

AARAN



ASHISH DADWAL

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CHAPTER 1 | **Home Coming**

Arguments lead to quarrels. Quarrels, if not resolved, turn into feuds. Feuds grow hungry and lust, only, for blood. They grow. They don't differentiate between right or wrong or between just and unjust. As the darkness around them grows, and consumes everyone, they grow stronger. So strong, that they can't see the very light in which they arose. From mental peace to the surroundings, they devour everything indifferently. No matter what the cost, all they desire is to quench their unsatiated desire for destruction.

Baldev and Amrik sat in front of the village elders, the 'panchayat', to try to resolve the dispute that grew out of greed. Greed which knows no bounds, respects no relation, and feeds on the very basic sense of being. Greed which grows and consumes every bit of sanity. Greed, which makes one hungry and feeds on the mind.

As the village 'panchayat' came together, everyone was calmly seated at the village headman's house.

Baldev had been away too long. As he sat at with the others, in front of the 'panchayat', he thought about his childhood in the village. He remembered how he and all his cousins always stood strong together. How they played cricket as a team. How they flew kites in unison and how they sat down together to eat.

Glancing at all the villagers seated around him, he closed his eyes and thought of her. He remembered kissing 'her' in the fields and during their long walks by the canal. He remembered how she wept in her arms, all night, just before he was to leave for his military deployment. He remembered her whispering, in his ears, that she would wait.

As he sat there, with eyes closed and mind as calm as the gentle summer breeze, he was brought back to his senses by an old yet strong voice.

"Amrik, this land rightfully belongs to Baldev Singh, s/o late Shri Harnam Singh, s/o late shri Jeevan Singh", said the first village elder, "you were merely the custodian, for the duration while Baldev was away."

Everyone seated agreed, in unison, with a simple nod of their heads.

"Both of you are brothers. Baldev is your 'taya's' son", said the second elder. "You took care of your 'tai', like she were your own mother, when Baldev was serving our country on the border. You shouldn't fight, like little children, over these petty issues", he said calmly, explaining the scenario to everyone who had gathered.

The third elder, a female, who had been a close friend of their family's said, "we have collectively decided that the land near the main road belongs to Baldev and that, he is the rightful owner of the same. All documents held by Baldev are true and the same has been verified by the 'patwaari'".

The village elders paused for a brief time, as if to listen to the whispers of the audience seated around them. The pause was not short enough to interrupt the thoughts, and not long enough to allow them to overthink. Everyone sitting around was whispering to each other.

"The matter is then resolved", said a strong voice of the centrally seated 'Sarpanch'. His turban pointed as sharp as his old eyes. His beard gently swaying with the wind. Hands clutching a silver-lion head walking stick. "Baldev is the rightful

owner of the land claimed by Amrik”, he said and paused for a split second. “Baldev can plough and cultivate his land, as per his choice, and no one will interfere in the same,” he conveyed his order in a gentle, yet firm manner.

“We wish that you live in harmony, like brothers, as before, and amicably resolve any further issues. Problems of a house must be resolved within its boundaries and not in open”, said the old woman softly, re-affirming the sarpanch’s words.

Amongst the whispers, everyone nodded again in unison.

“Does anyone of you has anything to say?”, asked Sarpanch.

There was a brief silence. Baldev looked at his first cousin, Amrik, seated on the chair to his far left. *Times change he thought.* There is no constant, never was, never will be. People change and so do hearts. He thought about her with Amrik now, took a very deep breath, smiled, and looked back at the seated ‘Panchayat’.

“Amrik is my little brother and will always be. I am grateful to him for taking care of my mother while I was away. If he wants the land, he can ask for the same. I am happy to share”, said Baldev in his firm voice.

“You have spoken like a true elder brother Baldev. Good”, said the ‘sarpanch’. “We don’t think that Amrik wants your land?”, he said looking towards Amrik.

Amrik looked around him. He could feel all eyes stabbing him. Through everyone’s eyes, around him, he could hear the unsaid words. He looked at the ‘Panchayat’ with anguish, which turned into anger when he looked at Baldev. He got up, and without saying a word, he left.

“The matter is now resolved Baldev”, said the ‘Sarpanch’. “Go and plough your land, Baldev. Respect it. See to it that you maintain harmony. Since Sukhdev no longer resides here, you are now the eldest amongst your brothers. Past, like a river’s water, has long-gone. Forget it and move on.”

Baldev stood up, folded his hands, and bent his head in respect. "Thank you", he said to everyone and walked away.

Baldev decided to stroll back home through an old path from behind the village. He had walked there with her several times. Her soft fingers entwined in his. As he walked along the rivulet, he remembered how he had first caught her hand there, and instead of freeing herself from his grip, she had inched closer.

As they sat beside the flowing stream, he remembered her smiling at him, and placing her head gently on his shoulder. He remembered the feel of her soft lips on his. He felt her warm breath on his face and how his heart skipped a beat, as he drew her nearer.

'Bang', Baldev felt a strong blow on his head. As his smile disappeared, his military reflexes kicked in. With senses dull, his brain commanded his hands and arms to reach out to the source. He pulled the long rod from one of his attacker's and without delay spun it around. Its three against one.

"Leave from here. I don't want to hurt anyone of you. Specially you Amrik", commanded Baldev in a deafening roar.

But Amrik was reluctant. He charged towards him. Baldev quickly moved aside and managed to escape the assault, in-turn hitting Amrik on the back. Another assailant dealt with in the similar fashion. Seeing the dynamics of the fight shift, the third assailant ran away. Sounds of assault drew the villagers to the site. As soon as it had started, the fight was stopped.

"It's gone beyond us now", shouted the 'sarpanch'. "We tried and this is the result. Shame. Let the matter be decided by law now", he ordered.

Police was prompt to arrive at the scene. The crowd was dispersed.

"Let's settle this matter in the police station", said the inspector. "Do you mind sitting in the jeep?", he asked, as he pointed towards the open back door of the old police jeep.

The trio move in.

At the police station, Baldev is called-in first to the inspector's desk.

"What happened?", asked the inspector, in a suspicious tone, looking straight in Baldev's eyes.

"I slipped", came the reply promptly.

"These injuries are not due to slipping. Also, sarpanch told a very different story. So, I am asking you again, WHAT HAPPENED?", he inquired again.

"I slipped and injured myself", replied Baldev calmly. "Amrik and the 'Bihari' came to help me up, and they also slipped."

"So, sarpanch is lying?"

"Ask the sarpanch", was Baldev's sarcastic reply.

Inspector kept his pen down on the register and relaxed back on his squeaking chair. "I heard that you were kicked out of the army?", he taunts. "We can give you a second chance, do you want to work for us, with the police?", he asks.

"No", comes the Baldev's prompt reply.

"He broke both my hands. I can't even lift them", interrupts the other assailant, weeping, sitting beside Amrik.

"You shut the fuck up, Bihari", shouts the inspector, "or else I will break both your legs as well."

Inspector picks his pen-up, looks at his register and scribbles something. He then looks up, frowns, and signals Baldev to leave.

Baldev nods, stands up and leaves without saying a word.

On the way out he stops for a second to look at Amrik and reaches out his hand. Amrik looks away. Baldev walks out.

Late evening, at home, he sits at the table for dinner with his sobbing mother.

“Why do you always fight? It would have been better for me to be with your late father, than to see this day, when you were in jail for picking up fights with your brothers”, says Baldev’s sobbing mother.

“I did not fight. I was assaulted. And I did not go to jail”, replied Baldev with an innocent smile on his face and bandage brandishing on his head.

“Just keep quiet”, she said with tears in her eyes and anger on her face. “I had always hoped that you would be better”, she sobbed, “but even ‘the army’ kicked you out. You must have fought with someone there as well.”

“Bebe’, I did not fight”, said Baldev as he tried to hold his mother’s hand from across the table.

She moved her hand away from his, “I don’t want to hear a word.”

She looked up, on the wall, towards their family photograph. She, sitting beside her late husband, Baldev sitting on her lap, and Sukhdev, her elder one, standing at his father’s side. In a row, there were multiple photographs of Baldev and Sukhdev together, and then of them alone. Sukhdev, dressed up in a suit, sitting on the bonnet of an expensive car parked in front of a sky-rise building in Mumbai.

“Look at your elder brother”, she said, pointing at the last photograph. “He has turned out to be a big businessman in Mumbai, while you are getting picked up by police, after getting beaten up like a stray dog”, she sobbed. “I have called your brother, and tomorrow morning you will catch the first train to Mumbai and join him there.”

Baldev looks up at the photos. He finishes his food, nods, and walks away.

As he lays on the bed, with his eyes wide open, he imagines ‘her’, wailing at her brother’s body. Sobbing inconsolably, as she wraps her arms around her brother’s motionless head, the

tricolored flag swaying slightly, swaddled neatly around the coffin. She looks up, as she tries to find Baldev in the gathered crowd, but he isn't there.

He thinks of her, sitting on the bed, draped in a beautiful red wedding dress, with Amrik standing on the bedside.

He closes his moist eyes.

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