

THE LINE HELD

**History drew the line.
Their hearts refused it.**

VIDURAS



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Viduras 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRoseONE.com
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-81-6744-633-6

Cover artwork: Somendra Singh

Cover design: Shariq Ansari

Typesetting: Simran Maurya

First Edition: October 2026

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to my brother, Krishnamurthy, my sister-in-law, Jeyashree, and the friends who listened to my thoughts, questioned my ideas, offered suggestions and, sometimes simply by talking with me, helped shape the story that became *The Line Held*.

My special thanks go to Sanjay Sood, who, thankfully, has always been the worst critic of my stories and was willing to have long conversations about the characters, their choices and the world they inhabited. His questions often made me look at the story differently and helped me find what I was trying to say.

My sincere thanks to my dear friend, Somendra Singh, who painted the cover of this book.

I also remember with affection all the grandmothers whose stories we heard as children growing up in rural Punjab. Those stories stayed in my heart for nearly half a century before finding their way into this book. They remind us that history is not made up only of dates, decisions and borders, but also of ordinary lives caught in extraordinary circumstances.

Above all, I owe my wife my thanks for her patience and encouragement while I was writing this story.

DEDICATED TO

For those whom Partition sundered apart.
And those who refused to divide the heart.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Harvest on the Ravi.....	1
Chapter 2: Three Hearths	6
Chapter 3: Before the Lines.....	12
Chapter 4: The Undercurrent.....	17
Chapter 5: The Rhythm of the Village	22
Chapter 6: The Man who Stood	27
Chapter 7: Beneath One Sky.....	30
Chapter 8: The Monsoon Ravi	34
Chapter 9: I Still Believe	38
Chapter 10: The Train at the Halt	42
Chapter 11: The Line at the Well.....	45
Chapter 12: Voices Beneath the Banyan	53
Chapter 13: Fires Beyond the Fields	57
Chapter 14: The Other Well	63
Chapter 15: The Village Still Stood	67
Chapter 16: The Village That Arrived	71
Chapter 17: The Story They Brought	74
Chapter 18: The Other Caravan.....	79

Chapter 19: The Last Council.....	81
Chapter 20: What We Carried	85
Chapter 21: The Last Morning	92
Chapter 22: Where the Road Paused	97
Chapter 23: Alone Amid the Crowd.....	106
Chapter 24: The Train	110
Chapter 25: The Roof.....	113
Chapter 26: The Longest Night	116
Chapter 27: Collapse.....	120
Chapter 28: Canvas City	125
Chapter 29: The Doctors	131
Chapter 30: The Ambulance	136
Chapter 31: The Missing	140
Chapter 32: Delhi	144
Chapter 33: Santo.....	148
Chapter 34: Malhotra Sweets Karachiwale.....	154
Chapter 35: The Taste of Home	158
Chapter 36: The Weight of Fathers	165
Chapter 37: Taking Root	169
Chapter 38: Passed On.....	185
Chapter 39: The Keeper of Memories.....	188
Chapter 40: Letter from the Ravi.....	192
Chapter 41: The Weight of Time	195
Chapter 42: The Invitation	198

Chapter 43: The Next Letter.....	200
Chapter 44: The Gift	203
Chapter 45: The Blessing.....	207
Chapter 46: The Road Across.....	212
Chapter 47: The Village Remembers	217
Chapter 48: What About Bashir?	223
Chapter 49: The Spear	230
Chapter 50: The Line Held	234

Chapter 1

HARVEST ON THE RAVI

The Ravi moved slowly, wide and patient, as it had for centuries. From the fields above the bank, it looked almost lazy, a sheet of dull silver sliding past tall grasses bending in the morning wind. Across the fields, wheat swayed in long golden waves beneath the pale sun of early spring.

Arun Sharma stood at the edge of the field watching the harvest begin. Men were already at work. Sickles flashed through the wheat, and the sound of cutting moved across the land like dry paper being torn. Women followed behind, gathering the stalks into bundles and talking among themselves. Among them, Nachatar Kaur moved from row to row with a wicker basket balanced against her hip, stopping now and then to straighten a bundle another woman had tied too loosely.

Farther down the field, a group of boys shouted at a pair of bullocks that had wandered too close to the irrigation channel. The sweep of the sickles sent a pair of cattle egrets gliding ahead of the harvesters. More gathered behind them, stepping through the stubble in search of insects and frogs driven out by the cutting. The harvest had begun as it always did.

A young calf suddenly bolted in from the edge of the field, weaving between stacks of freshly cut wheat with a boy close behind. “Niranjan!” someone shouted. “Leave the poor thing alone!”

“I’m trying to catch him, not frighten him!” Niranjan called back, laughing.

The calf zigzagged across the stubble, but Niranjan seemed to know where it would turn. He cut across its path, reached out and slipped an arm around its neck. The frightened animal struggled briefly, then settled beneath his hand. “You have a way with animals,” one of the harvesters chuckled.

Niranjan scratched it behind the ears. “It knows who loves it.”

Arun smiled. There wasn’t a cow, buffalo or horse in the neighbourhood that seemed afraid of Niranjan.

A flock of sparrows lifted from the field beyond. Through the gap in the wheat came Sultan. The chestnut stallion moved between the wheat tracks, neck arched, ears forward. Harjit Singh sat easily in the saddle, riding with the confidence of someone who had spent more time on a horse than on a chair. Near the edge of the field, he slowed Sultan to a trot and swung down before the stallion had fully stopped. “Niranjan will break his neck one day,” he said, watching the boy disappear towards the canal.

Harjit crossed the uneven ground in long strides. His faded jacket hung open over a loose kurta, the sleeves rolled to his elbows. A length of rope rested across one shoulder. Two farm workers followed several steps behind, carrying wooden tools.

Harjit stopped beside Arun and looked across the fields. “You came back from Lahore yesterday,” he said. “Already you are standing around thinking about something.”

Arun smiled. “In Lahore everyone talks about the future of the nation.”

“And here,” Harjit replied, sweeping an arm towards the fields, “the wheat does not care about the nation. Punjab runs on three things. Water, mud and stubborn bullocks.”

Arun laughed. One of the workers approached them. "Harjit paaji, the western bund is leaking again."

Harjit looked towards the canal. "How badly?"

"The water is cutting through near the lower edge."

Harjit handed the rope to the worker beside him. "Bring the spades, and tell Charanjit to stop opening the upper gate like a fool."

The worker grinned. "I told him you would say that."

"Then why is he still doing it?" The men laughed and hurried away.

A voice rose from the field below. "Sat Sri Akal, Harjit!"

Bashir, one of the village's senior farmers, guided a heavily loaded bullock cart along the dirt path beside the wheat, his silvery beard moving in the breeze as he raised one hand in greeting.

"And salaam to you, Bashir chacha," Harjit called back.

Arun noticed the change in the older farmers whenever Harjit arrived. Children followed him instinctively, and arguments among the labourers seemed to settle more quickly. Harjit glanced towards the canal embankment. "I should go before the entire field decides to become a pond."

Far beyond the fields, the faint beat of a dhol drifted through the air. Preparations for the harvest celebrations had already begun. Harjit rested his hands on his hips. "This is Punjab."

Sultan stood grazing near the field path. Harjit swung into the saddle and drove the stallion forward. The chestnut surged across the wheat tracks, scattering dust and startling birds. Harjit leapt from the saddle and waded knee deep into muddy water. Before he spoke, two labourers had already dragged a plank towards the breach. A farmhand climbed down beside them. Someone passed another spade. "Good," Harjit said. "Now push."

Water splashed around them as Harjit shoved wet earth into the breach with both hands. They worked for nearly twenty minutes in waist deep mud and rushing water until the flow finally steadied. Harjit climbed back onto the bank, breathing hard, mud streaked across his kurta and arms. One of the workers laughed. "Now the harvest may continue."

Before either could say more, heads turned towards the canal path. Harjit's father, Kartar Singh, approached on Badal, his grey horse. Someone had carried word of the breach to the upper fields. He dismounted without haste and looped the reins over a low acacia branch. Badal lowered his head and began cropping the fresh grass beside the canal. Kartar looked at the water for some time. "It will hold," he said.

Harjit smiled. "Now it will."

Bashir arrived at the embankment, saw the water and agreed. "It will hold."

"Hope so," Harjit replied. "I have no intention of doing this again tomorrow."

Bashir stood beside the repaired bund and watched the flow. "You kept the upper gate open too long."

Kartar's eyes were fixed on the water. "I closed it at the marker."

"So you always say."

"And so the marker always says."

A few of the older farmers exchanged amused glances. They had heard this argument many times before. Bashir pointed with his staff towards the western channel. "My lower fields waited."

"That is where the channel runs."

"And my fields wait."

Kartar said, "They still receive their share."

“After yours.”

“Water flows downhill, Bashir.”

Harjit wiped the mud from his hands and laughed. “If you two ever agree about canal water, we’ll know the Ravi has started flowing uphill.”

Bashir smiled. “Ask your father.”

“He says you have been arguing about this since before I was born,” Harjit said.

Kartar’s face stayed perfectly straight. “He exaggerates.”

The men laughed and returned to their work. The canal flowed on.

Harjit picked up a discarded spade and handed it to one of the labourers before walking back towards Sultan. By evening, crows returned to the banyan in noisy groups, filling its branches. The breeze moved through the fields, and the people settled back into their rhythm.

Chapter 2

THREE HEARTHS

Life here revolved around three houses. The largest belonged to Sardar Kartar Singh. Its red brick walls had darkened over the years beneath dust, rain and summer heat. A wooden gate opened into a wide courtyard where two buffaloes stood chewing beneath a neem tree.

The house was larger than it appeared from the road. Beyond the main courtyard were rooms arranged around inner courtyards and covered passages. Harjit had his own room, as did the other members of the family. A few rooms were kept for visiting relatives and guests. At the rear were quarters for the household servants and farmhands. The stable staff had their own rooms beside the stables, close enough to hear the horses at night. There were storage rooms for grain and equipment, a kitchen large enough to feed the household and farm workers, and several covered spaces that were used according to the season.

Even in the early morning the courtyard was busy. Farmhands moved in and out carrying sacks, ropes and tools. Women crossed between the kitchen and storage rooms with brass vessels balanced against their hips. Kartar Singh sat on a charpoy with an open ledger across his lap. Three farmers stood before him discussing irrigation turns and transport carts for the coming harvest. Kartar listened. He rarely interrupted. When he finally spoke, people listened. “Western fields first,” he said.

The farmers nodded. One hesitated. "And Vishwanath says the upper boundary near his cousin's field..."

"The boundary is where it was. I visited it yesterday." Kartar said without looking up.

The farmer stopped. "Ji, Sardarji."

Inside, Harjit's mother called instructions to someone in the kitchen while scolding Niranjan for chasing chickens through the courtyard. Nachatar Kaur seemed to know what everyone in the household was doing. One moment she was sending a farmhand for fodder, the next reminding someone that guests should never leave without being offered lassi. Near the gate, two younger boys struggled to lift a sack of grain onto a cart. The sack rose halfway before falling heavily back to the ground. A voice behind them laughed. Harjit strode across the courtyard, still damp from the canal work. Before either boy could try again, he lifted the sack onto one shoulder and carried it to the cart. The boys stared at him and one of them tried to imitate the way Harjit walked. The result was less impressive. Kartar noticed and smiled. Harjit dropped the sack into the cart. An old farm worker approached Kartar. "Bauji, should we send four men to the southern fields tomorrow?"

Kartar thought about it. "Six. The lower soil is still soft from last week's overflow."

The worker obeyed and left.

Beyond the courtyard wall stood the horse stable. Badal, Kartar Singh's large grey stallion, watched the activity with patient eyes while Sultan pawed the ground impatiently. Sultan belonged to nobody officially and to Harjit in every practical sense.

Near the main road stood the house of Haji Abdul Rahman Khan. Smaller than Kartar's house, it was kept in good order. The wooden doors were polished every year, and the whitewashed verandah pillars were kept

clean despite the dust rising from the road. Behind the house stood the grain shop. Tall jute sacks lined the walls in careful rows. Wheat, lentils, rice and chickpeas passed through the shop throughout the year. Inside, Haji sat cross legged on a raised wooden platform beside the brass weighing scale. Imran stood nearby recording figures in a notebook. Haji peeped into it and said, "This is not OK".

Imran looked up. "The total is correct."

"The total is, but the writing is untidy," Haji replied.

Imran sighed and rewrote the line. Haji adjusted one of the brass weights. "Young men think accuracy is enough. People trust neat hands."

Imran had always envied his father's handwriting. Every line sat straight, every letter exactly where it belonged.

Outside the shop, two farmers argued over grain prices while a third complained about the railway halt being served only by two trains a day. Imran barely heard them. His thoughts had been elsewhere lately; the meetings in Lahore, the speeches, the conversations that did not end with crops or canal water. A group of boys ran past the shop chasing a spinning bicycle rim through the dust. One nearly collided with a grain sack. "Careful!" Haji shouted.

The boys vanished down the lane, laughing.

A few seconds later Harjit appeared in the doorway. Without invitation, he stepped inside, lifted the water vessel from beside the wall and drank deeply. "You drink like Sultan," Haji observed.

Harjit grinned. Imran looked up from the ledger. "You are covered in mud."

"The canal fought with me."

"And who won?" asked Imran.

"You're standing on dry ground, aren't you?"

Haji laughed. Then voices drifted in from outside.

“...they say more meetings are happening in the city now...”

“...Muslim League people came through Sheikhpura last week...”

“...nothing good comes from politicians...”

The conversation moved down the road with the cart drivers. Harjit shrugged. “Cities talk too much.” Imran listened until the voices faded.

The third house stood beside the local school. Smaller than the others, it consisted of three sun dried brick rooms and a courtyard where a guava tree grew next to the wall. Somewhere inside, a child cried loudly enough to suggest hunger, hurt or outrage. “Ganga, who is troubling you? Tell them Dadaji will sort them out,” Omparkash called affectionately.

“Bauji, you are the one spoiling her,” his daughter-in-law, Parvati, called from the kitchen.

This was the home of Omparkash Sharma. Books lay everywhere; schoolbooks, history texts and loose papers filled with careful notes. In one corner, a neat stack of slates leaned against the wall, waiting for the next class. Omparkash sat at a wooden desk correcting student exercises while his thick glasses slipped regularly down his nose.

Omparkash and Kartar Singh had grown up beneath the same roof. Their father, Bisheshar Lal Sharma, had raised his elder son in the Sikh tradition while Omparkash continued in the faith of their forefathers, a practice not uncommon in Punjab at the time. One son might be raised in the Sikh faith while another remained Hindu, and within the family the distinction carried little weight. They shared the same courtyard, the same kitchen and the same upbringing. Now the next generation filled those lives: Harjit in Kartar’s house, and Arun, Santosh and Nirranjan in Omparkash’s.

The brothers were joint owners of their father’s land. Kartar managed the farms, supervised the labourers and oversaw the harvest, while

Omparkash devoted himself to educating the children. Each year, his share of the crop was sold through Haji Abdul Rahman's grain shop, providing more than enough for his family. The old ancestral house had fallen to Omparkash while Kartar had built a larger home as the demands of managing the estate grew, with its stables, cowsheds and constant movement of farmhands.

Though both brothers were comfortably off, Omparkash preferred a simpler life. There was no school in the village, so he established one himself, paying its expenses from his own income. To him, educating the village's children was as much a duty as farming was to Kartar.

Across the room Arun read beside the open window. Parvati sat nearby folding freshly dried clothes. Beside her lay a partially finished embroidered border. "You returned from Lahore only three days ago," she said. "Already you are buried inside another book."

Arun did not look up. "I only meant to read two pages."

Ganga wandered into the room clutching two sweets and half a newspaper. Arun smiled at her. "This is robbery."

Ganga popped one sweet into her mouth. Arun laughed. "At least leave me the newspaper."

Whenever Arun returned from Lahore, his satchel was inspected by his four year old daughter. Books were thrown around, letters occasionally torn and newspapers became toys. Sweets, however, were immediately confiscated. More than once Arun had tried to persuade Ganga to share her latest haul. Her list of approved recipients included Parvati, Santosh and Kartar. Nobody else qualified.

"One day she'll become a tax collector," Harjit predicted.

"God forbid," muttered Arun.

Santosh, Arun's younger sister, entered carrying a plate of sliced guavas. She peeped through the doorway. "You encourage him too much,

Parjai,” she declared. “One day he will forget how ordinary humans speak.”

She threw a folded cloth at Arun while Parvati laughed. Omparkash suppressed a smile without raising his eyes from the papers.

Outside the courtyard wall, footsteps slowed. Dharam Pal’s younger daughter, Sarita, stood with a brass pot in her hand. A little farther down the road, another figure appeared. Imran slowed as well. Santosh noticed first. A smile spread across her face. “Interesting,” she murmured.

Arun finally looked up. “What?”

“Your reading,” she said.

Outside, Sarita tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “You returned yesterday,” she whispered.

Imran nodded. “The train was delayed.”

“They say trains are always delayed now.”

Santosh emerged from the courtyard. “Sarita! If you stand there any longer, people will think you came for conversation instead of water!”

Sarita turned red and Imran looked away as Santosh laughed and disappeared back inside. Sarita lifted her pot and walked quickly towards the well. Imran watched her briefly before continuing down the lane. Inside the house, Arun said, “One day, your tongue will bring you trouble.”

Chapter 3

BEFORE THE LINES

The Ravi was narrower where the boys played. The river bent gently towards the village, slowing the current enough to create a shallow stretch near the bank. The elders said it was safe there. The boys believed it belonged to them.

On some evenings, when the heat softened and the shadows stretched towards the water, three figures could be seen racing down the dusty path from the settlement.

Harjit always reached first. Behind him came Arun, never quite fast enough. Imran followed last, holding his sandals in one hand to keep them from gathering dust.

“Today I will beat you,” Arun shouted.

“You said that yesterday too,” Harjit called back without turning.

“And the day before,” Imran added breathlessly.

Harjit reached the riverbank first and leapt from the embankment onto the sand, followed by Arun. Imran slid down the slope, brushed the dust from his clothes and placed his sandals on a flat stone.

“You run as though the river might disappear,” he said.

“It might,” Harjit replied cheerfully.

"You wouldn't notice. You'd still be cleaning your shoes," Arun said.

Beneath the afternoon sun, the river curved past the village. Tall grasses swayed along the banks while dragonflies skimmed the surface. The boys stood looking across the water towards the fields beyond. Then Harjit grinned. "Last one into the water is an Angrez."

Harjit and Arun jumped without delay. Imran, as usual, was a little late. Cold water splashed around them. Harjit surfaced laughing while Arun wiped the water from his face. Imran stood in the shallows, grumbling. "One day," he said, "both of you will drown."

The three boys drifted farther into the shallows, splashing and wrestling. Harjit pointed to a large rock rising above the deeper channel. "Race you there."

"That is too far," Imran objected.

Before either could answer, Harjit surged forward through the water with Arun following close behind. Imran hesitated only a second before going after them. At first the current felt gentle, then it changed. Near the centre of the channel, the water pulled harder and the depth increased. Harjit adjusted instinctively. Arun noticed a bit later and changed direction. Imran did neither and the current caught him sideways. At first he frowned in confusion. Then the riverbed vanished beneath his feet. "I can't touch the ground!" he shouted.

Imran tried to find the bottom but swallowed river water instead. Harjit reached him first. "Hold my arm!"

Imran grabbed him too hard, nearly pulling both of them sideways into the current. "Not like that!" Harjit snapped.

Arun reached them later. "Look at me," he said firmly. "Now loosen your grip."

Together they angled towards the shallower bank while the current pushed against them. Step by step, the riverbed rose beneath their feet.

When they reached the sand, Imran collapsed backwards, breathing heavily. Harjit stood over him laughing. "That," he announced, "was not swimming."

Imran stared up at the sky. "I dislike this river."

Arun dropped beside them, laughing. For several minutes none of them moved. Above them, kites circled in the blue sky. Harjit sat up. "Come. We still have time before evening practice."

"For what?" Imran asked.

Harjit pointed to a mango grove farther along the riverbank. Imran narrowed his eyes. "No."

"Yes."

"No."

Arun was already moving towards the mango grove which belonged to a farmer famous for guarding his trees as though they contained royal treasure. That only made them more tempting. The three boys crept through the tall grass towards the grove wall. Harjit climbed first and Arun followed. Imran stopped below. "If we are caught..."

"We will run," Harjit said.

"I do not run as fast as both of you."

"That is true," Arun admitted.

"Very comforting," Imran said.

Harjit dropped into the grove and began throwing mangoes towards the others. "Hurry!"

Arun caught one easily. Imran gathered a few more. From somewhere inside the grove came an outraged shout. "You thieves!"

Harjit vaulted the wall laughing while Arun lost two mangoes scrambling after him. Imran tried to maintain his dignity for all of three

seconds before sprinting through the grass with the others. When they reached the riverbank, all three were breathless. Harjit collapsed into the sand, laughing. The stolen mangoes lay beside them. He tossed one towards Imran. "See? We didn't get caught."

Arun laughed. "He isn't afraid of orchard owners."

"Only of little girls," Harjit said.

Imran looked up and saw Sarita standing a few yards away, balancing a pot against her hip. "You stole those," she declared.

Imran tried innocence. "We found them lying here."

"What?"

Arun burst into laughter. Imran gave up and held out the ripest mango. She took it at once. "See?" Harjit said. "She too is enjoying stolen fruit."

Sarita rolled her eyes and walked away smiling.

Somewhere, a dhol had begun beating for evening practice before the harvest festival. Harjit leaned back on the sand. "One day," he declared grandly, "people will speak of us as legends."

"They will speak of you as a thief," Imran replied.

"And you as the man who nearly drowned in shallow water."

Occasionally Ganga insisted on accompanying the boys to the river. Harjit refused immediately. "The river is no place for children."

"I am not a child."

"You are four."

"I am six," argued Ganga, exaggerating her age.

The argument continued until Kartar emerged from the courtyard. "What happened now?"

"Ganga wants to come with us."

Kartar looked at her and then at Harjit. "Take her."

The matter was settled. For most of the walk, one of the boys carried Ganga on his shoulders. At the river, another, usually a grumbling Niranjana, was left to keep her occupied while the others swam. Ganga considered the arrangement perfectly reasonable.

That evening Santosh lodged a complaint. "Bauji," she said to Omparkash, "when I was young, nobody allowed me to go to the river."

Omparkash looked up from the book in his hands. "You should ask your Tauji," he said, turning towards Kartar. "He was the one who gave permission."

Santosh turned to Kartar. "It was unfair."

"Probably," Kartar admitted.

"Then why does she get to go?"

A smile appeared above his beard. "When you were young, I was a father."

He glanced towards Ganga. "Now I am a grandfather."

Chapter 4

THE UNDERCURRENT

The railway station smelled of coal smoke, sweat and hot iron. Even before the train stopped completely, voices rose along the crowded platform. Tea vendors pushed through passengers carrying steaming kettles. Arun Sharma stepped down from the carriage with a cloth bag of books slung across his shoulder. Beside him, Imran adjusted the cuff of his white kurta before stepping onto the platform.

The morning train from their village halt had become part of their routine. They travelled to Lahore almost every day and returned by the evening train. Arun was studying for his BA in History. Imran pursued Islamic Studies. Their classes were different, but they usually travelled together.

Above them stretched the vast iron roof of Lahore Junction. The journey to Lahore had become routine, but the city was never quite the same. Imran leaned on the platform railing and watched the crowd. "This city never sleeps," he said.

Arun smiled. "It barely pauses to breathe."

As afternoon faded, Arun and Imran took a tonga back towards Lahore Junction. The roads were still crowded, though the heat had begun to soften. Tongas rattled over the uneven streets while bicycles, carts and pedestrians moved around them in every direction. They stopped at

a tea stall near the station. Several young men stood arguing around a wooden table darkened by years of spilled tea.

“Muslims will never be safe under majority rule...”

“Punjab cannot be divided like cloth...”

“There must be compromise...”

“We’ve compromised for years!”

The voices overlapped until the argument became difficult to follow. One of the students recognised Imran. “You missed the meeting yesterday!”

“I was returning home,” Imran said.

“The speaker from Aligarh was there. You should have heard him.”

He turned towards the vendor. “Bhai, two more teas.”

Another student addressed Arun. “And what does your village think about Pakistan?”

Arun hesitated. “My village thinks about rainfall.”

The students laughed. The tea seller placed small glasses before them.

“You joke,” one of the students said, “but villages will decide everything in the end.”

Another added, “The cities make speeches. The villages provide the blood.”

A train whistle sounded somewhere farther down the line. Arun finished his tea and stood. “We should go.”

They paid the tea seller and walked towards the station entrance. At the gate, a political procession moved along the road carrying green flags. Young men shouted slogans with raised fists. Some people joined, others

turned away while many simply watched. Imran watched longer than the others.

Arun looked at him. "You believe some of it," he said.

Imran did not deny it. "I believe people are afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of what happens when the British leave."

"And fear creates countries?"

Imran watched the procession disappear around the corner. "Possible."

They entered the station where the platform was already filling with passengers waiting for the evening train. Coolies moved between the carriages, vendors called out their wares and families searched for places to sit. The station clock showed nearly five. Passengers began moving towards the doors before the train had even stopped.

Imran picked up his bag. "Come. If we wait politely, we'll travel standing."

They found a place near the carriage door. As the train pulled out of Lahore Junction, Arun looked back through the smoke darkened window. The city receded behind them; domes, minarets, telegraph poles, factory chimneys and crowded rooftops fading into the evening haze. Beside him, Imran watched the same horizon.

The train gathered speed and the city gave way to open country. Factory chimneys disappeared behind groves of kikar trees. Soon the familiar landscape of Punjab returned: wheat fields, canals, grazing buffaloes and distant villages in the fading light. Arun broke the silence. "When did this become so important to you?"

Imran turned from the window. "Since coming to Lahore."

“Because of the meetings?”

Imran said, “No, because of the conversations.” He continued. “In the village we think we understand one another because we share the same roads and wells, and work the same fields.”

“And we do.”

“Yes.” Imran looked out of the window again. “But in Lahore people talk about what happens after the British leave.”

“What do they say?”

“They ask who will have power.” And added, “Most of them aren't angry, Arun. They're worried.”

A tea vendor pushed through the compartment. “Chai... garam chai...”

The two friends moved their knees aside to let him pass. When he had gone farther down the carriage, Arun spoke again. “Politics still feels very far away from here.”

“It only feels that way.”

“What do they expect?”

Imran looked out across the fields. “To know that our future won't always depend on someone else's decisions.”

An express thundered past in the opposite direction. Neither spoke until the noise faded. Arun turned towards him. “Have you ever felt that way in our village?”

Imran did not hesitate. “No.”

Beyond the window, a canal flashed in the evening light before disappearing behind a line of trees. “Then why does it sound as though you're preparing for something?”

Imran answered without looking at him. "Because villages are not the whole country."

"No," Arun said. "But they are the part we actually live in."

The train thundered across a small bridge. The wheels settled into their steady rhythm. Imran said, "You cannot ignore politics forever."

Arun smiled. "And politics cannot irrigate a field."

Imran returned the smile. "Fields will not matter if Punjab is divided."

Neither spoke for some time. The train carried them through the gathering dusk as villages slipped past beyond the window.

Arun wondered if they were travelling towards different futures.

Chapter 5

THE RHYTHM OF THE VILLAGE

Kartar Singh stood in the courtyard beside the neem tree, tying his turban with slow, practised movements. One of the buffaloes flicked its tail at the flies while a younger farmhand struggled with a stubborn rope knot. Badal stood in the stable nearby, half asleep, while Sultan tugged at his tether. Harjit emerged carrying a sickle and a bundle of rope just as a younger worker entered through the gate with a ledger wrapped in cloth. “Sardarji, Gurdev wants to know whether he should send your cart to the railway halt today or tomorrow.”

Kartar thought about it. “Tomorrow. The road is still soft.”

Harjit picked up a tumbler and drank two full tumblers of water. As he reached the doorway, Nachatar Kaur emerged from the kitchen carrying a cloth wrapped bundle. “You forgot your food again,” she said, pressing it into his hands before he could protest.

Harjit accepted it with the resigned smile of someone who knew there was no point arguing. “Someone has to remember for him. Get him married soon, then his wife can remind him.” She disappeared back inside.

Harjit grinned and headed towards the gate. Sultan’s eyes followed him from the stable while Badal continued chewing. “Take Komal,” one of the farmhands called.

The brown mare ambled across the yard. She had been christened Kamal, but somewhere along the way the village had begun calling her Komal. No one remembered who had changed the name. Harjit, as always, preferred Sultan.

At Omparkash's home, Parvati repaired a torn kurta while keeping an eye on the milk beginning to boil. Without looking up, she said, "If Niranjan spills the milk again, I will bang him on the head."

Outside, people were fully awake. Farmers moved towards the fields, women crossed the lanes carrying water and children helped. By mid morning the school had begun. Inside the small classroom, children sat cross legged on woven mats reciting their lessons. In a senior class, Omparkash Sharma stood before the blackboard with chalk dust on his fingers. "History," he said patiently, "is not only the story of kings."

A boy near the back frowned. "Then why are kings always in the book?"

Several children laughed. "We study what happened," Omparkash said. "The king is only one part of the story."

The boy asked, "Yes, Masterji, but why do we have to study the king if he was just one part?"

Omparkash adjusted his glasses. "Because when a king makes a decision, many thousands of people may have to live with it."

The boy asked, "Masterji, but there are no kings now, why do we have to study them?"

Masterji said, "There are governments these days, but the principles of governance are the same."

Outside the open window, Niranjan sprinted past chasing a tyre rim with two younger boys behind him. Omparkash called out, "Niranjan!"

The boy vanished and the classroom burst into laughter. Omparkash smiled.

Heera, the brown mongrel, had settled beneath the old mango tree outside. One ear twitched whenever the children laughed, but otherwise he lay still.

Gappu wandered around the well, inspecting the visitors before deciding none required his attention. He lay down in the shade and closed one eye. By afternoon the activities slowed beneath the heat. Men rested beneath the trees, sharing hookahs and arguing about crops and the weather. Bullocks stood in the shade, flicking their ears at flies. Near the edge of the wheat fields, two farmers were arguing over a narrow strip of boundary land. "The marker was always beside the neem tree."

"No. It stood farther east."

"It did not."

"It did."

Their voices rose until Kartar Singh arrived. "What is the matter?" he asked.

Both men spoke at once. Kartar listened without interruption. Then he walked the length of the disputed boundary, studying the ground. At last he stopped. "The line is where it has always been."

Neither farmer argued further.

Kallu, the large black dog, had been watching from the canal path. When the voices fell quiet, he wandered away. Arun watched from the shade of a nearby neem tree, his book open on his lap. Kartar did not need to raise his voice. People trusted his judgement.

Most children learned their first lessons in balance sitting atop Komal's broad back while an older brother walked beside them. She tolerated wobbly riders, pulled ears and endless conversation with patience. Two

smaller children were arguing over whose turn it was when Komal stood between them, completely indifferent to the dispute.

By evening the air cooled. Children spilled into the maidan, chasing kites or wrestling in the dust. Sultan whinnied from the stable while Komal accepted another reluctant rider.

The temple bell drifted across the village as the sun dipped lower. Opposite the temple, Imran found the carpenter smoothing the edge of a wooden plank with a hand plane. "Abbu asked me to tell you the desk has started wobbling again."

The carpenter looked up. "I'll come tomorrow morning."

"I'll tell him."

The carpenter returned to his work. Imran lingered, looking at a stack of newly carved chair legs. Women began leaving the temple with small flower baskets in their hands. His eyes drifted towards the gate, then back to the carpenter. Parvati emerged first and noticed him. Without saying a word, she nudged Santosh. Santosh followed her gaze. A smile spread across her face. Imran suddenly became very interested in the carpenter's chisels. The two girls crossed the lane. "Namaste, Imran," Parvati said.

"Namaste," he replied.

Santosh looked towards the temple gate and then back at him. "You've become remarkably interested in carpentry."

"Abbu sent me."

"Of course he did."

She teased him. "And it is a coincidence that the carpenter lives opposite the temple."

Parvati lowered her eyes, trying not to smile. Just then, Sarita stepped out of the temple. Santosh looked from Imran to the temple gate with exaggerated seriousness. "Should I inform Dharam Chacha?" she asked.

Before either of them could answer, she added, “You know how fast he gets things done at the brick kiln. He’ll settle the matter by tomorrow.”

Even Imran laughed. “You imagine too much.”

“No,” Santosh said. “I merely save people time.”

As night came, smoke rose from cooking fires and lanterns glowed across the courtyards. Families gathered for their evening meals. At Kartar’s house there were voices, laughter and the clatter of metal plates. At the Khan house the grain shop shutters came down while Haji tallied the day’s accounts beneath the lantern. At the Sharma home, Omparkash finally closed his books while Santosh demanded to know why Arun and Imran were the only ones who got to study at Lahore.

Chapter 6

THE MAN WHO STOOD

One evening, as often happened during the harvest, the entire village gathered beneath the banyan tree. As the heat faded and shadows spread across the maidan, charpoys emerged from courtyards and were arranged beneath its great twisting branches. Men settled with hookahs and brass cups of tea while women sat in smaller groups exchanging gossip and laughing. Children ran everywhere until someone shouted at them to sit still.

Kartar Singh sat upon the central charpoy. Around him gathered the older men; Bashir, Haji, Dharam Pal, Omparkash Sharma and half a dozen farmers whose lives had unfolded together over decades of shared harvests and monsoons. Harjit sat cross legged on the ground nearby while Arun leaned against the trunk of the banyan tree, a closed book resting loosely in his left hand. Imran stood slightly apart from the others near the outer edge of the gathering. A little distance away, Sarita sat among the women, pretending not to notice.

The dhol from the harvest grounds had finally gone quiet. Kartar cleared his throat, and the conversations around him faded. “When I was a boy,” he began, “my grandfather used to tell us stories after harvest.”

Several of the older men smiled. “He believed stories should be repeated before they are forgotten.”

Niranjan squeezed between two little boys and sat down directly at Kartar's feet. "You are too old to sit there now," Harjit muttered.

"I hear better near the front."

"You hear trouble from every distance."

The younger boys laughed. Kartar smiled and continued. "This story comes from the time of Guru Gobind Singh."

At the mention of the Guru's name, several Sikh elders bowed their heads respectfully. "The Mughal governor of Sirhind, Wazir Khan, captured the Guru's younger sons. They were only boys, six and nine. Younger than many sitting here tonight. They were brought before the court and told they could save their lives if they changed their faith. But they did not."

"The elder stood firm," he continued. "And the younger stood beside him. The governor ordered their execution."

One of the younger girls stared at him. "In that court sat many powerful men. Most maintained silence. But one man stood up."

A few of the elders shifted. "He was not Sikh," Kartar said. "He owed those boys nothing. But he could not remain seated while children were condemned."

He looked across the circle. "He spoke against the order. He said killing children was dishonourable."

"Who was he?" one of the boys asked.

Kartar looked towards him. "He was Sher Mohammad Khan, the Nawab of Malerkotla."

Bashir gave the faintest nod. Kartar continued. "He knew it was wrong, and he spoke."

The children listened closely. “He knew his words would not save the boys,” he continued. “But he spoke anyway. Sikhs remembered what he had done, and Malerkotla was never forgotten for it.”

Harjit asked, “Why are you telling us this tonight, Bauji?”

Kartar looked around the square. “Because we should remember that a man does not have to share your faith to stand with you.”

He rested both hands on his knees. “If times become difficult, remember the people who stood beside you before the difficult times came.”

Chapter 7

BENEATH ONE SKY

Lajjo's wedding would begin after sunset. By afternoon, the square was crowded. Women sat beneath a neem tree sorting spices into brass bowls. Men raised bamboo poles for the shamiana while arguing over whether it stood straight. Relatives continued to arrive throughout the day. Dharam Pal walked around the shamiana, inspecting every knot as though his daughter's wedding depended on it. Every few steps he stopped to remind someone of a task already completed. His wife Lakshmi seemed to be everywhere at once. She checked the sweets, adjusted Lajjo's dupatta, welcomed arriving relatives and still found time to ask whether everyone had eaten.

Harjit stood barefoot on a wooden stool, tying a long cloth canopy above the entrance. "Pull tighter!" he shouted.

"It is tight already!" one of the younger boys protested.

One knot slipped, sending the cloth sagging sideways onto Harjit's head. The boys burst out laughing. Harjit emerged from beneath the fabric. "Now Lajjo will marry inside a collapsed tent," he announced.

Even the older women laughed. Harjit climbed onto the stool again, retied the ropes and jumped down.

Near the cooking fires, Bashir supervised the unloading of grain sacks from a bullock cart while Haji argued with a butcher about the amount of meat required for three hundred guests. "You are counting children as half people," Haji accused.

"Children eat less," said the butcher.

"We eat more at weddings. Anyway, have I not paid you for enough goats?" Haji countered.

Nachatar Kaur walked along the rows with a basket of hot rotis balanced against her hip. Beside her, Parvati followed with a small bucket of dal and a long handled ladle. Nachatar Kaur stopped beside Kartar. Before she could serve him, he raised his left hand. "Just one," he said.

She ignored him and served him two. Parvati giggled. Then, despite his protest, she filled his bowl with two ladles of dal before following her Taiji to the next row.

By late morning, music had taken over the village. Dhol beats rolled through the lanes while women gathered for the Giddha beneath the shaded courtyard. Sarita approached her sister carrying jewellery. "You've worn my bangles," Lajjo said. Sarita looked like a schoolgirl caught cheating in an exam. Lajjo smiled. "They suit you. Keep them."

Santosh moved between groups carrying trays of sweets while collecting gossip faster than anyone else. She paused beside Sarita. "You have already changed clothes twice."

Sarita glared at her, and Santosh was delighted. Across the lane, Imran sat beside Arun, but every few moments his attention drifted towards the place where Sarita stood among the women. Arun smiled without lifting his eyes from the page. "She's not going anywhere."

Imran blinked. "Who?"

"The one you've been looking at for the last ten minutes."

“You were busy with your book.”

“You didn't even notice I was watching you.”

Before Imran could answer, loud cheering erupted near the wedding venue. A group of musicians had begun an impromptu competition with the dhol players from the groom's village. Within minutes a crowd gathered around them, offering advice and declaring winners after every song. The contest achieved nothing except noise and laughter.

As the baraat finally approached, its sound reached the village before the procession itself; dhols, people cheering and singing. The procession entered through the main lane in a swirl of colour. Children spent half the time admiring the groom's white mare. Several of Kartar's horses had been decorated as well, though Komal was unimpressed and concentrated on her fodder. Sultan, by contrast, behaved as though the wedding had been arranged in his honour. Gappu barked at the procession while Sheru followed it for nearly half a mile before wandering back.

Women watched from rooftops and along the lane as the procession passed. Children ran alongside the horses. Old men pretended annoyance while smiling openly. The groom sat stiffly upon his decorated mare, trying to appear dignified while his friends danced around him.

When the ceremony began, the gathering grew quiet. The dhols fell silent and the children were gathered to one side. Even the men who had argued all afternoon removed their shoes and stood respectfully. The prayers were familiar to some and unfamiliar to others, yet every head remained bowed. When the ceremony ended, the quiet was shortlived. Someone laughed and a child clapped. The solemnity dissolved into smiles.

The dhols burst into life once more. At the centre of the dancing, drenched in sweat, was Harjit. Before long he had pulled half a dozen reluctant men into the circle, including two who claimed to be too old for dancing. Bashir clapped along beside the Sikh farmers. Haji laughed until

tears formed in his eyes. Arun stood slightly apart, watching the music and the dust rising beneath the dancers' feet.

Near the courtyard entrance, Sarita stood beneath the hanging lanterns, adjusting her jewellery while women teased her about future marriage prospects. As Imran passed carrying trays for the guests, their eyes met briefly. Santosh appeared between them. "Wonderful," she announced. "Now both of you are pretending not to look at each other."

Sarita nearly dropped the tray. Imran coughed into his hand, trying unsuccessfully to hide his laughter, while Santosh walked away smiling.

Dharam Pal looked across the courtyard before the guests began drifting towards the meal. Lajjo laughed at something her cousins had said. Lakshmi stood watching her, a serving spoon still in one hand. Bashir called Dharam Pal over to eat before the rotis turned cold. That day, they were all beneath one sky. For once, the wedding was all that mattered.

Chapter 8

THE MONSOON RAVI

By the time the last wedding guests had returned to their own villages, the first monsoon clouds had begun gathering over the Ravi. For a week the rain fell without a break. The Ravi gave them life, but during the monsoon it demanded respect. By the third day, talk of the rain ending had ceased. Women moved brass vessels beneath fresh leaks, as they did every monsoon. Outside, the river disappeared behind a curtain of grey. Even the buffaloes stood beneath shelter, looking thoroughly displeased with the weather.

Children suffered the most. By the second day, every indoor game had been exhausted. Parvati sat nearby mending damp clothes rescued from unexpected leaks while several women compared the virtues of one roof over another. “You should charge people for all this stitching,” one of them remarked.

“Half the village pays me in vegetables.”

“That is still payment.”

“Only if the vegetables survive the rain.”

Across the courtyard, Sultan stamped impatiently inside the stable. Badal occupied the neighbouring stall with complete indifference, sleeping through most of the storm and waking only when fresh fodder arrived.

After a week, the rain stopped and people emerged into pale sunshine. Children rushed outside before their mothers could invent fresh chores. Smoke rose once more from cooking fires, though the damp wood protested stubbornly. By afternoon, word spread from one courtyard to the next. The Ravi was rising, not because of the rain in the village but because of the rain in the hills. People drifted towards the river in small groups. The river was not dangerous yet, but everyone watched it.

Ganga slipped her hand into Kartar's as the villagers began walking towards the river.

"Dadaji, I'm coming with you."

Kartar shook his head. "No, the river is in spate."

She raised her head to look up at him. "But you're going."

"I am."

"Then why can't I?"

"Because today it is not meant for children." He pointed towards the swollen Ravi. "When you grow up, you may stand beside the river whenever you wish."

She accepted the explanation and skipped away to join the other children.

Santosh, who had been listening, fell into step beside Kartar. "I thought Ganga always got her way with you."

"So does she."

"But you are going to the river yourself."

Kartar looked ahead. "Adults may choose risk for themselves. They have no right to choose it for children."

Santosh smiled. "What about me?"

Kartar answered, "Come along."

“And if the river rises while we're there?”

“We'll come home.”

As they approached the river, they saw that much of the village had gathered along the bank. The Ravi rolled past broad and brown, carrying branches, reeds and whole tree trunks from places far upstream. The current was deeper now, and no one went near the water. Harjit watched it for a while. “Will it flood?”

Kartar did not answer. He walked to an old tamarind tree whose roots reached almost to the bank. “Not today.”

Bashir joined him. “I remember the flood of 1929.”

Haji laughed. “That was hardly a flood.”

“It reached the second branch,” Bashir said.

“It reached the first,” Haji corrected him.

“The second.”

“You were standing on a cart,” Haji taunted him.

“I was standing on this very bank, and you were still a little boy drinking milk at home,” Bashir retorted.

The younger men laughed while the older ones continued the argument. Children searched among the driftwood for anything worth claiming. Mothers called them back whenever they ventured too close to the water. Before leaving, Kartar looked once more at the old tamarind tree and then at the water. “We'll check again tomorrow,” he said.

The rain returned before sunset. One by one, lamps began to glow in the houses.

That evening, Niranjan returned home soaked to the skin, a coil of rope hanging from one shoulder. A young colt walked close behind him,

no longer frightened, nudging his elbow whenever he slowed. His father looked up from the veranda. "You've missed school again."

Niranjan smiled sheepishly. "Lal Singh sent for me. His colt panicked in the storm and bolted towards the canal. Nobody could get near him."

"And naturally they called you."

"They knew I could calm him."

His father sighed. "One day it is someone's buffalo. The next day it is someone's horse. If you spent half as much time with your books, you'd be the best student in the village."

Niranjan untied the rope and draped it over a peg. "The books will still be there tomorrow, Bauji."

"And so will the animals." His father continued. "Books don't choose people, Niranjan. People choose whether to open them."

Rain drummed softly on the tiled roof. "You look up to Harjit, don't you?" his father said. "Learn from all of him. He works harder than anyone I know, yet he still studies. Education will carry him farther than these fields ever can."

Niranjan stroked the colt's rain soaked mane. "Bauji... books are for Harjit and Arun. Animals are for me."

The colt rested its head against Niranjan's shoulder. His father watched them for a moment. Then he picked up Niranjan's damp schoolbooks from the veranda and carried them inside.

Chapter 9

I STILL BELIEVE

The grain shop had always been quieter than the rest of the village. Customers arrived throughout the day with sacks of wheat, mustard, gram and barley on bullock carts. They stayed long enough to bargain, exchange news, complain about the weather and drink a cup of tea before returning to their fields.

Behind the weighing scale, Haji Abdul Rahman entered figures into a large leather bound ledger. Imran arranged freshly delivered grain sacks against the far wall while Arun sat near the doorway reading a newspaper that had arrived that morning from Lahore. The front page was crowded again: Cabinet discussions, Muslim League resolutions, Congress replies, arguments over provinces, representation and majorities.

Arun lowered the paper. "It seems every newspaper prints the same quarrel now."

"They all print different versions of it," Imran replied.

"Listen to this." Arun read out the argument that Muslims of the subcontinent must decide whether they wished to remain a permanent minority or seek a homeland where they might shape their own future.

The shop fell quiet as a cart rolled past outside. Haji continued writing without looking up. Arun folded the newspaper. "Every speech sounds larger once it is printed."

"Perhaps the questions are larger," Imran said.

"You really think Pakistan will happen?"

"Yes."

The certainty surprised Arun. "And afterwards?"

Imran rested his left hand on a grain sack. "I hope people will stop being afraid."

Haji finally looked up. "People were afraid long before politicians began talking about it."

Neither young man answered. Haji closed the ledger. "They can draw whatever line they want. It will not divide us."

He smiled. "And no politician has ever harvested a field."

Haji left home for lunch, leaving Imran to mind the grain shop. The afternoon passed quietly. A bullock cart creaked past before the lane fell still again. Sarita stepped inside carrying a small cloth bag. Imran looked up. "What does your mother need?"

"Half a seer of salt."

He reached for the sack and began weighing it. Before he could finish, Santosh appeared at the doorway. A mischievous smile appeared on her face. "Remarkable."

Neither answered. "Every time Haji Chacha goes home for lunch," she said, "the two of you somehow end up in the same place." Her gaze shifted from one to the other. "Shall I write to the Deputy Commissioner?"

Imran smiled as he emptied the salt into her cloth bag. "You have far too much free time."

"No," Santosh replied. "I just notice everything."

Sarita took the bundle from the counter. "You observe things that don't exist."

Santosh stepped aside to let her pass. "No. I notice things before either of you does."

In the evening, a young farmer entered carrying a jute bag of wheat.

"Assalam alaikum, Haji Chacha."

"Wa alaikum assalam."

The farmer sat beside the weighing platform. "What are the educated men solving today?"

"India," Haji replied.

The farmer chuckled. "When they finish, ask them to solve canal water."

Arun laughed, but Imran continued to be thoughtful.

At shop closing time, Haji stayed behind to finish the accounts while Arun and Imran walked towards the western fields. Arun spoke first. "When did all this become so important to you?"

Imran knew what he meant. "When I first went to Lahore. I thought the meetings were nothing more than speeches."

"And now?"

"I kept listening."

They walked a little farther.

"I expected anger," said Imran.

"What did you find?" asked Arun.

“Worry. People asking the same question over and over.”

“What question?”

“What happens when the British leave?” Imran said.

The wind moved gently across the harvested fields.

“Do you feel like that here?” Arun asked.

“Never.”

“So the village hasn't changed.”

“No.”

“Then what has?”

Imran looked towards the distant railway line. “I have.”

Hoofbeats sounded behind them. Harjit appeared on Sultan and brought the stallion alongside. “I've been looking everywhere.”

“We're discussing politics,” Arun said.

“So I gathered.” Harjit swung down from the saddle. He added, “I leave you alone for one afternoon and you've nearly divided the country.”

Imran smiled. Harjit walked beside them, Sultan following on a loose rein. After a while he asked, “Tell me... if Pakistan comes, what happens to our village?”

Imran turned towards him. “I don't know.”

Harjit said, “I don't know much about Pakistan. I know these are my people.”

Imran nodded. “I still believe our fears are real,” he said. “And I still think Pakistan may become necessary.”

Chapter 10

THE TRAIN AT THE HALT

One foggy morning, Arun found Kartar Singh awake outside his house. The Sardar sat wrapped in a woollen shawl, a brass tumbler of tea cupped in his broad palms. “Sat Sri Akal, Tauji. You are awake early.”

Kartar smiled. “At my age, sleep comes less.”

Arun sat beside him. The fog drifted between the trees while somewhere near the canal Heera’s gang barked unseen in the whiteness. Kartar looked at him. “You worry too much.”

Arun glanced at him. “Is it that obvious?”

“To older men, yes.”

Arun stared towards the hidden fields. “In Lahore everyone speaks as though the country is already breaking apart.”

Kartar said, “Cities become excited by ideas.”

“And villages?”

“Villages grow tired of such things.”

Kartar sipped his tea. “When I was young, I thought I could see trouble coming.” Arun asked, “Can’t you now?” Kartar tilted his head.

“Not always. This time I see things are changing faster than I can understand them.”

The fog lifted slightly, revealing the faint outline of Harjit approaching across the square with a bundle of tools over one shoulder. Even in winter, he moved with the same restless energy. “You people discuss politics before sunrise?” he called out.

He set the tools beside Kartar’s charpoy. “The northern irrigation gate froze again in the night.”

“Is it clear now?” Kartar asked.

“Cleared,” Harjit said.

That afternoon, a train from Gujranwala stopped unexpectedly at the village halt. Such stops were rare, and word spread quickly. Arun reached the platform and noticed that several villagers had gathered to watch passengers descend from overcrowded compartments. The first three compartments appeared ordinary enough: traders, families, clerks, soldiers. The compartments further down were different. Families sat surrounded by bedding rolls, brass utensils and trunks tied with rope. Frightened children stayed close to their mothers. An elderly man sat on a trunk staring ahead. A younger Sikh argued with a railway guard about onward travel. Fragments of conversation drifted across the platform.

“Shops burned...”

“Only for one night, they said...”

“We left before things worsened...”

“No one knows who started it...”

Arun watched a railway porter help an elderly man lift a heavy trunk onto the platform. “Where are they going?” he asked.

The porter shrugged. “They don't know yet.”

Imran arrived and stopped beside him. The railway guard blew his whistle. Passengers hurried back into the compartments. The train began moving eastward once more. At last Imran said, "It has begun."

Neither knew what else to say.

That evening, beneath the banyan tree, the gathering discussed the train. "Riots happen in cities every few years," one farmer said.

"They always settle," said Dharam Pal.

Haji cautioned, "People exaggerate during travel."

"Politics makes fools of everyone," Bashir added between drags from his hookah.

Kartar looked around the circle. "We may fight with our neighbours, but they are still our neighbours."

Chapter 11

THE LINE AT THE WELL

Morning sunlight had barely reached the village lanes when the women began gathering at the well. Brass pots rang against the stone edge while ropes creaked through the pulley wheel above. Arguments began there, marriages were discussed there, and sometimes entire harvest disputes were settled while women waited for water. The well had been there for generations. That morning Sarita stood near the front beside two Sikh women discussing winter vegetables while Bashir's daughter-in-law, Fatima, lowered her vessel into the water below.

Their conversation moved easily, as it always had. Then three Muslim women from the neighbouring hamlet beyond the canal arrived. Visitors rarely mattered in the village. These women, however, carried news from beyond it, and their voices reached the well before they did.

“...shops burned after evening prayers...”

“...people disappeared during the night...”

“...they say trains are being stopped outside some towns...”

The conversation near the well faltered. The visitors reached the stone platform and greeted the others politely. One of them looked around before asking, “You all still draw from the same well?”

The question caught them off guard. Sarita noticed Fatima pause beside the rope wheel.

“Of course,” an older Sikh woman said.

The visitor adjusted her shawl. “In some places people have become careful now.”

“Careful of water?” the older woman asked sharply.

“Careful of each other.”

No one answered. The pulley creaked overhead and a metal pot struck the water. Somewhere down the lane, a stray goat bleated. At last Fatima lifted her filled vessel. “This well has served us longer than any politician.”

A few steps away, Parvati stood with her own pot balanced against her hip. She said nothing. No one drew water differently that morning, but the conversation did not return to what it had been.

Later that afternoon, Santosh told Arun that she had noticed something unusual. The women still gathered at the well. They still shared gossip and recipes and complaints. But sometimes the talk was different. A joke would be left hanging because nobody was quite sure how it would be taken. And when news came from the outside districts, everyone listened.

Sarita stood speaking to Fatima about the grain shortages near Sheikhpura she had heard of. Their conversation was warm. Twice, however, Sarita glanced towards the road where the visiting women had stood that morning.

Later that afternoon, Santosh spotted Sarita walking towards the well. Imran stood beside it waiting for Bashir, who had gone into the blacksmith's yard. Santosh slowed as she approached. “What an astonishing coincidence,” she announced dramatically. “The entire village disappears and only you two remain near the well.”

Sarita closed her eyes. Imran looked away, trying unsuccessfully not to smile. Santosh lowered her voice. "Should I ask Kartar Tauji to announce it at the council this evening?"

"May you fall into the well," Sarita cursed her.

Santosh laughed, picked up a cup from the edge and drank water leisurely while looking at both of them. "You know," she added, "people become suspicious very quickly these days."

The humour faded. "I was joking," she said softly.

That evening beneath the banyan tree, the men discussed the news arriving from Lahore and Amritsar. More trains were being delayed. More processions. More clashes after political speeches. The stories arrived so often that fewer people dismissed them. Bashir smoked silently while Haji described disturbances reported by traders arriving through Lahore Junction. "Perhaps it will calm after the British announce the final settlement," one farmer suggested.

"And if the settlement creates more anger?" another asked.

Harjit sat nearby repairing a wooden yoke while two younger boys watched him work. Politics rarely held his attention unless it threatened something practical: water, roads, fields or people he knew. Eventually he looked up. "In cities men fight over speeches," he said. "Here people still need each other."

Over the following weeks, the changes remained small. A Sikh trader from another district refused tea at a Muslim owned stall while passing through. Two visiting Hindu farmers argued angrily about Muslim League marches in Lahore. A Muslim traveller at the railway halt warned villagers not to trust political promises of equality from "the other side."

People talked about each incident for a day or two before returning to their work. But the next incident came soon after. That evening, the men spoke about it again beneath the banyan tree. Nobody wanted to say

openly that they were afraid. They spoke instead about what was happening in neighbouring districts, about strangers moving along the roads and about rumours reaching the village from farther away. Gradually, the idea of keeping watch at night began to seem sensible. Someone suggested that a few men should take turns staying awake after sunset. No one objected.

“No harm in caution...”

“Other districts are more troubled...”

“It is only temporary...”

Such sentences passed easily beneath the banyan tree during the evening council. Men spoke on, perhaps comforted by having something practical to do. Men tried to remain calm, but the fear stayed beneath the surface. For the moment, though, nothing was decided. The men went home and the idea remained with them.

The situation changed the next afternoon when a trader from Lahore visited the grain shop. In the course of business, he brought disturbing news. A caravan had been attacked near Gujranwala. Two villages had burned outside Lyallpur. A group of refugees moving eastward by bullock cart had been attacked near Sheikhupura. By then, people did not know which reports to believe.

In the evening, Kartar stepped out into the courtyard to join the others at the banyan tree. Nachatar Kaur looked up from her work. “Will you be long?”

“I don't know.”

She said, “I'll keep your meal warm. Bring Harjit back with you. These days, wherever he goes, Arun and Imran are with him. God knows what the three of them talk about for hours.”

Kartar smiled. “Nothing worth repeating.”

He walked towards the banyan tree. Groups of men had gathered in small clusters throughout the village, discussing roads, railway lines and travellers passing through nearby districts. Gradually they came together beneath the banyan tree.

After a long discussion, Kartar finally looked around the gathering. "Talking will not guard the roads. We will organise night watches."

"What do you suggest?" Bashir asked.

"I will take first watch," Harjit said.

"Two men at each entrance road," Kartar instructed, "rotating before the ones on watch get tired. No one stays alone." He looked around the gathering. "No one stays alone."

As the square emptied, Kartar stayed seated for a while longer beneath the banyan. Harjit lingered nearby. At last Kartar rose. "Come," he said.

Harjit followed him across the square and into the courtyard. Bashir, who had already started home, noticed them leaving the square after him. After a brief hesitation, he turned and followed. Kartar disappeared into the house. When he returned, he carried an old spear and two heavy staves darkened with age.

"My father kept these for the wild boars that raided the fields in those days," he said.

He laid them across the charpoy. Bashir smiled faintly. "I remember helping chase them."

Kartar noted. "You ran faster than anyone else."

Harjit picked up the two heavy staves, testing their weight before tucking them beneath his arm. Bashir lifted the spear and ran his fingers along the smooth wooden shaft. "It is still sound."

"It was made to last," Kartar replied.

Bashir balanced it lightly in his hand and appreciated its balance. Carrying the two staves and a lantern, Harjit stepped out into the dark lane. Bashir followed beside him with the spear. They parted at the fork, Bashir towards his house and Harjit towards the guard post.

That night the village felt different after dark. Lanterns burned later than usual in several homes. The animals seemed to sense it too. Gappu barked more than usual, and Kallu spent long hours near the eastern road. Even Heera abandoned his usual northern boundary and patrolled closer to the village. For the first time anyone could remember, Sultan, Badal and several of Kartar Singh's horses remained saddled after sunset.

Near the western road, Harjit stood beside a small fire, wrapped in a shawl with a heavy staff resting across his knees. Arun sat beside him. "You realise," Arun said, "we are guarding a village against rumours."

Harjit smiled into the firelight. "Rumours sometimes arrive carrying knives."

Arun laughed despite himself. The fire crackled between them. Near the northern canal road, Bashir's son and another farmer stood watch. From inside the village came the occasional sounds of ordinary life: a crying child, someone coughing, a buffalo shifting in its enclosure.

Harjit stretched his legs towards the fire. "When we were boys, I thought danger always looked obvious."

"You mean soldiers and guns?"

"Yes."

Before Arun could answer, hoofbeats sounded faintly along the distant road. Both men stood. Harjit lifted the lantern higher. A lone rider emerged slowly through the darkness, leading a tired horse. "Who goes there?" Harjit called.

"Trader from Sheikhpura. I seek water and shelter for the night."

Harjit tried to see him in the faint light before lowering the staff. "Come forward."

The trader obeyed. He carried no visible weapons beyond a small kirpan at his waist. Dust covered his clothes and face. Arun fetched water while Harjit questioned him beside the fire. "Are the roads safe?"

The trader gave a tired laugh. "No road in Punjab feels safe anymore."

"What happened?"

The man rubbed his face before answering. He took a slow drink of water. "People stopped trusting one another."

The firelight flickered across his tired eyes. "You travel alone?" Arun asked.

"My brothers stayed behind with the shop."

Harjit finally showed him the way. "You may sleep near the grain shed tonight."

The trader thanked him gratefully. As he disappeared slowly down the lane, Arun noticed Harjit watching the darkness beyond the road again. "What are you thinking now?" Arun asked.

Harjit answered, "When people start travelling alone, something is wrong."

By the time the two men turned homewards, dawn was breaking. As Harjit entered the courtyard, Nachatar Kaur looked up from the chulha. "Your tea is getting cold."

"Coming, Bebe."

He washed his hands at the earthen pitcher and sat down beside Kartar. Over the following weeks, the night watches became routine. Every evening after dinner, men gathered beneath the banyan tree to

collect lanterns and staves before taking assigned positions along the roads, canal crossings and railway path.

One day, Niranjan was asked to join a team for the night's watch. He straightened proudly at once. For the rest of the evening, he walked through the village with such seriousness that even the older farmers smiled at him.

People's habits changed too. Haji instructed Imran to close the grain shop earlier than before. Neither mentioned the change aloud. Muslim farmers stood watch beside Sikh labourers. Hindu traders shared fires with men who had harvested beside them for decades.

At the well, conversations were cautious but kind. And beneath the banyan tree each night, Kartar Singh sat listening as the patrol groups departed one by one into the darkness. One particularly cold night, Arun found Kartar alone after most of the patrols had left. The lantern beside the banyan cast long shadows across the empty square. "You should rest, Tauji," Arun said.

Kartar glanced at the dark roads beyond. "A village sleeps better when someone remains awake."

Chapter 12

VOICES BENEATH THE BANYAN

By spring, the men were gathering beneath the banyan every evening. The talk was no longer only about crops and irrigation. Names of distant towns came up. So did stories from the railway and questions about what might happen next. And before the conversations ended, eyes often turned towards Kartar Singh, probably because he still sounded steady.

One evening, Niranjana organised a wrestling game beside the banyan tree. Usually the square remained noisy until well after sunset. That night several mothers appeared before the game had properly begun. “Home.”

The boys protested. “We are right here.”

“Home.” One mother glanced towards the western road.

“We are safe here,” her son protested, but the boys dispersed. The square emptied sooner than anyone could remember.

As the last of the children disappeared into the lanes, most of the older men had settled beneath the banyan. A railway clerk travelling through Lahore earlier that day had brought fresh rumours: more violence in Amritsar, retaliatory attacks near Multan, meetings growing increasingly hostile in the cities.

The children too sensed the change. They played near their homes in smaller groups, glancing towards the adults whenever voices rose too

sharply. Kartar sat upon the central charpoy with Bashir beside him and Haji slightly farther back, his chin resting on his walking stick. Harjit stood near the outer edge of the gathering while several younger men discussed the latest railway delays. "The trains from Lahore arrive overcrowded every day now," one man said.

"Half the passengers carry rumours instead of luggage," another muttered.

A third lowered his voice. "My cousin in Sheikhpura says entire neighbourhoods have begun storing weapons."

The word unsettled the gathering. Weapons. Across the circle, Imran kept silent. Arun noticed it, and so did Harjit. "You have attended more meetings than any of us," Harjit said to Imran. "Tell us honestly, what are people saying in the cities now?"

Imran hesitated. "They say division is becoming unavoidable."

Several men shifted uneasily. "Division of what?" one farmer demanded. "Land? Provinces? Villages?"

"No one knows exactly yet."

"That is convenient," the farmer muttered.

Another man spoke more sharply. "And after division... what then?"

Imran did not back down. "They believe peace will follow once people govern themselves."

Harjit gave a short, humourless laugh. "We water our fields, we harvest them, we have our rules in the village, who is governing us? People already govern themselves."

A few younger men smiled despite the tension. Imran did not. "You joke because this village still feels untouched," he said.

Harjit straightened. "And you speak as though the village is already lost."

Arun glanced towards Kartar. The old Sardar remained silent, watching both young men. "I am saying this because things feel different now," Imran said. "When I first heard those speeches, I thought they were exaggerating." He paused. "Now I am no longer certain."

"And I speak," Harjit replied, "as someone who trusts people he has known his entire life more than speeches shouted in cities."

Several villagers murmured agreement. Imran noticed. Before the argument could deepen, Bashir cleared his throat. "When I was young, my father told me something during the famine years."

The gathering quietened. "He said hunger makes men foolish first and cruel afterward."

He looked around the circle. "I think fear behaves the same way."

Haji spoke from beside the charpoy. "The trouble is not that people hate each other." He rubbed his tired fingers across his beard. "The trouble is that they begin imagining life separately."

Kartar finally spoke. "The outside world is entering here faster than before."

He looked around the gathering. "We cannot stop that. But we may still decide how this village behaves."

His eyes moved across the Sikh farmers, Muslim traders, Hindu teachers and young men growing increasingly restless. "No outsider has planted our wheat. No outsider repaired our canals. No outsider dug our well. No outsider carried our dead during floods or famines."

He spoke on, "If fear arrives, we must remember who we were before it."

Arun watched the faces around him. Some looked reassured, some uncertain, some merely tired. All were listening. Later that evening, the discussion softened into smaller conversations. Men debated grain shortages while younger boys drifted back towards games in the dust. Arun moved beside Imran. "You should not argue with Harjit publicly," he said.

Imran exhaled. "I was not arguing with him."

"You were."

Imran turned towards the square, where Harjit now stood laughing with several labourers leaving for the night watch. "They trust him," Imran said.

"Yes."

"And because of that, they believe strength alone will protect them."

Arun frowned. "What else should protect them?"

Imran thought and then said, "Try to understand what is coming."

Across the square, the lanterns glowed while familiar voices filled the night air. After most families had returned home, Kartar stayed beneath the banyan tree. The lantern beside him burned low. One by one, the lanterns of the night watch disappeared along the village roads until only the one beneath the banyan remained. Kartar stared at the road disappearing beyond the fields, towards Lahore and farther on towards Amritsar. At last Bashir, who had lingered nearby, spoke. "You think the storm will reach us too."

Kartar thought and then he answered. "When storms come, the fields cannot stop them."

Chapter 13

FIRES BEYOND THE FIELDS

The smoke appeared first at dawn. At that hour the village usually woke to roosters calling across courtyards, women drawing water and the faint clatter of milk vessels beside cattle sheds. But this morning people stepped from their homes and stopped in the lanes. Far beyond the western fields, beyond the canal roads and scattered groves, a dark column of smoke rose into the pale sky. It was too large for crop burning and too thick for cooking fires.

Arun saw it from the Sharma courtyard while washing his hands. “What is burning?” Santosh asked behind him.

The villagers gathered, staring westward. The smoke climbed higher before thinning into the sky. Harjit arrived directly from the fields. “Which village?”

No one knew. Kartar Singh stood near the edge of the square, watching the distant smoke. Haji muttered a prayer beneath his breath. A younger farmer spoke first. “Perhaps it is only a grain store fire.”

“No grain store burns like that,” another replied.

The smoke darkened. Harjit looked at Kartar. “I will go and see.”

Several younger men stepped forward. “So will we.”

Kartar cautioned him, "Take the canal road, and do not enter trouble if you find it."

Harjit gave a short grim smile. "Yes."

Harjit had saddled Sultan in quick time. By then many villagers had reached the village square and other horses were being prepared. Badal, the grey stallion, stood beside the gate, stamping impatiently. Though fully recovered, he had only recently returned to work after a bout of illness. Nearby, Komal stood beneath the neem tree watching the activity with her usual calm. "You take Badal," Kartar said to Arun.

Arun looked from Komal to Badal. "Shouldn't Badal rest another few days? I'll take Komal."

"He is fit enough," Kartar replied.

Amardeep, a young farmhand, had been looking at Komal. "I was hoping for her."

Harjit glanced at him. "Because you are not comfortable on a horse."

"I can ride."

Arun looked at Amardeep and then at Komal. "Let him take her. I'll take Badal."

Arun rested a hand on Komal's neck. "Komal will forgive mistakes."

Amardeep mounted Komal while Arun swung himself onto Badal. The stallion tossed his head and pawed at the ground. Arun leaned forward and patted his neck. "You have been waiting for this, haven't you?"

The group departed. Badal surged eagerly forward while Komal settled into her usual steady pace. As they rode on Amardeep looked considerably more confident. The farther west they rode, the stronger the smell of smoke became.

Kartar and Haji watched them disappear. Work continued because it had to; animals were fed, grain sorted and children played. But every conversation returned to the smoke beyond the fields. Women gathered near the wells speaking in lowered voices. Men glanced towards the western road by the canal, waiting for news. Near midday another column of smoke appeared farther south. It was smaller, but unmistakable. By then no one pretended it was nothing.

Harjit and the others returned in the afternoon. Most of the village saw them approaching from the western road long before they arrived. The men rode silently, dust coating their clothes and faces. Harjit dismounted without speaking. Kartar stepped towards him. Harjit wiped dust from his forehead. "It is Chak Badrin."

No one interrupted. Until then, every story of violence had belonged to another district. Now it had the name of a place they knew.

Bashir returned from Chak Badrin with Harjit. There was blood on his clothes. He carried a young Muslim child whose parents had been killed in the fighting. The child's grandmother gathered him into her arms. Bashir washed his hands before anyone asked whose blood stained his kurta. Chak Badrin lay barely twelve kilometres away. Several families in the village had relatives there. Bashir stood looking towards the western road. "I have known some of those men since we were boys."

Harjit looked around the square. "Fighting began after evening prayers yesterday."

"Between villagers?" someone asked.

"At first," he said. "Then armed men arrived from outside during the night. Houses burned along the western lane. Some families escaped towards Lahore before dawn."

"And the rest?"

Harjit did not answer. A woman near the back looked away. Children were pulled closer by anxious mothers. At last Harjit said, "The village is almost empty now."

By then six frightened survivors from Chak Badrin had reached the village on foot. Their stories differed in detail but not in horror. Houses had burned during the night. Families had scattered into the fields. No one could say exactly how many had died.

In the evening, younger children were playing near the banyan tree as they always had. A game involving a cloth ball had spread across the square until boys from half the village were involved. One of Bashir's grandsons chased the ball into Dharam Pal's courtyard and disappeared through the gate. His father appeared. "Rashid!"

The sharpness in his voice surprised everyone. The boy stopped. "Come here."

The child obeyed, confused. "You do not go wandering off like that."

"But Dharam Chacha was giving us gur."

The boy returned reluctantly. Dharam Pal, standing near the gate, looked puzzled. "It is only gur."

Rashid's father nodded awkwardly. "Of course."

The children resumed their game, but the adults carried the caution with them.

Later that evening the square beneath the banyan tree filled completely. No one wished to sit alone at home. The conversations moved through fear, anger and disbelief. "How can entire villages vanish?"

"Where were the police?"

"The British have already abandoned Punjab..."

"People have gone mad..."

“No,” Haji said from the edge of the gathering. “Madness ends eventually. It always does. Crowds tire, wars tire, men remember themselves again.”

The remark silenced several men. Harjit sat near the centre of the square cleaning mud from one boot while younger men surrounded him with questions.

“How many attackers?”

“Were they local men?”

“Did anyone fight back?”

Harjit answered only what he knew.

“Yes, some villagers resisted.”

“No, many attackers were outsiders.”

“Yes, there were guns.”

At the mention of guns, several men exchanged nervous glances. They possessed staves, axes and a few kirpans. Nothing more. Niranjana sat nearby, listening wide eyed. “They burned the whole village?” he asked.

Harjit looked sad. “Yes.”

The boy fell silent.

After most people had dispersed for the night, Arun found Harjit standing alone near the western road. The sky above Punjab glowed faintly red from distant fires still burning somewhere beyond the fields. “You saw bodies,” Arun said.

Harjit nodded. Arun leaned against the roadside tree, staring towards the darkness. “What frightened you most?”

Harjit’s face was grim. “Not the dead.”

Arun was puzzled. Harjit stared towards the horizon where smoke still blurred against the night sky. “What frightened me was that they were ordinary people like us...just ordinary people.”

Some distance away, a pair of jackals howled across the fields.

That night the patrols increased without anyone suggesting it. Lanterns burned at every entrance road. Younger men took turns sleeping and keeping watch. Fear had organised them more quickly than meetings ever could.

Chapter 14

THE OTHER WELL

The story arrived two days after the Chak Badrin fire. It came not from a traveller but from a man who had walked many miles with blistered feet and a face that looked many years older than the muscular body. He appeared at the well just after noon. The women drawing water noticed him first. His clothes were torn and dusty. One sleeve of his kurta had been ripped away completely. He clutched a cloth bundle against his chest, holding it carefully in both arms. Someone brought him water. He drank slowly.

“Where have you come from?” one of the women asked.

“From a village called Dera Dana Khan.”

Soon, the news had spread through the village. Men gathered in the square. The stranger sat on a charpoy, the cloth bundle resting on his lap, both hands still wrapped around it. Kartar Singh asked him, “What is your name?”

“Gurmeet Singh.”

“And your family?” asked Kartar.

He replied, “I do not know.”

Kartar spoke again. “What happened there?”

Gurmeet looked from one face to another. He seemed reluctant to bring such a story into another village. "You would have heard stories."

The men heard him in silence. He continued, "At first nobody believed them."

His fingers tightened around the bundle on his lap. "Most people never do."

"We thought the trouble would pass." He swallowed.

"But it did not. Our men tried to defend the village," he continued. "For a while they succeeded."

He turned towards the eastern road. "Then more men came." He closed his eyes. "After that, we were slaughtered by the dozens."

Parvati's voice came softly from the edge of the gathering. "And the women?"

Gurmeet closed his eyes. "They knew what would happen once the village fell."

His voice dropped. "There was a well in the village."

He stopped for several seconds. "Our village had over a hundred families. The women gathered there."

He struggled to continue. "Mothers lowered their little girls into the well first..."

His voice broke. "...then they jumped after them."

No one moved. "One after another," he whispered.

His eyes moved towards the fields. "When it was over, there were hardly any women left."

Only the alarm cries of lapwings broke the quiet. Arun glanced at Santosh, who stood a little distance away near the well. Her face had turned pale. Harjit stared at the ground, his fists clenched. Across the

circle, Imran stood perfectly still. Finally Bashir spoke. "Such things should never happen."

As the gathering dispersed, Gurmeet rose from the charpoy. Before taking a step, he adjusted the cloth bundle in his arms. Kartar noticed. "What do you carry so carefully, Gurmeet?"

Gurmeet looked down at the bundle. Without a word, he untied the cloth. Inside lay a small Guru Granth Sahib wrapped in white muslin. Beside it rested a small steel kara. "My son's," he said.

He unfolded another corner of the cloth. Nestled within it lay a handful of dry soil. "It came from our field."

Harjit stepped forward. "You should stay the night. The roads are no place for a man alone."

Gurmeet shook his head. "I have already stayed longer than I intended. My brother lives in Amritsar. If he is alive, that is where I must go."

"Then take my donkey. He'll get you there faster." Harjit offered.

Gurmeet hesitated. "How will he find his way back?"

Harjit smiled. "Take him to Amritsar. When you've no more use for him, hand him to someone travelling this way. He'll find his way home."

Gurmeet hesitated again. His hand rested lightly upon the Guru Granth Sahib. "Thank you."

He tied the bundle securely across his chest before climbing onto the donkey. As he started moving, he looked back at the villagers. "Don't wait too long."

They watched him ride towards the western road.

The story of the faraway well spread through the village that evening. It passed through the lanes, the fields and the conversations of families

sitting together. It was no longer a story of riots in distant cities. It had become the story of a village, quite like their own.

That evening, the women came to the well as they always had. Brass pots touched the stone rim. The pulley creaked beneath the rope. Conversations continued in lowered voices. More than one woman paused before looking into the dark water below.

Chapter 15

THE VILLAGE STILL STOOD

The elders found a duty of their own. Each night, they carried kettles of hot tea and baskets of fresh rotis to the men on watch. They seldom stayed long. A few words, a cup of tea, another roti, then on to the next post.

One night, Bashir carried the tea to the western road. At the first post, he found only one of the three sentries awake. "So this is what guarding a village has become?" he asked.

The young man smiled. "If all three of us stay awake till dawn, who will harvest our wheat tomorrow? We take turns. When one grows tired, he wakes the next."

Bashir looked at the two sleeping men, their lathis resting beside them. The second and third posts followed the same pattern.

The next morning Bashir mentioned it to Kartar Singh. "They're right," Kartar said after a moment. "The harvest is as important as the watch."

From that night onwards, every post followed the same practice. The harvest gathered pace over the next few days. Every morning the carts left the village before sunrise and returned only after the shadows had begun to lengthen. One by one, the standing fields disappeared, replaced by neat

rows of bundled wheat waiting to be carried home. Bullocks plodded along the familiar tracks while children followed the carts, picking up stray stalks that had fallen onto the path. Women sat beneath the shade of kikar trees, twisting fresh straw into cords for tying the bundles.

In the evening, a railway porter arrived from the station carrying a small cloth bag over his shoulder. He had relatives in the village and stopped to meet others, as he often did, before going home. Someone handed him a tumbler of water. "Busy day?"

He drank before answering. "Busier than I've ever seen."

"In Lahore?" someone asked.

He nodded. "Every train heading east is full before it leaves the platform."

"Traders?" a farmer asked.

"Some."

"Families?"

"Mostly."

Bashir asked him. "What do they carry?"

The porter said, "Their homes," he said. "Whatever they can lift. The rest they leave behind."

Somewhere above them, a pair of weaver birds continued stitching a nest into the drooping branches of the banyan.

"Are they saying why they're leaving?" Bashir asked.

The porter shrugged. "Every family tells a different story. A quarrel, a rumour, a fire. Someone heard there would be trouble. I only know the trains leave full."

"And come back?"

“They leave carrying Hindus and Sikhs.” he added, “They come back carrying Muslims.”

The porter adjusted the cloth bag on his shoulder. “I should go.”

Bashir rose with him. “You’ve brought us troubling news.”

The porter looked around at all of them. “I’ve only brought what I saw.”

He thanked them for the water and walked towards his relatives’ house.

Behind him, work resumed. The grain still had to be gathered before nightfall.

As the sun dipped lower, the last cart entered the village. Women came out carrying vessels of water while children ran beside the bullocks, arguing over who had worked the hardest. It sounded as it always did after a successful harvest.

Charpoys appeared beneath the banyan tree and along the open square. Women brought baskets of rotis, earthen bowls of dal and fresh buttermilk. Children drifted from one group to another until someone called them back for supper.

The talk was easy. Someone complained about a stubborn bullock. Another insisted that Bashir’s field had yielded better because he had secretly persuaded the clouds to favour his side of the village.

Bashir laughed. “If I had that much influence, I would ask for rain every Thursday.”

The harvest had been kind. Yet, there was no dhol, no bonfire, no celebration and no one asked why. The village had food for the months ahead.

One by one, the gathering broke. Some men carried their charpoys indoors. Others remained outside, chatting before the night’s watch began. The sentries soon took their places. The eastern sky had long since faded

when the first groups gathered beneath the banyan tree. The patrols had become part of village life, as ordinary in its own way as opening the irrigation gates or taking cattle to graze. Kartar looked around the gathering. "Western road?"

Three men stepped forward.

"The canal?"

Another three.

"The northern fields?"

Another group answered.

"Keep a horse at every post," said Kartar.

"Sultan can be kept on the western road," one of the men suggested. "Badal at the canal."

Ahmed, a stable hand, glanced at the stable. "Komal can stay at the northern fields."

Kartar disagreed. "Komal startles easily in trouble."

Surjit Singh offered his mare, Renuka. Kartar said, "Go."

A nightjar called from beyond the field. Another answered farther away. The sound travelled across the darkness before fading. At the western post, one of the sentries sat on a charpoy while another spread his blanket beneath the tree. It had become the custom at every post. He looked once across the dark fields beyond the village. Nothing moved. No glow marked the horizon. No voices carried on the wind.

Chapter 16

THE VILLAGE THAT ARRIVED

The morning passed much as the one before it had. The harvest was over, but work had not ended. Grain still had to be threshed, winnowed and stored. Courtyards filled with women cleaning wheat while men repaired carts that had worked without rest through the harvest. Bullocks circled patiently over the threshing floors.

Near the school, Arun was helping Omparkash sort the children's exercise books when a boy came running from the western fields. He was too breathless to speak. He simply pointed. The first cart appeared. Then another. Then another.

The road continued to fill. After the first twenty, counting no longer seemed possible. Bullock carts stretched one behind another until dust swallowed the rest of them. Some carried little more than rolled bedding and brass utensils. Others were piled high with sacks of grain, wooden chests, spinning wheels, charpoys and ploughs tied together with rope. Men walked beside the carts, staves in their hands. Women carried sleeping infants against their shoulders. Children sat silently atop the loads, their feet dangling over the sides. A few goats were tied behind the carts. Two buffaloes limped along with the caravan. One cart had a wheel that wobbled dangerously.

The first cart reached the banyan tree and stopped. For years the banyan had welcomed weddings, harvest gatherings and evening stories. That afternoon it received an entire village. An old man climbed down slowly. He stood with one hand on the wheel, as though uncertain whether they were truly safe. "We need water."

Before anyone replied, Bashir turned towards the well. "Draw water."

Nachatar Kaur was among the first to reach it. "Fill every pot," she said. "We'll ask questions after people have drunk."

The women around her needed no further instruction. Some drew water while others carried vessels towards the waiting carts. Pots appeared from every direction. Someone untied the bullocks and led them to the pond.

Kartar pointed towards the shade beyond the school. "Take the carts there."

Men stepped forward without waiting to be asked. They lifted bundles from overloaded carts and steadied old people climbing down. A woman stumbled while carrying a child. Another woman, whom she had never met before, took the child from her arms without a word. Near the rear of the caravan, one of the bullocks collapsed where it stood. "Don't force him. Bring water first."

"Loosen the yoke," said a farmer.

The animal drank greedily before anyone thought to ask where they had come from.

Children watched from a distance at first. Then curiosity overcame caution. Very soon, they were carrying tumblers to children who had been helped down from the carts. One little boy offered half his piece of jaggery to a smaller child. The child accepted it without speaking.

No one asked the newcomers who they were or where they had come from. Questions could wait. Thirst could not. By noon, every patch of

shade in the village had found new occupants. The school verandah filled first. Then the gurdwara courtyard. The temple had already been taken. Charpoys appeared from every lane. Women kneaded more dough and extra fires were lit. Someone brought fodder for the cattle.

Arun looked around at what stood before them. A village had arrived carrying everything it had been able to save. The last carts continued arriving well into the afternoon. By then, the first arrivals had eaten, the bullocks had been watered and the children had begun to wander about, their curiosity returning more quickly than their voices.

A game that had begun with three children soon drew in four more from the caravan. Names were exchanged, forgotten, then exchanged again. A boy laughed because two of them answered to Gurinder. Before long they were chasing one another around the grain stacks as though they had lived in the same village all their lives.

More dough was kneaded and more rotis went onto the griddles. Large pots of dal simmered over hurriedly built fires. Buttermilk was carried from every house until every earthen pot had been emptied. Raw patches beneath the yokes were washed with cool water. A blacksmith examined broken cart wheels without waiting to be asked.

Arun carried a bucket towards the school verandah where several families had settled. A boy of about ten rose at once. "I'll take it."

Arun noticed an iron house key hanging around his neck, tied with a strip of cloth. The boy reached up to touch it regularly.

Near the western edge of the village, Kartar stood watching the bullocks feed. Bashir joined him. "They'll rest well tonight," Bashir said.

Kartar nodded. "They need it. So do the people."

The travellers slept without wondering whether they would be woken before dawn. The villagers left them to their sleep. Questions could wait for tomorrow.

Chapter 17

THE STORY THEY BROUGHT

Before sunrise, the first bullock carts creaked towards the threshing floor. Women swept their courtyards before sprinkling water to settle the dust. Somewhere, a handmill began its steady rhythm.

The travellers were slower to wake. Many continued to sleep long after the village had begun its day. Some lay beneath their carts, others on charpoys borrowed from village homes. A few lay on coarse blankets spread upon the ground. No one hurried them. One by one, the refugees woke. A mother combed her daughter's hair for the first time in days. An old woman unfolded the shawl she had used as a pillow and spread it in the morning sun. A young man examined the cracked wheel of his cart before setting the broken pin carefully beside it, as though he finally had time to repair it.

Near the pond, two boys helped the refugees lead their bullocks to water. They were now talking as though they had known one another for years. "Your buffalo has a white ear."

"So?"

"Ours doesn't." The boys laughed.

Not far away, Haji watched them for some time before returning to the men repairing harnesses. Arun carried a basket of fresh rotis towards the school. The old man looked up. "You people have done enough."

Arun smiled. "We've only done what any village would do."

The old man held his gaze. "No," he said. "Not every village."

Arun placed the basket beside them and walked away.

By mid morning, the village had returned to its usual rhythm. The threshing floors were busy again. Women spread grain to dry in their courtyards. The blacksmith worked on two broken cartwheels brought by the refugees while his apprentice repaired bent iron rims beside the forge. The strangers had begun mingling with the villagers in small groups. An elderly refugee sat beneath the banyan tree watching two boys twist rope from fresh straw. "You make it the same way?" one of the boys asked.

The old man smiled. "The rope doesn't know which village made it."

The boy laughed and continued working.

Near the well, Bashir stood beside a refugee farmer examining the cracked yoke of a bullock cart. "It can be repaired," Bashir said.

The man ran his hand over the worn wood. "It has carried my family for ten years."

A little later, Arun found himself sitting beside an old Sikh who had finished his meal. "Where is your village?" Arun asked.

The old man looked towards the western road. "It was near Lyallpur."

"You farmed?"

"My father did." He smiled. "I thought my son would too."

After a while he asked Arun, "Your harvest is over?"

"Yesterday."

"You were fortunate."

The old man rubbed his calloused palm. "Our wheat was still standing."

Nearby, two refugee women sat with women cleaning lentils. Nachatar Kaur settled beside them.

“You haven't told us the name of your village.”

The older refugee answered. “Rasul Basti,” she said. None of the village women recognised it. “It was a good village,” she added.

No one asked why she spoke of it in the past.

Bashir pulled a stool into the shade for the farmer Arun had been speaking with. The refugee sat down. Others gathered nearby without being asked. A tumbler of buttermilk was placed beside him. He thanked the woman with a nod but did not touch it. At last he spoke. “We did not leave because we wanted to.”

His voice was steady. “We left because there was no village left to stay in.”

No one interrupted. “It began at night.”

He looked to the side, as though he could still see it. “There was no moon. It was Amavasya.”

Several of the older men exchanged glances. “In that darkness, we could not tell where they were coming from.”

Another refugee, sitting a little apart, took it on from there. “First we heard the dogs bark furiously. Then people shouting.”

The old farmer continued. “Some of us lit lanterns.”

He gave a weary smile. “We thought it would help us find one another.”

A younger man sitting nearby looked down at the ground. “It helped them find us. They took the lanterns. They took the burning mashals. They poured the oil and set the houses on fire.”

The younger refugee gave a blank look. “The flames showed them every lane.”

An old woman, who was silent until then, folded her hands tightly in her lap. "We ran from one house to another. There was fire everywhere."

She fell silent. Another refugee took up the story. "We had prepared."

He continued. "We had men guarding at night."

Kartar listened without speaking. "We had men at every approach."

"So do we," Bashir murmured.

"We had guns." The man's eyes moved across the gathered villagers. "We had many men too, we were a big village. It made no difference."

A boy, no older than fifteen, had been listening from the edge of the gathering. He cried, "We ran into the wheat."

Every face turned towards him. "The crop had not all been harvested. The standing wheat hid us. The darkness hid us too."

His voice grew softer. "If there had been moonlight..."

Bashir asked, "What happened the next morning?"

The old man answered. "We gathered our dead. There were too many. We did not have enough wood to cremate them one by one. So we built one big pyre. It was the only way."

A woman covered her mouth with the end of her dupatta. Another refugee continued. "We thought it was over."

Several heads lifted. "We believed they had taken what they wanted."

He smiled sadly. "We were wrong. They returned the next night."

"We had spent the whole day tending to the wounded, repairing what little we could, and burying and burning our dead."

He stopped. "We had not imagined they would come again."

An elderly woman, who had not spoken until then, looked towards the children playing beyond the banyan tree. "My grandson asked whether we could sleep inside the house again."

Her voice trembled. "I told him yes."

She lowered her eyes and twisted the end of her dupatta between her fingers. "That night, the house burned. He did not come out."

Everyone remained frozen. After a while, the headman of the refugee village spoke. "When morning came... we knew we could not stay." He looked at his hands, which were covered in blisters. "I do not remember getting them."

He took a slow breath. "We gathered those who could walk and separated those who could not."

He stopped again. "Some could not walk. There was no way we could have carried them. We had old people, the gravely wounded, children who would not survive the journey. We sat together, the Panchayat. No one wanted to speak, but someone had to. We decided..."

The man covered his face with both hands. There was a long silence. Finally another man finished the sentence. "We ended their suffering."

The words were scarcely louder than a whisper. "We prayed, we wept, and then... we left."

The old man's shoulders sagged. "I have been asking Paramatma since then... whether we chose rightly."

Birds chirped in the banyan above. The gathering broke up slowly. People rose one after another and walked away. The villagers returned to their work because there was work to do. Across the lane, a woman called her children home for the evening meal.

On the way home, Bashir stopped beside one of the refugee carts. He rested his hand on the worn wooden wheel, then walked on without saying a word.

Chapter 18

THE OTHER CARAVAN

As the sun dipped behind the trees, the refugee families began preparing to leave the following morning. Some had relatives farther east. Others knew only that they had to keep moving. The old headman thanked Kartar. The headman turned towards the children playing near the pond. "You gave us time without fear."

Before daybreak, Kartar looked once more along the line of carts. It stretched from the banyan tree to the western mango tree. He had seen wedding processions, harvest carts and military convoys during the war. He had never seen a village gathered like this. A little farther away, the women were saying their farewells. Hands were clasped. A few embraced and some wept. Bashir arrived carrying a small sack of flour. He placed it on the first cart. "For the road."

The old headman looked at it. "You have already fed us."

"You've a long way to go," Bashir said.

The carts were ready. Only the children delayed the departure. Bullocks shifted their weight impatiently. Men checked the ropes one last time while women counted the children, almost unconsciously, before climbing onto the carts. The youngest wandered between the carts, saying their own farewells in ways the adults scarcely noticed.

A little girl from the village ran back to her house. She returned carrying a cloth doll dressed in a faded blue frock, one arm stitched back

on with red thread. She stopped beside one of the refugee carts. The refugee girl looked down at her. "For me?"

The village girl nodded and held it out. "You keep her."

The refugee girl hesitated. "But whom will you have?"

"I have another." She didn't.

The refugee girl took the doll and hugged it tightly. "Thank you."

Then the village girl smiled. "I heard Father telling Mother last night that we may leave too."

The refugee girl looked surprised. "You are coming?"

The village girl smiled with complete certainty. "We will play there."

She climbed onto the cart, still holding the doll.

The village girl stepped back as the bullocks strained against their yokes. The first cart began to move, then another. Slowly, the caravan stretched along the road. The two girls continued waving until the distance made it impossible to tell one from the other. The last cart disappeared beyond the bend. Dust hung in the still air before settling back onto the road.

One little boy tugged at his mother's hand. "When will they reach?"

His mother looked down at him. "I don't know."

The answer satisfied him. He turned and ran after another child. The adults remained where they were. Bashir said, "They've a long road ahead."

Kartar nodded. "May they find peace."

Near the banyan tree, the charpoys used by the refugees were carried back by their owners. The school verandah was swept clean. The last borrowed vessel found its way home. By evening, there was little to show that another village had spent two nights among them. Only the ruts left by hundreds of cartwheels marked the road.

Chapter 19

THE LAST COUNCIL

Once the refugee caravan had left, the elders and the important village heads gathered beneath the banyan tree. Kartar sat where he always did. Bashir lowered himself onto the charpoy beside him. Haji, Omparkash, Harjit, Arun, Imran and the other elders and a few younger representatives formed a loose circle beneath the shade.

Kartar looked around the gathering. “You have all heard what our guests told us. They were prepared. They had patrols, dogs, more men than we do. And yet...”

Bashir looked down at the earth between his feet. “I have been asking myself the same question since yesterday.”

Several faces turned towards him. “If our village had been attacked like that, what would we have done?”

Omparkash spoke first. “I would have wished I’d left a day earlier, if I had survived.”

Haji folded his hands across his lap. “We have lived together all our lives, and I pray we shall continue to.”

He looked around the circle. “But prayers are not plans.”

Kartar agreed. “They are not.”

Harjit had been silent until then. "If we decide to leave, we must leave before we are forced to."

Imran spoke. "Yes. We can prepare while there is still time. The roads are open, the trains are running and there is enough grain to carry. If we wait..."

Kartar looked around the gathering once more. "I will ask only once. Who believes we should stay?"

A farmer from the outer lane cleared his throat. "What if we do not leave?"

He looked in the direction of the well. "My great grandfather helped dig it. My father built our house. Why should I abandon them because men elsewhere have gone mad?"

Several heads nodded. Another elder spoke. "Perhaps this madness will pass. It has before."

"And if we leave," another asked, "when do we come back?"

A voice came from the edge of the gathering. "I will not go."

Heads turned. Old Lala Shyamlal sat slightly apart on a low stool. His back had bent with age, and his voice carried strain. Kartar met his gaze. "You do not understand the danger."

"I am old enough to understand," Shyamlal said calmly. "I will not leave my house to die on a road."

A few men shifted. "This is not about comfort," Haji said.

Shyamlal faced Haji. "It is about ending where one began."

The old Granthi, Bhai Tirlok Singh, spoke. "I will not leave the Gurdwara."

Before anyone could respond, another voice rose from the side. "I cannot travel."

It was Gopal's mother, seated among the women near the front. "My legs will not carry me beyond the canal."

Her son simply lowered his head. Sukhaman Singh, an older Sikh farmer, spoke next. "Even if they could carry me," he said, "I would still not go."

"Why?" someone asked.

He looked towards the fields beyond the banyan tree. "Because I would spend whatever time remains here, in my village."

The gathering grew quiet. These were not arguments. No one was trying to persuade the others. Kartar's gaze moved across the circle. "You are asking to stay when others are leaving."

"We are not asking," Shyamlal said. "We are telling you what we cannot change."

Kartar Singh looked around the gathering. "If anyone wishes to remain in his own house, that is his decision. Every father, every mother, has to make that decision for a child." He continued, "But remember, we have to make every effort to keep the children safe. That is our duty as parents. Keep it in mind while choosing."

Haji raised his head. "They will not stay alone."

He looked around the gathering. "If some must leave and some must remain, those who remain will be under my care."

The conversation moved to other matters. "What about the cattle?" an elderly farmer asked. "They are our livelihood."

Another farmer answered, "They are more than that. They are like children to us."

Many men agreed. "We have raised them since they were calves. They have worked our fields and they know our voices. They cannot be left behind in sheds."

Omparkash spoke softly, "They cannot travel by train either."

A long silence followed. "Then some must walk," Bashir said.

The words changed the meeting. Kartar looked around the gathering. "The old people, the women and the young children need to take the train from Lahore. The cattle will go by road. Those who choose to stay with them can go too."

The village would have to separate again. The travelling families would part at Lahore. One group would board the train. The other would continue to walk, leading bullocks, buffaloes, goats and horses on foot across Punjab. Omparkash spoke, "Our carts will no longer be needed after Lahore. We will hand them over."

The others turned towards him. "The train group will unload at Lahore. The carts, bullocks and whatever grain remains will go with the party escorting the cattle."

The questions became practical.

"How many carts?"

"Each one."

"What goes first?"

"The children and the old."

"The grain?"

"As much as the bullocks can pull."

"The cattle?"

"All of them."

Kartar rose. "We leave tomorrow."

The men stood with him. The meeting lasted no more than an hour. The village had made its decision. Now it had to prepare.

Chapter 20

WHAT WE CARRIED

The council dispersed and no one had time to linger beneath the banyan tree. The elders returned to their homes without speaking. The village looked unchanged. Women swept their courtyards, bullocks dozed beneath the shade and somewhere a hand mill turned steadily. Only the men returning from the council knew that by this time tomorrow, none of it would belong to them.

Kartar entered his courtyard just as Nachatar was lifting rotis from the griddle. Kartar removed his turban and hung it on the wooden peg. “We leave tomorrow.”

“How many carts?”

“As many as we have.”

She placed the last roti into a clean cloth. “I’ll begin.”

Omparkash stepped into his house. His wife was washing clothes in the courtyard. “We vacate the village tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” she asked, surprised by the suddenness.

“I’ll sort the grain,” Omparkash said, sitting on the edge of the charpoy. “For the road.”

Bashir's wife was measuring wheat into a large earthen bin. Bashir said, looking at the street, "They are departing tomorrow. They are leaving a great deal of grain too. Enough to feed us for many years."

She met his eyes. "Don't be greedy for another man's grain."

Bashir gave a small, sheepish smile. "I was only stating a fact. If they return, we'll give them back every maund we use."

"And if they don't?"

He looked out towards the village. "Then it was Allah's will."

By afternoon, the news had reached every house. It travelled the way news always travelled in a village, from one courtyard to the next. Grain sacks appeared outside doorways. Old trunks were opened, lengths of rope were untied from roof beams and harnesses were brought down from hooks. The threshing floors that had been busy separating grain now became places where sacks were weighed, tied and loaded onto carts. Woollen blankets, brass utensils and family quilts were brought out and laid in neat piles. Some things were wrapped carefully. Others were put aside. They could not all go.

Near the blacksmith's shed, men waited their turn with cartwheels, broken pins and loose iron tyres. "I'll get to every one," the blacksmith said.

"You'll have to. We don't know another blacksmith between here and Amritsar," said one.

Across the lane, the carpenter fitted a new spoke into a wheel while his apprentice planed rough timber for another cart. "You'll have to hurry," said someone.

"I'm hurrying."

"You've been saying that since morning."

"I've also been working since morning. And I have my own house to pack, and am yet to find a cart."

Two men stepped forward. "You take care of the village carts. We'll take care of your house."

"I will share my cart with you," said another man.

Women rolled rotis in cotton cloths before folding them into large bundles. Nachatar Kaur moved among them, tying the bundles with strips of old cloth and setting aside smaller packets for families with very young children. Others roasted gram and filled small cloth bags with roasted wheat, gur and salt. It was food that would keep.

Children were given work as well. Some gathered dry dung cakes for the journey. By afternoon, the village lanes were lined with carts. Some stood loaded. Others had empty beds while families decided what could still be taken. The village should have been celebrating after a bountiful harvest. Instead, it was preparing for a journey.

Every household discovered the same problem. There was never enough space. A lota found a place beside the grain while a second one did not. One quilt was folded while another was left on the charpoy. An axe was tied beneath a cart, but the spare plough was left leaning against the wall. No one argued with the cart. Its capacity decided for them.

At Omparkash's house, Santosh wrapped her schoolbooks in an old piece of cloth. She reached for another bundle. Omparkash looked over. "Leave those. They're notebooks. We'll buy more."

She hesitated before placing them back on the shelf. A few chalk pieces, however, went into her bag.

As Sarita tied the mouth of her cloth bag, her mother noticed the small round stone lying beside the other articles. Years of water had polished it until it shone smooth and grey. "You're taking that? It's only a stone."

Sarita picked it up. "Imran found it by the Ravi last year. He said it was the roundest stone he had ever seen."

Her mother noticed the shape of the pebble. "You remember that?"

A faint smile touched Sarita's lips. "So does he."

Her mother hesitated, then said, "Keep it."

Near the mosque, an old shepherd stood beside two goats. He looked from one to the other. Finally, he selected the younger one. The older goat rubbed its head against his leg. He stroked it gently. "You may not be able to walk the distance." He handed the older one to a neighbour. "Please look after her."

Not every family owned a cart. Some had bullocks but nothing to yoke them to. Others had neither. At Kartar's house, farmhands had drawn four carts into the courtyard. One held grain and the others stood empty. Harjit announced, "These should be enough."

His mother was folding quilts beside the verandah. Without looking up, she said, "No, one cart will do."

He looked from the grain to the remaining carts. "There won't be room."

"Doesn't matter." She folded another quilt. "How many families have no carts?"

Harjit kept silent.

"They'll need these more than we do," she said.

He glanced towards the cattle shed.

"What about our grain?"

"We'll take what one cart will carry."

"And the rest?"

She tied another knot in the cloth bundle.

"If we return, it will still be here."

Harjit understood. "I'll keep one."

The extra carts disappeared from Kartar's courtyard. One stood outside the house of a widowed farmer. Another was stationed beside the home of a carpenter whose old cart had collapsed that morning. The third was being fitted with a yoke borrowed from another family.

No one kept account of whose cart carried whose belongings. There was still work to do, and darkness came before the work was finished. One by one, lanterns appeared in the courtyards. Near the blacksmith's shed, the forge still glowed. "I'll finish this one too," the blacksmith said.

His apprentice looked at the dark sky. "You've not stopped since morning."

"We are leaving in a few hours." The apprentice nodded and worked the bellows again.

As darkness gathered, a few men made their way to Haji's house, one or two at a time. Dharam Pal was the first to arrive, followed by Kartar Singh. Madan Lal was helped in by a younger man and sat near the doorway. Sohan Singh arrived last, his steps slow but steady. Dharam Pal cleared his throat. "We will return."

Haji inclined his head. "Of course."

They spoke one by one.

"There are two trunks in the inner room..."

"The wheat in the storage... it will last through the season..."

"The documents... they're in the wooden box near the cot..."

They were leaving instructions for the things they could not carry. Sohan Singh spoke without looking up. "The southern field needs water first, if the canal runs low."

Haji assured him. "It will be done."

Madan Lal lifted his head. "The shop keys... You know where they are."

"Yes," Haji said.

As the night deepened, the conversation remained practical. Fields, houses, wells, things that had always been part of the day. Dharam Pal said, "Keep them safe."

Haji said, "They are yours. They will remain yours."

The men rose one by one. They would meet again in the morning. Shyamlal did not stand. When the others had moved towards the gate, he continued to sit. "Please see that the well is kept clean," he said.

"It will be," Haji replied.

"And the neem tree..." Shyamlal said, "My mother planted it when we first came here. Look after it."

Haji nodded. "It will be.". Shyamlal allowed himself to be helped to his feet. The lantern burned lower. One by one, the lights disappeared. The forge still glowed in the distance. Every now and then, the sound of a hammer striking iron drifted across the sleeping village.

Neither father nor son spoke for a long while. After a while, Imran stepped forward. "Abbu..."

Haji turned. "Yes?"

Imran hesitated. "I want to marry Sarita."

Haji's expression did not change. He had expected this. "She is a Hindu."

Imran met his gaze. "So are many among us. In many houses, there are Sikhs and Hindus together. It has never been a problem."

Haji said nothing. Imran continued. "Abbu, our own great grandfather was a Hindu. We changed our names just two generations ago. How can Sarita suddenly become a stranger to us?"

The question was not defiant. Haji turned towards his wife and exhaled. "Come," he said.

Haji, his wife and Imran, went to Dharam Pal's house. A lamp was burning inside. Dharam Pal welcomed them in. Haji spoke without introduction. "My son wishes to marry Sarita."

He spoke about Imran's feelings for her. Dharam Pal listened without interruption. When Haji finished, he said, "You are like family. There is no question of that."

His voice was gentle, but there was weight in it. "But I cannot leave my daughter here. Not in a village that will not remain the same. Not by herself."

Haji's wife shook her head. "She will not be by herself," she said. "She will go as a wife does, to her husband's home."

The words were simple. Dharam Pal replied, "I have no objection. If this had been any other time... But we leave at dawn."

Haji said, "There is time for a Nikah."

Dharam Pal peeped into the inner room, then turned back to Haji. "This... all this... is temporary," he said. "We will return. Once things settle, we will come back to our homes, to our ways."

He met Haji's gaze. "Then we can do everything properly."

Inside, Sarita had been listening. She stepped forward. "I will go with Bauji," she said. Her voice was steady. "We will return."

Chapter 21

THE LAST MORNING

The village awoke long before dawn. The refugee caravan had disappeared beyond the horizon the previous day. Now there was no one left to send away. It was Kartar's village that had to leave. Lamps had burned late into the night, and few had slept for more than an hour or two. Lanterns still glowed in the courtyards as men yoked the bullocks. The animals, well fed the night before, stood patiently as the wooden yokes were lowered into place. The village dogs wandered from house to house, puzzled by the unusual activity at that hour.

Niranjan appeared wearing his favourite red silk shirt. It had been reserved for festivals and weddings and looked slightly absurd beside the dust covered carts and bundles.

Santosh stared at him. "That red silk shirt? Are you dressed for a Baisakhi fair?"

Niranjan looked offended. "So?"

"You chose today to wear this red shirt?"

"Why not?"

"Because it is your favourite shirt."

Niranjan looked down at it. "Exactly."

Near the banyan tree, Harjit stood waiting. The first carts were ready and the remaining few were being attended to. Most of the scouts, mounted on horses, would ride ahead while the others would bring up the rear.

Near the front of the caravan, Omparkash counted the children and counted them again. "Twenty three."

A woman beside him smiled. "You've counted your own granddaughter twice."

He was surprised. "Have I?"

His granddaughter Ganga laughed. It was the first laughter of the morning. An old widow climbed onto a cart that belonged to another family. Nearby, Bashir stood watching the caravan take shape. Harvest carts had carried grain. Wedding processions had carried music. These carts carried families. Many tasks remained unfinished. Families returned once more to the homes they had already emptied. Some paused at the doorway. There was still much left to carry, but there was no more space.

Omparkash walked through his house. The bookshelves stood where they always had. His writing desk remained beneath the window. A slate still rested upon it, exactly where one of the children had left it after the previous lesson. He picked it up, smiled to himself and put it back. There would be slates elsewhere. He hoped.

Across the lane, Nachatar stepped into the courtyard carrying a small plate. She walked from room to room, then stopped beside the mango tree they had planted together as a sapling in their first year of marriage. Each year, the fruits were plucked after the harvest. The tree was laden with raw mangoes. She plucked one gently. Before stepping out, Nachatar looked once around the courtyard. She lifted the small brass lota from the courtyard and placed it in the kitchen, as though setting the house in order for whoever might one day open its door again.

One old man hung his key upon the same nail where it had rested every night for years. "It will wait," he said.

His grandson looked up. "For us?"

"For whoever opens this door next."

The boy nodded as though that explained everything.

Kartar entered the gurdwara with Nachatar. They bowed and remained there for a while without speaking. When they rose, Kartar touched the threshold with his fingers before stepping outside. The old granthi said, "You'll return."

Kartar folded his hands. "Waheguru."

Omparkash walked to the small temple at the edge of the village. The bell rope hung beside the entrance. He rang it once, and the sound drifted across the village. He folded his hands and said a short prayer. When he stepped outside, he found Haji waiting. "Ready?"

Omparkash said, "Yes."

Together they walked back towards the road.

A little farther away, a young farmer, Satpal, stood beside the irrigation channel. Water flowed through the narrow cut in the earth. Almost absent mindedly, he bent down and cleared a small clump of grass that had begun blocking the flow. When he straightened, he smiled to himself and turned away.

One by one, families returned to the road. The houses stood behind them, each family having said goodbye in its own way. Children had settled into the carts while the older people found places wherever there was room. Only the dogs were unusually excited. They moved from cart to cart, tails wagging, barking whenever another bullock joined the line. Heera trotted proudly at the front of the caravan. His companions moved between the carts, sniffing bundles, greeting familiar faces and chasing one

another through the wheels until someone called them away. "They think we're going to the next village," Arun said.

Harjit smiled. "I wish we were."

The first cart creaked forward a few feet. The dogs bounded ahead, then raced back again. One young boy threw a piece of roti towards Heera. He caught it in midair and wagged his tail. "He's coming with us," the boy announced.

At the edge of the village, Bashir stood waiting with Haji beside him. With them were the few families who had chosen to remain. Kartar signalled the caravan to move on and walked towards Bashir. The two old friends stood facing one another. Bashir held out his hand. Kartar pushed it aside and embraced him. When they stepped apart, Bashir smiled. "You'll return."

Haji reached into his shawl and removed a small cloth bundle. "What is this?" Kartar asked.

"Seeds."

Kartar loosened one corner of the cloth just enough to see them, then tied it again.

"Wheat from the northern field," Haji said. "Plant them wherever you settle."

Kartar looked down at the bundle for several seconds before closing his fingers around it. Haji stepped forward and embraced him like a brother.

Kartar turned towards the people who had chosen to stay. "May Waheguru watch over you."

One of the older men smiled. "And may He bring you home."

Kartar returned to his place beside the leading cart. As the caravan moved on, the dogs ran with it. They went from one side of the road to

the other, barking at nothing in particular. When the village ended, a few slowed and stopped. They looked back, turned and returned home. They had followed carts this far many times before. This was where they always returned. But Heera did not stop. He kept pace beside the leading cart. Nirranjan called out. "Heera!"

The dog looked at him but continued. Nirranjan whistled. Heera wagged his tail and ran on. Nirranjan knelt in the middle of the road and scratched the old dog's neck. "You've done your duty."

Heera licked his hand. Nirranjan turned him towards the village. "Go home."

The dog stood looking first at Nirranjan, then at the moving caravan. Finally he trotted a few steps towards the village. Then he stopped. He looked back once more and disappeared between the houses. Nirranjan stood where he was until he could no longer see him.

Wooden wheels groaned beneath their loads. Bullocks settled into the steady pace they knew so well. Somewhere, a child laughed before being hushed by his mother. The road climbed gently after leaving the village. It was a rise so gentle that no one had ever thought about it. Many villagers had not gone past it. Bullock carts had creaked over it every harvest. Today it led them towards Lahore.

Chapter 22

WHERE THE ROAD PAUSED

The road stretched eastward beneath the growing warmth of the morning sun. The caravan moved steadily. Bullocks leaned into their yokes, their bells sounding with each step. The scouts rode ahead, pausing now and then to look back before urging their horses onward. Four horsemen brought up the rear. Able bodied men walked beside the carts, keeping an eye on the children, the cattle and the road ahead. Dust rose behind them, settling upon turbans, shawls and the bundles tied to the carts. No one noticed anymore.

Every village announced itself before its houses came into view. The first welcome always came from its dogs. They rushed towards the road barking at the strangers, determined to drive them away. After a distance, they stopped and watched before turning back to the village. A little girl sitting beside her mother watched them disappear. She called her father, who was walking beside the cart.

“Baba?”

“Yes, puttar?”

“You told me dogs bark at bad people.”

He smiled. “Sometimes they do.”

She pointed towards the dogs that had just turned back. "They barked at us. Have we become bad?"

He rested his hand against the side of the cart. "No, puttar."

"Then why did they bark?"

He looked towards the distant village, where the dogs had disappeared among the houses. "They were looking after their home."

She smiled. "Like Heera used to?"

"Just like Heera."

She thought about it. "They didn't come after us."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because they know where their village ends."

She turned towards the road behind them. "Even dogs know where home is?"

"Yes, they do."

The first hour passed easily enough. The children waved at horses grazing in distant fields, counted egrets rising from irrigation channels and watched shepherds moving their flocks along the roadside. Then the road became only a road. The fields began to look alike and dust settled over every face. A little boy swung his legs over the side of the cart. "Can I walk now?"

"You'll be tired in five minutes," his mother said.

"I won't."

"You will."

He climbed down anyway. Within a few hundred yards he was asking to be lifted back onto the cart. Another child leaned against her mother. "I'm thirsty."

"You've only just had water."

"I'm thirsty again."

"At the next village."

A baby, disturbed by the uneven road, began to cry. At once another baby answered from the next cart. Someone further along the caravan laughed. "They've started talking to each other."

Even the mothers smiled. "Ma," a little voice asked. "How much farther?"

Her mother rubbed her forehead. "I don't know."

"You said that in the morning."

"And it's still true."

The girl fell silent. A few minutes later she asked again. "When will we reach?"

Her mother closed her eyes briefly. "I've told you already."

The sharpness in her voice startled the child. She sat without another word.

Nachatar, travelling in the same cart, had heard it. She rested a hand on the young mother's arm. "Don't be harsh with them."

The woman looked embarrassed. "I didn't mean to."

"I know."

They moved in silence. Then Nachatar said softly, "We know why we're moving. They only know they've been taken away from play."

The young mother followed her gaze. One little girl had fallen asleep against a sack of grain, still clutching a cloth doll. "Be patient," Nachatar said. "They don't understand our troubles."

The young mother nodded. When her child asked again, a little while later, "How much farther?" she smiled instead. "We'll know when we get there."

The child was content with that answer.

The sun had climbed well above the trees by the time the scouts brought their horses to a halt. One turned in the saddle and pointed ahead. A cluster of trees stood a little distance from the road. Beyond them were the signs of another village: mud houses, a few smoke trails drifting into the still air and the outline of a small temple catching the sunlight. The caravan continued at its steady pace.

They had carried enough food for the journey, but the animals and people needed water. As the leading carts drew nearer, a few villagers looked up from their work. A farmer resting his plough beside a pair of bullocks shaded his eyes. Two women returning from the well slowed their steps. Children abandoned their game and watched the long line of carts.

No one appeared surprised. They had seen refugee caravans pass through during the past few weeks. As the first cart stopped, an elderly villager stepped onto the road. He folded his hands. "Namaste ji"

Kartar returned the greeting. "Sat Sri Akal."

"Have you been on the road a long while?"

"We left at sunrise."

The old man looked past him at the long line of carts. "Rest for some time and go farther after the sun softens."

Before Kartar could reply, the old man turned towards the village. "Bring water."

Two boys were already running towards the well. A woman changed direction and disappeared into her courtyard. Another called to someone inside her house. Kartar stepped forward. "You are very kind, but please don't trouble yourselves. We have enough with us."

The old man smiled. "You should save it."

He gestured to the children sitting in the carts. "They'll need it before this journey is over."

Before Kartar could repeat his refusal, people had begun moving. The two boys returned balancing buckets between them. Another followed with earthen pitchers filled with cool water. The bullocks were led to a large trough beneath the shade of the trees. "Let them drink first," an old farmer said. "They've got a lot more to do."

The weary animals lowered their heads eagerly into the water. A few younger men loosened the yokes and rubbed the bullocks' necks where the wooden beams had rested since morning. Women emerged from the houses carrying whatever they had found closest at hand. Some brought stacks of fresh rotis wrapped in cotton cloth. Others carried pots of lassi. One elderly woman arrived with a bucket of milk. "For the children," she said.

The children watched from a distance at first. Then they began talking to those who had climbed down from the carts, comparing marbles, spinning tops and homemade slings. An elderly villager smiled. "Thank Mahadev, we have enough to spare."

Several women arrived with more. One placed another bundle of warm rotis into Parvati's hands before she could refuse.

Near the rear of the caravan, a carpenter crouched beside one of the carts. He pressed both hands against the wheel. It rocked slightly. "Call Shiv."

A young man appeared soon. By then the blacksmith had arrived with his tools. Neither asked for permission. They set to work. Around them, someone brought fodder and someone else filled the water skins again. Children who had been listless an hour earlier were laughing beneath the trees, milk still clinging to their upper lips. The blacksmith turned the wheel. "The pin has worked loose."

He addressed the carpenter. "It won't take long."

One shaped a new wooden wedge while the other tightened the iron tyre with steady blows of his hammer. When the wheel was put back into place, the carpenter gave it a firm shake. It did not move. "Now it'll carry you farther."

Kartar stepped forward and pulled out some money from his kurta pocket. "You've saved us a great deal of trouble."

The young man refused it. "My name is Shivraj Sharma. If you bless me, I will be richer."

Kartar placed his hand gently upon the young man's head. "May Waheguru keep your heart kind."

As they prepared to leave, the young girl who had served lassi to Kartar and Omparkash came hesitantly towards Santosh. Her eyes fell upon the red dupatta around Santosh's shoulders. She touched its edge. "This colour is really good."

Santosh smiled. "It would perhaps suit you better."

She slipped it from her shoulders and held it out. "Keep it."

The girl stared at her. She took the green dupatta from around her own shoulders and placed it in Santosh's hands. "Then you must take mine."

They embraced briefly before the caravan moved on.

The hour had passed quickly. As the caravan began moving once more, a boy noticed an elderly man limping beside one of the carts. The leather strap of his slipper had torn away from the sole. The young man slipped off his own slippers and walked towards him. "Baba...Wear these"

The old man looked up. "And what will you wear, puttar?"

The young man looked down at his bare feet and shrugged. "My house is close by."

The old man tried to refuse. "I cannot take them."

The young man bent down and slipped them onto the elder's feet. "Please."

They fitted well. The old man placed his hand upon the young man's head. "May you never know the road we have walked."

The young man folded his hands. "Thank you, Baba."

The caravan had moved a short distance beyond the village before Kartar turned and looked back. "We never even asked the name of this place."

He noticed a young man bathing a buffalo near the edge of the village. "Puttar!" he called.

The young man looked up. "Yes, Babu ji?"

"What is the name of your village?"

The young man smiled. "Chak Dhol."

Kartar repeated it. "Chak Dhol."

Then he said softly, "We shall remember Chak Dhol."

By late afternoon, the outskirts of Lahore began to appear. The road grew busier. Bullock carts, tongas, cyclists and the occasional military lorry shared the highway. Smoke drifted above the city, and clusters of houses

appeared more frequently along the roadside. The caravan slowed. Everyone knew this was where they would separate. The railway station lay ahead for those travelling by train. The road beyond the city belonged to those who had chosen to stay with the cattle. The train party began unloading their carts. Bedding rolls, grain sacks, spare fodder, farming tools and heavy household utensils were lifted down and redistributed. Only what could be carried by hand would go onto the train. Each cart stood a little lighter. Harjit untied the yoke from his pair of bullocks and handed them over. "They answer to whistle," he said. "If they refuse to move, give them time."

The man took the reins. "I'll look after them."

Nearby, Omparkash rested his hand upon the neck of his buffalo. "I never thought I'd hand her to another man."

"She is yours," said the man. "I will hand her over to you at Amritsar."

One by one, the carts changed hands. Nachatar Kaur moved among the women. She embraced each one before placing a small packet of roasted gram or gur into waiting hands. "For the children."

Dharam Pal had operated a brick kiln in the village. He was travelling with all fourteen mules and three horses that worked at the kiln. He and his family had taken the road to Amritsar.

Niranjan looked towards the cattle being led away. "Bauji, let me go with them."

"No," Omparkash said firmly.

"They know me. They will be frightened."

"They will manage," said his father.

"I can keep them together."

His father shook his head. "You are coming with us."

Niranjan looked back at the cattle. "But who will look after them?"

"Someone will."

Niranjan tried to reason. "I promised Lal Singh I would bring them safely."

His father put a hand on his shoulder. "And I promised your mother I would bring you safely. Moreover, where will I look for you in Amritsar? We don't know the place, we have never been there. Come along."

He looked back once more at the cattle before following his father. Children clung to cousins they had played with since birth. They could not understand why they were suddenly taking different roads. Gopal, who had left his mother back in the village, stepped forward and embraced Kartar. "We'll meet in Amritsar."

"We shall," Kartar replied.

Harjit said, "Take care of the animals."

"You take care of the people," Replied the villager.

After everything had been transferred, the train party carried only what their own hands could bear. "We shall meet in Amritsar," they said more than once.

Then one group turned towards the railway station and the other followed the Grand Trunk Road eastwards. For a while, each group remained visible to the other. Then Lahore came between them.

Chapter 23

ALONE AMID THE CROWD

Finally they reached Lahore Junction. The city no longer resembled the Lahore Arun remembered. The station had become a human tide. Bullock carts clogged the approaches for more than a mile. Families sat upon trunks beneath walls blackened by coal smoke while exhausted children slept on the pavement beside piles of bedding and utensils. Railway whistles screamed above shouting porters, arguments and prayers. Arun stared as he walked. He had never imagined so many people could lose their homes at once.

Outside the station, men quarreled over bullock carts, horses and cattle left behind by refugee convoys rushing to board eastbound trains. Some claimed ownership. Others insisted the animals had been abandoned and now belonged to whoever could take them. Local strongmen, flanked by men carrying lathis, took possession of carts and livestock while no one was able, or willing, to stop them.

The village gathered closer. The children were kept in the centre. “Keep moving and stay together!” Harjit's voice rose above the confusion.

“Niranjan, stay beside Santosh,” Omparkash said.

Niranjan looked offended. “She is not a child.”

He muttered something else but obeyed. People and cattle from dozens of villages jammed the station road. Sikh families from Sheikhpura and Hindu traders from smaller canal settlements travelled with neighbours. Everywhere Arun looked, he saw the same exhausted faces. Near the outer station gate, British soldiers attempted to organise boarding lines. The lines dissolved whenever a train was announced. People surged forward as fear overcame patience.

A railway clerk shouted through a megaphone, "Only eastbound passengers on this platform!"

No one listened. Another train rolled through the station, overflowing with passengers hanging from doorways and windows. Every train looked impossibly full.

The village gathered near a cracked station wall beneath a patch of shade. Nachatar Kaur settled beside the other women and divided the remaining water among the children and asked Kartar to fetch more. The heat pressed down across the station yard. Coal smoke mixed with sweat and dust. Omparkash wiped his glasses and looked towards the crowded platforms. "We may wait all night."

Harjit shouted above the din. "No. We board the first train heading east."

"And if there is no room?"

"Then we push through and make space," he said firmly.

Around them, the station churned. A woman screamed when she realised one child was missing. Two porters fought over payment. An old man sat against a pillar clutching a birdcage with no bird inside. Parvati held Ganga's hand firmly. Later that afternoon, an eastbound refugee train was announced. The crowd surged towards the platform before the train had entered the station. Railway guards shouted as people pushed carts, children, trunks and elders through gaps barely wide enough to pass.

Harjit picked up Ganga while Arun and several younger men cleared a path ahead. "Move aside!"

"Children first!"

"Careful!"

People ran alongside the moving compartments before the train had fully stopped. Others pushed through windows and climbed into doorways. Beyond the crowd, two familiar figures searched the faces moving towards the train. Imran's eyes moved from one group of women to another. He saw Nachatar Kaur, then Parvati and Ganga. Sarita was nowhere. At the carriage door, he caught sight of Santosh helping children through a window. "Sarita?"

Santosh could not hear him. She saw his lips move, and gave a small shake of her head. Imran understood. She was not leaving with them. He was convinced that Sarita would leave her family and come to him. He was young, and in love. He could not imagine otherwise. Imran turned to Haji. "She isn't travelling with them."

Haji put a hand on Imran's shoulder. "You stay. I'll go back."

They parted without another word.

Harjit shoved through the crowd. "Inside! Quickly!"

One by one, the families were pushed into compartments already crowded. Women passed children through windows while bundles disappeared overhead. Voices called names constantly, each person making sure the others were still there. At one compartment entrance, an elderly Sikh collapsed against the platform wall, struggling for breath. People moved around him without stopping.

Harjit forced his way towards the old man. "Arun!"

Arun turned. "Take the others inside!"

Before Arun could answer, another wave of passengers struck the platform as more people rushed towards the train. The old man coughed blood into his beard. Harjit dropped to one knee beside him. "Water!"

Around them, the crowd continued to surge. Harjit and two men from another village hauled the old man into the compartment just as the train began to move. Men stood packed shoulder to shoulder in the doorways. Children sat upon luggage racks while women clutched bundles and sleeping infants.

Near the edge of the platform stood Haji Abdul Rahman. The crowd jostled him from all sides. He searched the moving train one last time, though he could no longer tell where the villagers were. The train gathered speed and carried the village out of sight.

Somewhere on the same platform stood Imran, alone amid the crowd.

Chapter 24

THE TRAIN

By the time the train finally pulled out of Lahore Junction, it no longer resembled an ordinary passenger train. Every compartment overflowed. People sat pressed shoulder to shoulder across wooden benches, luggage racks, floors and doorways. Men clung to the outer steps and window bars. Even the spaces between compartments held people.

Inside the carriage where the families had boarded, the air was stifling. Children cried from heat and exhaustion. Someone near the far corner whispered a prayer. More people tried to force themselves aboard before the train gathered speed. Arun stood near the compartment entrance, gripping the metal bar beside the door. Hot, dry wind struck his face as Punjab rolled past beneath the afternoon sun. Fields, canals and villages slipped past the windows. From a distance, the land looked unchanged.

Santosh sat pressed between two refugee women, clutching a sleeping child she did not know. Omparkash leaned against the wall with his eyes closed, his glasses safely inside his kurta pocket after nearly being crushed during boarding. Niranjana crouched beside the luggage stacks near the doorway, trying to appear calm. Outside, passengers saw abandoned bullock carts beside the tracks as the train continued eastward.

As the kilometres passed, the compartment grew quieter. Children whimpered in their sleep. Prayers were murmured softly. As the sun

lowered, the elderly Sikh began coughing again. Harjit steadied him. "Water."

Someone passed the cup. The old man tried to speak between breaths. "My son..."

"We'll find him later," Harjit said. "He may be in another compartment."

The old man barely whispered. "He did not board."

Harjit's expression changed, but he held a calm voice. "We'll look for him at Amritsar."

The train slowed unexpectedly. The compartment stiffened. Passengers lifted their heads. Hands tightened around luggage and children. "Why are we stopping?" someone whispered.

The train crawled forward for a while before halting completely somewhere between stations. There was no station noise. No porters. No announcements. Only the engine hissing ahead.

Arun looked out from the doorway. Many men armed with staves and rods moved beside the tracks. Fear moved through the train. Harjit was kneeling beside the elderly Sikh. The old man was still breathing unevenly. Harjit held a wet cloth against his forehead and trickled a little water between his cracked lips. Around them, people shifted, searching for space that did not exist. A woman near the opposite bench asked, "Will we reach Amritsar tonight?"

No one knew what to answer.

Outside, voices drifted faintly. They were indistinct at first. Then they grew nearer. Somewhere farther down the train, a woman screamed. Passengers on the roof shouted warnings. The words were lost beneath the noise, but the urgency was unmistakable. Then someone inside the compartment shouted: "They are climbing!"

Panic spread through the carriage. Before Harjit could force his way towards the door, Arun was already climbing up. “Arun!” Santosh shouted.

Niranjana followed instinctively. “Stay back!” Harjit roared.

Neither heard him above the shouting. Neither stopped. Then a hand appeared over the edge of the carriage roof.

Chapter 25

THE ROOF

The train moved again. The voices outside faded as it gathered speed. Arun pulled himself onto the roof. The evening wind struck his face, carrying dust and smoke. Ahead, figures moved across the roofs of the crowded carriages. They carried sticks and iron rods. Passengers below were shouting, but their words were lost in the noise. Without hesitation, Arun ran forward. Behind him, another figure appeared. Niranjan. “Go back!” Arun shouted.

Niranjan ignored him.

Steam, coal dust and tiny orange embers burst from the locomotive ahead. The roof swayed beneath them as the train sped past partly harvested fields. From inside the carriage, no one could see what was happening above. Then the train entered a long curve. Passengers at the windows saw dark figures running beside the train. Some tried to climb aboard. Others stumbled as they were struck. One by one, men fell off the roof and tumbled beyond the embankment. “People are falling,” someone whispered.

Six attackers had climbed aboard before the train pulled away. By the time Arun reached the carriage roof, two were already gone. One man pitched over the side, his scream swallowed by the roar of the train.

Another stumbled backwards under the blow of a heavy staff and disappeared into the dusk, dragging his attacker with him.

Four remained. Arun hauled himself over the edge. Niranjan scrambled up behind him. The roof seemed impossibly narrow. There was nowhere to go except forward. The nearest attacker stood only a few feet away, his back turned. Arun surged forward and drove both hands into the man's back. The man had not seen him and was taken by surprise. He pitched over the edge before he could turn. The other three spun around. Below, passengers saw two shadows collide. They could not tell who was fighting whom. Then one shadow broke away and disappeared. A murmur spread through the compartment. "One has fallen."

No one knew who.

Kartar stood rigid beside the doorway. Santosh gripped the edge of the bench with both hands. On the roof, the three remaining attackers closed in. Arun lunged at the nearest man before they could surround him. A heavy staff struck him across the chest. He staggered but caught hold of the attacker before he could strike again. The two men struggled across the swaying roof. By then Niranjan had reached them.

Another attacker rushed towards Arun with his staff raised. Niranjan drove his shoulder into him. The man reeled backwards, struggled for balance, windmilled his arms and disappeared from the roof. Two attackers remained.

Inside the compartment, Kartar had not moved. Then he raised his voice. "Bole So Nihal!" For a heartbeat everyone froze. Then the answer came from several directions. "Sat Sri Akal!" Again, "Sat Sri Akal!"

Even strangers joined the cry.

On the roof, Arun and Niranjan faced the two remaining men. One attacker swung his staff. Arun ducked, but the blow caught the side of his head. The world lurched. He dropped to one knee. The attacker raised

the staff again. Niranjan saw it and threw himself between them. The blow struck Niranjan across the shoulder. He staggered sideways. For an instant he seemed to lose his balance completely. Then he disappeared.

Beside the train, a figure fell from the roof. For the briefest moment, something red flashed past the carriage window. "Niranjan!" Santosh's scream tore through the compartment. Omparkash stared at her. He tried to push towards the doorway, but Kartar caught hold of him before he could reach it.

Outside, the fields raced past in the gathering darkness. On the roof, Arun collapsed. Blood ran down the side of his face. The two remaining attackers looked at him. Thinking him finished, they moved onto the next carriage.

The wheels continued their endless rhythm over the rail joints; metal against metal, mile after mile. Arun lay on the roof, fighting to stay conscious. Behind them, somewhere beside the railway tracks, lay Niranjan.

Chapter 26

THE LONGEST NIGHT

Night fell across Punjab. The train moved through the darkness while children cried against their mothers' shoulders until exhaustion silenced them one by one.

Somewhere farther down the carriage, Omparkash whispered prayers. He sat motionless against the wooden wall, staring at the doorway. Santosh sat beside him with her hands folded tightly in her lap. Parvati held her daughter close. No one knew whether Arun was still alive on the roof. No one could climb up while the train raced through the darkness.

Harjit had moved to the open doorway. One hand gripped the metal rail as the wind rushed past his face. Kartar joined him. "I should have been with them," Harjit said.

"No."

"I should have stopped them."

Kartar looked out into the darkness. "You could not have."

His father placed a hand upon his shoulder. "Sometimes you have no choice."

The train continued its rhythmic din. An hour later, the train slowed unexpectedly. Passengers stirred as the wheels ground against the rails.

Then the train stopped. There was no station or platform, only open countryside beneath the moonlight. Panic spread through the carriages.

Without a word, Harjit began climbing. No one stopped him. The metal roof was cold beneath his hands. Several exhausted passengers still lay scattered across the carriages. Some were motionless. Others stared blankly into the night. Near the centre of the carriage roof, he found Arun lying where he had fallen. Initially Harjit thought he was dead. Then he saw his chest rise. "Arun."

The young man opened his eyes. Recognition came first, then pain. "Where is Niranjana?"

The question was barely a whisper. Harjit did not answer. Arun closed his eyes and drew a painful breath. "He saved me."

With the help of two other passengers, Harjit carried Arun down into the compartment. Parvati covered her mouth. Santosh began to cry. Omparkash looked away.

Shortly before midnight, the lights of Amritsar appeared ahead. At first they seemed like scattered stars. Then more emerged: station lamps, camp lanterns, cooking fires and the glow of a city that had not slept for months. Long before the train stopped, they heard the station: crying children, voices calling names, volunteers shouting directions.

The train entered the station. Amritsar had become a city of refugees. Thousands crowded the platforms. Relief workers moved through the smoke carrying vessels of dal and stacks of rotis. Doctors worked beneath canvas shelters. Army patrols guarded the entrances. Volunteers directed people towards water stations and relief camps while workers recorded names of the missing.

Harjit stepped onto the platform followed by Kartar. Volunteers helped lower Arun and the old Sikh from the carriage. Omparkash descended next, followed by Parvati carrying her daughter. Santosh climbed down behind them, wearing the green dupatta and carrying the

small cloth bundle. Harjit saw her. She was walking directly behind Omparkash. Then the crowd closed around them.

A fresh train arrived on the neighbouring platform. Thousands of passengers pressed towards the water stations and relief kitchens. The village group moved towards the medical tents while volunteers carried Arun and the old Sikh. Kartar kept one hand on Omparkash's shoulder. The crowd thickened. Bundles struck shoulders. Children cried. Voices merged around them. A fresh wave of passengers poured across the platform. One could see only faces and bundles. Then the crowd loosened near the station exit. Harjit looked back. Santosh was gone. At first he assumed she had fallen behind. He searched for the green dupatta. Nothing. "Santo."

No answer. He turned. "Santo!"

People continued moving around him. Kartar saw his expression. "What is it?"

"She was here."

Harjit's voice had changed. "She was right behind us."

Omparkash looked around. Confusion crossed his face, then fear. Harjit pushed back through the crowd. "Santo!"

Nothing. Again, "Santo!"

Only strangers moving past him.

The search continued until exhaustion defeated it. Santosh had disappeared somewhere between the train and the medical camp. At the medical camp, volunteers laid Arun and the old Sikh on neighbouring stretchers. A doctor knelt beside the old man and felt for his pulse. "He's fading."

The old man opened his eyes and looked around the tent, as though searching for the faces he had lost at Lahore. "My family..."

Harjit took his hand. "We'll look for them."

The old man gave the slightest nod. His fingers tightened once around Harjit's hand. "Waheguru bless you, puttār. You did not leave me."

And his hand relaxed. The doctor drew the sheet gently over his face and turned to the next patient.

Arun died shortly afterwards. The doctor had known from the beginning that the skull fracture was too severe. Too much blood had been lost and there was nothing more he could do. Kartar stood beside him until the end. When he finally stepped outside the tent, Harjit rose. Kartar looked older than he had that morning. "He went peacefully," he said. There was nothing else to say.

Omparkash did not react immediately. The schoolmaster sat beneath the canvas shelter, staring into the darkness. Then he asked, "And Nirānjan?"

Kartar shook his head. That was answer enough. Something in the old man seemed to break. Nearby, Parvati pulled her daughter against her and broke into a helpless wail. The child began crying immediately. Nachatar Kaur moved beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. "Paro..."

Parvati did not respond. She remained folded around her daughter. Nachatar kept her hand there. Then, suddenly, Parvati smashed the glass bangles on her wrists against the bamboo pole beside her. The sharp crack disappeared into the noise of the camp.

The refugee camp outside Amritsar glowed beneath hundreds of lanterns. Thousands of displaced people tried to sleep on unfamiliar ground. Children cried for homes they would never see again. Men searched lists of missing names. Women whispered prayers. Around them, other families mourned their dead. And somewhere within that endless sea of canvas and dust, Santosh had vanished without a trace.

Chapter 27

COLLAPSE

With morning came queues near the water pumps as relief workers distributed grain. Refugee trains continued arriving from across the border. Children cried during the night. Babies were born. The camp carried on.

For Omparkash, time had stopped moving properly. The days after the death of his sons passed in a blur. He sat outside the tent most of the day on a folded towel beneath a patch of shade. Around him were rows of canvas shelters, cooking fires and people carrying metal utensils between the tents. Volunteers shouted instructions beside supply carts. He noticed little of it. Omparkash could not forget Niranjan standing beside the road, looking back at the cattle. *“Let me go with them, Bauji.”*

He had said no. At the time, he had believed he was keeping his son safe. Now, each time the memory returned, another thought came with it. *“I should have let him go.”* Omparkash never spoke those words aloud.

As the camp stirred to life, Nachatar Kaur prepared the morning meal over a shared fire. When the food was ready, she passed a roti and a cup of dal to Omparkash before serving the others. Kartar moved constantly through the camp. He arranged food, spoke to officials and searched each new list of arrivals for Santosh's name.

On the third morning after Arun's death, Kartar carried tea in two small metal cups. He handed one to his younger brother. For several minutes they sat without speaking. Then Omparkash asked softly, "Did we teach them wrongly?"

Kartar frowned. "What do you mean?"

Omparkash's fingers tightened around the cup. "All these years. History, civilization, morality..."

He gave a small smile that disappeared almost at once. "I told children that human beings learn from suffering."

Omparkash looked across the camp. "But what if they do not?"

A child ran past them barefoot through the dust, chasing a broken wheel rim with a stick. Somewhere farther away, a woman who had recently arrived from Multan called for a missing relative.

"I taught the Mauryas," Omparkash continued. "The Cholas, Mahavir, Nanak, Buddha. Men who taught us to be humane, to be compassionate. What should I have taught instead?"

Kartar had no answer. After a pause, Omparkash said, "When my wife died, I accepted it as the will of God. Fever does not hate."

His voice weakened. "But this..."

He looked down at his hands. "Arun and Niranjana are gone. Santo is lost somewhere among strangers."

After a short silence, he said, "Human beings chose this themselves."

Harjit worked constantly now. He helped unload relief supplies from military trucks and began carrying water for older refugees who found it difficult to stand in queues for long. By evening he was helping volunteers move the sick and the wounded towards the medical tents. The refugees had begun noticing him.

“The tall Sikh boy.”

“The one from the train.”

At night he slept only in fragments. Sometimes Kartar woke and found him sitting outside the tent, looking towards the railway tracks visible beneath the moonlight. Once, Kartar stepped outside near midnight and sat beside him. Harjit said, “I should have been on that roof.”

Kartar understood. “You were helping the sick man.”

Harjit stared into the dark. “Niranjan went up after Arun.”

Kartar remained silent. “They were fighting while I was still inside.”

Kartar looked at Harjit. “A man cannot stand in two places at once.”

Harjit said nothing. After a while Kartar added, “If you begin carrying every death yourself, you will not remain standing long enough to live your own life.”

Harjit stood and walked back into the tent.

Omparkash weakened rapidly, though not physically at first. He still walked to the water pumps each morning. He ate when food was placed before him and answered when spoken to, but something in him had given way. He spoke less as the days passed. Rain clouds gathered over the camp one late evening. The smell of wet earth came with the first drops. Refugees rushed to secure the canvas sheets against the wind. Nachatar hurried outside and saw Kartar gathering the wet clothes from the line. “Omni needs you.”

Inside the tent, Kartar moved the bedding away from a leaking corner while Harjit secured the ropes outside. Omparkash sat watching the rain. “It sounds the same,” he murmured.

Kartar sat down beside him. “The rain,” Omparkash added. “Back in the village... first on the neem leaves, then in the courtyard.”

His eyes remained fixed somewhere beyond the tent. "Do you remember how Niranjan used to run outside when the first rain came?"

Kartar almost smiled. "Yes."

Omparkash looked at him. "And Arun... do you remember?"

His voice weakened. "You were always complaining about the roof leaking."

Kartar realised that his brother was no longer fully aware of where he was. "Ji Bauji," he replied.

The rain drummed harder on the canvas. Omparkash spoke again. "I cannot see clearly."

He paused, breathing with difficulty. "But thankfully Niranjan is here."

Kartar looked at him. His brother was clearly hallucinating and his breathing had changed. "Omni?"

Omparkash's eyes were half closed. "When we left..." He stopped to catch his breath. "I hope we brought everything with us."

Thunder rolled across the dark sky. After a moment he whispered, "The village... the house... everyone."

Then he seemed to hear something else. "Santo, close the door. The drizzle is reaching me."

"I will Bauji," Nachatar whispered.

Omparkash smiled. His hand moved across the bedding until it found Kartar's. Kartar took it. Omparkash held his brother's hand tightly. Then his fingers loosened.

Parvati bowed her head over her father-in-law's hand, her shoulders shaking. Nachatar gently closed Omparkash's eyes. The rain continued through the night. Inside the tent, Kartar sat beside his brother's body

while Harjit stood near the entrance, listening to the water striking the canvas. Beyond the camp, trains continued arriving in the darkness, bringing more refugees and more names to the lists of the missing. Near dawn, Kartar rose and covered his younger brother with the blanket. Then he stepped outside into the rain soaked camp.

Only now, since leaving the village, was Kartar beginning to understand how much of it had already been lost.

Chapter 28

CANVAS CITY

The refugee camp outside Amritsar had once been farmland. Kartar could still see traces of it beneath the tents. The earth was level where wheat had once grown. Here and there, broken irrigation channels ran beneath rows of canvas shelters.

The camp had grown into something resembling a town. Families from Lahore, Sheikhpura, Gujranwala, Rawalpindi, Lyallpur and Multan lived among bedding rolls, tin trunks and cloth bundles stacked beside temporary shelters. Each tent held a different story.

The trains kept arriving. Each morning new groups entered the camp carrying the same expressions Kartar had begun to recognise; exhaustion first, then disbelief. Government officials tried to maintain order, but the numbers were too large. Relief workers moved between food distribution points, water pumps and medical tents. Soldiers stood near supply trucks whenever grain or food arrived. A week later Ganga asked when Arun would return.

“Not today,” Parvati replied.

“Tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Next week?”

“No.”

“Then when?”

Parvati hesitated. Before she could answer, Ganga noticed a squirrel racing outside the tent. “Look!”

She ran off. The question remained in her mind. It returned every few days, sometimes while eating, sometimes before sleeping, sometimes in the middle of another conversation. At her age, Ganga could be distracted easily.

Harjit spent most of his days lifting sacks, though nobody had asked him to. He had started helping and never stopped. By afternoon his kurta was soaked with sweat and dust clung to his arms and beard. Kartar sometimes watched him from a distance, then looked away.

Nearby, Nachatar Kaur washed clothes beside a shallow drainage channel with the other women. They spread them across ropes strung between bamboo poles before returning to their tents.

One day Kartar took a paper from the registration office and wrote his first letter to Haji Abdul Rahman Khan. He described only the essentials; they had reached Amritsar alive, Omparkash had died in the camp, Santosh went missing, and that Harjit and Paro were safe. At the end he wrote that they were living in the refugee camp outside Amritsar, with no permanent address to call their own.

One morning, while Kartar waited near the ration lines, a quarrel broke out between two refugee families over their places at the water pump. Both men were exhausted and hungry. Within seconds, they were pushing one another. Kartar stepped between them. “Bas.”

His voice was firm and both men stopped. “You are fighting over water,” Kartar said. “Not land or honour. Water.”

Neither answered. “Tomorrow you may stand beside each other again, needing help.”

One man lowered his eyes. The other stepped back. The quarrel ended. An old refugee woman nearby remarked, "Sardarji is right." She approached him with her problem. "Sardarji, they have put my name down as a widow. My husband is missing, but I don't know that he is dead. They say I cannot get rations unless I accept it."

Kartar asked, "When did you last see him?"

"Three months ago. At the station."

Kartar looked toward the man keeping the records. "Can nothing be done?"

The official was firm in his stance. "We need proof of death. Without it, I cannot change the record. I have hundreds of cases waiting."

Kartar could see that the man was already stretched beyond what he could manage. "All right. I understand."

He turned back to the old woman. "Come here tomorrow morning. I will see what I can do."

The next morning, Kartar took her to the district office and asked to see the officer in charge of refugee rehabilitation. He explained the woman's situation and asked whether a missing person could be recorded as missing rather than presumed dead, without depriving the family of their ration. The officer listened, checked the regulations and wrote a letter to the clerk handling the records. Kartar carried it back to the camp. "Keep her husband's name on the missing persons register," it mentioned. "Issue the ration card in her name. If the man is found, the record can be corrected."

Three days later she visited Kartar. "They have given me the ration card," she said, holding it out as though it were something precious.

Kartar smiled. "Keep it safe."

She folded her hands. "Thank you, Sardarji."

Kartar shook his head. "Don't thank me. That was your right."

After that, people began approaching him.

"Sardarji, can you read this paper?"

"Sardarji, my son is missing."

"Sardarji, the officials are not listening."

"Sardarji, can families share one tent?"

At first Kartar resisted. "I am only another refugee."

People listened politely and returned the next day with another problem. The missing person lists grew longer near the central registration tent. Sheets of paper hung from ropes tied between bamboo poles. Names written hurriedly in Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi and occasionally in English, covered every page. Missing daughters, separated children, old parents left behind during attacks, brothers lost at railway stations... Each evening Kartar stood near the lists, helping those who could not read.

Once, Kartar saw a child who had broken his arm while playing in the camp. There was no medical help, and the boy's father had tied his hand to a stick, hoping the bone would set. Kartar visited the hospital the next day and asked if any of the doctors could spare a few hours for the camp. Two agreed, and Kartar thanked them profusely. Every evening, after finishing their duties at the hospital, the two doctors made their way to the refugee camp.

The next evening a camp official approached him while he was helping an elderly refugee read a notice. "You are Kartar Singh?"

"Yes."

The official glanced towards the crowd around the registration tent. Several people were waiting nearby. One needed help finding relatives. Another was struggling with government forms. A third wanted to know

about tent allocations. The official gave a tired smile. "You seem to have acquired responsibilities."

A few refugees laughed. Kartar did not. "I have acquired problems."

Over the following days the pattern continued. People arrived with questions about missing sons, disputed ration cards, widows unable to collect supplies and relatives believed to be somewhere near Jalandhar. Most problems had no easy solution. Some had no solution at all. Kartar listened before speaking. He never promised what he could not deliver.

Each morning he rose before dawn. He washed near the hand pump while the eastern sky was still grey, tied his turban and walked through the camp before most people were awake. Fires were already burning outside some tents. In the mornings, Nachatar Kaur could be seen sweeping the small patch of ground before preparing the meal. Women kneaded dough. Somewhere a child coughed in the cold air.

Weeks passed. The canvas sagged with use. Bamboo supports were strengthened with rope and scrap wood. Small mud stoves appeared outside tents. Refugees planted coriander and chillies near the drainage lines. Parvati had found her own way of keeping busy. During the afternoons she sat with a group of women outside her tent, mending torn clothes, knitting woollen caps for children and teaching basic stitching to younger women. Soon refugee families began bringing damaged garments for repair. A few paise, and occasionally an anna, changed hands. It was little, but the work gave Parvati something to do.

Harjit also found work. Every evening, after spending the day helping at the camp, he crossed the road to a small dhaba near the station. For a few hours he carried buckets of water, washed utensils, served rotis and cleared tables until the last customers left. The wages paid for vegetables, kerosene and the daily milk for little Ganga.

Meanwhile, the missing person registration tent grew larger. Several volunteers now sat there permanently, recording names in ledgers. Notices

from other refugee camps arrived daily. Children separated during train journeys were brought there before being placed in temporary care. Kartar had helped organize the system, though nobody had appointed him to do so. One evening a government officer arrived from the city administration carrying files. He was young, educated and visibly exhausted. "You are Kartar Singh?"

Kartar looked up from the registration desk. "Yes."

The officer examined the ledgers arranged across the table. "These records... who organized this?"

Kartar shrugged. "People were searching without direction."

The officer turned several pages. "These are better than some district offices."

Harjit, stacking forms nearby, smiled. The officer stayed for nearly an hour, reviewing the camp arrangements: missing persons, food lines, medical queues and tent allocations. Finally he said, "You should work with the administration officially."

Kartar refused. "I already work."

A few days later the officer returned with an appointment letter. The camp administration wanted Kartar to assist with refugee registration. Kartar thanked him and declined. "Give it to someone younger."

The officer looked surprised. Kartar said, "If I wear the government's badge, people will think I belong to one side of the table. Let me remain where anyone can approach me."

The young officer folded the letter. He seemed to understand. As he walked away, another refugee was waiting beside Kartar's table with a folded piece of paper. "Sardarji," the man said hesitantly, "can you help me read this?"

Kartar unfolded the paper. The work continued.

Chapter 29

THE DOCTORS

Winter arrived over the refugee camp. Mornings came with pale fog drifting across the canvas shelters and muddy lanes. Fires burned earlier now. Refugees sat close to small clay stoves, warming their hands while waiting for the day's water distribution. Children coughed through the cold air. Blankets became almost as important as food.

Illness spread quickly. Fever, dysentery, chest infections and untreated wounds filled the small medical tent near the centre of the camp. The two doctors worked until exhaustion showed on their faces. The older doctor was Dr. Anand Lal Sharma. Before Partition he had maintained a successful private practice near Lahore. He worked quietly and methodically, rarely looking up from his patients. The younger doctor, Dr. Gurdev Singh Gill, was from Multan. He had remained there during the riots while completing his hospital training and had crossed over only weeks earlier with his surviving sister. Gurdev spoke constantly; to nurses, frightened children, old women who refused medicine, volunteers carrying stretchers and sometimes to himself.

Every evening, after finishing their duties at the civil hospital in Amritsar, both doctors visited the refugee camp and the camp had begun depending on them. One night rainwater leaked through the roof of the medical tent while patients continued arriving. Kartar stood outside

helping organize the waiting line. Inside, lanterns cast shadows across the canvas walls as nurses moved between the cots carrying steaming water and folded cloth strips. A child burned with fever near the far corner. An old refugee coughed blood into a rag. A pregnant woman lay trembling beneath blankets.

Two refugee women who had worked as midwives before the migration now helped the doctors with many of the nursing duties. When labour pains or fever struck during the night, they were often the first to arrive. The doctors called them *Didi*. Before long, the whole camp did too.

Late one night, the doctors sat on wooden crates while one of the women poured tea into metal cups. Dr. Sharma removed his spectacles and rubbed his tired eyes.

“This cannot continue.”

Kartar looked towards him. “There are more patients every day,” the older doctor said. “We are treating people in darkness with inadequate staff. How much can be done with two didis?”

Gurdev leaned against the tent pole. “And no sleep.”

One of the Didis laughed. “You complain every night and still return the next evening.”

Gurdev accepted the tea. “Yes. That is my tragedy.”

The next afternoon, Kartar met a refugee widow from Gujranwala who had once worked at a mission dispensary. She now spent most of her days near the missing person tents, hoping for news of two brothers. Kartar sat beside her beneath a tree. “Can you still work?”

The woman looked confused. “As what?”

“As a nurse.”

Purpose replaced the grief on her face. “I have forgotten much.”

“You will remember.”

That evening she reported to the clinic. Two days later Kartar found another woman willing to help. Young and frightened, she had completed the eighth standard at the village school in Chak Dara and was staying with her grandfather. Everyone else she knew was gone. Gurdev protested. “She is a child.”

“She will learn,” Kartar replied.

By the end of the week, the girl was sterilizing instruments, preparing dressings and carrying messages between the cots. She still made mistakes and needed guidance, but each day she became a little more confident.

The clinic began to function more smoothly. Kartar soon realized that the Didis were spending their days caring for the sick and injured, with little thought given to how they would manage their own lives. He approached several local traders who had begun supplying the camp with food, cloth and other necessities. “These women are keeping the clinic running,” he told them. “They cannot live on gratitude.” After some discussion, the traders agreed to contribute a small amount each month to pay the Didis. It was not much, but it gave them something they could depend on. Kartar kept no part of the money and the payments went directly to the women. The small monthly payments gave the women a sense of security and encouraged other midwives in the camp to come forward. Soon there were six Didis working at the clinic, enough to serve the needs of the camp.

Late one evening, Dr. Anand Sharma sat outside the clinic smoking beside Kartar. Fog had settled over the camp. Lanterns glowed between the tents. Somewhere in the distance, a child laughed unexpectedly. The sound startled both men. Anand exhaled smoke. “Do you know what frightens me most?” Anand continued, “That one day all this will become normal.”

Kartar watched the fog. “It already has.”

The doctor lowered his cigarette. "What does that mean?"

Kartar thought before answering. "The sick are being treated. The hungry are being fed. The dead are being cremated. What more normal can it get?"

A week later, Gurdev sat against a wooden crate and removed his spectacles with trembling fingers. "We cannot continue like this," he muttered. "There are too many."

Kartar handed him water. Gurdev drank and looked across the camp. "We spend the entire day at the civil hospital, then come here until night. Soon neither place will have doctors."

Kartar was silent for a moment. "Please do not leave. These people have no one else."

The doctor gave a weary laugh. "And what do we eat? Idealism?"

Kartar did not hesitate. "Yes."

The answer surprised Gurdev into silence. Kartar continued. "In difficult times, someone must continue to hold on."

Gurdev looked at him. "You speak like a schoolmaster."

"Not me. My brother was."

"His name?"

"Omparkash."

"Is he here?"

"No. He died a few days ago. Here in the camp."

The doctor muttered a small condolence. The two doctors continued returning each evening after hospital duty. Medicine was scarce and the work was exhausting. One night Dr. Sharma emerged from the tent rubbing his aching neck.

“You have trapped us,” he said to Kartar.

Kartar looked mildly surprised. “How?”

“We now work two jobs.”

Kartar handed him a cup of hot tea. The doctor accepted it with a smile. “I treated wealthy men in Lahore before all this.”

“And now?” asked Kartar.

The doctor looked at the long queue of patients. “Now I know why I became a doctor.”

Beyond the clinic, lanterns glowed through the fog. Inside the tent, another patient called for the doctor.

Chapter 30

THE AMBULANCE

The tongawalas became part of the effort without anyone planning it. One freezing morning, a man collapsed near the grain lines, coughing heavily. He fell face first into the mud. The hospital was too far to carry him by hand. Before anyone could decide what to do, a blue tonga rolled through the crowd. The driver, a lean man with a few greying strands in his beard, climbed down. "Put him in."

Kartar hesitated. "We have no money."

The driver looked genuinely offended. "Did I ask? Tell me where to go."

Together they lifted the unconscious man into the tonga. The driver snapped the reins and disappeared towards the city through the fog.

That evening he returned. The next day he came again. Soon his brother joined him with a second tonga, this one white. Before long, people in the camp recognized the sound of the wheels moving through the muddy lanes, the horses' breath steaming in the cold air and hooves striking the ground. They knew what the sound meant. Someone needed the hospital. By the end of the month, everyone in the camp knew the tongawala brothers, Hiralal and Pannalal. At night, the sound of their tongas moving quickly through the muddy lanes often meant another journey to the city hospital.

One cold evening, after the last patient had been taken to the civil hospital and the camp had grown quieter, Kartar found the two brothers tending their horses beside the tongas. "Thank you," Kartar said.

The older brother shrugged. "You would have done the same."

Harjit arrived carrying a kettle of hot tea. The four men sat on overturned wooden crates while the horses ate nearby. They spoke of ordinary things; the cold, the muddy roads and the patients who seemed to arrive without end. Then the conversation turned to horses, as conversations often did among men who had lived with them for years.

After a short silence, Kartar turned towards the older brother. "You never charge anyone. Why?"

The man smiled faintly. "We used to run tongas in Lahore."

Harjit looked up. "Outside Lahore Junction," Pannalal added. "If you arrived by train, you probably saw us."

"It was a good life," Hiralal said. "Railway passengers, weddings, markets, Anarkali, the Mall. We worked hard and we never lacked food."

"When the trouble began," Pannalal continued, "we left before the worst of it. We thought we were leaving early enough. We travelled with our families on the tongas. In the afternoon we stopped near a pond so the horses could drink."

He added fodder to the bag hanging from the white mare's head. "We led them a short distance away. When we came back..."

Hiralal finished the sentence. "The tongas were there. They were gone. We had only the horses and tongas."

A long silence followed. "We searched until nightfall," Pannalal continued. "Then we found the five boys."

Hiralal looked down. "They were lying in blood, nearly a kilometre from the tongas. They were young, but old enough to understand the

danger. They had fought. They had tried to protect their mothers and the three sisters.”

Pannalal took a breath. “Then for another day, and another. Roads, police camps, hospitals,” he said. “Everywhere. We never found them.”

The horses shifted behind them. Harjit stared into his cup. “You never learned what happened?”

Both brothers shook their heads. “No.”

Kartar gestured at the tongas. “Why keep them?”

Hiralal smiled sadly. “What else was left?”

“Someone still had to feed the horses,” Pannalal said.

“And once we reached Amritsar,” Hiralal continued, “we realized it was the only livelihood we knew.”

“So you rebuilt your lives,” Harjit said.

Hiralal looked across the camp. “Our lives? No. We built our lives around the tongas.”

A cold wind moved across the camp. “We have no families to provide for anymore,” Pannalal said. “The two of us need very little.”

Hiralal continued, “So we decided that whatever remained of our lives would belong to people who had suffered as we had.”

Hurried footsteps approached. “Hira! Panna!”

A volunteer was running towards them. “A child has fallen.”

The brothers were on their feet before he had finished. Pannalal gathered the reins while Hiralal climbed onto the driver's seat. The blue tonga rolled into the darkness. Kartar watched it disappear between the lanterns.

Over the following weeks, the tongas became part of the camp. Children knew where to find them. The doctors knew the brothers by name. When an emergency arose, someone called for a tonga.

A labourer fell from a supply truck while unloading sacks of grain. Before the crowd had fully gathered, the blue tonga was already moving through the camp. Another evening, a woman went into difficult labour during heavy rain. The white mare arrived through the mud with a lantern swinging beneath the carriage. The journeys were never charged and no accounts were kept.

Chapter 31

THE MISSING

By spring, the missing person registration centre had become one of the busiest places in the camp. Every morning, before food distribution began, people gathered there carrying scraps of paper, faded photographs and half remembered details repeated so often that they had become fixed in their minds. “A girl from Sheikhpura, about twelve years old. A scar near the wrist. Last seen near Karol Bagh...”

The volunteers wrote everything down: name, age, relatives, village and last known location. Kartar had organized the system over several weeks. At first there had been loose lists pinned beneath the canvas. Now there were ledgers arranged by district, notice boards grouped by railway routes and separate sections for children, women and elderly refugees. Government officials from nearby camps had begun sending copies of their records for cross checking.

The work never ended. But sometimes it succeeded. A mother found her son after two months. Two brothers from Gujranwala recognized each other's names on adjacent lists. An old man discovered that his daughter's family had reached Jaipur safely. Each reunion brought others back to the registration centre the next morning. Harjit often worked beside Kartar, sorting reports from railway stations and transit camps farther south. He had become methodical and quiet. His hand sometimes stopped over the

ledger. He would look away, wipe his eyes and continue writing. Kartar noticed. One night, while they were returning to their tent, he said, "We still look for her in every crowd."

"How do we stop?" Harjit asked.

Kartar replied, "We cannot."

The registration system soon expanded beyond the camp. Refugee convoys travelling towards Delhi, Jaipur and Ambala carried copies of the missing person lists. Notices were exchanged between railway stations. Relief workers forwarded names from women's shelters where women had been placed under protection. One morning, the young district officer arrived carrying a fresh stack of documents tied with cloth string. "Delhi reports," he said.

Harjit took them from him. The officer looked exhausted. "The numbers are impossible now. Thousands separated during transport."

That evening Harjit worked late beneath the lantern light, sorting the Delhi reports. Most entries began to blur after hours of reading. Unknown child. Missing mother. Unidentified elderly man. Then his fingers stopped. The entry was from a women's shelter near Old Delhi. *Female, approximate age twenty. Recorded name: Santo. Transferred from a refugee convoy to a Purana Qila Women's Shelter in Delhi.*

Harjit stared at the page. Kartar looked up. "What is it?"

Harjit handed him the paper without speaking. The description was incomplete. The name could have belonged to someone else. After months of nothing, it was enough to make them look again.

"She may still not be our Santo," Harjit said.

Kartar folded the paper. "No."

But his voice had changed.

The next morning Kartar walked to the district office. The building stood near the railway administration quarters outside the camp, crowded with clerks processing refugee records. The young officer recognized him. "Sardarji."

Kartar handed him the shelter report. "I need confirmation."

The officer read it. "This may take time."

"I will wait."

He waited for more than six hours through the noise of typewriters and the constant movement of the crowded office. At last the officer returned carrying another paper. "The record is genuine," he said. "A woman calling herself Santo was admitted to the Purana Qila Women's Shelter in Delhi."

Harjit, who had arrived later that afternoon, stood immediately. "When?"

The officer checked the paper. "Three weeks ago."

Harjit's hand tightened around the edge of the table. "She is alive?"

"She was when she reached the shelter."

Kartar pointed towards the address. "Can we find her?"

The officer looked at the paper. "Not from here. You will have to go to Delhi."

That evening the camp looked as it had every other evening, muddy and full of people waiting. Kartar emerged from the tent carrying tea. Harjit took a cup.

"We will go to Delhi," Harjit said.

Kartar was practical as ever. "For that we need to save whatever money we can."

For the first time in months, they had somewhere to look. Harjit stared into the darkness. He was no longer wondering whether Santosh was alive. He was wondering how far away she was.

After months of searching railway platforms, reading death lists and asking strangers for news, they finally had a name and a place. Santosh might still be alive in Delhi.

Chapter 32

DELHI

The relocation orders arrived in early summer. For weeks, rumours had moved through the camp that large groups of refugees would soon be shifted farther inland; to Delhi, Ambala, Jaipur, Lucknow, Agra and other cities. Nobody trusted such rumours anymore until the notices actually appeared on the wooden boards outside the administrative tents. This time they did.

The transfers were voluntary, and families could choose from the destinations which suited them. Some preferred to remain near Punjab, hoping they might one day reclaim their homes. Others chose towns where distant relatives might still be found. Harjit scarcely considered the choices. “Delhi,” he said.

Kartar agreed. “If there is even the smallest chance of finding her, we go there.”

Neither considered another destination. Several hundred refugee families were to leave for Delhi within three days. The announcement spread quickly through the camp lanes. Some welcomed it. Others grew anxious. Refugees had begun to fear movement itself. Every train carried memories now; of burned stations and crowded compartments, of people who had disappeared somewhere along the way. The camp changed mood over the next two days. Families packed their few belongings once more.

Canvas shelters were dismantled and utensils tied into cloth bundles. Children were repeatedly told not to wander away.

Parvati spent much of those two days finishing work she had promised others. Shawls and children's sweaters were returned, and many bundles of repaired clothing collected by their owners before departure. Several women came to thank her and asked whether she would continue the stitching work in Delhi.

Parvati smiled. "First we have to find somewhere to live." But as she packed her belongings, she realized that the work she had begun in the camp could travel with her.

Kartar continued helping at the clinic until the final evening before departure. Dr. Sharma would remain in Amritsar, having accepted a government hospital posting. Gurdev planned to continue to Delhi after another month. On the final night, the two doctors sat with Kartar and Harjit outside the medical tent, drinking tea beneath the lanterns.

Dr. Sharma adjusted his spectacles and turned towards Harjit. "What will you do in Delhi?"

Harjit looked up. "Work, and find Santosh."

Departure morning arrived. Kartar walked once more to the clinic. Near the entrance stood the blue tonga. Hiralal and Pannalal were preparing another journey to the civil hospital. The brothers folded their hands in farewell before climbing aboard. The tonga disappeared into the streets of Amritsar, carrying another patient towards the hospital.

Dust rose as columns of refugees moved towards the railway station under police supervision. Soldiers walked alongside the groups carrying rifles. This train looked different from the one that had carried them out of the village months earlier. Yet people boarded cautiously. Kartar climbed into the compartment with Harjit beside him, carrying their bedding rolls and small metal trunk. The carriage filled steadily. A widow

from Rawalpindi recognized Kartar. "Sardarji, here? Sit near us," she said.

More familiar faces from the camp gathered around them.

The train moved shortly after dawn. No one talked much. When the train gathered speed, women held their children closer. Punjab rolled past beneath the harsh summer sunlight. Fields, canals, dusty roads and scattered refugee settlements passed outside the windows. At one halt near Ludhiana, the train stopped beside another convoy travelling in the opposite direction. For some time the two trains stood side by side. Muslim refugees looked out from one train. Sikh and Hindu refugees looked out from the other. Faces met across the space between the carriages. Children, old men, women holding bundles, people who might easily have been travelling in the opposite direction.

Then the whistles sounded and the trains began moving again, each in its own direction. Harjit continued looking out of the window long after the other train had disappeared. Kartar sat beside him. "Once," he said, "we travelled these roads and rails together."

The city announced itself long before the station appeared. Factories, smoke, crowded settlements and roads thick with carts and bicycles stretched in every direction. Refugees pressed towards the carriage windows. Most had never seen a city this large. Even Kartar, who had visited Lahore several times, felt overwhelmed. The train rolled into the crowded station beneath clouds of steam and noise. Platforms overflowed with coolies, relief workers, vendors and newly arrived refugees. Loudspeakers crackled. Porters shouted. Children cried. Tea sellers moved through the crowd. Life simply continued.

Harjit climbed down carrying the trunk. Then he turned automatically and held out his hand for Kartar. The old man accepted it without protest. Nachatar followed, with Parvati close behind carrying Ganga in her arms.

The little girl looked around in wide eyed wonder. “Do they all live in this station?”

Parvati managed the faintest smile and brushed a strand of hair from the child's forehead. “No. Most are like us, looking for someone, or looking for a place to begin again.”

They stood together on the crowded Delhi platform. Somewhere in Delhi, a government ledger said that a woman called Santo had been alive three weeks earlier. They had come to find out whether she was indeed their Santosh.

Chapter 33

SANTO

Delhi did not welcome people, it swallowed them. The city moved too quickly for mourning. Refugees arriving from Punjab, Sindh and the Frontier entered a place already overflowing with clerks, labourers, traders, government officers and thousands of displaced families looking for a foothold in unfamiliar streets. Harjit carried the trunk through the crowd while Kartar followed with their bedding rolls. Around them, refugees moved in exhausted clusters behind relief officials carrying signboards for different transit camps. “Kingsway Camp, Karol Bagh, Military Barracks...”

Voices rose constantly above the station noise. A volunteer approached them. “Lahore district?”

The man pointed towards a waiting convoy of military trucks outside the station yard. “Registration first, temporary accommodation later.”

Outside, Delhi struck them with heat and dust, both familiar enough. What was new was the smoke and petrol fumes. Buses rattled past, overflowing with passengers, while tonga bells sounded continuously. Refugees slept beneath trees, beside walls and along pavements near government buildings. The transit camp assigned to them stood near a cluster of old military barracks on the northern edge of the city. Compared to Amritsar, the structures seemed almost permanent: brick walls, tin roofs

and narrow rooms instead of canvas tents. Families partitioned rooms with hanging sheets and cardboard. Cooking fires burned in open courtyards between the barracks. Children played barefoot through dust lanes lined with drying clothes and stacked refugee trunks. A government clerk sat beneath a ceiling fan near the entrance recording arrivals.

“Name?”

“Kartar Singh.”

“How many members?”

“Five.”

The clerk glanced up. “Just five?”

Kartar answered, “Yes. Just five.” The number brought back all those who were no longer with them.

Their allotted room contained two charpoys, one cracked window and a chair. They did not wait to settle in. That afternoon Kartar and Harjit made their way to the Purana Qila Women's Shelter whose report had first mentioned Santosh months earlier. The superintendent searched through several worn ledgers before finding the entry. “Yes,” she said. “The girl was here.”

Harjit's heart quickened as she turned another page. “She left with someone named Madan Lal. The departure was recorded as voluntary.”

“Where did they go?” Harjit asked.

The superintendent shook her head. “There is no address.”

She showed them the register. Beside Madan Lal's name, the space for forwarding details was blank. “Surely someone would know where he settled.”

The woman gave a smile. “Thousands passed through here. Some went to government colonies, some to relatives, some to other cities. Once they left, we rarely heard from them again.”

They had followed their only lead, and it had ended there. Back at their room, they unpacked the few belongings they had carried from Amritsar. Parvati looked up as soon as they entered. Kartar told them what they had learned. Neither woman spoke. Parvati returned to the clothes she had been folding while Nachatar Kaur put away the bedding they had only just unpacked.

For the next several days Kartar and Harjit searched wherever they could. They visited refugee camps, rehabilitation offices, gurudwaras and registration centres across Delhi. There were many men named Madan Lal in the records, but no way of knowing which one, if any, had taken Santosh from the shelter. Every enquiry ended the same way; no address, no forwarding information. At last Kartar folded the shelter record and slipped it into his pocket. “She was alive when she left here,” he said.

Harjit was silent for a moment. “But she could be anywhere now... or even nowhere.”

Within a few days Kartar wrote again. He did not know whether his first letter had reached the village. This time he wrote from the Delhi transit camp, telling Haji that they had been moved south and that they still had no permanent address.

Tiny shops appeared near the barracks selling tea, soap, cloth and vegetables. Nachatar decided to open a small grocery shop of her own. Harjit made a wooden counter for her and she began with flour, lentils, oil, salt, tea, soap and matches. It was little more than a corner of the barracks, but people soon began coming to her for their daily needs. She remembered every credit sale and told Parvati about it each evening. Parvati kept the accounts, and Nachatar made sure no one forgot what they owed.

Parvati quickly discovered that Delhi had no shortage of stitching work. Women from the barracks began bringing her torn garments and children's clothes for repair. Some of the younger women she had taught in Amritsar continued helping her in the afternoons. The earnings were small, but the work had travelled with her.

Children carried slates under their arms towards temporary schools operating wherever space could be found. Around them, the machinery of resettlement slowly took shape: ration cards, forms, employment offices and compensation claims. Within days Harjit found temporary work at a refugee registration office near Civil Lines. The officials needed educated men who could read both Punjabi and Urdu records. Endless files passed through the office every day; property claims, missing person reports, employment requests and housing allocations. Harjit worked from morning until evening, carrying ledgers, organizing records and helping those who could not fill out the forms themselves. The work exhausted him differently from camp labour, but it paid a small daily wage.

Each file represented another broken life. A merchant from Lahore claiming compensation for a burned down shop. A widow from Rawalpindi searching for land records. A teacher requesting school placement after losing three children during migration. Sometimes the stories blurred together. Harjit remained patient, and the officials noticed.

Kartar could not remain idle. The Delhi camp had its own disputes and confusions. Within a week refugees had begun approaching him, just as they had in Amritsar. Women drifted towards Nachatar during the afternoons. Some wanted work, some wanted company and some simply wanted a place where conversation was not always about loss. The small gatherings around the stitching became part of life in the barracks.

Harjit spent long hours at the rehabilitation office while Kartar divided his time between the refugee settlement, the Gurudwara and the growing

lists of the missing. They no longer searched every evening. They had reached the point where they no longer knew where to begin.

People here called him “Babaji.”

“Babaji, can you read this notice?”

“Babaji, where is the rehabilitation office?”

“Babaji, these officials are asking for documents we lost during the riots.”

Kartar moved through the camp helping where he could. Soon he established a small missing person desk near the Gurudwara langar beside the barracks. Notices from other camps were exchanged there. Families left names and descriptions, hoping someone travelling between settlements might recognize them. The Gurudwara committee welcomed him. Each morning Kartar joined the seva before beginning his camp work, washing utensils, serving dal and sweeping the courtyard.

Weeks passed and Delhi's rhythms entered their lives; government office queues and dust. Refugee children recited lessons in makeshift classrooms. Sometimes at sunset Kartar and Harjit sat outside the barrack watching the city fade into dusk. Santosh was rarely mentioned now. She stayed in their thoughts, but there was little more they could do.

Several days later Harjit received instructions to deliver government files near Old Delhi Railway Station. Kartar decided to accompany him. The rehabilitation office was close to several refugee neighbourhoods, and he intended to leave fresh copies of the missing person notices with the Gurudwara committee before returning.

The area overwhelmed them. Crowded bazaars, handcarts blocking narrow roads, porters shouting near warehouses. Outside the station, refugee run stalls and temporary shops had appeared almost everywhere. Men sold cloth from wooden carts. Some operated tea stands beneath

patched awnings. Signs painted hurriedly in Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu hung unevenly above newly claimed spaces.

Harjit finished the file delivery shortly before evening. As he and Kartar walked back towards the main road through the noisy bazaar, a familiar smell reached them through the crowd. Fresh jalebis frying in ghee. Ahead stood a modest sweet shop beneath a painted wooden signboard. **MALHOTRA SWEETS KARACHIWALE.** They had passed the shop when a woman's voice came from somewhere inside, almost lost in the noise of the bazaar. Harjit stopped. Kartar stopped with him. For several seconds neither moved. Then the old man whispered, "Santo?"

Chapter 34

MALHOTRA SWEETS KARACHIWALE

For several seconds neither Kartar nor Harjit moved. The bazaar went on around them. Porters shouted near the station entrance, bicycle bells rang through the crowd and customers argued over prices at nearby stalls. Then the voice from inside the sweet shop stopped. A woman laughed. Harjit felt the breath leave his chest. Kartar stood still, trying to find the direction of the voice.

Inside, a young boy stood near the counter arranging boxes of sweets. Behind him, brass kadhais bubbled with fresh jalebis. Near the entrance, an elderly man sat beside a high wooden desk with a ledger open before him. A cash box rested near his elbow. The walls were still half finished, the lime plaster uneven in places. Then the curtain near the back doorway moved.

Santosh emerged carrying a steel tray. She looked thinner. Months of displacement had changed her face. She lifted her eyes towards the entrance. The tray slipped from her hands. It struck the stone floor with a sharp clang. The boy near the counter turned. Santosh stood still. Harjit took one step forward. “Santo...”

Santosh covered her mouth with both hands. Then she crossed the room. Harjit met her halfway. Neither spoke. They held each other while the noise of the bazaar continued outside. Kartar stood near the entrance. His hands trembled as Santosh looked over Harjit's shoulder. "Tauji..."

He crossed the room. When she bent to touch his feet, he caught her by the shoulders and raised her. "No," he said.

His voice broke. Santosh began to cry. The young boy near the counter watched them, bewildered. Another man came hurriedly from the back room, wiping his hands on a cloth. He stopped when he saw them. Surinder Malhotra was broad built and in his early thirties. Beside the ledger, the elderly merchant also rose slowly. Madan Lal Malhotra looked at Santosh, then at the two men. "You found them," he said.

Santosh drew them closer. "These are my people."

Surinder folded his hands towards Kartar. "Namaste ji."

Kartar returned the greeting. "Please," Surinder said. "Sit first."

The shop closed early that evening. Inside, trays of sweets cooled on wooden shelves beneath the lantern light. Santosh said, "I searched for you in Amritsar."

Harjit said, "We searched everywhere."

"I lost you outside the station. There were so many people. People started pushing. I couldn't find my way back."

She glanced towards Surinder. "Two men came up to me. They said they would help me. I was going with them when Bauji stopped them."

Madan Lal said nothing. "I didn't want to stay with strangers," Santosh continued. "Bauji took me to the women's shelter. He kept visiting me. After some time he asked me to stay with the family until my people were found."

She looked at the old man. "I owe my life to him."

Harjit crossed the room and bent to touch Madan Lal's feet. The old man caught his arm and helped him up. "We will never forget what you did," Harjit said.

"Good," he said. "Now sit down, we can cry after you've eaten."

Later, Surinder told them about the family's journey. "We came from Karachi. Half our family was lost near Hyderabad."

With moist eyes, he said, "Bauji had already lost two daughters. He could not leave another girl to her fate."

"So we brought her with us," Madan Lal said.

Kartar asked, "You were the one who stopped those men?"

Madan Lal shrugged. Santosh smiled through her tears. "I prayed every day that you would reach Delhi."

Kartar closed his eyes. "Waheguru."

Then Santosh asked, "And Arun?"

Harjit closed his eyes. Santosh understood. After a while she asked, "Did anyone find Nirranjan?"

Kartar shook his head. "No."

She then asked, "And does Bauji stay with you?"

Kartar looked at her. "He left us at Amritsar."

Santosh did not cry at once. She sat with her hands folded in her lap. Then the tears came, slowly at first, and then without stopping. Surinder placed a glass of water beside her.

Later that night they climbed the stairs to the family rooms above the shop. They ate dal and roti with pickle. Surinder spoke about the business. The Malhotras had owned a large sweet shop in Karachi before Partition. In Delhi they had started again on a much smaller scale. The shop was downstairs; the family lived above it.

“Work is work,” Surinder said. “As long as the hands work, life moves.”

Kartar liked the young man. He was a simple person and spoke respectfully.

“Where are you staying?” Surinder asked.

“Refugee barracks near Kingsway.”

Surinder frowned. “That is too far. Come here. We’ll stay together.”

“No,” Kartar said firmly.

“We’ll come there often,” Santosh said, looking at Surinder.

Surinder smiled. “Of course.”

Kartar looked at her. The Mangalsutra showed beneath her dupatta.

When Kartar and Harjit finally stepped outside near midnight, Old Delhi had grown quieter. Station lamps still glowed through the smoke. A few late tongas rattled along the road. Harjit stood beside the shuttered shop. Kartar smiled. “We found her.”

Chapter 35

THE TASTE OF HOME

The evening meal had been ready before sunset. Parvati had expected Kartar and Harjit back long before dark. Harjit had gone to Old Delhi on office work and Kartar had accompanied him with a bundle of papers belonging to several refugees from the camp. Such errands often took time. In Delhi, queues and forms could consume an entire day.

At first she thought little of it. She finished washing clothes, folded several repaired garments and packed away her stitching materials for the night. Two women from neighbouring barracks stopped by to collect shawls she had mended. Another arrived carrying a child's torn sweater. "Tomorrow," Parvati said, taking it from her.

Evening came over the camp. Cooking fires glowed between the barracks. Children were called indoors. Somewhere nearby a harmonium played and then fell silent. Still Kartar and Harjit did not return. Parvati reheated the dal once and waited. The lantern burned lower. Outside, footsteps came and went as members of other families returned from work. She reheated the meal a second time and irritation replaced patience. "What government office remains open this late?" she muttered.

She stepped outside and looked down the dim lane again. A few late arrivals were still making their way home carrying tiffin carriers, but

neither Kartar nor Harjit was among them. She returned inside. Partition had taught everyone to fear delays.

One by one the neighbouring lanterns went out. At last footsteps approached outside the room. Parvati rose immediately. The door opened and Harjit entered, followed by Kartar. Before either could speak, Nachatar Kaur looked up from the water she had been heating. "Do you know what time it is?" she demanded. "Not a word. Poor Parvati has reheated the food twice and has been peering into the lane every few minutes."

Harjit merely smiled. Kartar lowered his eyes like a schoolboy caught returning late. He sat down on the charpoy while Harjit remained standing. Nachatar looked from one face to the other. "Now what is it?" she demanded. "Both of you have been smiling since you walked in."

Kartar held the suspense for a little while and then said, with a mischievous smile, "We found Santo."

Parvati looked from Kartar to Harjit. "What?"

Harjit laughed, still unable to contain himself. "We found her."

For months Santosh had existed only in lists, reports and prayers. Now she was in Delhi.

"Where?" Nachatar asked.

"Old Delhi."

The story came out in fragments until everyone understood how Santosh had been found. Long before Harjit finished, the food had been forgotten. "And then?" Parvati asked.

Kartar smiled. "She is married now."

Parvati looked at him. "Married?"

"To Surinder Malhotra." Harjit smiled. "And Madan Lalji is a good man. He looked after her when she had nobody."

He pointed towards the cloth bundle lying beside the trunk. "The good man has sent some good things for us too."

Nachatar and Parvati had been so absorbed in the story that neither had noticed it. Parvati laughed softly and untied the knot. The smell of fresh parathas rose from inside. There was also a packet of jalebis and laddoos each, and another packet of savouries from the shop. "Santosh packed all this?"

"Yes," Kartar said. "And every time we thought she had finished, either Surinder or Madan Lalji added something more."

Harjit smiled. "They were trying to feed us as though we had survived a famine."

Nachatar smiled through moist eyes. "Keep some for Ganga."

The reheated dal remained untouched. Instead they sat together sharing the food Santosh had packed. The parathas had cooled, but nobody cared. For a long time they had spoken of Santosh as a memory. Now her hands had prepared food for them. "Santo," Parvati whispered.

"She refused to let us leave empty handed," Kartar said. "According to her, we looked half starved."

"She is not entirely wrong," Harjit added.

Nachatar shot him a look while Harjit smiled sheepishly.

Only once did Parvati wipe her eyes, when Harjit described Santosh asking about Arun. The room was quiet for a while. Finally Parvati asked, "How does she look?"

"Different," Harjit said.

"Older," Kartar added. They all were.

Much later, after Harjit had fallen asleep, Kartar lay stretched on his charpoy staring at the ceiling. The lantern had almost burned out. Outside, Delhi hummed faintly in the darkness. Santosh was alive.

Parvati remembered the village well, the mango harvests, the laughter beneath the banyan tree and the endless conversations while grinding wheat. A whole life belonged to another age now. She smiled. Tomorrow she would go to Old Delhi. Nothing was going to stop her.

The next morning Parvati and Nachatar were awake before the others. By the time Kartar emerged from the barrack room, Parvati had prepared tea, cooked breakfast, packed lunch for Ganga and put away the previous day's stitching work. "You are going," Kartar said.

Parvati looked up. "Of course. And Harjit, please drop Ganga at school today."

Before Harjit could answer, Ganga looked up from her breakfast. "I'm not going."

Nachatar smiled as if she had expected this. Parvati frowned. "Why not?"

"I'm coming with you."

"School."

Ganga shook her head firmly. "No."

"Ganga..."

She did not relent. "I'm going to see Santo Bua."

Harjit looked away, hiding a smile. Kartar chuckled. "Let her come. One day's leave won't do much harm."

Parvati pretended to object, then sighed. "Very well. But tomorrow, no arguments."

Ganga sprang to her feet, grinned triumphantly and ran to change her clothes.

By mid morning they were making their way through the crowded streets of Old Delhi. Handcarts blocked the roads. Tongas competed with

bicycles for space. Vendors shouted from beneath awnings while smoke from railway engines drifted across the rooftops. Harjit led the way. He remembered every turn. At last the familiar signboard appeared. **MALHOTRA SWEETS KARACHIWALE.**

Before they had even reached the entrance, Santosh appeared from the back of the shop, wiping her hands on the end of her dupatta. She saw them and stopped, then hurried forward. Before the women could meet, Ganga saw Santosh and ran towards her. She threw her arms around her without saying a word. Santosh caught her and laughed through her tears. "Ganga!"

Ganga held on tightly. "I knew you would come."

Santosh pulled back and looked at her. "You remember me?"

Ganga looked almost offended. "Of course I remember you."

Santosh laughed. "Do you remember the sweets?"

"Yes, all of them," Ganga said.

Santosh laughed again and hugged her.

"You foolish girl," Nachatar said through sudden tears, finally reaching them.

Santosh turned. "Taiji..."

She embraced Nachatar, then reached for Parvati. The two women held each other tightly.

Ganga waited impatiently. As soon as Santosh turned back, she caught her face in both hands and turned it towards herself. "Look at me," she said.

Santosh smiled. Ganga could not take her eyes off her. Whenever anyone tried to speak to Santosh, Ganga tugged at her arm or turned her face back towards her. She had found Santosh again and had no intention of sharing her. Santosh laughed. "Will you have chole bhature?"

Ganga's eyes lit up. "Yes!"

Santosh laughed and called to the boy behind the counter. A few minutes later he brought over a huge bhatura with a bowl of chole. Ganga sat down immediately, completely absorbed in it. For the first time since they had arrived, the elders were left to talk.

Near the entrance Madan Lal sat behind a high wooden desk. Ledger books lay open before him and a cash box rested beside one elbow. His beard was completely silver. He rose with the help of the desk, moving slowly. Santosh turned. "Bauji, this is my Taiji, and this is my bhabhi, Paro."

He folded his hands and greeted Nachatar. "Namaste ji."

Nachatar returned the greeting. "Namaste ji."

Parvati moved around the counter and bent to touch his feet. Then she called Ganga forward. Madan Lal stopped her. "Let the child eat first."

He looked at Ganga and smiled. "Is it tasty?"

Ganga flashed a big smile.

The shop remained busy through the morning. Customers bought sweets and snacks, while others stopped to talk.

Between transactions Madan Lal kept an eye on everything. He checked accounts, approved purchases, questioned a supplier about sugar prices and corrected a mistake in a ledger. Occasionally he called instructions towards the kitchen where Surinder worked.

Around noon Santosh took Nachatar and Parvati upstairs. The family occupied rooms above the shop. The staircase was narrow and worn from constant use. On the floor below, sacks of sugar and tins of ghee were stacked in the storage rooms.

Santosh showed them the kitchen, the small courtyard, the rooms where the family lived and the view over the crowded street. As the three

women sat together upstairs, they talked, at times through tears and at times with laughter.

When they finally returned downstairs, Madan Lal was still seated behind his desk. He addressed Parvati. "Santosh tells me you do stitching."

"A little."

"A little?" Santosh interrupted. "That means half the barracks bring their clothes to her."

Parvati rolled her eyes. Madan Lal smiled. "And knitting?"

"Yes."

"And people pay?" the old merchant asked.

"Yes."

"Where is your shop?"

"I work on the verandah," Parvati replied.

The old merchant nodded thoughtfully. Before he could ask anything further, another customer approached the desk and the conversation ended. As Kartar and the others prepared to leave later that afternoon, Madan Lal watched Parvati speaking with two women who had arrived at the shop looking for Santosh. The women soon drifted into a conversation about clothes, stitching and repairs. Madan Lal noticed the ease with which Parvati handled the conversation, answering questions and discussing the work without hesitation. Then she returned to her place beside the others. Madan Lal returned to his ledger. He had an idea.

Chapter 36

THE WEIGHT OF FATHERS

After Santosh returned to their lives, Delhi no longer felt quite so foreign. The city was still loud and crowded, but somewhere within it was a place where someone belonged to them. That same day Kartar wrote once more. This letter was shorter than the others. Santosh had been found and was safe. Delhi no longer felt unfamiliar. He addressed the envelope to the village and posted it the next morning near the rehabilitation office.

The following evening Kartar arrived at Malhotra Sweets shortly before closing time. Business was still brisk. Refugees arriving from Old Delhi Railway Station stopped for tea before continuing their journeys. Railway workers came in between shifts. Men from Sindh stood outside discussing neighbourhoods they would never see again while eating jalebis. Behind the counter sat Madan Lal. Age had bent his shoulders and silvered his hair, but he still occupied the owner's chair with authority. He looked up when Kartar entered.

“Bauji is here,” he called.

Harjit had stayed back at the rehabilitation office that evening. His work had been increasing steadily. Surinder looked up from the trays and nodded respectfully. “Come, sit,” Madan Lal said. “The shop is nearly closed.”

Later, after the shutters had been lowered and the last customer had left, the two old men carried their tea upstairs. Both had once had comfortable lives. They had property, businesses, and felt secure about the future. Partition had taken away most of that security. Yet both had managed to begin again. "I can never thank you enough," Kartar said.

Madan Lal frowned. "For what?"

"For giving Santosh a home when she needed one."

The old man waved the words away. "You would have done the same. Besides, she became family."

Kartar met his eyes. "Even more so."

Madan Lal smiled. "Then thank my elder brother. He brought us to Panchgaon. Without him, none of us would have reached Delhi."

The Sardar said, "I should visit your brother in Panchgaon. I should thank him too."

Madan Lal carried on. "Before Partition I owned restaurants and catering businesses in Karachi. Ministers, businessmen, judges, military officers, if there was a large wedding or banquet, people came to us."

He smiled faintly. "Those days seem to belong to somebody else now."

His eyes welled up as he continued. "When the trouble began, I told Lajjo and the girls."

"Lajjo?"

"My wife."

"Lajwanti. Nobody called her that except when she was angry."

He smiled again. "They loved jewellery. All three of them. Lajjo, Meenu and Saro. Gold bangles, necklaces, earrings. If they went to a wedding, they spent half the time comparing ornaments."

The smile disappeared. "I told them the journey would be dangerous. I asked them to hide the jewellery or leave it behind."

He looked down at his hands. "They said I was imagining things. I wish I had argued harder. I saw it happen," he added. "I saw it with my own eyes."

Kartar waited. "First they looted them of their gold. Then more men arrived. They took all three of them."

Madan Lal turned away. "I offered them everything. Money, jewellery, everything I had."

His voice broke. "But I could not save them."

The room was quiet. "Surinder and I tried to reach them. They had beaten us badly. We could barely stand."

He wiped his face. "All these years," he said, "and I still hear them."

Santosh entered and collected the two cups of tea, which had gone cold. "I built the shop," Madan Lal said after a while. "I rebuilt everything I could."

He looked out of the window. "But every night I still remember that road. I wish they had listened to me," he said. "Perhaps we would have left earlier."

Finally he straightened. "After that, my brother took us to Panchgaon."

Kartar looked up. Madan Lal continued, "I was fortunate in one thing. I had wrapped some of the gold in cloth and packed it among ordinary goods. The looters searched for valuables. They never noticed it."

He gave a tired smile. "That gold helped build Malhotra Sweets."

Kartar said nothing. He thought of Niranjana, Arun and Santosh, and of all that had been lost. Then he said, "Lalaji, you gave Santosh a home."

"How could I leave another man's daughter alone in a world like that?" said Madan Lal.

He pointed at the family photographs hanging on the wall. "Not after what I had already seen."

After a while Madan Lal cleared his throat. "Enough of old sorrows."

He pointed towards a framed photograph hanging on the wall. "Have you ever visited Panchgaon?"

Kartar shook his head. Madan Lal continued, "Then one day you must. My brother would be offended if I did not send you. He is the Lambardar."

"A Lambardar in the family. Great!" Kartar exclaimed.

Madan Lal laughed. "In Panchgaon he is not my brother. He is Chaudhary Sahab. Even I require permission to disagree with him."

He leaned back. "Most of those from Karachi left for Mumbai. Chaudhary Sahab insisted that I stay with him until I got a foothold in the new place."

Santosh returned with two cups of hot tea. They spoke of Panchgaon, crops and wells, and of the refugee families who had passed through the village after Partition. Madan Lal described how he had first intended to remain there permanently before seeing the opportunities developing around Delhi Railway Station. Neither man mentioned Karachi or Lahore again.

Chapter 37

TAKING ROOT

One evening, Kartar found Surinder alone downstairs shaping laddus beside the large trays. “You should hire more help,” Kartar remarked.

Surinder smiled without looking up. “With what money?”

Kartar sat near the doorway watching him work. The younger man’s movements were efficient and practised. After some time Surinder said, “She still wakes during the night sometimes.”

Kartar understood. “Santosh?”

Surinder said, “She thinks she hears station noise. Or crowds. It is reducing with time,” Surinder added, “Slowly.”

Kartar looked towards the upper floor where faint household sounds drifted down. “You have been very kind to her.”

Surinder looked up, surprised. “She is my wife.”

The simplicity of the answer made Kartar nod.

Nachatar and Parvati visited often now. What began as a reunion had become routine. Some afternoons Parvati helped Santosh upstairs while Nachatar chatted with Madan Lal and Surinder managed the shop below. Parvati carried stitching work with her and sat near the window

talking while her hands were busy. The two women had lots of conversation to recover. Before leaving in the evening, Parvati gathered a bundle of repaired clothes she had promised to several refugee women. Madan Lal watched her balancing the work beneath one arm.

“People pay you for this?” he asked again.

“A little,” she replied.

“Hmm.”

The old merchant returned to his ledger. As she was leaving, Madan Lal’s eyes followed her a little longer.

Harjit continued assisting the Rehabilitation Department after the move to Delhi. The officers had discovered that he could read, write and work hard without asking for recognition. What had begun as helping displaced families with records and supplies became regular work. One day the officer in charge called him into his office and handed him a folded paper. “You’ve been doing this work for months,” he said. “It is time we made it official.”

Harjit unfolded the paper. “**Camp Assistant**”.

As soon as he reached home, Harjit gave the paper to Nachatar Kaur. She turned it over before smiling at her son. “You know I cannot read,” she said, handing it to Kartar. “Your Bauji will tell us what it says.”

Kartar unfolded the paper. His eyes moved across the lines once, then he looked up at Harjit. “Camp Assistant,” he read aloud. “Department of Rehabilitation.” Nachatar visited the Gurudwara the next morning with the appointment letter.

When Harjit received his first wages the following month, he returned home with the notes folded carefully in his pocket. He placed them in Nachatar Kaur’s hands.

She handed them over to Kartar. "You keep them," she said. "You know what the house needs."

Kartar counted the notes, then separated a few of them and held it out to Harjit. "Keep this."

Harjit hesitated. "For yourself," Kartar said. He then handed another note and said, "Buy something for Santosh, you missed the last Raksha Bandhan."

Harjit accepted the note with both hands.

That evening Nachatar prepared halwa. Surinder and Santosh arrived later. It was reason enough to celebrate. They ate together; Kartar, Nachatar, Harjit, Parvati, Santosh, Surinder and Ganga. During the meal Surinder asked casually, "Bauji, why do you still travel to the camps every day? You should rest now."

"You work more than younger men," Harjit said.

Kartar scooped dal into his roti before answering. "The camps still need people."

"There are officials now," Harjit said.

"Yes," Kartar replied. "And refugees still trust someone who stands beside them when they have to deal with paperwork."

Harjit then turned to Nachatar, "Bebe, you can close your shop now."

She put down her spoon. "Why?"

"I am earning."

"And?"

"And you have worked enough."

"I am not tired."

“I know. But you don't have to do everything anymore. Sewa in the Gurudwara is more important.”

She gave him a proud look and said, “Fine. But you will help me sell the remaining stock.”

Harjit was allotted a government quarter six months after his appointment. It stood in a newly developed rehabilitation colony on the western side of Delhi, rows of small one storey houses built quickly for employees working in the expanding administration. The houses had two rooms, a narrow kitchen and a tiny lawn shared between two houses. But they had walls.

Moving day required very little effort. Refugee life had reduced their possessions to one trunk, two charpoys, a few utensils, four blankets and a bundle of carefully folded papers. Parvati had sorted most of the bedding and utensils before moving day. Santosh arrived early from Old Delhi carrying food wrapped in cloth, while Surinder followed with a few tins of sweets for the neighbours. “First day in a new house should begin sweetly,” he said.

When Harjit first unlocked the door, he stood silently inside the empty room for a few seconds. Kartar examined the cracked plaster and uneven flooring. “The roof is solid,” the old man declared.

When Nachatar entered the new quarter, she stopped at the threshold, whispered a prayer of thanks and stepped inside. “I never thought we would have a place of our own again.”

Women from nearby quarters appeared through the afternoon carrying small bowls of kheer, lassi and other food from their kitchens. They introduced themselves across the courtyards. Before long Nachatar had become “Mataji” to many of the younger women in the colony. Parvati had begun receiving requests for repairs and alterations from women across the colony. Word travelled quickly. In the evening, Kartar sat outside the quarter watching children play gulli danda in the dusty lane

between the houses. A woman called her children inside. A vessel fell somewhere nearby. Two wives chatted while waiting for their husbands to return from work. Kartar listened for a while. "It is enough," he said.

Life had settled into routines elsewhere as well. At Malhotra Sweets, Santosh handled household accounts, festival orders and the customer requests that Surinder sometimes forgot. Madan Lal still occupied his desk near the entrance, watching the ledgers and the shop with equal attention, while Surinder managed suppliers, deliveries and production. The business had begun to prosper.

One morning, without looking up from the ledger, Madan Lal said, "Surinder."

"Ji, Bauji?"

"That corner shop near the rehabilitation colony... the one beside the grain shop. Is it still vacant?"

Surinder thought for a moment. "I believe so."

"Find out."

"Anything else?"

"Everything."

Surinder returned later that afternoon.

"Twenty feet by twelve. Good frontage. Plenty of people pass that way now. The owner would rather sell than rent."

"Price?"

Surinder named the amount. Madan Lal made a small note in the margin of the ledger.

"Who will manage it?" Surinder asked.

Without looking up, Madan Lal replied, "Paro."

“Paro?”

Madan Lal closed the ledger. “I have watched her. She will manage.”

Surinder said nothing. That night, he told Santosh, “Bauji is looking for another shop. I suppose he is thinking of opening another branch. But I don't understand why he has chosen Paro to run it. She has no experience. You would be better.”

Santosh shook her head. “If Bauji thinks she can do it, who am I to say otherwise? He has done so much for us. I won't go against him, even in my dreams.”

The following afternoon, Kartar stopped at the shop on his way to the camps, as he often did. Surinder brought two cups of tea before returning to the customers. Madan Lal finished entering a few figures into the ledger, blotted the ink carefully and closed the book.

“How are the camps?” he asked.

“Smaller every week,” Kartar replied. “Families are leaving for their allotted homes, which is a good sign.”

They drank their tea quietly for a while. Then Madan Lal asked, almost casually, “How old is Paro now?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“She has no parents?”

“No.”

“Brothers?”

“None.”

Madan Lal nodded. “And when you are no longer there?”

Kartar was puzzled. “Who will look after her?” Madan Lal asked.

Kartar smiled faintly. “Waheguru will.”

Madan Lal returned the smile. "Perhaps. But we should do what we can while we are here."

The old Sikh looked at him. "Why do you ask?"

Madan Lal rested both hands on the closed ledger. "I have been thinking."

"About Paro?"

"About tomorrow," Madan Lal said.

Kartar waited for him to continue. Instead, Madan Lal rose slowly, reaching for his walking stick. "I had hoped you would walk with me this evening."

Kartar found it difficult. "The camps..."

"I know." Madan Lal smiled. "Then I shall come to your quarter after I close the shop. We will have dinner together, and then talk."

"What is it about, Lalaji?"

"You will see."

After sunset, the sound of a tonga stopping outside drew Kartar to the doorway. Madan Lal was climbing down with the driver's help. "Welcome, Lalaji," Kartar said, hurrying forward.

"After dinner, shall we go for a ride?" Madan Lal asked with a smile.

Kartar smiled. "Where to?"

"Not far."

The tonga rolled through the evening traffic as Madan Lal puffed his cigarette. Delhi had begun changing before their eyes. Canvas tents stood beside newly built brick quarters. Small grocery shops had appeared where relief kitchens had once stood. Children chased one another through lanes that only months earlier had been rows of refugee shelters.

The tonga stopped before a small row of newly built shops. He asked the tongawala to open the doors. The broad wooden panels, each made of several sections, folded back against the walls, leaving almost the entire width of the shop open. Inside, the room was empty except for bare walls and a rough cement floor. Madan Lal walked slowly around the room, measuring it with his eyes. "Good frontage," he murmured.

Looking towards the road, he said, "Women can reach it without crossing the main bazaar."

He then turned towards the doorway. "Plenty of light."

Kartar could no longer hide his curiosity. "Lalaji... Why are we here?"

Madan Lal looked around the empty shop once more before answering. "For Paro."

Kartar stared at him. "No." His answer came immediately. "We cannot accept such a thing."

Madan Lal smiled. "Babaji, when it comes to business, I am a Lala."

He pulled out a folded receipt. "I have paid a small advance. If you refuse, I shall collect it back tomorrow morning. The matter ends there. But if you agree..." Madan Lal tapped the receipt gently. "It is a loan."

"A loan?"

"Every rupee."

Kartar asked, "And if the shop fails?"

Madan Lal pretended to think for a second. "Then Paro will stitch my clothes free of charge."

Kartar almost smiled. "Until I die." Added Madan Lal with a mischievous smile. This time even Kartar laughed.

Across the road, a middle aged woman sat cross legged on her verandah filling paper packets with roasted gram while two children tied

them with string for a neighbourhood grocer. He pointed his cane towards them and said, "Our daughters should not be working on verandahs."

Kartar followed his gaze. He folded the receipt carefully and slipped it into his pocket. "The loan will be repaid."

The two old men climbed back into the tonga as evening darkened over Delhi.

The following Monday morning, before the market had fully awakened, the family gathered outside the new shop. The lane was still cool from the night. A tea seller across the road had just lit his stove, and the smell of damp earth lingered after the mild shower. Above the freshly painted shutter hung a new wooden signboard. Against a cream background, deep blue letters announced: **PARO LADIES TAILORS.**

The paint still looked fresh, catching the first rays of the morning sun. Parvati stood looking at it. No one had told her what the shop would be called. Madan Lal noticed the smile that slowly appeared on her face but said nothing. She had arrived carrying a thali. Upon it rested a small brass Ganesh, a diya, incense sticks, flowers, kumkum, a coconut and a box of sweets. Nachatar walked beside her while Harjit carried a small wooden stool. Surinder and Santosh had come early from Old Delhi, and Madan Lal was already waiting outside, leaning uncomfortably on his walking stick.

Kartar paused at the shutter. "One moment," he said softly. From his bag he removed a newspaper parcel tied neatly with string. He untied it carefully and unfolded the paper. Inside was a framed portrait of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. He stepped into the empty shop and placed the portrait gently upon the wooden shelf fixed to the front wall. Only then did he turn to Parvati. "Now."

Parvati smiled and entered. She placed the brass Ganesh beside the portrait and arranged the flowers before them. Nachatar lit the diya while

Parvati touched the flame to the incense sticks. As the fragrance filled the little room, the family stood together in silent prayer. When the prayers were over, Kartar broke the coconut upon the doorstep. Surinder distributed the prasad while Santosh marked a small red swastika upon the doorframe with kumkum for good fortune.

Outside, the market was beginning to stir. Shopkeepers raised shutters one after another, bicycles rattled past, and the first customers appeared in the lane. Madan Lal glanced towards the entrance and gestured almost imperceptibly. A minute later, two labourers appeared carrying a brand new black treadle sewing machine mounted on a polished wooden table with cast iron legs. They placed it carefully against the wall. They returned almost immediately with a second, and then a third. Parvati stepped closer. Each machine bore a small polished brass nameplate fixed neatly to the wooden table beneath the needle. She bent to read them: **PARO**. On the second was engraved: **SANTO**. And on the third: **GANGA**. She choked with emotion. Madan Lal smiled. "Three daughters, three machines."

He raised his hand in blessing. "One day you'll need a bigger shop."

Parvati gasped, Bauji...."

Madan Lal looked up innocently. "What is it?"

She stared at the machines. "We... we never..."

He smiled. "Those are not part of the loan. They are from Bauji."

Her eyes filled instantly. "Bauji, I..."

He raised a hand before she could continue. "Don't argue with elders."

A gentle laughter passed through the room, breaking the silence. Just then a woman appeared hesitantly at the entrance, a bundle of clothes tucked beneath her arm. She asked shyly, "have I come too early?"

Parvati looked around the little shop, at the portrait of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, at the brass Ganesh, at the lamp that still flickered softly, and finally at the sewing machines waiting for their first stitch. "No," she smiled, "you are my first customer."

Now and then Ganga still asked when Arun would return. "Have you done your homework?" Parvati asked.

"No."

"Bring it. Let us do it together."

Ganga went to fetch her school bag. Her questions became less frequent as the years passed, though they never disappeared.

For years Harjit refused every suggestion of marriage. Refugee life still felt uncertain, and there was always a camp to visit, a missing relative to search for, a document to secure or a family responsibility to handle. "We have only just settled," he would say.

Santosh ignored him. "You are no longer twenty."

"I was never twenty properly."

But life was steadier now. Harjit was no longer a young man and marriage proposals were no longer dismissed immediately. The approaches were informal at first; suggestions and inquiries passed through refugee friends. A government employee with a stable salary was valuable in those years.

Despite moving into the government colony, Kartar continued visiting the refugee camps daily. Every morning he travelled across Delhi between settlements and offices. Refugees everywhere still called him "Babaji". The name had spread beyond the first camp. At Kingsway Camp he helped establish evening literacy classes for children who had lost years of schooling during migration. Near Karol Bagh he persuaded officials to reopen delayed compensation claims for widows lacking proper

documents. At other settlements he helped settle disputes between refugees.

"You escaped death together," he told them calmly. "Must you now destroy survival over walls and shelves?"

The government quarter was small, but after a few additions and adjustments it had begun to feel like home. Parvati sat near the window sorting clothes that had dried in the afternoon sun. Harjit had returned from work and was reading a newspaper in the corner. Kartar occupied his usual chair near the courtyard door. A knock sounded outside.

Before anyone could rise, the door opened and Santosh entered carrying a box wrapped in brown paper. Surinder followed behind her. "Move aside," Santosh announced. "Important people have arrived."

"Then why are you here?" Harjit asked.

Santosh ignored him. "We brought sweets."

That improved everyone's opinion of the visitors. Within minutes tea had appeared and the box had been opened. Ganga, now ten years old, claimed the largest piece before anyone else could object. Surinder pointed at her. "I wanted that piece."

"You were too slow," Ganga teased.

Kartar smiled. They talked about neighbours, prices and relatives. Ganga examined the sweet in her hand, then looked up. "Dadaji?"

"Hmm?"

"Did Bauji like sweets?"

Kartar smiled. "Yes. He liked sweets."

"What kind?"

"Laddoos."

Ganga admitted. "So do I."

That satisfied her temporarily.

Then she asked, "What else did he like?"

Kartar looked out into the fading evening. "Books."

Harjit gave a short laugh. "Too many books."

A smile crossed Kartar's face. "He was always reading."

"Like Masterji at school?"

"Worse," said Harjit.

That earned a few smiles. Ganga smiled too, then became serious. "Dadaji?"

"Yes?"

"What happened to him?"

The room went quiet. Harjit lowered the newspaper. Parvati stopped folding clothes. Santosh was unsure what to say.

Ganga looked from one face to another. "Please tell me."

For years the family had answered the question in fragments. Ganga was no longer five or seven. She was old enough now to notice the gaps, old enough to recognise when adults changed the subject, and she kept asking. Surinder tried to change the subject. "Finish your sweet first and then I'll take you for a tonga ride."

Ganga barely glanced at him. "I want to know."

Parvati tried gently. "You haven't gone out to play today."

"Not today."

"Ganga..."

"No."

Her eyes were fixed on Kartar. "What happened to Bauji?"

The old man remained silent for several seconds. When he finally spoke, his voice was calm. "Your father died protecting people."

Ganga frowned. "Who?"

"Us."

The answer confused her. "Us?"

Kartar corrected himself. "No. Everyone."

He glanced at a picture of Guru Gobind Singh on the wall. "There were families on that train. Women, children, old people."

Nobody interrupted. "There were men on top of the train who were trying to harm them."

Ganga's eyes widened. "Bauji fought them?"

"Yes."

That answer surprised her. The father she knew existed in stories and three photographs, not in fights. Kartar continued. "He did not have to climb onto the roof."

"Then why did he?"

"Because the bad people were there."

The answer was too simple. "That's all?"

Outside, somewhere, a neighbour was scolding a child. "Were you there?" Ganga asked.

"Yes."

"Were you afraid?"

Kartar smiled sadly. "Terrified."

The honesty surprised Ganga. She had imagined grown men as people who never felt fear. "What about Bauji?"

“He was afraid too.”

“Then why didn't he come down?”

Kartar's eyes drifted towards the darkening courtyard. “Because he thought he could help.”

Ganga waited. “And then?”

“He was injured.”

“And then?”

“He made sure that all of us were safe.”

A long silence followed. “And then?”

Kartar stood up facing his granddaughter. “Then he did not come back.”

Ganga stared at Kartar without blinking, her eyes wide with disbelief. She looked at the sweet in her hand, and placed it back in the box. She understood that her father had not been away on a journey, he had not been delayed, he had not been lost, he was gone. Silence claimed the room. Finally, Ganga asked, “Was he brave?”

Kartar answered without hesitation. “Yes.”

Then she asked, “Was he happy?”

Kartar smiled. “Most of the time.”

A small smile appeared on Ganga's face. After a while she picked up the sweet again and finished it. Across the room Parvati turned away to wipe her tears.

The marriage eventually came through a refugee family from Rawalpindi settled near Patel Nagar. The girl's name was Jasmeet and she had passed ninth standard. The first meeting took place in the family courtyard beside a young mango sapling barely two feet high. Neighbours pretended not to watch from the adjoining verandahs. Harjit looked

deeply uncomfortable throughout. Jasmeet noticed. "You dislike these formal meetings?" she asked while tea was served.

Harjit blinked. "A little."

"So do I," she said.

He smiled. Kartar saw it and relaxed. Before any decision was made, Nachatar and Parvati spent some time speaking with Jasmeet in the kitchen while tea was prepared and trays were moved in and out of the courtyard. The three women emerged only when the conversation outside had begun to run dry.

The guests had barely gone out of earshot when Santosh asked Nachatar. "Well?"

Nachatar smiled. "She seems sensible."

That was recommendation enough. Later Santosh asked Harjit, "So?"

Harjit adjusted his turban before answering. "She speaks honestly."

Kartar nodded. "That is enough." He believed it mattered more than beauty.

The wedding was simple. Refugee families possessed neither the means nor the appetite for extravagance. Neighbours arranged the seating, borrowed utensils arrived from one household after another, and children ran through the colony carrying packets of sweets from Malhotra Sweets. The sweets were, of course, gifts from Madan Lal.

During the Anand Karaj at the Gurudwara, Kartar sat near the front listening to the Shabads. He imagined Omparkash beside him, Arun near the doorway and Niranjan laughing outside with the younger boys. The ache remained, but hope remained too.

Chapter 38

PASSED ON

Harjit and Jasmeet's first daughter was born during the next monsoon. Kartar held the child for a minute before speaking. "She has Niranjan's eyes."

Nobody corrected him. Three years later, a second daughter arrived. By then the government quarter had become home. There was children's laughter, little books, steel trunks and pickle jars drying in the courtyard sun.

Kartar adored the girls. They climbed into his lap while he read the newspaper, stroked his beard, accidentally untied his turban cloth while playing and constantly demanded stories. "Tell us about the village."

He told them about the wheat fields near the Ravi, the old banyan tree, buffaloes refusing to leave the pond, the canal flooding during the monsoon, Haji Khan laughing during harvest arguments, Bashir cheating at kabaddi and their father being the strongest lad in the village. The girls listened wide eyed, as though hearing about another world. Perhaps it was.

Kartar returned later than usual on a Monday afternoon. Jasmeet was in the courtyard helping Ganga with arithmetic while Parvati prepared tea inside. "You are late," Nachatar observed as he entered.

“The school visit took longer than expected.”

“Amarnath Thakur’s son?” Jasmeet asked.

Kartar sat in his chair. “The headmaster finally agreed to admit him.”

“Good.”

The only sound was Ganga reciting her multiplication tables. As Nachatar handed Kartar a cup of tea, she noticed the box of laddoos beside him. “Where did those come from? Did you meet Lalaji?”

“The market.”

Now everyone looked at him. “You bought sweets?” Jasmeet asked.

“The headmaster gave me good news.”

Ganga had already stopped reciting. “What news?”

Kartar could barely suppress a smile. “He said my granddaughter stood first again.”

Ganga's face lit up. “I told you she would,” Jasmeet said.

Kartar smiled. He broke a laddoo in half and handed it to Ganga.

“For you.” Ganga abandoned her books immediately and accepted it with both hands.

Parvati smiled. “You deserve some credit for that.”

Jasmeet shook her head. “No. You still spend half your evenings teaching her.”

That brought another smile from Kartar. “Does this mean I get another one?” Ganga asked.

“No,” said three adults at once. Kartar ignored them. He placed another laddoo in Ganga's outstretched hand. “Yes,” he said.

One winter evening, after finishing seva, Kartar sat outside the Gurudwara when a young man approached him. “Babaji?”

“Yes?”

“I came to meet you. I was sure I'd find you here. My father says you helped our family reach Delhi years ago.”

Kartar searched his memory but found nothing. The young man smiled. “You won't remember me. I was one of the older boys at Kingsway Camp. You helped me get admission to Hindu College.”

Recognition still did not come. The young man held out a folded appointment letter. He was clearly proud of it. “I became a schoolteacher today. I wanted you to be the first to know.”

Kartar took the letter and read it. He thought of the train roof, Kingsway Camp, the missing person lists, the clinic lanterns and the government quarters. Then he looked again at the young teacher standing before him. His voice caught. “You became a teacher.”

The young man smiled. “Yes, Babaji.”

Kartar nodded slowly. “Good.”

He reached out and placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. “Very good.”

Chapter 39

THE KEEPER OF MEMORIES

Imran returned to the village a week later. The journey from Amritsar back across Punjab had felt longer than the journey out. Silence seemed to travel beside him now. Sultana sat quietly in the bullock cart during the final stretch from Lahore Railway Station towards the village. She had become quieter after Amritsar. The crowds, the railway stations filled with missing names, the thought that entire families could disappear between two platforms had unsettled her. When the village finally appeared beyond the dusty road, Sultana looked up. "This is it?"

From a distance the village looked much as he remembered it. The banyan tree rose near the maidan, low mud walls bordered the lanes and the fields stretched towards the river. Inside, the absences were harder to miss. Closed doors, empty courtyards, stillness where there had once been voices. The village had emptied.

Haji Abdul Rahman Khan sat in his courtyard when Imran arrived. Bashir sat beside him with a hookah between them while several boys played marbles in the dusty lane outside. Haji looked up once. "You took long," he said.

Imran stepped down. "There was confusion in Amritsar."

Haji's eyes moved towards Sultana. "And this girl?"

"She was alone."

Imran lowered the small trunk from the cart before answering. "I stayed in Amritsar hoping I might still find Sarita." He continued. "After a few days I understood the scale of it. Names covered entire walls. Families disappeared between trains. Finding one person among that chaos was impossible."

He glanced towards Sultana. "On the third day I noticed her standing alone at the railway station. She had been separated from her family while travelling from Nakodar to this side. She didn't know where they were or how she would find them again. I looked after her while I searched. When it was time to return... I couldn't leave her behind."

Haji looked at Sultana and nodded. "Then she will stay."

Bashir picked up the girl's small cloth bundle. "Come," he said gently. "There is space."

Sultana lowered her eyes and followed him into the house.

That night the village seemed strangely hollow to Imran. The familiar evening sounds could be heard; cattle mooing, women drawing water, Gappu barking without reason. Yet there were gaps in the rhythm now. No laughter from Kartar Singh's courtyard. No harmonium from the Gurudwara during evening prayers. No arguments near Bashir's house about irrigation schedules. No Nachatar Kaur calling the family in from the courtyard when the evening meal was ready. There was no young woman drawing water at the well while pretending not to notice who was watching her. Imran looked away from the empty lane.

After dinner, Imran walked alone to the banyan tree. He imagined the two boys beside him. The lane looked deserted. Several houses still stood locked exactly as families had left them. Dust had gathered near the thresholds. Wind moved loose pieces of thatch against the walls. He stopped outside Kartar Singh's house. The gate was closed. He pushed it and it opened without resistance.

Inside, the courtyard lay swept clean. The neem tree still leaned towards the wall. The old charpoy stood near its usual place. A broken wooden stool stood near the kitchen wall. He removed a fallen leaf from the verandah. He imagined the family might return and complain that someone had entered their courtyard. Footsteps sounded behind him. Haji entered carrying a lantern. Imran turned. "You maintain all this?"

"Who else would?"

Refugees from eastern Punjab began arriving over the following months; Muslim families from Amritsar, Ludhiana, Jalandhar. They occupied empty houses near the outer lanes first, uncertain whether the arrangements were temporary. Haji handled most disputes personally; which house could be used, which field remained untouched and which belongings should be kept safely. The villagers accepted his decisions because they trusted him. They also knew he never claimed anything abandoned for himself. One evening a newcomer asked openly, "Why keep empty houses locked when people need shelter?"

Haji answered calmly, "They belonged to someone."

The man said nothing after that, but the question continued to be a sore point among the villagers.

Imran resumed work in the fields. Wheat still required sowing, canals still needed clearing, buffaloes still broke fences if ignored. The memories arrived without warning. They were ordinary memories, and those were the hardest to escape. Sometimes, while working near the Ravi, he remembered Arun beside him from years earlier, discussing college life under the winter sun. Or Niranjan racing bullock carts recklessly along the canal path. Or Santosh teasing everyone. Sometimes he found himself smiling at the memory, only to feel the emptiness that followed. There was no one left to share it with.

Sultana became part of the household. At first she moved through the house like a guest, uncertain how long she might remain. Haji's wife gave her work in the kitchen, involved her in household routines and avoided

painful questions. One evening while preparing rotis, Sultana asked, “Did Hindu and Sikh families truly live here before?”

Haji’s wife looked genuinely surprised. “Of course.”

“All together?”

The older woman smiled. “We fought over buffaloes and water more than religion.”

Winter deepened and fog settled in the mornings. Men gathered beneath the banyan tree wrapped in shawls, discussing crops and government rumours while warming their hands around small fires. The school stood quieter now without Omparkash’s voice. The maidan lacked Kartar’s evening presence. The Gurudwara remained open. The old Granthi had refused to leave, tending the empty building with the same devotion as before, though there were fewer voices now.

One day, Haji entered Kartar’s courtyard again carrying oil for the door hinges. Imran watched silently from the gate. “You still come here every week.”

Haji continued oiling the hinges. “Yes.”

“They may never return.”

The old man paused. He lifted the oil can and worked it into the hinges. Then he said, “I know.”

Imran said nothing more. Haji replaced the oil can beside the door and looked once around the courtyard before walking back towards the lane.

Haji Abdul Rahman Khan remembered. He knew who had left, who had not. He looked after the old who stayed back. If someone wanted to know what had happened to a family, sooner or later they came to Haji. He had become the keeper of the village's memories.

Chapter 40

LETTER FROM THE RAVI

The first letter from the village arrived during the winter following the birth of Harjit's second daughter. By then, nearly eight years had passed since the train had left the Ravi behind. The family now possessed something permanent: a door, a number painted beside it on the wall, an address. After they moved into the government quarter, Kartar wrote to Haji again. Then life resumed, and weeks passed without expectation.

One winter evening, returning from the refugee settlements, Kartar found Harjit sitting outside the quarter holding an envelope between both hands. "There is a letter."

"From where?"

Harjit looked up. "Village."

Initially, Kartar did not move. Then he took the envelope. The handwriting was unmistakable. Every line sat straight, every letter carrying the same discipline as the man himself, Haji Abdul Rahman Khan. Kartar sat down on the charpoy beneath the courtyard lamp before opening it. Inside was a single folded sheet.

Kartar,

Your last letter reached safely.

I was happy to learn that you too are now a grandfather. Bashir declared that this means we have all become old men.

The wheat near the western canal outside our village grew poorly this year. Bashir says the soil misses your arguments more than the water itself. Your courtyard remains closed. I open it every few days. Houses also need air.

Some refugee families from Ludhiana now live near the southern edge. Their children play loudly. This is good. Empty villages lose their life and wither very quickly. The neem tree has grown broader. The old well still draws sweet water. The banyan now gives more shade than it used to. Children who never knew your names now play in the maidan.

The Ravi flooded again this monsoon, though not as badly as in '29. Imran works the fields properly now. You would not recognize how serious he has become. The girl, Sultana, he brought back from Amritsar now helps in our household. My Begum says she works harder than all of us put together.

Last winter the neem branch near your well finally broke during a storm. I remembered you saying for years that it would fall and nobody listened.

The years have changed the village, but I still follow the old routines. I wake before dawn, walk to the maidan and sometimes find myself looking down the road, as if the old folks might still come by.

If Allah allows, write again.

Haji Abdul Rahman Khan

Kartar finished reading and kept silent for a long time. He imagined himself to be beneath the banyan tree again, beside Haji, listening to canal disputes and harvest predictions while evening smoke drifted across the village. Harjit asked, "What does he say?"

By then Nachatar Kaur had come out into the courtyard, the aroma of fresh rotis following her. She did not interrupt. She stood watching Kartar's face. Kartar handed the letter to Harjit. He read it beneath the lamp. When he reached the line about the neem branch, he stopped. The village was still there. The tree had broken. Children played in the lanes. The fields still produced wheat. Much of the village was still the same.

At night Kartar placed the folded letter beneath his pillow. Outside, the winter night was quiet. Somewhere beyond the lane, distant radios played faint film songs. The next morning he began his reply. He sat near the courtyard window while the Delhi winter light faded outside.

Haji,

Your letter reached safely. For one evening Delhi disappeared and the village returned.

Harjit now works more than he speaks. Perhaps responsibility does that to men. The grandchildren keep me busy at home.

Refugee families conduct weddings differently now. Most relatives exist only in memory. Santosh has found another family among Malhotraji and for that I remain grateful. She is quieter than before, but stronger also.

Your line about waking before dawn is the same here too. Some mornings I still think I will hear Omparkash calling from the school classrooms.

Keep the key. Whether we return or not, it should still have an owner.
Kartar Singh

Chapter 41

THE WEIGHT OF TIME

The letters were not frequent and sometimes months passed between them. But whenever one arrived, the mood inside the household changed. They never discussed politics or Partition. They wrote about the weather, marriages, births, just ordinary things. Later, Haji's letters began including questions about the girls. Do they speak Punjabi properly? Do they get to see a river?

Kartar read those lines aloud while the family gathered after dinner. Nachatar Kaur listened from her usual place, smiling when Haji asked after the girls. "He remembers everyone," she said.

Manjeet asked, "Which river?"

"The Ravi," said Nachatar.

"Can we go there?"

Kartar folded the letter before answering. "Perhaps one day."

The girls accepted this easily.

Delhi expanded around the refugees during the 1950s. What had once been temporary settlements became proper neighbourhoods. Markets emerged beside rehabilitation colonies. Schools opened. Bus routes extended farther outward. Children born after Partition now spoke of Lahore or Karachi the way earlier generations spoke of Kabul or Kandahar; places they had heard about, but had never known.

Harjit advanced slowly within the Rehabilitation Department. He was exactly the kind of man government officers trusted; punctual and meticulous. It also meant they gave him more work than others. Files followed him home now. Compensation disputes, land claims and resettlement records occupied space inside the government quarter. Sometimes late at night Kartar found him still working beneath the table lamp while the rest of the household slept. "You should rest."

Harjit continued writing. "These papers wait for no one."

Both of them knew the truth. Behind every file was another refugee family asking the government to acknowledge the life they had once possessed elsewhere. Nachatar Kaur remained the centre of the home. Long before anyone realised it, she had settled into grandmotherhood as naturally as she had once become wife and mother. She decided little openly, yet meals appeared on time, festivals brought the family together and disagreements faded before they grew. Every child in the house instinctively sought her first when hurt or frightened.

Jasmeet settled easily into the household. She understood when silence mattered and when a voice was needed. Harjit was at the centre of her life. She never asked Kartar painful questions directly, never interrupted when letters from Pakistan arrived and never complained when strangers appeared at the house seeking "Babaji" late at night for help with forms, disputes or emergencies. Instead, she made room for everyone. Tea for visitors. Warm rotis after long days.

Harjit's elder daughter preferred Ganga's stories to her books. The younger girl followed Ganga everywhere. If Ganga sat down with her college notes, they sat beside her. If she went shopping, they accompanied her. If she happened to be away for an afternoon, both girls wanted to know when she would return. Harjit occasionally observed that his daughters appeared considerably more obedient towards Ganga than towards him. He did not seem particularly troubled by it. If anything, he appeared rather pleased.

Parvati's tailoring shop in Kingsway had grown steadily over the years. What had begun with a few stitching orders had become a respected business employing five women, all of them refugee widows rebuilding their lives through honest work. The shop remained busy from morning until late afternoon, but Parvati never relaxed one rule: work must never come before family. Those early refugee years, when every waking hour had been spent simply surviving, were behind them. Families deserved time together. There would always be another dress to stitch tomorrow.

The granddaughters transformed Kartar completely. Even before the elder girl Manjeet turned seven, she had already learned that climbing into his lap was the quickest way to get a story. The younger one, Simran, preferred to pull at his beard or close his newspaper to demand his attention whenever she wanted it.

They would often demand. "Tell us about the river."

"Which river?"

"The real one."

To children born in Delhi, the Ravi sounded almost mythical. So Kartar told them about the village beside it, where he had spent most of his life. He told them about the mustard fields glowing yellow in winter, Bashir falling from mango trees, Haji arguing about canal timings, Santosh teasing everyone, and their father stealing mangoes from neighbouring orchards while insisting, years later, that he had never once been caught. The girls laughed loudly at those stories. Sometimes Harjit listened from the doorway without speaking.

Though the refugee colonies had become neighbourhoods, with addresses and homes of their own, the older generation never fully stopped thinking about the places they had left behind. At weddings, someone mentioned Lahore. At meals, someone remembered mangoes from Multan. During winter, someone spoke about the fog near the Ravi. And every few months, when a letter arrived in Haji's careful handwriting, the village returned to their home in Delhi for an evening.

Chapter 42

THE INVITATION

Winter yielded to spring, and spring to another Delhi summer. Harjit buried himself in government files. The children measured time by school holidays, mangoes and new clothes. The grief of those years had softened into memory. Letters from across the border continued to arrive from time to time.

One winter afternoon, several years later, Kartar sat in the courtyard wrapped in a woollen shawl, reading yesterday's newspaper while Simran read her lessons aloud nearby. The postman stopped outside the gate. "Letter for Kartar Singh ji!" Harjit looked up from the office files spread before him. Even after all these years, a letter from the village changed the atmosphere of the house. Kartar accepted the envelope. The familiar handwriting brought an involuntary smile to his face.

"Haji," he said, adjusting his spectacles.

Kartar,

I pray this letter finds you and your family in good health. Age has finally begun winning its arguments with me.

The village continues. The government finally lined the canal with cement. I still refuse to admit that you were right about it. There are no breaches to repair anymore.

Your courtyard remains standing. Imran rebuilt part of the outer wall after last year's dust storms. The neem tree fell in the last monsoon wind. Many of the younger villagers know your name without ever having seen you. They often ask why an empty house is swept every week. I tell them some absences should remain visible. Otherwise people begin forgetting too easily.

Kartar... If your health allows, come once. Bring Harjit and Santo. Bring the grandchildren. Come and see the village not as memory, but as it has become.

If Allah permits, I shall receive you at the border myself.

Haji

Kartar handed the letter to Harjit. He read it slowly. When he finished, he folded the pages with the same care with which Haji must have written them. Kartar took the letter back and placed it inside the old wooden box beside Haji's earlier letters. Later, when the house had grown still, he opened the box again and read Haji's letter a second time. He sat for a while with the letter in his hands.

What would he really find there now? He remembered the village the way it had been when he was there. The fields would be in other hands now. The people living there would not know him. Even the lanes might not be the same anymore. Perhaps it was better to remember the village as it was. He was no longer a young man who could spend days travelling without consequence. Haji himself had written that age had begun winning its arguments. Perhaps some friendships were easier to hold on to through letters.

Kartar closed the box gently. There would be another letter.

Chapter 43

THE NEXT LETTER

Delhi changed almost without anyone noticing. Another row of Government Quarters appeared beyond the old refugee colony. A bus route was extended. The children grew taller. The letters from Haji continued at their familiar, unhurried pace. Another letter arrived. Kartar opened it.

Kartar,

There is something I did not write in my previous letters. I wished to spare you another sorrow. But before Allah calls me too, I must be truthful.

During these past few years, many who remembered our village before Partition have left us.

Chacha Mehar Singh is gone.

Maulvi Karim Sahib no longer calls the faithful to prayer.

Old Lala Kishan Chand's widow passed away before the last wheat harvest.

The Granthi, Bhai Tirlok Singh, passed away four monsoons ago.

Gopal's mother, Lala Shyamlal and the ever smiling Sukhaman Singh have also gone.

Every cremation seems to take away another voice that remembered the village we once knew. The younger people know our village well. But they know only the village that remained. They do not know the one we lived.

Sometimes I walk through the lanes and realise that there are fewer and fewer people with whom I can remember aloud. That is a lonely feeling.

Forgive me for writing such things. I did not wish to burden your heart. But before Allah closes my account, I could no longer keep them from you. If you still wish to visit... do not wait too long.

Your brother,

Haji

Kartar lowered the letter. Harjit watched his father's face. "What happened, Bauji?"

Kartar handed him the letter. Harjit read it and, when he finished, folded the pages and returned them. The afternoon passed. Kartar spoke little and ate only one roti and a spoonful of dal that evening. Long after everyone had gone to bed, he sat alone in the courtyard.

The winter air had turned cold. Somewhere along the lane, a wooden door was pulled shut. The sound echoed briefly before fading. He thought of the village, not as it had looked, but as it had sounded: the creak of the Persian wheel, the Ravi in flood, children shouting in the lanes, Bashir laughing across the fields, Omparkash's voice from the school, horses calling from the stable. He had known those sounds all his life. Now many of the people who had made them were gone.

He understood what Haji was telling him. If he waited much longer, there might be no one left who could point towards a field and say, "Your father planted wheat there."

No one left to stand beneath the banyan tree and remember the boys they had once been.

Just before dawn, Kartar rose and went inside. Harjit was awake, preparing for work. "Bauji?"

Kartar hesitated and then said, "I have been thinking."

Harjit waited. Kartar said, "Perhaps... perhaps I should go."

"To the village?"

Kartar nodded. By then Nachatar had entered the room with a cup of tea. Her eyes moved from one face to the other. "What is it?"

Harjit handed her Haji's letter. She handed it over to Kartar. "Read it to me."

Kartar read the letter aloud. When he finished, Nachatar took it from him and folded it carefully. "I understand," she said.

Parvati and Ganga joined them a few minutes later. The letter passed from one hand to another. No one questioned why Kartar wanted to go. They questioned whether he should. "The journey is too long," Harjit said.

"You tire after walking a short distance now," Parvati added gently.

"There will be visas... permissions... waiting," said Ganga. "And what if you fall ill there?"

Kartar looked once more at Haji's letter. Then he folded it and placed it beside the others inside the wooden box. Perhaps they were right. For now, the village would have to remain where it had always been for him. In memory.

Chapter 44

THE GIFT

In 1962, Ganga entered the final year of BA in History. Once, the family gathered for dinner as usual. “So,” Harjit said between mouthfuls, “what are your plans after graduation?”

Ganga looked up from her plate. “I have not decided yet.”

Parvati exchanged a glance with Jasmeet. “Actually,” she said, “one of the women at the tailoring centre spoke to me recently.”

Ganga immediately became suspicious. “About what?”

“A marriage proposal.”

Harjit suddenly found his food very interesting. Jasmeet appeared equally absorbed in the dal. “And?” Ganga asked.

“The family seems respectable.”

Ganga did not hesitate. “And after marriage?”

Parvati looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

The room fell quiet. “I get married, then what?”

“You run a household.”

Ganga could not hide her disappointment. “I want to work.”

Harjit finally put down his glass. “There is nothing wrong with that.”

Parvati said politely, "There is nothing wrong with marriage either."

"I didn't say there was." Harjit turned towards Ganga. "If you want a job, try the government."

"Doing what?"

"Clerical work, like me. It is steady."

"That sounds worse."

Harjit ignored the remark. "Steady salary, quarter, pension. You won't have to worry."

"If I don't become a clerk, someone else will. The government won't notice the difference. It is only my ambition that will remain unfulfilled."

A reluctant smile appeared on Harjit's face. "Probably."

Jasmeet laughed. "What do you want to teach?"

"History."

Harjit nodded. "Then apply."

A year later, she did.

The appointment letter arrived on a hot Wednesday afternoon. Parvati read it before handing it to Harjit. He adjusted his spectacles and checked the posting details. Government Girls' Senior Secondary School. History Teacher. He smiled. Kartar accepted the letter without a word. After reading it, he folded it and handed it back. "Very good," he said.

Nachatar Kaur said to Ganga. "Bapu would have been very proud."

No one asked whether she meant Arun or Omparkash. Somehow, she seemed to mean both. Parvati smiled. *Arun would have tried very hard to appear calm and failed completely.* She thought to herself.

Ganga received her first salary at the end of the month. On her way home, she stopped at the market. When she returned, she was carrying

several brown paper packets tied with string. Parvati noticed them. "What have you bought?"

Ganga smiled. "You'll see."

That evening, after everyone had finished dinner, she placed the packets before the family. The first was for Kartar. He unfolded a fine cotton kurta. "For me?"

"You keep saying the old one has become too thin."

He rubbed the fabric between his fingers. "It is too expensive."

"It is my first salary, Dadaji."

For Nachatar there was a light cotton sari in her favourite shade of blue. "Dadiji," Ganga said, "I think it suits you."

Nachatar smiled. "So now my granddaughter has begun looking after me."

Harjit received a fountain pen. "I have watched you borrow everyone else's pen for years," Ganga said.

Harjit laughed. "Government offices supply them. I just keep forgetting where I leave mine."

Jasmeet's packet contained a beautifully embroidered dupatta. Santosh received a new handbag. Surinder unfolded a crisp cotton shirt. Manjeet and Simran squealed over their small gifts and immediately ran off to show each other.

Parvati noticed one parcel still lying unopened. "What is that?"

Ganga smiled proudly. "It is yours."

Parvati unwrapped it slowly. Inside lay a delicate pair of gold earrings. She stared at them in astonishment. "Ganga..."

"You have never bought anything for yourself."

Parvati's smile faded. "How could you afford these?"

Ganga looked away. "I borrowed a little."

Parvati's expression changed. "You borrowed money?"

"I'll repay it in a few months."

"You should never begin life with debt," Parvati said.

She looked at her daughter, unable to decide whether to scold her or embrace her. In the end, she did neither. She reached out and touched Ganga's cheek.

Late that night, after everyone had gone to bed, Parvati opened the small box again. The earrings caught the faint light from the lamp. She thought of a young man who would have indulged her in the same way. He would have laughed at the fuss over a pair of earrings. Then he would have asked whether Ganga had bought something for herself.

She smiled, closed the box and placed it beside her pillow before turning out the lamp.

Chapter 45

THE BLESSING

The final parcel was for Madan Lal. The following afternoon Ganga carried it to him herself, accompanied by her mother. The familiar fragrance of ghee and cardamom greeted them before they entered the shop. Business had slowed after the lunchtime rush. Madan Lal sat near the counter, spectacles resting low on his nose as he checked the day's accounts. He looked up and smiled.

“So, the teacher has visited us today. What lessons have you brought?”

Ganga smiled and placed the neatly wrapped packet before him.

“What is this?”

“My first salary.”

Madan Lal untied the string and unfolded a soft woolen muffler. He looked from the muffler to Ganga and laughed. “In this heat?”

“Winter will come,” Ganga said.

He draped it around his neck anyway. “Then I'll keep it ready for winter.” He adjusted it with exaggerated importance. “How do I look?”

Everyone laughed. “Like someone who should stop pretending he is still forty,” Ganga teased.

Surinder laughed. Madan Lal beckoned Ganga closer. She bent respectfully. He placed his hand upon her head. "May Lakshmi Maa bless you."

She touched his feet. When she rose, he said, "Paro, you have raised her well."

Parvati smiled. "We all have."

They talked as they always did. Business, children, Harjit's work and the rising prices. As the family prepared to leave, Madan Lal draped the muffler around his shoulders. "You'll melt in that, Bauji," Parvati joked.

Madan Lal chuckled and took it off. "Then it can wait for winter. I'll wear it on the first cold morning."

"I'll remind you," Ganga said.

The following night the household retired early. The children had finally fallen asleep after insisting upon one more story from Kartar. It was well past ten when someone knocked at the courtyard gate. Harjit looked up. Visitors rarely arrived at that hour. He opened the door. A young man stood outside, breathing heavily. "I have been sent by Surinder ji."

Harjit's face changed. "What has happened?"

The young man lowered his eyes. "Bauji..." He hesitated. "passed away a little while ago."

Harjit stood still, then he nodded and closed the door. By the time he turned around, Kartar was already standing behind him.

The family reached Surinder's home before midnight. A few neighbours had visited and gone. The shop shutters were closed. Inside, Madan Lal lay upon a white sheet. The new muffler rested neatly folded on a chair beside him. "He said he would wear it in the coming winter," Surinder said through his tears.

Parvati covered her mouth. Ganga stood perfectly still. She walked slowly towards him, knelt beside the charpoy and touched his feet one final time. Then, sobbing, she draped the muffler around his neck. Harjit placed a hand on Surinder's shoulder. Kartar stood near the head of the charpoy for a long time. At last he folded his hands. "Waheguru," he whispered.

The cremation took place the following morning. Friends, neighbours and customers attended the last rites. Many had known Madan Lal only as the smiling sweet maker. Others knew how many refugee families had found help through him during the years after Partition. As the flames rose into the morning sky, Kartar thought of another funeral many years earlier beside the Ravi.

That evening the family returned home exhausted. No one spoke much during dinner. After the children had gone to sleep, Kartar remained alone in the courtyard. The summer air had turned slightly cooler. He looked up at the stars. Madan Lal's empty chair came to mind. Then Arun, Omparkash, Niranjana and the names Haji had written in his letters.

He thought of how many people who remembered the old village were now gone. The invitation inside the old wooden box returned to his thoughts. He had found reasons not to go. The journey was too long. There were health concerns and official formalities. Haji would understand. There would always be another year. Or so he had told himself.

The following morning, Harjit was fastening the buttons of his shirt before leaving for the office when Kartar entered the room. "Bauji?"

"I have made up my mind."

Harjit asked him. "About Haji chacha's invitation?"

Kartar nodded. "I should have gone when he first asked."

“The journey has not become any shorter,” Harjit said gently. “Nor have you become any younger.”

“I know.”

“There will be visas, permissions and long hours on trains.”

“I know.”

“And if the journey proves too much?”

Kartar looked at his son. “If I wait any longer, there may be no one left who can remember it with me.”

By then Nachatar had entered from the kitchen. Parvati and Ganga followed, sensing from the unusual tone that something important was being discussed. Harjit turned towards them. “Bauji wants to accept Haji chacha's invitation.”

No one seemed surprised. Parvati spoke first. “The journey will be difficult.”

Ganga added softly, “You have not travelled so far in years.”

Harjit said, “We are only thinking of your health.”

Kartar listened without interrupting. Then he said, “I have spent years telling myself there would be another opportunity.”

He paused. “Yesterday I stood beside Madan Lal's funeral pyre.”

Everyone listened silently. “When Haji wrote, I believed there would always be another letter.” Kartar looked down. “Now I do not know if there will be.”

His voice was calm. “I want to see my friend while he is still waiting for me.”

The room was quiet. Nachatar smiled. “I left that village with you. If you are going back to visit it, I shall come with you.”

Harjit smiled. "You cannot manage by yourselves. I will accompany you. The journey will be difficult for the two of you."

Ganga's face brightened. "May I come along?"

"Of course," said Kartar.

Parvati looked at Ganga and smiled. "Then I shall come too."

Jasmeet laughed softly. "And if Parvati is going, I am not staying behind."

Kartar looked around at them. For a moment, he said nothing. Then his face broke into a smile.

Kartar was beside himself with happiness. For the first time in a long while, he thought about the journey without thinking about what might prevent it.

Chapter 46

THE ROAD ACROSS

Preparations for the journey began. Nachatar Kaur moved through them with the authority the family had long stopped noticing. She reminded everyone what still needed packing, checked the medicines twice and looked inside every trunk before it was closed. No one questioned the habit. If Nachatar said the luggage was ready, it was.

Harjit dealt with the government offices while Ganga kept track of the paperwork. Forms were filled, letters written, addresses verified, photographs collected and signatures obtained. The passports and permits took months. At one counter the clerk looked up. "Purpose of visit?"

"Personal."

"Relatives in Pakistan?"

Harjit hesitated. "My old village."

Parvati carried a handwoven shawl for Haji. She had made it herself over many evenings in Delhi. She inspected it one final time before folding it away. "Do you think Haji Chacha will like it?" she asked.

Jasmeet smiled. "Haji Chacha would be pleased with a handkerchief if it came from you."

Parvati shook her head. "This is different."

Santosh carried tins of freshly made laddoos from Malhotra Sweets for the village children she had never met. "If they don't remember us, the laddoos will help," she declared.

The children treated the journey like an adventure. Manjeet and Simran insisted on carrying toffees for "the Pakistan children."

Ganga packed a photograph of Arun that had travelled with the family since Delhi. She was not sure why she carried it. The village had known her father as a son, a friend and a young man, while she knew him only through stories. Kartar travelled lighter than everyone else. An extra shawl, a change of clothes, a few medicines, Omparkash's photograph and Haji's letters tied together with fading string. When Harjit suggested carrying a larger suitcase, his reason was simple. "I am not going there to stay."

Before locking the government quarter, Nachatar stood in the doorway and looked back through the house. "We'll be back in a few days," she said.

Then she closed the door and slipped the key into her handbag.

The train journey towards Punjab felt different from the trains of 1947. Clean compartments and reserved seats, vendors selling tea through the aisles, families discussing ordinary matters without fear. Yet for the older generation, every railway whistle still carried echoes of those earlier journeys. Harjit sat near the window, mostly silent, as the plains rolled past. Kartar watched Punjab pass outside. Mustard fields, eucalyptus trees, canals catching the afternoon light, small stations with tea stalls and grazing cattle. Sometimes he closed his eyes and the years seemed to disappear.

At Amritsar they stayed one night before crossing. The city had changed. Roads were wider, new buildings had appeared and crowded markets stood where refugee camps had once stretched across the outskirts. Certain memories returned anyway. The station platforms, the confusion, Santosh disappearing into the crowd.

Santosh avoided looking too long towards the railway exit. Harjit noticed and guided the family elsewhere without saying anything. That evening Kartar walked alone through the old refugee camp grounds outside the city. New houses stood where the tents had once been. Children played cricket near the places where missing person lists had fluttered beneath lantern light.

The crossing took place the next morning. The road narrowed before a white painted steel gate. A striped boom barrier rested across the Grand Trunk Road, and beyond it another, almost identical, stood on the Pakistani side. Between them lay barely thirty yards of sun baked tarmac. Two sentries watched from opposite ends while customs clerks shuffled papers in low brick buildings.

The border disappointed the children. "That's all?" Manjeet asked. "A road, gates and soldiers?"

The adults smiled. Immigration formalities continued beneath the trees. Officials stamped documents while travellers waited with suitcases and bags. Kartar remained outwardly calm, though his hands tightened around his walking stick when the Pakistani officer examined his passport. "Purpose of visit?"

"Old village."

The officer looked at him, then at the birthplace listed in the documents. His expression softened. "Welcome."

Beyond the border, the road continued much as on the Indian side. The same dust, the same heat and the same trees beside the canals. Only the signboards had changed. Simran called out loudly, "It doesn't look different at all."

Surinder smiled. "No."

The child frowned. "Then why did we move out?"

Before anyone could answer, a voice came from nearby. "Kartar Chacha."

An older man stood waiting a short distance away beneath the afternoon sun. Grey touched his beard and the years had carved deeper lines across his face. There was no mistaking him. Imran. He stepped forward. "Kartar Chacha."

Kartar smiled. "You've become old."

Imran laughed. "So have you."

The tension broke. Harjit embraced him first, followed by Surinder. Introductions began at once. "This is Jasmeet, and these are the girls, Manjeet and Simran."

The children folded their hands politely. Imran's eyes moved to Parvati. "Paro."

She smiled through sudden tears. "You recognised me."

"You think age has damaged my eyesight that badly?"

The others laughed. "Last time I saw you," Imran continued, "you were scolding Arun for joining us on a mango raid."

The smile faded. Parvati answered, "And last time I saw you, you were pretending you had not fallen into the canal."

Imran laughed again. Beside him stood Sultana, no longer the frightened girl separated at Amritsar Station years earlier. Three children stood nearby, watching the visitors from Delhi. Sultana stepped forward and folded her hands respectfully towards Kartar and Parvati. "Namaste."

The children stared openly at one another. After the greetings quietened, Kartar looked around. "And where is your Haji?"

Imran smiled. "Waiting."

Kartar frowned. "At the village?"

"Where else?"

"He wrote that he would meet us."

“He intended to.” Imran's smile widened. “For three days he spoke of nothing else. Then my mother, Sultana and several of the elders told him he was not going anywhere.”

“Old man!” said Kartar.

A ripple of laughter passed through the group.

Imran continued, “The truth is, he has been waiting since morning. He asked many times whether the house had been swept properly and inspected the courtyard himself.”

Something shifted across Kartar's face. “And the house?” he asked.

Imran looked at him. “It is waiting too.”

Finally Imran clapped his hands. “Let's go.”

He pointed towards the waiting tongas. “If we remain standing here any longer, Abbu will personally arrive and scold all of us.”

The children climbed aboard first. Luggage followed and conversations continued as everyone found a place. The small convoy turned towards the village.

The city slowly disappeared behind them. Roads narrowed, buildings became fewer and fields stretched out beneath the Punjab sky. The tongas moved at an unhurried pace, their horses' hooves muffled against the soft ground. Occasionally a dog chased them for a short distance before giving up. Imran sat beside Kartar, pointing towards landmarks as they passed. “That canal came later.”

A little farther on he said, “This road used to be mud.”

Kartar listened, sometimes asking a question, sometimes simply looking. In the early afternoon, Imran began looking ahead more often. The road curved around a grove of trees. Beyond it lay the village.

The tongas slowed. People had gathered near the eastern road leading into the village, watching. And at the front of them all stood Haji Abdul Rahman Khan, leaning upon a wooden staff.

Chapter 47

THE VILLAGE REMEMBERS

Age had thinned them both. Their beards had turned white and their backs no longer carried the certainty of youth. Yet neither needed introduction. Haji stepped forward and placed both hands upon Kartar's shoulders. "You came."

Kartar nodded. "I had to."

Both men laughed. Harjit stepped forward next. The boy Haji remembered had disappeared long ago. A middle aged man stood in his place. Harjit bent and touched his feet. Haji pulled him up at once. "No."

When Harjit straightened, Haji looked at him again. "You have your father's face."

Santosh embraced him next. Then Parvati stepped forward carrying the handwoven shawl she had brought from Delhi. "For you."

Haji unfolded it. His fingers rested upon the wool. "It is beautiful."

Parvati smiled. "It will keep you warm when you sit outside giving orders."

The villagers laughed. Soon afterwards Santosh opened the tins she had carried all the way from Delhi. Within seconds she found herself surrounded by children. "One each."

The children ignored the instruction, and one tin of laddoos soon disappeared. Haji joked, “Delhi people are spoiling them.”

“No,” Santosh laughed. “The laddoos are.”

Even before the laughter had faded, Haji asked, “Kartar, shall we go?”

The question needed no explanation. Haji turned into the lane. Kartar walked beside him. The others followed. Men stepped aside respectfully as they passed, and women watched from courtyards. They stopped before a familiar wooden gate. Kartar looked at it. The wood had darkened with age. One hinge had been replaced. The mud wall beside it had been repaired with newer brick. Yet the gate was unmistakably his. Haji pushed it. It opened without resistance.

Inside, the courtyard was clean. The old neem tree had fallen, leaving an empty space against the wall. In its place, a young mango sapling, barely a year old, was beginning to claim the courtyard. The well remained covered, its brass lota hanging from the hook. A broken wooden stool rested beside the kitchen wall. Kartar stepped inside. Without thinking, he slipped off his shoes at the edge of the verandah. He then realised no one expected him to. He touched the charpoy and then the place where the neem had stood. His eyes moved towards the verandah. On the wall, the old wooden peg still projected from the plaster. Kartar rested his fingers upon it. Every evening Badal's bridle had hung there after the day's work. He wondered what had become of the horse. Then he withdrew his hand. “You did all this?” he asked.

“Who else would?”

Kartar looked around once more. “Nothing has changed.”

Haji lowered himself onto the charpoy. “No, things have. I failed you, Kartar.”

Kartar was surprised. "I tried to keep everything as it was. I would not let anyone touch your fields or houses. I kept saying, they will return."

He faced Kartar. "Then the officials came. They had their registers. Refugees had arrived from across the border. They needed land. They needed homes. They said the government had allotted everything."

He went on. "I argued. I pleaded. I even delayed them for as long as I could. In the end..." He stopped. "I could not stop them."

Haji's eyes moved across the courtyard. "Not every house remained like this."

Before he could say anything more, Junaid, who had been standing a little behind them, spoke. "Chacha never told you?"

"Told me what?"

"After you left, the government allotted this house to another family. A few days later, chacha bought it from him."

Haji frowned. "Junaid..."

But Junaid continued. "People said he had lost his senses. They asked why he was spending good money on a house that belonged to someone who had crossed the border."

Haji shot him a look. "Leave it."

Junaid smiled sheepishly. "He never lets anyone tell this story."

Haji looked across the courtyard. "I always believed someone would walk through that gate again. If not you, then your children. If not them... then someone who still remembered. Until then, the house had to wait."

Kartar's eyes moved across the courtyard again. "I am glad."

Haji smiled. "So am I."

Santosh walked towards the kitchen doorway. Her hand rested lightly upon the worn wooden frame. "I used to sit here to eat," she said.

Parvati smiled. "That gave you a view of both the courtyard and the kitchen. And you could collect gossip from both."

The women laughed. Harjit wandered towards the far corner where the cattle shed had once stood. Only the stone feeding trough remained. "It feels smaller," he murmured.

Kartar looked around. "Everything does. The lanes, the courtyard... even the distance to the well."

"Isn't it?" asked Harjit.

Haji smiled. "Not to me. I still think this village is big. Probably seems small to you after Delhi."

The children had already begun exploring. Simran discovered the old swing hook still fixed beneath one of the branches. "Dadaji, was there a swing here?"

"There was."

"Who used it?"

"You would have had to stand in a queue," Haji laughed.

"With whom?"

"With your father, he pushed everyone aside."

Harjit protested. "I never pushed anyone."

Haji laughed. "I remember that."

The children stared at Harjit. "You pushed people?"

"Only when your Dadaji is telling the story," Harjit smiled.

As the afternoon wore on, more villagers arrived. Some Kartar recognised at once; others he recognised only after they spoke. Faces had altered, but voices hardly had. Ahmed embraced him. "I told everyone you would become fat in Delhi. You have disappointed them."

The men around them laughed. For the next hour names filled the courtyard. Some belonged to those present. Many belonged to those who no longer were. At last Kartar looked around. "And Bashir?"

A brief silence followed. Haji met his eyes. "There will be time to speak about him," he said. "Today, let us welcome you home."

Nachatar Kaur welcomed each woman as though she had never left the village. Names returned to her more quickly than faces, and before long she was asking after sons, daughters and grandchildren she had last seen as children. As evening approached, women from nearby houses began arriving with dishes despite Santosh's protests. "There is already enough."

"There is never enough when family returns," said Sultana.

Someone brought fresh rotis, someone else brought curd and another arrived carrying vegetables. Before long the courtyard resembled a village feast. The children looked around in surprise. "You have all brought something."

One elderly woman smiled. "That is how villages work."

Kartar sat beneath the neem tree and watched the preparations. Children ran in and out. Neighbours came and went without knocking. Someone borrowed a ladle and someone else returned it without anyone noticing.

The meal stretched long after dark. "Lanterns hung along the courtyard wall and beneath the verandah. Children sat wherever they found space while the elders gathered on charpoys beneath the tree. Plates passed from hand to hand. Nobody was certain who had cooked what anymore. Conversation moved from wheat crops to marriages, grandchildren, government officers, railway journeys and the endless habit of politicians promising more than they delivered. Every now and then someone remembered another villager.

“Do you remember...”

And another story followed. Most of the time it ended in laughter. As the meal drew to a close, Haji leaned back against the charpoy and looked across the courtyard. “It sounds different again.”

Kartar followed his gaze. “What does?”

“The house. For years this courtyard knew only silence.”

His eyes rested upon the children chasing one another beneath the neem tree. “Tonight, it feels like a home again.”

The villagers departed gradually. One family rose, then another. Someone remembered cattle waiting to be fed and someone else mentioned the morning irrigation. Within half an hour the courtyard had grown quiet again.

A cool breeze drifted through the open gate, carrying the faint smell of damp earth from the fields beyond. Harjit sat looking at the lane and said, “I’d like to visit Chak Badrin tomorrow.”

Haji looked up. “You still remember the way?”

Harjit smiled. “I think so.”

“Good,” Haji said. “Leave it to me. I’ll arrange something in the morning.”

Inside the house, the children were deciding where they would sleep. Simran declared she wanted the room nearest the courtyard. Manjeet insisted that she wished to sleep where her father had slept as a boy. Their voices travelled through the rooms, careless and loud.

Kartar listened from the doorway. The children knew nothing of the silence that had once filled those rooms. Perhaps that was how it should be.

Chapter 48

WHAT ABOUT BASHIR?

Morning arrived quickly. A pair of mynas argued noisily upon the neem before flying across the lane. Kartar awoke before dawn and lay listening to the familiar sounds around him; the soft clink of harness chains, the rustle of neem leaves outside the courtyard and, somewhere beyond the lane, the first rooster announcing the day. Seventeen years had passed, yet the village still awakened in the same order.

When he stepped into the courtyard, the air carried the sharp chill of a Punjab winter morning. Mist lay low over the fields beyond the walls. Haji was awake, seated upon the charpoy with a steaming cup of tea. “I was wondering how long it would take you,” he said.

Kartar smiled. The household stirred gradually. Children emerged wrapped in shawls, rubbing sleep from their eyes. Parvati and Santosh disappeared into the kitchen while Jasmeet tried unsuccessfully to persuade Simran that washing before breakfast was not a punishment invented by adults. Nachatar Kaur directed the morning without appearing to do so. One child was sent to fetch more firewood, another reminded to fold the bedding properly before breakfast. “Finish your parathas first,” she told Ganga. “The village will not move away while you eat.”

Harjit finished his tea quickly. “I’ll get ready.”

Haji rose. "I have already made the arrangements."

After breakfast Harjit walked towards the stable. The doorway stopped him. Sultan stood there saddled. The old stallion lifted his head. When he saw Harjit, his ears came forward and he gave a low, familiar neigh. Grey had spread around his muzzle and his shoulders no longer carried the strength they once had. Harjit stood still. "Sultan... you old man."

The horse stretched his neck towards him. Haji, who had been waiting nearby, smiled. "Did you think I would offer you any other horse?"

Harjit crossed the stable in a few quick strides and wrapped both arms around the old horse's neck. Sultan snorted and rubbed his head against Harjit's shoulder. "Come," Haji said.

He led Harjit to the next stall. Badal stood there.

The old horse turned his head, blinked once and stepped forward as far as the tether allowed. "Someone go and call Kartar Singh," Haji said to one of the boys nearby. "Tell him there is something waiting for him here."

Shortly, Kartar entered, wondering what the excitement was about. When he saw Badal, he stopped. He walked forward and placed both hands upon the horse's face. Badal rubbed his head against Kartar and breathed against his shoulder. Kartar's eyes turned moist. He had never imagined he would touch Badal again. Haji smiled. "For months after we returned from the border, he would stand facing the road."

Harjit finally broke the silence. "And Komal?"

Haji's smile faded. "She went several winters ago."

Kartar rested his forehead against Badal's neck. "She carried us well," he said.

Harjit looked at Sultan, smiled and shook his head. "No."

Haji looked puzzled. "He's carried me enough," said Harjit.

He turned towards the adjoining stall and pointed to a younger chestnut horse. "Who's this fellow?"

Haji's face brightened. "Sultan's son."

"His name?"

"Nawaab."

Harjit laughed. "Sultan's son deserves a name like that."

He walked back to Sultan and stroked the old horse's neck once more. "You've carried me enough."

Sultan stood patiently while Harjit tightened the girth. When Harjit gathered the reins, the horse's ears came forward as they always had. Harjit mounted and rode him slowly through the village lanes before returning to the stable. He dismounted, rested his forehead briefly against Sultan's and handed the reins to Haji. He walked over to Nawaab, who tossed his head impatiently. Harjit mounted the younger horse and, after one last glance at Sultan, rode towards Chak Badrin. The rest of the family drifted into the village.

The morning mist had begun lifting. Thin shafts of sunlight filtered through the banyan branches and spread across the maidan where a handful of boys were playing marbles. Kartar paused beneath the tree. The trunk had thickened over the years. New roots had reached the earth while older branches stretched further across the square. He rested one hand against the rough bark. "It has outlived most of the people who have sat beneath it."

The other old man smiled. "And listened to more foolishness than any of us."

The younger villagers laughed, though they were not quite sure what had amused the two old men.

The lane beyond looked narrower now. Several mud houses had given way to brick. Others stood almost as he remembered them. As they walked, women looked up from courtyards and greeted Nachatar Kaur warmly. A few older faces recognised her at once, and the conversation became that of village women rather than visitors. Those who had not met her the previous day asked after Harjit, admired the granddaughters and laughed over memories that needed no explanation to those who had shared them.

The school appeared beyond the peepal tree. Part of the old building still stood. Another section had been rebuilt with newer bricks and a corrugated tin roof. Children's voices floated across the playground. Kartar stopped. He almost expected Omparkash to appear from the neighbouring lane carrying school registers beneath his arm. Instead, only the morning breeze crossed the yard.

A young teacher emerged carrying a bundle of exercise books. He paused when he noticed the elderly Sikh standing near the gate. "Ji?"

Kartar smiled. "My son studied here."

"Then you must come in."

Morning lessons had begun. About forty children sat cross legged across two classrooms, reciting multiplication tables loudly. Kartar stood near the doorway. The sound caught him unexpectedly. He heard Omparkash's voice again, correcting pronunciation, explaining history and tapping the desk lightly with a piece of chalk. The young teacher noticed. "You knew the old master?"

Kartar turned. "Which one?"

"Omparkash sahib."

The name, spoken aloud within those walls after so many years, caught him in the throat. "Yes," Kartar answered. "He was my brother."

The teacher stared. "You are Kartar Singh?"

An old man waiting to pick up his granddaughter overheard them. He reached forward and touched Kartar's arm. "Your brother taught my sons."

The teacher smiled. "I didn't know..."

The old villager chuckled. "And he beat them too."

The younger teacher smiled. "With a stick," the old man clarified, laughing. "Only when necessary. He taught the whole village and frightened them with his stick."

Kartar almost heard Omparkash protesting. "I never frightened anyone."

Inside the classroom, one wall still carried faint traces of the old blackboard beneath newer coats of paint. Kartar stepped towards it and rested his fingers upon the rough wall. The young teacher spoke beside him. "We wanted to repair more, but funds..."

"No apology," Kartar interrupted.

The teacher fell silent. Kartar looked around the room. "The school survived."

His eyes moved across the room once more. "That is all he would have asked for."

Before leaving, the children gathered curiously around Kartar. They had never seen an elderly Sikh visitor inside the school before. One little boy asked directly, "Did you really live here?"

"Yes."

The innocence of the question made Kartar smile. As they stepped out of the school, Ganga lingered near the verandah. A faded wooden board hung beside the entrance. Several names had been painted upon it over the years, some erased by time. She suddenly stopped. "Dadaji."

Kartar turned. She pointed towards one of the older names. "Is this...?"

He stepped closer. There, beneath several newer coats of paint, he could still make out the words. **Headmaster - Omparkash Sharma** He stood looking at it. The young teacher noticed what had caught their attention. "He taught here for many years," he said.

Later that afternoon they walked to the canal. The children raced ahead, soon joined by village boys who needed no introduction before becoming friends. Near the canal crossing, Kartar stopped. The old wrestling ground still lay beside the water. It was smaller than he remembered, but unmistakably the same. Ahmed, who had joined them along the way, laughed loudly. "You still afraid to wrestle?"

Kartar looked over his shoulder with mock irritation. "You cheated then too."

"I won fairly."

"You fell into the mud before the match even began," Kartar teased him.

The younger villagers gathered. "Who won?" asked Ganga.

"I did," Ahmed declared.

"He still believes that," Kartar replied.

Laughter rippled along the canal bank. A little distance away Parvati stood looking at the Ravi. The river seemed broader now, or perhaps she had become older.

She watched the sunlight dancing upon the water. A boat crossing came back to her, wedding songs, women adjusting her red veil against the wind and the nervous excitement of leaving one village and entering another. She had crossed this river as a young bride, carrying hopes far larger than the small bundle of belongings beside her. On the opposite

bank Arun's family had been waiting. She remembered seeing him standing among them, trying very hard to appear serious. She almost expected to hear the laughter again.

Instead, only the river moved before her. She wondered how many brides it had carried since she had last stood there. The Ravi had carried brides, harvest boats, fishermen and traders long before any border existed. After a while Parvati smiled. "Still showing off," she murmured.

Harjit returned shortly before sunset. Nawaab trotted into the village, flecked with dust but scarcely tired. Several children ran towards him at once. "Did you find it?"

Harjit smiled as he dismounted. "I did."

As evening approached, lanterns appeared one by one beneath the banyan tree. The older villagers gathered as they always had. Children chased one another across the maidan while the women talked in small groups nearby. Conversation wandered through harvests, weddings, grandchildren and the endless foolishness of governments.

Much later, after the lanterns had been turned down, Haji pulled on his hookah in the courtyard while Kartar shared the charpoy beside him. Moonlight lay across the courtyard. After a short silence, Kartar spoke. "You did not tell me about him."

Haji asked, "Whom... Bashir?"

Chapter 49

THE SPEAR

Haji took his time to answer. Then he drew upon the hookah. “I was hoping I would not have to tell you.”

He rose and walked a few steps. Kartar followed. Nachatar Kaur looked at them from the doorway. “Don't sit out too long,” she said.

Seeing the expression on Haji's face, she added nothing more. She went back inside. “His death was not the hardest part,” said Haji.

The lantern burned in front of them. The voices beneath the banyan had died down. “You never told me,” Kartar said. “Not even in the letters.”

Haji continued looking into the darkness. “I did not know how to.”

After a while he smiled. “Do you remember when he fell into the canal?”

Haji laughed despite himself. “He insisted he jumped deliberately.”

“He couldn't swim,” said Kartar.

“He learned very quickly.”

They remembered Bashir stealing mangoes, cheating at kabaddi, insisting he understood farming better than men twice his age, climbing

the banyan because he claimed the view improved his thinking. At one point Kartar laughed aloud.

From somewhere beyond the fields came the distant howl of jackals. Haji drew a slow breath. "Do you remember Chak Badrin?"

The name stirred something unpleasant in Kartar. "The village beyond the canal?"

Haji nodded. "The one that burned."

Kartar looked at him. "What about it?"

Haji kept his eyes on the ground. "Bashir was there."

Kartar frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He went with the men who attacked it."

Kartar stared at him. "No."

The word escaped before he could stop it. Haji closed his eyes. "Yes."

"Not Bashir," Kartar murmured.

"I wish that were true. Do you remember the night you brought out your father's spear?"

Kartar remembered it. "I had not seen it since the day it was used against that wild boar."

Haji's voice dropped. "Bashir carried it."

Kartar stared at him. "The same spear?"

Kartar could see it again, his father's spear, lifted in fear and entrusted to a friend. "He knew those people."

"I know," Haji agreed.

"He grew up beside them."

"I know."

“He sat in their homes.”

“I know.”

“He ate at their homes.”

“I know.”

Kartar's voice trembled. “He carried Arun through the Baisakhi fair on his shoulders. Arun would never have believed this.”

An owl hooted somewhere beyond the fields. Finally Kartar asked, “Why?”

“I have asked myself that many times.”

“And?” Kartar asked.

“I don't know.” Haji looked towards the dark outline of the banyan. “Maybe fear. Maybe anger, pride. Perhaps all three.”

He paused. “Too many good men lost themselves in those days. I don't know what happened to him.”

The lantern beside them flickered. “Afterwards,” Haji continued, “he spoke of it openly.”

His voice hardened. “Proudly.”

Kartar closed his eyes. “I am angry with him.”

“So was I,” said Haji.

The boy who stole mangoes, the young man who laughed too loudly, the friend who carried Arun on his shoulders, the man who walked into Chak Badrin carrying his father's spear. Kartar struggled to hold all of them in his mind. “I want to remember only the boy I knew,” he said.

Haji turned towards him. “So do I.”

After a while he added, “But that would leave out the man he became.”

Kartar dimmed the lantern a bit. "No. It wouldn't be fair."

The lantern burned lower. Kartar finally asked, "Did he ever speak of it again?"

"Only once."

"When?"

"Five years ago." Haji hesitated. "He said he still remembered their faces. He never told me their names."

He went on. "We found the spear afterwards. I threw it into the Ravi. I could never bear to see it again."

Kartar remained still. Haji had carried the memory for many years. Kartar now stood facing the dark fields. "He has met his Creator," he said. "He would have answered for it already."

The anger was still there. So was the sorrow. Neither man tried to name it. Haji agreed. "Now the answer belongs to Allah."

Kartar looked up at the stars. They had watched over the village before Partition, over the fields and the river, over children playing and weddings taking place beneath the same sky. After a long while he spoke. "May Waheguru forgive him. And grant him better understanding in the next birth."

Beside him Haji whispered, "Ameen."

Chapter 50

THE LINE HELD

The final morning arrived quickly. At dawn the luggage was loaded onto the waiting tongas. Villagers came steadily, and the final meal stretched longer than usual. Someone found another story to tell, another cup of tea to pour. At one point Santosh rested her hand lightly upon the courtyard wall. "I had forgotten this crack."

Haji smiled. "It survived longer than Ahmed's teeth."

The protest came immediately. "I still have teeth!"

Laughter filled the courtyard.

When departure could no longer be delayed, everyone gathered beneath the banyan tree. Children embraced one another. Women exchanged food bundles, recipes and blessings. Nachatar Kaur held Haji's Begum for a short while before they finally let go. "May Waheguru keep you," Nachatar said.

"And may Allah keep you too," came the reply.

The younger men checked the luggage again, although it had already been tied down twice. Kartar stood beside Haji beneath the old tree where they had spent half their lives arguing about crops, canal schedules and matters neither could now remember fully.

The tongas began moving through the village. A few young men jogged beside them as they passed the banyan, the well, the school, the fields and the stable. Badal and Sultan stood in the winter sunlight, watching the carts disappear along the road. At the edge of the village the tongas stopped once. The village lay beneath the winter sun. Smoke rose from kitchen fires. Somewhere a child was calling from one courtyard to another.

Then the journey continued. The border came into view in the afternoon. Visitors were permitted to approach a small area near the gate where final farewells could be exchanged.

Kartar found himself standing opposite Haji, with Imran beside him. A little behind them stood Sultana with her children. "You came back," Haji said.

Kartar smiled. "You kept the place standing."

Haji smiled. "Do you remember the story you once narrated beneath the banyan?"

Kartar looked at him. "The Nawab of Malerkotla."

Haji reminded him, "You said a kindness done once should never be forgotten."

Kartar's eyes glistened. "No, it should not."

Haji reached into his kurta pocket and brought out an old iron key. "It belongs to you."

Kartar looked at it for several seconds. The iron had darkened with age. For years it had travelled only between Haji's pocket and the empty house at the end of the lane. Kartar closed Haji's fingers around it. "No."

Haji looked puzzled. "It is your house."

Kartar shook his head. "No. It belongs to the village now."

Kartar looked at the key in his palm, then at Haji. "The school could be shifted there," Kartar said. "It should be put to good use."

Haji smiled and slipped the key back into his pocket.

They walked together for a few steps, holding hands like two little schoolboys. Then a Pakistani soldier stepped forward and called firmly, "*Bas, Bhaijaan. Bas yahin tak.*"

Haji stopped. Kartar crossed into India. Haji remained in Pakistan.

The Line Held

For Those Separated by Borders
But Bound by Friendship

