before a single flickering lamp. Its weak flame stretched shadows across the walls, turning his solitary figure into something spectral. Before him lay a blank page, and beside it a pen whose nib had already scratched through three false beginnings. The weight of what he was about to do pressed so heavily upon him that words, his only solace, resisted forming.

He pressed the nib down again.

Dearest Mother,

The ink bled into the fibres of the paper, the word standing like a fragile thread between life and memory.

If this letter finds its way back to Sansarpur, know that I write it on the eve of a trial unlike any other. By the time you hold it, my fate may already be sealed. I am not afraid of death, Maa, only of failing you and our land.

The world has robbed us of many things – fields, homes, honour. But tomorrow, I reach for something stolen long before I was born, something that belongs to India, to Punjab, to you as much as to me.

I will not tell you where or how, for those secrets must remain buried. Only this: if I succeed, one day the people will whisper that a son of Sansarpur dared the impossible. If I fail, whisper too that I fell as a son should, standing upright before God.

His hand paused, the pen trembling. He stared past the paper, beyond the flicker of flame, seeing not the drab walls but the bright memory of paddy fields in monsoon, the smell of earth heavy with rain, the call of his mother from the doorway, “Kehar, enough wandering, come eat.”

He continued, slower now.

I remember your hands, calloused from work yet soft when they touched my forehead. I remember how you tied my turban with care before I left, saying that wherever I went, it must sit proudly. It still does. I promise you this: my turban will not be stained in shame. Should tomorrow bring my end, burn me not in sorrow. Sing the songs of our fathers, the ballads of those who stood against the tide. Say your son walked into the lion’s jaws with open eyes. Maa, bless me once more, as you did when I set foot on this path. You and Bauji should remember me as your proud son who lived and died for his motherland.

He signed no name – none was needed. Folding the sheet with reverence, Kehar sealed it with the address, pressing the paper flat as though sealing his resolve within. He slid it beneath the false lining of his trunk, where only Verma would find it if he did not return.

For a long while, he sat unmoving, listening to the distant groan of London's night: a carriage wheel, a cry from a tavern, the restless whistle of a watchman. He whispered to the silence, "Forgive me, Maa. Tomorrow, I either return as your son or never return at all."

The Knock

The silence was fractured with three sharp knocks. Kehar froze, hand instinctively brushing the hilt of the bureau-issued revolver beneath his coat. He moved to the door with noiseless steps.

A voice whispered through the crack. "It is Ramesh."

Kehar eased the latch. Ramesh slipped inside, thin frame taut with nervous energy, eyes flitting as though chased by unseen shadows.

"Verma sent me," he said. "He thinks you should walk tonight for one last look. Feel the ground beneath your feet. A man who knows the stones does not stumble on them."

Kehar studied him. Ramesh was brave in his own way, but there was always a nervous edge, a flicker of fear behind his resolve. Kehar nodded. "You are right. Let us walk."

The Midnight Walk

The streets of East London at night were both alive and dead. Alive with drunks, carts, stray dogs rummaging through alleys; dead with the emptiness that came once the gas lamps sputtered, and respectable folk barred their doors.

The two men walked without speaking at first, footsteps echoing against the cobblestones. They cut westward, toward the river.

And then — there it was.

The Tower.

From across the Thames bend, it loomed pale under the half-moon, its battlements jagged against the sky. The White Tower rose above the

complex like an ancient sentinel, the site which housed the Crown jewels, squat and watchful, like a coiled beast. Ravens wheeled overhead, their cries slicing the silence. To Kehar, it was as if the birds themselves bore witness, mocking yet ominous. The exit plan from inside - Jewel House, down the grassy slope, till the exit gate- was mapped during his visit with Lady Simar. From the outside, Verma and Kehar had practised the escape runs with Ali in the boat three times, up until the sailboat. Tonight, Kehar recreated the Heist in his mind.

Just then, Ramesh halted, shivering despite the mild air. "You ever think of them?"

"Who?" Kehar's gaze did not move from the Tower.

"The guards. Not as obstacles. As men. With wives and children. They walk their rounds to feed families, not to guard diamonds."

Kehar looked puzzled, thinking to himself whether Ramesh had struck cold by the London night, or was he really saying what he meant? But then his jaw clenched. "Men, they may be. But to us, they are iron bars. Tomorrow, they are neither fathers nor husbands. They are walls. And these walls must be passed."

When they turned back, Ramesh finally said, voice low, "Verma waits. The council must finish tonight. We will not sleep otherwise."

The Final Council

Verma's lodging was dim but charged with an energy no lamp could dispel. A map of the Tower spread across the table, its corners weighted by tumblers. Beside it lay sketches of locks, patrol timings scrawled in hurried notes, even a rough chart of the Thames embankment.

Verma, already half in disguise, wore a broad-brimmed hat and false beard that made him look older and sterner. He moved like a

commander before battle. Ali sat in the corner, silent as stone, massive arms folded, his presence as steady as an anchor.

"You are late," Verma said as Kehar and Ramesh entered. His tone was clipped but not angry.

"We watched the Tower," Kehar replied. "It was good advice. The diamond will find a new home tomorrow. Comrade Verma, let us go through the plan once more."

They circled the table. Verma placed his finger on the map. "We have picked the right day. It is Christmas Eve, and it will be the night when the guard will be low. Here is what we will do. Kehar will enter the Tower at 5 pm, just an hour before closing. Dressed as a gentleman, he will mingle with the last of the visitors and head toward the Bureau office near the Jewel House. At six, when the gates close, he will already be inside for the job. The key works?"

Kehar held up the duplicate, iron catching the lamplight. "Smooth as butter."

"Good. Once locked in, he changes. Black turban, black coat, black shoes. A shadow among shadows."

Verma looked at Ramesh. "You, stationed near the wharf. The boat will be ready by dusk. If Kehar sends the sign — two flashes of a lantern or when a commotion breaks— you be ready to take Kehar and cast off. The tide will carry you into the estuary before dawn. Do not wait longer than an hour past midnight."

Ramesh nodded, voice steady. "The boat is sound. I checked it myself. Enough fuel, enough quiet."

"Ali," Verma continued, "you patrol the Bishopsgate approach. You watch for tails. If anyone follows Kehar in or out, you intercept. A brawl if needed, but never lead them back to us."

Ali swallowed, then nodded, though sweat glistened on his brow.

“And me,” Verma finished. “I walk the outer walls in disguise...a hat, beard, a Londoner on his nightly stroll. My task is to pass twice, near the exit wall and once by Tower Hill. If Kehar fails to emerge by dawn, I vanish. But if he comes, I will shadow him until the boat or carriage. We have more friends along the Thames. Remember it is Christmas. Time is on our side.”

The room grew silent. Kehar studied their faces. Ramesh’s nervous fire, Ali’s grim steadiness, Verma’s commanding precision. These were the men upon whose shoulders his fate rested.

“Listen carefully,” Kehar said, his voice low, carrying the weight of command. “At six, when the last footsteps fade, I will be alone inside. I will wait for the guard’s round to pass – twenty minutes at most. Or when the time is right. It can be a few hours later. Then I move. If the diamond is with me, I will come out river side. That is the only chance of escape. If there is a commotion inside, Comrade Verma will create a diversion from outside. I will use the distraction to escape. If they catch me, silence will prevail. What will happen will happen by midnight. Then you must not wait. Save yourselves. The mission dies with me. Do you all understand?”

Ali spoke first. “No, Kehar. If they catch you, the mission lives. We take it back. One day or another. Do not speak as if only your hands can lift it.”

Verma added, softer, “But it must be you tonight. The Tower may never open its ribs again. That is why we stand together.”

Ramesh leaned forward suddenly, words spilling. “What if the ravens stir? I heard stories – if they leave the Tower, the kingdom falls. What if—”

Kehar silenced him with a steady gaze. “Then let them stir. If one bird flies, perhaps it will carry India’s fate in its wings.” Kehar put his hands on Ramesh’s shoulder, as if to reassure him.

A brittle silence followed. Verma finally lifted a glass, filling it with cheap whiskey. He raised it high. "To tomorrow. Whatever comes, let it be said we planned as men, not thieves, and stood as brothers, not cowards."

They drank. The liquor burned Kehar's throat but steadied his spirit. His mind was steel now.

December 24, 1936

The day dawned with a false calm, as if the city itself had decided to disguise its unease beneath the trimmings of Christmas. London moved in its slow, wintry rhythm – vendors shouting through breath that steamed in the air, newsboys crying headlines of abdication and exile, and bells tolling dully from dew-drenched steeples.

By late afternoon, the fog had thickened into a pale shroud over the Thames. The Tower loomed through it, vast and ancient, its battlements glistening with frost.

Christmas cheer was marked by vendors selling cakes, fish and chips. Kehar walked among them with a confidence and attire that made him look almost regal. The turban was tied in a different style, almost like a signature. His countenance reflected that of a gentleman whose home was in London.

At five o'clock, Kehar Singh timed his entry to curious looks from the guards who seemed unperturbed by a brown man seeking knowledgeable pursuits at this hour. The mood was remarkably easy-going as the minders let the visitors walk around the precincts and through the jewel house at leisure.

Kehar passed beneath the arch of the Tower's gate with the crowd of visitors, his step measured, his eyes calm. He glanced about as though for history's sake – admiring the grey walls he had already committed to memory, each stone a part of the geometry of the night ahead.

By six, the guards went about their duties. Closing gates, putting barriers, and getting ready for a change of guard as the last of the groups filed out.

It was at this opportune time that Kehar Singh slipped through the Bureau office door, the duplicate key turning with a soft click. The chamber inside was a hiding place which suited his plans. He waited with the silence broken only by his breath.

He leaned against the door, heart hammering, ears straining. Outside, the boots of guards struck stone, fading into the distance.

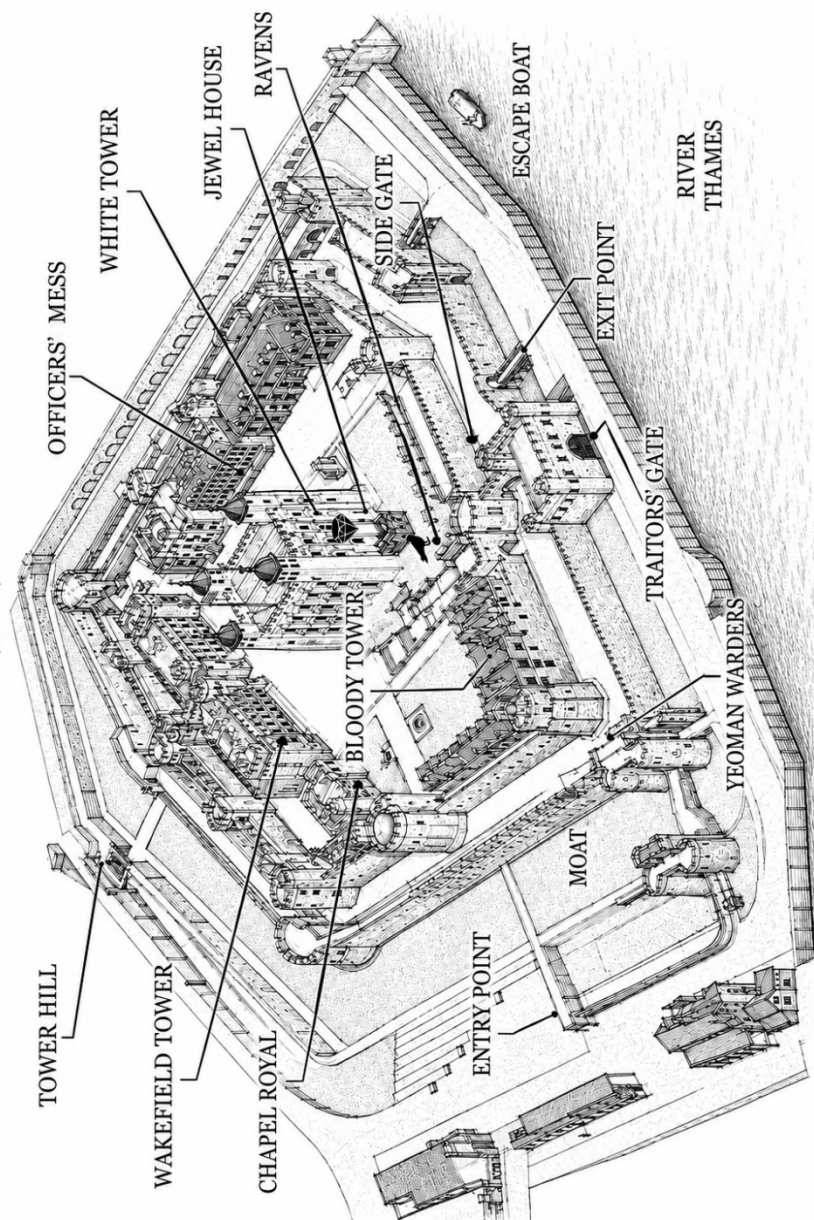
He began to change. Coat black as night, shoes soft as velvet, turban bound tightly. Every scrap of colour hidden. Kehar Singh was no longer a visitor. He was a figure transformed.

And then — silence.

The boots outside had stopped.

The Tower exhaled. The heist had begun.

TOWER OF LONDON (1936)





Chapter 30

THE NIGHT OF THE HEIST

The night pressed down on the Tower of London with a weight older than memory. Stone walls loomed black against a gloomy December sky, their jagged lines softened only by the silvery wash of the moon playing hide and seek.

Kehar Singh crouched in the silence of the Bureau office, its narrow room smelling faintly of oil and dust, and listened to the footsteps retreating along the outer corridor. The echoes receded, muffled by thick walls, until only the rhythm of his heartbeat remained.

It was after seven. The visiting crowds had long dispersed into the London night, swallowed by the streets adorned with Christmas spirit. The Tower itself had gone into holiday mood, though sombre and nearly empty apart from its resident ghosts, secrets, and guards.

Kehar adjusted the black tunic clinging to his frame. Every fold had been stitched with purpose: cloth that did not rustle, leather that did not shine. His turban, too, was darkened, wound tightly to keep no edge loose. Even his shoes had been rubbed with soot, their soles padded. The very air seemed to press against him, testing his silence.

His tools lay snug in a pouch at his side: a thin metal probe, a small file, a coiled wire, matchsticks and a stub of candle. His hands hovered around the bigger pouch hidden near his crotch, which hid the Bureau-issued Enfield Mk1 revolver. Kehar was ready to kill or be killed for the mission. It was do or die.

Silence led to meandering thoughts and to the letter he had left behind, folded and hidden under the false lining of his luggage trunk. His last testament to his mother, words inked in the stillness of the night before. She would never know how near she had been to him in this hour; he had not dared carry the page here. If fate abandoned him, the letter would remain, a whisper from a son who had gambled with destiny.

Now there was only this. The Tower. The diamond. The mission.

He waited five minutes more – long enough for the rhythm of the guards to steady. From the slit in the Bureau’s window, he caught the gleam of a lantern swinging at intervals beyond the courtyard. Fifteen minutes – he had counted it during his earlier watch. Every quarter of an hour, boots rang on cobbles, iron scraping stone. One patrol. Then silence. That silence was his clock, his measure of daring.

At last, Kehar rose. He turned the duplicate key with practised care, easing the door open until the black corridor stretched before him like a throat swallowing moonlight. The smell of limewash and iron drifted in faint currents. He slipped out, closing the door behind him with no more sound than the hush of breath.

The Tower was alive in its stillness. The ravens wheeled against the parapets, their caws cutting through the silence like ancient curses. Kehar glanced upward once. The birds were restless tonight, hopping along battlements, wings flaring in quick bursts. He remembered Lady Simar’s warning from weeks ago, spoken half in jest, half in reverence: *“If the ravens ever leave the Tower, the kingdom will fall.”* A strange omen fit for a night like this.

He pressed himself against the wall, moving in shadow, his outline swallowed by the stone. The Jewel House lay ahead, that small fortress within a fortress, its windows dark, its treasures cloaked in secrecy. Each step was measured, each pause attuned to the world around him.

At the first corner, he froze. Torchlight shone suddenly, sweeping along the stones. A guard's boots clanged – nearer, nearer. Kehar held his breath, sliding behind a buttress carved deep into the wall. The lantern's glow brushed the edges of stone, licking dangerously close. He smelled the oil, heard the scrape of metal on leather. For a heartbeat, he thought the light would fall on him, unmask him. But the guard passed, humming faintly under his breath, his steps echoing into the distance.

Kehar exhaled only when silence returned. His breath steamed in the cool night air. His pulse pounded like a drum inside his chest, but his hands did not tremble. The danger was real, the peril sharp, yet his mind felt a curious clarity. He was in step with the rhythm of the Tower now, inside it, one of it.

At last, the Jewel House rose before him – squat, stern, its entrance bound by a heavy door. This was the entrance used by staff and accessible from the Bureau's office corridor. Kehar had planned well. This was not so well guarded as the entry door used by the visitors.

He knelt, drawing the probe and wire from his pouch. The metal kissed metal with the faintest click. His hands worked quickly, but without haste; a twist, a pressure, a slight lift. Then, at last, the lock sighed open. He slipped inside, closing the door behind him.

The interior smelled of polish and stone dust. Shafts of lantern light hung like ghosts in the corners. There were neatly laid glass cases which housed stolen treasures and crown sets. Kehar had to make his way slowly to the spot, which had grabbed his attention a few weeks ago during the visit with Lady Simar. The Kohinoor lay there, placed atop the Crown that was scheduled to be worn by the new King in May of the next year.

Kehar's breath caught. For a long moment, he didn't move. The diamond seemed almost alive, a creature coiled in glass, whispering of empires fallen and stolen thrones.

He forced his gaze away and checked the room. The exit door – firm, latched. No sign of disturbance. He counted the steps back to the Bureau in his mind, tracing the shadows. Then he returned to the case, kneeling, tools ready.

Under the dimmed light of the chamber, the first screw resisted, biting against the probe. Sweat formed at his temples as he turned it carefully, silently, until the thread released. One by one, he worked them loose, pausing every fifteen minutes to retreat into shadow, flat against the plinth when boots clattered past outside. The pattern was exact: a scrape, a pause, the fading of sound. He moved only in the silences, working as though time itself were his accomplice.

At last, the casing shifted. His heart thudded, louder than the creak of the glass as it lifted. The Kohinoor now had to be removed from the Crown of Queen Mary, who had worn it last in 1911. This was not easy. The casing was knitted around the diamond and was not clearly visible on his last visit. Prying off the Kohinoor was an onerous task. Each second felt like an eternity.

And then footsteps, a change of guard, and a look inside by the soldier. Kehar stopped, slunk away and waited. Silence ensued. And he went back to work.

He moved his tools with precision, even getting abrasions on his fingers in his hurry to complete the extraction from the crown. Finally, the diamond came off, with its casing still intact.

He reached out, his hand trembling despite himself. The diamond was colder than he expected – icy, unyielding, a weight that filled his large hands. Yet it was not the weight of stone but of history itself. The Mughals, Persians, Afghans, Sikhs, British – all had touched this gem, all had claimed it as their prize. And now, for the first time, it rested in the palm of a man who sought to return it, to reclaim what conquest had stolen.

A dozen voices crowded his head: his mother's, proud yet weary; the cries of the Punjab fields; the whispers of Simar, warning of the Tower's spirits; Verma's steely instructions. The world collapsed into this one glittering shard.

But Kehar was not finished. From his pouch, he drew the ace he had carried for months: the glass lookalike, cut to mimic the Kohinoor. It was similar in size, imperfect, but in this dimness, it was just ideal to deceive long enough. He set the 'diamond' carefully into the casing, adjusting the angle so it caught the same faint gleams, arranging the shadows to cloak its flaws. The crown and the jewel now looked untouched, and the glass lid was screwed back. The real diamond he closed within his fist, the glass one left as bait for time.

Kehar gathered his tools and stowed the Kohinoor safely. It was time to plan his escape. It was the first instance that night when doubt pierced him. Would this ruse suffice? Would a guard glance too closely? Would the dawn unmask him before he reached safety?

Then — footsteps.

They came quicker this time, closer, slower at the end, as if the guard lingered. Kehar stiffened, crouched against the pedestal, the Kohinoor burning cold against his chest. His pulse roared in his ears.

The boots stopped outside the Jewel House. Silence. Then the scrape of a lantern being set down. A key rattled faintly against the door, used as an exit by visitors.

Kehar froze. The keys scraped against the metal like teeth biting bone. The guard was at the door.

Kehar slid lower into the shadow of the pedestal, every muscle locked. If the guard stepped in, he would be found out. The Kohinoor burned cold against his chest, a fire of ice that seemed to cry out for discovery. He clamped his hand tighter, pressing the jewel against his skin until it cut like frostbite.

A pause. The keys stilled. The padlock dropped. Then came the sound of a cough, gruff and impatient. Boots shuffled on the cobbles. Kehar dared not move, not even to ease the ache in his lungs. He imagined the guard on the other side of the wood, using the faint lantern light to turn the key.

The rattle came again, faint, testing. For a dreadful moment, he thought the key would turn, the door would swing open, and light would flood in. He braced, already picturing himself leaping into the man's throat, silencing him before the shout could tear the night. Just then, a clock nearby chimed ten times. Christmas Day was just two hours away.

As the sound died down, so did the intent to open the door. The key was withdrawn. The guard spat, muttered something inaudible, then his boots struck stone once more — heavy, steady, fading into the rhythm of the patrol.

Kehar let the air burst from his chest in a slow hiss. His body quivered from the strain of stillness. He counted slowly — one, two, three — all the way to fifty before he dared move again.

He slipped to the door, which was at the back of the Jewel House, ear pressed against the wood. Silence. The patrol would not pass again for another twelve minutes by his measure. He would wait.

The waiting was agony. Minutes stretched into gulfs. Each tick of his inner clock was a hammer blow to his head. He thought of his mother, of her calloused hands plucking weeds under a Punjab sun, of her voice when she sang to lull him in boyhood. He thought of Lady Simar, her eyes steady as she whispered that history demanded courage. He thought of Verma, pacing the shadows outside in his false beard and hat, ready to misdirect suspicion if alarms sounded.

The diamond pressed cold against his chest, but his body burned with tension.

At last, he judged the time. He turned the lock gently and opened the door a sliver. The courtyard stretched before him, soaked in moonlight. No boots, no lantern glow. He slipped out, melting into the dark.

The walk back was a gauntlet. At each corner, he paused, listening for echoes. Once, he nearly collided with a shadow that moved ahead of him – a raven swooping low, wings cutting the silence with a leathery whisper. He stilled until it passed, then crept on.

Another patrol – two men this time. Their lantern arced across the stones, the glow licking toward him. Kehar pressed himself flat against the wall, edging into a hollow where rainwater stained the masonry. The men passed close – so close he smelled the tang of sweat and tobacco on their clothes. One laughed at some muttered jest, the sound booming in the emptiness. Kehar's heart galloped. If either man turned his head, he would be nothing more than a blot of shadow against the stone, but a blot that should not be there.

But they walked on. Lantern light shrank, swallowed by distance. Kehar exhaled shakily, limbs trembling.

Minutes stretched again. He stole along the final stretch, keeping low, until the Bureau office loomed ahead like a sanctuary. He slipped inside, closing the door with exquisite care.

Silence embraced him once more. His body sagged. The Kohinoor was still in his pouch, the glass twin left behind. He touched the pouch, almost disbelieving. *It was done. It was in his possession.*

Yet he knew the night was not finished. Not until he was free of the Tower. Not until the river carried him away.

He crouched in the darkness, listening for one more patrol to pass, waiting for the sign – a long stretch of silence, broken only by ravens. Then, and only then, he would move.

The Night of the Heist

The jewel pulsed against his chest like a second heartbeat. The world beyond the Bureau felt immense and hostile, but he was already dreaming of the Thames, of Verma's signal, of the boat rocking gently against its mooring.

He waited, still as stone, until the footsteps above ceased and the night itself seemed to hold its breath.



Chapter 31

ESCAPE TO THE THAMES

It was midnight. Kehar could feel the Christmas cheer reverberating outside the Tower walls. As he sat crouched by the desk in the Bureau room, he strained to hear the rhythm of footsteps outside. The jewel, heavy against his chest, felt less like a prize and more like a beacon calling trouble toward him.

He counted silently. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen.

Then he heard it: boots, heavy and deliberate, marching not toward the tourist door but to the massive oak gate that sealed the main entrance of the Jewel House. He froze. The scrape of iron against iron followed – the unmistakable sound of a lock being tested.

Another pause. Then voices, sharp and unsettled. One guard barked something, muffled by the thickness of the stone. Another replied, lower, more agitated. Then came the metallic clatter of the great padlock being lifted. A guard went inside.

Kehar's stomach dropped.

A shout rang out – a bark of discovery. Within moments, the courtyard stirred with commotion. Boots converged. Keys rattled. A horn was blown – not the alarm bell itself, but enough to summon others nearby.

Kehar pressed both hands over his face, whispering curses into his palms. The game had shifted. The Tower was waking.

He crouched low, every sense sharpened. From outside came the barked orders, the scrape of pikes dragged against stone, and the scurry of men positioning themselves along the walls. A patrol passed close enough that their voices carried clearly through the slit windows.

“No jewels missing?” one asked.

“Not a thing,” came the reply. “But who opened it, then? No fooling with these locks unless—.”

The first one replied, “ Maybe the previous shift guard just became careless, going home for Christmas, eh?”

A third cut in. “Captain says tighten the watch. Every man stay sharp. Till dawn, no one in or out without a pass.”

This was the main door that a guard had been trying to open with a bunch of keys a few hours ago; did he not notice that the padlock was undone? Or did he leave it down in a hurry? How is this possible?

Kehar closed his eyes. The patrols would double or triple. Escape was narrowing.

And then, as if in sympathy with his pounding heart, the ravens stirred.

From his narrow window, he glimpsed their restless wings. They wheeled and swooped over the courtyard, cawing harshly into the night. Their racket echoed across the stone like a warning, setting teeth on edge. To the guards, it was superstition — the old belief that the Tower’s fate was tied to the ravens. Men muttered, crossing themselves, spitting on the ground. But for Kehar, it was a signal.

It was Verma’s sign.

The ravens had been stirred, agitated deliberately. Somewhere beyond, in the courtyards, Verma in disguise was moving.

The diversion began with shouts. Kehar strained to catch the words. A figure — Verma, surely — had approached the outer wall, claiming to

have seen someone slip out through the shadows by the moat. He was shouting over the walls and insisted the intruder had run toward the southern gate. Guards broke formation, their boots clattering in pursuit, some rushing to search the southern stretch, others to scan the waterline. The chaos rippled outward like a stone cast into a pond.

Kehar knew this was his only chance.

He slipped from the Bureau's room, careful not to let the door creak. The courtyard beyond was fractured with lantern beams and hurried men, but for every lit path there was a shadow deeper than before. He pressed himself against the walls, moving with the patience of a stone shifting with time. His breath came shallow.

The ravens screamed again, darting overhead like black omens. The guards cursed as they got distracted and turned their faces upward. Kehar used the moment to dart across the open stretch to the hidden side door. This was used by the guards in hot pursuit of the alleged intruder, indicated by Verma shouting beyond the thick walls.

His hand found the iron latch. For an instant, he feared it would be locked tight. But fortune held – the door gave way with a shoulder push. He slipped through, the night air cold and damp on his face.

The Thames lay before him, broad and glinting under the fractured moonlight. A shadow moved at the water's edge: Ramesh, crouched low, his hands steady on the rope of a moored craft.

Kehar's heart surged. He dashed to the bank. Ramesh looked up, eyes flashing.

"Quickly, Kehar," he hissed. "Before the patrols circle back."

They pushed the boat off, the wood groaning as it slipped into the current. Kehar leapt in, crouching low as Ramesh bent to the oars. The river took them, dark and hungry, its surface whispering against the hull.

Behind them, the Tower loomed – its pale walls catching the moon, its torches winking like the eyes of watchful demons. Shouts still rang from within, muffled but urgent. The diversion had bought them minutes, but not hours.

Kehar clutched the side of the boat, chest heaving. The pouch pressed against him – the Kohinoor inside, real and solid. He had it. Against all odds, against empire and steel, he had stolen back the pride of India.

He let his eyes close for a heartbeat, feeling the enormity. He could almost see his mother's face, feel the soil of Punjab between his fingers, hear the cheer of comrades when he placed the diamond before them.

But then he felt it.

The river's current shifted oddly. A wake too strong, too deliberate, rippled against their small craft. Ramesh stiffened, glancing over his shoulder. Kehar turned, dread hardening in his gut.

Out on the Thames, a larger shadow was moving. Long, low, and purposeful. Lantern light flashed briefly off its prow before being doused. The sound of oars – measured, silent, professional – cut across the water.

They were not alone.

Danger followed them onto the Thames.

The second boat was closing.

Its oars struck the water with silent precision, far smoother than Ramesh's desperate rowing. Kehar knew at once – this was no ordinary patrol. These were trained men, their movements drilled, their silence unnerving.

"Faster!" Kehar hissed.

Ramesh gritted his teeth, muscles straining. The little craft leapt forward but skittered in the swell, too light to keep true speed. Behind,

the prow of the larger boat loomed, black against black, but unmistakably gaining.

A lantern flared — suddenly, harshly. The pursuers had revealed themselves. Red coats glimmered, muskets lifted. A voice rang across the water, firm and commanding:

“By order of the Crown, heave to!”

Ramesh spat into the river. “Not tonight.”

The first shot cracked. The musket ball hissed into the dark, striking water a foot from the hull. Spray leapt into Kehar’s face. He flinched, ducking low. Another shot followed, then another — a volley of thunder across the river.

Kehar felt the air tear beside his ear. Wood splintered near the prow. The boat rocked violently.

“Row!” Kehar shouted, though Ramesh was already pulling with everything left in him. His arms were ropes of strain, veins standing out, sweat mixing with the river mist.

The Tower was slipping behind, its torches dwindling, but the chase was only beginning. London’s banks pressed close with warehouses, piers, and shadowed arches. Every corner threatened an ambush.

A sudden flare lit the sky — a signal rocket fired from the pursuing boat. Red light bathed the water, the warehouses, the bridges beyond. Alarms would spread. Other patrols would be watching now.

Kehar’s heart hammered. The jewel felt heavier than a stone, as if slowing the boat.

Another volley came. This time the shots were lower, closer. One punched through the stern, missing Ramesh’s leg by inches. Water seeped in.

Kehar seized an oar, helping to steady their course. His body shook with every pull, but adrenaline carried him. “We need cover!” he gasped.

Ramesh’s eyes flicked left — the looming shape of Tower Bridge, its arches gaping black against the current. “There,” he said. “Through the middle arch. Hold on.”

The boat angled, sliding toward the great bridge. Behind them, the larger craft hesitated — to fire under the bridge was to risk ricochet, chaos. But they followed all the same, their shouts echoing off the stone.

The current dragged Kehar and Ramesh hard as they shot into the arch. Darkness swallowed them. Water thundered. Overhead, the bridge groaned with carriages and footsteps. For a breathless span of seconds, only the river’s roar remained.

When they burst into open air on the far side, Verma was waiting.

From the shadows of a moored barge, he stepped out, disguised still — cap low, coat tattered, a fisherman’s lantern in hand. His voice carried low but sharp: “This way!”

Ramesh pulled hard toward him. The pursuing craft cleared the bridge just moments later, but Verma was ready. He swung his lantern thrice — a prearranged signal — and from the far bank two larger barges loosed their moorings, drifting deliberately into the channel. Verma’s network on the job.

The pursuing boat swerved, crashing against the first barge. Shouts erupted, curses filling the night. Muskets fired wildly but harmlessly. Kehar and Ramesh seized the opening, their little boat cutting tight into Verma’s shadowed channel.

“Keep low!” Verma barked. He leapt aboard as their hull scraped alongside, shoving them into a narrow alley of water between barges. For a moment, the darkness hid them entirely.

Kehar's chest burned. "How far to the sea?"

"Hours," Verma said grimly. "But we don't need the sea. Not yet."

He pointed ahead. The Thames widened, and far downriver, dim against the horizon, a larger vessel waited – masts black against the stars. A smuggler's ship, hired weeks ago, its captain bought with gold and silence.

"That's our way out," Verma said. "If we reach her."

The pursuing patrol had freed itself and was giving chase again, though slower now. Others would be roused. Gunfire still cracked, but distance and darkness made the shots wild.

Ramesh rowed until his breath tore ragged from his chest. Kehar took over when he faltered, sweat and blood slick on his palms. The city slid past – warehouses, piers, church spires pricking the skyline. The great river carried them like fugitives fleeing time itself.

But danger never left. Twice, patrol boats appeared from side channels, lanterns swinging, muskets ready. Twice, Verma's signals drew allied barges across their paths, sowing confusion, forcing the enemy to split. Still, the noose tightened.

And then came the final gauntlet.

Near Deptford, the river broadened, but so too did the vigilance. A gunboat sat anchored midstream, its cannons dark but its crew restless. To pass unseen was impossible. To fight was madness.

Verma's eyes gleamed. "The diversion, now."

From beneath his coat, he drew a flare – a single cylinder of powder and spark. With a hiss, it ignited, arcing high into the sky. For an instant, night turned red, then green, then a cascade of sparks that drew every gaze.

The gunboat's crew shouted, craning upward. The patrol behind veered toward the light. In that breath of confusion, Ramesh rowed

with everything left in him. Kehar pulled beside him, veins near bursting. The little craft slid along the gunboat's shadow, so close they could hear the English curses above.

And then — silence.

They were through. Past the cordon, into the widening Thames that stretched toward the Channel and freedom. Ahead, the smuggler's ship loomed larger, her sails already catching wind.

Kehar slumped, every nerve aflame, but his hand clutched the jewel. Against his chest, it seemed to throb — as though alive, as though mocking.

He looked back once. The Tower was gone from sight, but pursuit had not ended. Lights still danced on the river, lanterns weaving like angry stars. The chase would follow them to sea.

Yet for this moment, Kehar allowed himself one breath of triumph. They had taken the Kohinoor from the Crown's vault, carried it into the night, and set the river itself against empire.

What lay ahead — betrayal, pursuit, or glory — was still hidden. But the jewel was theirs, and the escape had begun.



Chapter 32

A LEGEND IS BORN

The Thames was behind them now.

The smuggler's brigantine, dark-sailed and unmarked, cut swiftly toward the estuary, her bow dipping into the churn as the tide carried her into open waters. The city shrank to a smear of lights and towers, the cries of London swallowed by the night wind. Kehar stood at the rail, chest heaving, the jewel pressed against his breast beneath his coat. He remembered his first steps in England at Southampton.

It was real.

He had done it.

The Kohinoor — centuries of blood, empire, and humiliation contained within its cold fire — now sat in the palm of a man from Punjab who had outwitted the Crown's watch. For a fleeting moment, he felt invincible. The river, the sea, the stars themselves seemed to bow before the audacity of the heist.

But even triumph carries its shadows.

From the stern came the first warning. A glimmer of lanterns, faint but steady, upon the horizon they had left—two big boats following their trail.

Verma joined him at the rail, his disguise gone now, beard stripped away, eyes fierce. "They've not given up," he murmured. "The river

patrol would have lit signals all the way to Gravesend. By now, the Navy will know.”

Ramesh slumped nearby, arms like lead, his face hollow from the river escape. Ali sat cross-legged, whispering a prayer, eyes fixed upon the jewel as though it might burn through Kehar’s coat.

Kehar tightened his hand over the diamond. “We’ve outrun them before. We’ll do it again.” Glimpsing a moment, Kehar drew Verma close and handed the Kohinoor in his hand. “Comrade, savour the moment. This is what we lost, and this is what was snatched from us. We have got it back, now.”

For Verma, it was a moment of a lifetime. But years of living amongst the enemy had him worried. The force of the Empire will soon be upon them. He knew the pursuit was getting close and asked Kehar to quickly secure the diamond once again. Verma looked towards the horizon. His lips curved into something between a smile and a grimace. “The river is not the sea. Out here, their ships are faster, their guns longer. But we have one chance – if the wind holds, and if fortune favours courage.”

The brigantine’s captain, a hard-eyed smuggler named Finch, barked orders. Sails filled, timbers creaked. The ship leaned into the swell, pushing east toward the Channel. Behind, the pursuing lights grew clearer.

Hours passed in tense silence. Each man aboard felt the weight of pursuit, of destiny. Kehar’s mind replayed every step – the Tower’s stone walls, the glassy case, the jewel in his hands. It seemed unreal, as though a dream he might wake from. But the ache in his arms, the salt sting in his eyes, and the steady weight of the Kohinoor against his chest reminded him: this was no dream.

And then came the sound that froze every man aboard.

A cannon’s low thunder, far off but unmistakable.

The sea shuddered with its echo. A flash lit the horizon. Moments later, the boom was carried on the wind, closer. The pursuers were in hot pursuit, within range.

Finch swore and hauled at the wheel. "They'll catch us before we see the Channel!"

Verma's eyes met Kehar's. "We need more time."

The sea gave none. By dawn's first pale streaks, their hunters revealed themselves.

Two ships bore down upon them, larger, faster, their sails white against the greying sky. The lead vessel cut the water like a predator, and through a spyglass, Finch cursed, eyes set on the pursuers.

"A corvette. Navy. And the other—" He paused, his jaw tightening. "God help us, the other's a sloop rigged for speed. No outrunning them both."

Kehar stared, breath caught in his throat. The dream of escape to distant lands, of carrying the Kohinoor back to Punjab, cracked beneath the sight. These were not random patrols. These were ships dispatched with purpose.

Verma's voice was sharp. "They'll not fire the jewel to splinters. They want it whole. That is our one advantage."

"And if they board us?" Kehar asked.

Verma did not answer.

The sea chase was merciless.

The Navy ships pressed closer, cannon fire splashing the water just yards astern. Finch's brigantine shuddered, her timbers groaning under near misses. The wind betrayed them, faltering, then shifting, robbing the sails of their strength.

They were nearer now. And at their prow, silhouetted by the sky, stood a man he knew.

Langdon.

His figure was unmistakable — tall, composed, his greatcoat whipping in the wind. A binocular by his side. Even at a distance, Kehar felt the weight of that gaze, cold and unflinching.

The realisation struck hard: Langdon had been the shadow at every turn, the hand that always lay just behind him. Not the faceless machinery of empire — but this man, this officer, relentless, calculating. He knew it all along and played along. He was the hunter, now ensnaring his prey for the final rites.

By mid-morning, the corvette had drawn alongside, her guns run out, her deck bristling with redcoats. A single broadside would obliterate them. Yet no fire came. Instead, a voice — Langdon's — boomed across the gap.

“Kehar Singh! Enough!”

The words cracked like thunder, amplified by command and sea air. Kehar's blood chilled. The men around him looked to him, their leader, the thief who held the empire's pride in his hand.

Langdon's voice carried again. “You have played your part with brilliance. But the game ends here. Yield, and no blood needs to spill.”

Ramesh muttered, “They'll hang us all.”

Ali spat into the sea. “Better death than chains.”

Verma's eyes narrowed. “Wait. They do not want death — not yet. They want the jewel intact, and Kehar alive to answer for it. That buys us time.”

But Kehar's heart pounded with a strange mixture of terror and pride. Langdon's words had not been laced with mockery, nor triumph, but something far more cutting — respect.

Respect for the thief who had dared the impossible.

By noon, the brigantine was under Navy control. With no shots fired. Kehar and his companions were bound.

The deck was chaos – redcoats swarming, muskets bristling, smugglers disarmed.

The Kohinoor was sealed once more, its case guarded by a dozen rifles. The sea swallowed their hopes of escape.

But Verma was gone.

In the chaos of the boarding, he had slipped over the side, vanishing into the waves. No shot had marked his fall, no cry of his capture. When they counted prisoners, one was missing.

Kehar was caught in a stranglehold with multiple hands searching. Kohinoor was taken, yet his eyes were blazing with the same fire that had carried him into the Tower.

Langdon advanced slowly, boots thudding across the deck. He took the diamond out and studied it closely. Langdon shifted his gaze from the Crown Jewel to the Crown's servant, who had dared the impossible. He stopped before Kehar, the sea-wind snapping his greatcoat, and for a long moment said nothing.

Then, with a sudden motion, he lunged and seized Kehar by the coat front. His grip was iron, dragging him forward until their faces were inches apart.

"You fool," Langdon hissed. His voice trembled, not with victory but with a storm of emotions – anger, disappointment, dismay, and, beneath it all, reluctant awe. "Do you realise what you've done? The Empire will roar for blood. You might have set the whole of India aflame."

Kehar met his stare, unflinching. "Then let it burn. Better fire than chains."

Langdon's jaw tightened. For an instant, something flickered in his eyes — respect, unwilling but undeniable. He released Kehar with a shove, stepping back, chest heaving as though the struggle were within himself more than with the prisoner before him.

"Damn you," he muttered, though the words rang hollow. " You thought everything was hunky dory? We knew you were up to something. You were too smooth. You were too clever. But not enough for me, Singh!"

The soldiers pulled Kehar roughly up on his feet, searched him and seized his revolver. It was nothing less than a climactic ending. The spymaster had caught the executioner of a fantastic heist.

Chains bit into his wrists, yet Kehar stood tall, shoulders square, his gaze on the horizon. Around him, Ramesh and Ali sagged in their bonds, beaten, bloodied. But Kehar did not bow.

He lifted his voice, strong despite the salt and smoke, the cry tearing through the sea air like a trumpet blast:

"Jai Hind!" "Jai Hind!" "Jai Hind!"

It startled even the soldiers. The cry carried across the deck, echoed against the waves, hung defiant in the morning sky. Ramesh, bruised and bleeding, picked it up. "Jai Hind!" Ali followed, hoarse but proud. Soon, the cry rolled like thunder among them, a chorus of chains and courage.

The redcoats shouted them down, musket butts driving them to silence, but the echo lingered — not in sound, but in memory. Even hardened sailors would remember the tale long after.

For in that moment, Kehar Singh was no longer a fugitive, no longer a thief. He was the man who had dared to touch the empire's crown jewel, who had carried it in his palm if only for a night, and who had answered chains with a cry of freedom.

Far away, in a quiet Lambeth apartment, his letter still waited – the last testament of a son to his mother, entrusted to Verma should fate turn dark. And fate had turned.

But a legend had been born.

Kehar Singh, the man who stole the Kohinoor. If only for a night.



Chapter 33

THE KOHINOOR CONSPIRACY CASE

The clang of the gavel still echoed in Kehar Singh's ears, long after the trial had ended.

It had been no trial at all, not in the sense that the newspapers of free men liked to boast of justice. It was a closed chamber, heavy curtains drawn against daylight, a handful of Crown prosecutors and military officials, who spoke in clipped tones, and a judge who seemed less a man than an instrument, wound up to deliver the inevitable verdict. The charge was treason. The evidence: unauthorised entry, stolen jewel, a pursuit on the Thames, the testimony of men whose words carried the weight of empire.

No jury. No defence counsel dared fight beyond perfunctory words. No audience save for a few clerks, some stiff-lipped officers, and one man who sat quietly at the back — Major Paul Langdon.

Langdon's presence gnawed at Kehar. The Major did not look triumphant. His eyes, when they met Kehar's across the courtroom, were not those of a victor gloating over a defeated foe. They were harder to read: a storm of anger, disappointment, and something dangerously close to respect. Kehar wondered if the Englishman would speak, and what he might say.

He did.

When the judge asked for statements from the Bureau, Langdon rose. His testimony was delivered with military precision — how Kehar Singh, entrusted with tasks of intelligence and discretion, had abused his position, manipulated trust, conspired, and sought to rob the Crown Jewels. Yet beneath the words ran a subtle undercurrent. Langdon spoke of courage, of audacity, of a mind that had outwitted systems meant to be foolproof.

“Had his loyalty been otherwise placed,” Langdon said, pausing for a moment, “Mr Singh might have risen in ranks in the service. He is, in a manner, both a traitor and a soldier — a man at war, though his battlefield was not one the law will ever acknowledge.”

The judge shifted impatiently at what sounded dangerously like admiration. But Langdon’s words stayed in the chamber. They would follow Kehar Singh into his cell, into his memory, into the long years ahead.

The sentence was delivered without drama. Life imprisonment. No rope, no bullet, no martyrdom to inflame the colonies. Instead, a slow death of years behind bars. The Crown was careful: make an example, but not a legend.

They failed.

The Prison Years

Kehar’s first cell was in Pentonville, then he was transferred to a quieter block outside the city, where men forgotten by the world waited for their end. The stone walls were cold, the food unpalatable, the hours endless. Many prisoners broke under the monotony, their spirits ground down by the sameness of each day.

Kehar Singh did not break.

He rose with the dawn, performed his ablutions as best as the prison taps allowed, and kept his body strong with exercises in the narrow space of his cell. He treated each day as a soldier treats a march: one

foot in front of the other, measured, steady. He spoke little, but when he did, even the guards listened. There was something in his bearing – a dignity they could neither explain nor strip from him.

At night, when the prison fell silent save for the occasional cough or the scrape of a rat, he allowed himself memories. His mother's face-weathered and kind. The fields of Punjab- glowing golden in harvest. The click-clack of hockey sticks battling for ball possession. The sound of horses on the dust roads of Kandahar. The laughter of comrades who had long since vanished into the smoke of revolution. And always, always, the glitter of the Kohinoor in its glass case, the weight of it in his hand that single night when he had, if only for a moment, reclaimed it for his people.

The Tower guards whispered of him. Some said he had nearly succeeded. Others claimed the diamond had indeed left the Tower for a night before being returned, though no official record would ever admit it. Among the revolutionaries of the Free India Club, his name became a banner – proof that audacity could shake even the iron walls of empire.

In Punjab, his story trickled back in fragments. About a Sikh who had dared the unthinkable. About a son who broke into the heart of London and rattled its crown. Myths grew where facts were scarce, and Kehar Singh's name was spoken in both pride and sorrow.

He did not hear of these things directly. But he sensed them, as a man senses the shifting of seasons. He knew his attempt had not vanished into silence.

Langdon's Visit

It was some years into his sentence when Langdon came. The Major entered the cell block with the authority of one still attached to government service, though his hair had grown greyer, his gait slower.

The two men faced each other across the narrow cell. No chains bound Kehar's hands – the warden had come to see them as unnecessary.

"You've aged," Langdon said quietly.

"As have you," Kehar replied.

There was a long pause. Then Langdon spoke again, voice taut. "You were reckless. Mad. You betrayed every trust placed in you."

Kehar's eyes did not waver. "I betrayed nothing. I honoured a greater trust – my land, my people."

Langdon's jaw tightened. He looked away, then back. "Do you know what it cost me? To speak for you at the trial as I did? To temper my words when the Crown wanted you painted as nothing but a thief?"

Kehar's lips curved faintly. "Then perhaps you are more conflicted than you admit, Major."

Langdon exhaled sharply, anger and something unspoken flashing across his face. He stepped forward, seized Kehar's shirt by the collar, and pulled him close. "Damn you, Singh! You could have been one of us – more than one of us. And instead you chose this!"

Kehar held his gaze calmly, even gently. "I was never yours to keep. The Kohinoor was not yours to keep. You may hold it in your crown, but it can never be rightfully yours."

For a long moment, neither man moved. Then Langdon released his grip, eyes clouded with frustration and reluctant admiration. Without another word, he turned and left.

Kehar never saw him again. But that moment lingered: the grasp of a man torn between duty and respect, between empire and honour.

1949

The years passed. The world cracked and shifted. The war came and went, cities burned, and empires fell. India was free now, though divided and bleeding. The Union Jack no longer flew over Delhi.

In the dim quiet of his cell, Kehar Singh felt no bitterness at having missed that dawn. Freedom was never for one man alone. He had played his part, however small, however hidden.

He sat in his cell, staring at the iron bars that now felt more ceremonial than threatening. He had carved marks into the wall—tallies of months, then years. Twelve years of dawn roll calls, of damp mornings, of books smuggled in by sympathetic wardens, of letters from comrades that dwindled with time. And the letter to his mother, was it sent by Verma? Did it reach Sansarpur? Did his mother read it? What did she think? Time had swallowed all the answers.

What he remembered most vividly, however, was not prison life but the faces of those who had stood with him: Verma with his commanding presence, Ali with his youthful eagerness, Ramesh with his quiet loyalty. And above all, Lady Simar Singhji, who had carried herself like royalty even in exile. They had vanished into the tides of history. Kehar often wondered: Did they remember him? Did they speak his name, even in whispers? Or had he become just another cautionary tale?

A visitor like no other

It was on a morning washed clean by rain that the knock came. Two wardens appeared, their boots echoing in the corridor. Between them walked a man in his forties, dressed in a light khadi jacket, spectacles perched on a sharp nose, a satchel slung across his shoulder. He carried himself with a restless energy.

“Kehar Singh,” the chief warden said brusquely. “This is Mr Thapar. He is a journalist. He has permission from the court to speak with you.”

Thapar inclined his head politely. “I have followed your story, or let’s say legend, for years, Singhji. Now that I am here, I hope you will narrate your story and allow me to record it. Not just for me, but for history.”

Kehar studied him in silence. The young man’s eyes were sincere, but also hungry—the curiosity of one who knew that a great untold tale lay before him.

The guards searched Thapar’s belongings. From the leather case he carried, they drew out a strange machine: a bulky but portable wire recorder, its reels gleaming like captured moons. The wardens frowned.

“It is harmless,” Thapar explained patiently. “It records voices on spools of wire. My editors wish to preserve Singhji’s words, not merely rely on shorthand.”

After some hesitation, the wardens allowed it. They set the case on the wooden table in Kehar’s cell. Thapar wound the spools with careful fingers, connected the leads, and switched it on. A soft whirl filled the air, and the reels began to turn. He also pulled out a notebook and a pencil.

“Machines fail,” he said with a smile. “But paper never forgets.”

Kehar leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. “So my voice will live in that?”

“Yes,” Thapar replied. “Your voice, unfiltered, unaltered. Long after both of us are gone, someone may play it and hear you speak.”

For the first time in years, Kehar felt the faint tremor of destiny. Perhaps this was why he had endured: not just to act, but to speak.

The Beginning of the Confession

The machine hummed softly. Thapar adjusted his spectacles, leaned close, and asked the first question:

“Tell me, Kehar Singhji. Why are you in jail? They say you tried to steal the Kohinoor?”

For a long time, Kehar said nothing. He studied the young man, as though weighing not his words but his soul. Then, slowly, he nodded.

A faint smile touched his lips — a smile both weary and proud.

“What I attempted — no, what *we* attempted — was madness to some, patriotism to others. But to me, it was simply unfinished business. My country bled while its jewels sparkled in London’s crown. I could not sleep knowing that.”

The words hung in the air, heavy as chains, bright as steel. Thapar’s pen scratched furiously, but he knew already: this was not just a story. This was history, spoken in the voice of the man who had dared it.

Kehar Singh leaned back, eyes distant now, fixed on a horizon only he could see.

“Do you like what you hear, Thapar?” he said quietly and continued. “Then, there is much to tell.”

And in that small, dim cell, the past began to unspool — the tale of a man who had almost stolen the heart of the empire, and who, in failing, had still become a legend.



ANNEXURES

ANNEXURE 1 HISTORY OF THE KOHINOOR

- Chronological Timeline & Authoritative Online Sources
- AD 1200s-1323 – Probable origin at the Kollur (Golconda) mines. Reference: British Museum and Golconda diamond studies.
- AD 1260-1323 – Kakatiya dynasty – earliest traditional association. Sources: Richard Eaton; Irfan Habib.
- AD 1323-1526 – Delhi Sultanate – Alauddin Khalji / Malik Kafur campaigns brought major diamonds north.
- AD 1526-1739 – Mughal Empire – part of imperial treasury and later the Peacock Throne (Shah Jahan). Royal Collection Trust.
- AD 1739 – Nader Shah invades Delhi and seizes the Mughal treasury; diamond named 'Koh-i-Noor'.
- AD 1747-1813 – Diamond passes to Afghan Durrani rulers. British Library Afghan archives.
- AD 1813-1849 – Transferred to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sikh Empire, Lahore. See Khushwant Singh; Sikh history archives.
- AD 1849-1850 – British acquire the diamond after annexation of Punjab; Treaty of Lahore. India Office Records, British Library.

Annexures

- AD 1851-1852 – Displayed at the Great Exhibition (1851) and re-cut in London by Garrard (1852).
- AD 1937 – Set in the Crown of Queen Elizabeth (Queen Mother). Displayed at Tower of London.

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>

<https://www.booksfact.com/history/kohinoor-diamond-owner-bhadrakali-goddess-warangal.html>

<https://www.cambridge.org/>

<https://www.bl.uk/>

<https://www.rct.uk/>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nader-Shah>

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<https://global.oup.com/academic/>

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/india-office-records>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Koh-i-noor>

<https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/crown-jewels/>



ANNEXURE 2

INDIAN GOVERNMENT'S STAND ON KOHINOOR AND LEGAL STATUS

- In 2016–2017, several public-interest petitions were filed in the Supreme Court of India asking that India be directed to reclaim the Kohinoor from Britain
- **Initial Submission:** On April 18, 2016, the Solicitor General informed the Supreme Court that the Kohinoor was a gift to the East India Company by the rulers of Punjab in 1849, not forcibly taken or stolen by the British – meaning it did not qualify as an illegally exported “antiquity” under relevant Indian laws
- **Government U-turn:** The next day, April 19, 2016, the Ministry of Culture clarified that the Solicitor General's statement was based on historical references from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and did not represent the government's final view.
- **21 September 2016**-Claiming its ownership over the ‘Kohinoor’ diamond based on historical evidence, the Union government told the Supreme Court it would make all efforts for “satisfactory resolution” of the issue with the United Kingdom.
- In **April 2017**, a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court (headed by CJI J. S. Kehar) dismissed the petitions as “frivolous” and held that the court could not direct the government to recover property held by a foreign country.
- The bench stated that the matter of retrieval must proceed through **diplomatic channels** and that courts have no jurisdiction to supervise or enforce compliance by foreign governments.

Annexures

- When a **review petition** was filed later, seeking reconsideration, a larger bench (comprising five judges) in **2019** refused to reopen the decision, deeming the grounds insufficient and affirming that judicial recourse had run its course.
- Since the Supreme Court has **rejected legal intervention** and declared it **cannot order a foreign country to return the diamond**, the **judicial path is closed**.
- The Court explicitly stated that it cannot “monitor diplomatic efforts,” effectively removing **judicial oversight** from diplomatic matters.
- The government’s own stance – that the Kohinoor was *gifted*, not stolen – means it doesn’t qualify under laws designed to retrieve illegally exported antiquities (e.g., the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) / Art-Treasure Acts) for repatriation.
- Diplomatic efforts have no binding legal pressure – once the court doors closed, it became a **matter of state policy** and international negotiation.

What It Means Now

1. **No ongoing court case** – with the Supreme Court’s final ruling (2019), there is no active judicial petition demanding return.
2. **Reclamation depends solely on diplomacy** – if India wishes to request a return, it must negotiate with the UK government, using political or diplomatic channels.
3. **No legal guarantee or timeline** – without UK agreement, there is no enforceable mechanism for return.
4. **Public and activist interest remains, but efforts are narrower** – some cultural, parliamentary or activist appeals may exist, but they face major legal and diplomatic obstacles.

The Royal Kohinoor Heist- A 1930s Spy Thriller

<https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=139000®=3&lang=2>

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Kohinoor-was-gifted-not-stolen-says-Centre-to-Supreme-Court/articleshow/51885916.cms?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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<https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/210916/govt-will-explore-ways-to-bring-back-kohinoor-diamond-to-india-centre-tells-sc.html>

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https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/Apr/29/sc-declines-to-review-decision-on-petition-over-kohinoor-1970348.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/why-india-may-never-get-its-kohinoor-diamond-back-from-the-british-318525-2016-04-18?utm_source=chatgpt.com

<https://www.deccanherald.com/india/will-make-efforts-resolve-kohinoor-2096614>



ANNEXURE 3

BRITISH GOVERNMENT'S STAND ON KOHINOOR

Across decades, the British government has maintained a consistent position on the Kohinoor: it regards the diamond as part of the Crown Jewels and as having passed into British possession under the 1849 Treaty of Lahore, so there is no legal basis for compulsory restitution. Successive UK administrations have emphasised practical and legal objections – the complex, multi-owner provenance of the stone, the risk of opening an unmanageable precedent for repatriation of many colonial-era objects, and the status of the jewel as an element of national heritage – and have therefore resisted calls from Indian politicians, media and campaigners to return it. Where discussions have occurred, Westminster has treated the matter as political and diplomatic rather than judicial, arguing that any change would need to be resolved by government-to-government negotiation.

In recent years, the rhetoric has softened somewhat: ministers have signalled willingness to explore cultural collaboration, loans or shared access arrangements, but these gestures stop short of transferring ownership, and as of today, the UK continues to retain the Kohinoor in the Tower of London.

- **May 2023** – *Tower of London display update*: Historic Royal Palaces and Tower displays were changed to acknowledge the Kohinoor as a “symbol of conquest” and to say it had been “compelled” from a child ruler, reflecting public pressure for more honest museum interpretation.
- **2023–2025** – *Diplomatic and public diplomacy language shifts*: UK ministers and cultural officials emphasised dialogue, “shared

access,” and contextualisation rather than unilateral restitution; the Indian government reiterated exploring repatriation options as part of a larger repatriation agenda. In 2025, there were press reports quoting the UK Culture Secretary (Lisa Nandy) indicating talks about collaboration/shared access.

https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/crown-jewels/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/british-minister-asked-about-uk-returning-kohinoor-diamond-to-india-she-said-101746348944268.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/25/new-tower-of-london-display-acknowledges-complex-history-of-crown-jewels?utm_source=chatgpt.com

<https://thewire.in/history/new-tower-of-london-display-to-explain-kohinoors-story-as-a-symbol-of-conquest>

The Guardian – Cameron statements

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/28/david-cameron-india-koh-i-noor>

BBC News – why Camilla did not use the Koh-i-Noor crown

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-64948275>



ANNEXURE 4

PETITION TO THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA (For the Kohinoor's return)

To,

The External Affairs Minister
Government of India, New Delhi

Subject: Return of Kohinoor Diamond to India

Dear Sir,

I, a citizen of India, am proud of my heritage. Historically, the diamond, mined from the Kolar mines, owned by the Kakatiya Dynasty in the 13th century, adorned the eye of Kaali Ma in the Bhadrakali temple at Warangal, Andhra Pradesh. Over the years, the diamond, later known as the Kohinoor, became an article of conquest for many.

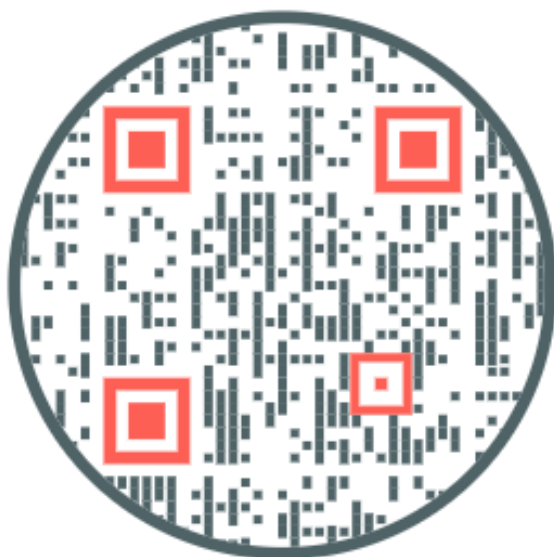
As per accounts, Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839 had bequeathed the diamond for the Jagannath Temple in Puri. But after defeating the Sikh Empire, the Britishers coerced the Treaty of Lahore and obtained the Kohinoor for their Queen.

Till today, the Kohinoor is in the Tower of London as part of the Crown Jewels.

The Government of India must renew efforts to bring it back to India through consultations with the British Government. Please treat this as a petition and an earnest request. The Kohinoor is an original property of *Akhand* Bharat and must find its way back to its rightful place.

JAI HIND

SCAN AND SEND EMAIL



Kohinoor Diamond Return Petition