

Excerpt from my novel in progress, *The Shawl Seller*

## 7

The *Saffron Warriors*, as the other team prided in calling themselves, had already arrived on the field. Their team was comprised entirely of boys from the Kongposh colony, the inhabitants of which cultivated and exported saffron. Immediately after setting foot on the ground, they got busy unpacking their kit and putting on their snow-colored uniforms with the player's name on the back of the shirts and black strips running down the trousers. Each player put on a hat with a specific number printed in black on it.

The field was situated at the foot of the *Zabarwan* mountain range so that the rugged slope of the tallest peak stood as a silent guardian for each game played in front of it. A small crowd of teenagers and young men had also gathered sporadically under the shade of willow trees that formed a natural boundary of the cricket field. A shepherd boy wearing a black phiran over his grey shalwar kameez prodded his flock away from the track and joined the spectators who were waiting for Rizwan's team to arrive. Many of them were from Abramabad and had come to support the team from their locality—Rizwan's team. Some of them grabbed the tribal shepherd boy's hookah to try a few drags. Their cheeks hollowed as they slurped on it; they sputtered all the smoke out, coughing and laughing. Ahmed, the young man who was to act as an umpire for the game, was also from Abramabad, but he had arrived ahead of the team from his neighborhood and prepped for his role.

"Is it true, Ahmed Sab, that Fayaz and Rahil have been released by the army?" One man in the crowd asked Ahmed, who was a distant cousin of the uncle-nephew duo who had been taken on the night of the cordon and search operation in Abramabad.

"Yes, alhamdulillah. They reached home yesterday in the morning." Ahmed looked away toward the mountain as he replied.

"And how are they feeling?" the man asked next.

"Just like everybody else feels after coming out of an army camp." Ahmed flipped his wide-brimmed white hat as he responded in a muffled voice.

"I mean, did they say anything, or were they tortured?" the man kept asking.

Ahmed held the hat's brim between his fingers and flipped it faster and faster until it fell out of his hand.

"Oh! There they come." He pointed in the direction from which a dozen or so young men were entering the field, carrying duffel bags on their shoulders and kit bags on the carrier seats of the few bicycles they had.

Rizwan avoided stepping on dried cow dung and sheep droppings as he walked on the turf with the other teammates toward the pitch. He carried a water can in one hand and a cricket

bat in the other. An expectation that the team captain would let him be the opening batsman was growing in his head. He could not wait to unleash his hits and pile on the runs. But more than anything, he wanted to relieve his tensed head from an obscure anxiety and restlessness by tiring himself on the field.

“*Go Chinar Stickers go!*” the crowd roared and whooped as Rizwan’s team clad themselves in their green uniform with the player names printed in white on their backs.

The two captains of the opposing teams came closer, facing each other as the umpire, standing between them, sent a coin into the air with a flick of his right thumb. The coin flashed under the sun as it twirled rapidly before it landed on the ground— heads up!

Rizwan’s team received a hollering from the crowded boys for winning the toss and deciding to bat. His captain indeed asked him to open the innings!

Rizwan received the first delivery from a tall bowler from the other team. He synchronized his footwork perfectly with eye and hand coordination as he hit the ball with all his might. The cows nibbling on the grass near the boundary lifted their heads at the sound of the leather ball hitting Rizwan’s bat, made from Kashmiri willow. The crowd stood up to cheer and shouted in excitement. It was not a common sight in their local cricket matches that a sixer was made off the very first delivery. But it was no surprise for the spectators when Rizwan held the bat. Most of the inhabitants of the neighborhoods next to his own had either witnessed his hits or heard the tales of the bowlers frustrated—the long fours, towering sixes, and the endless singles from Rizwan’s bat that swung swiftly like the wind. He wasn’t an ordinary batsman for *Chinar Stickers*. They called him *run-machine*, an epithet uttered with admiration and fear depending on who uttered it. No one could forget that legendary inning when Rizwan carved three sixes through the off-side, sent two soaring down long-on, and one brutally toward the leg-side in a *single* over. The bowler? He refused to bowl again to Rizwan.

The only thing that made Rizwan perceive that match as different from the ones he had played for before was his inner state of mind. He was not feeling great even when he was playing well. The inning was not helping him relieve his seemingly irrational anxiety. He wasn’t sure if he had had a nightmare, woke up with a heavy head, missed Sabreen badly, or had some premonition hovering over him that affected his mood. He felt like he was playing mechanically. His heart was not on the pitch or in the game. Yet, he felt a surge in adrenaline that made him hit the ball hard.

Three non-striking batsmen had fallen by the time Rizwan was closer to scoring a fifty. They had anchored well to pave the way for Rizwan to score for the team after they saw him in form. The sun was above the head and flocks of sheep could be seen grazing on the distant mountain range behind the *Zabarwan*. Facing his teammates sitting in small groups under the shade of white willows, Rizwan curled the fingers of his right hand inwards and brought them closer to his mouth to signal that he needed water. One of his teammates jogged toward him carrying water in a bottle. He squatted, drank half the bottle, and put his gloves back on. He needed 8 runs to complete a fifty. He felt sure that he would make it by hitting any combination

of a six and a four or a six and a few singles or two fours. His confidence made him decide to hit sixes or fours rather than run to make singles.

The bowler sprinted toward the bowling position with the ball clenched in his right hand. Each step built his momentum until he took one final leap before swinging his arm in a smooth, practiced arc, coupled with flicking of his fingers to make a fast tangential release toward Rizwan, aiming the stumps behind him. Rizwan fixed his eyes on the red leather ball as it cut its way through the air. He took two quick steps back, balanced himself, and then lunged forward to strike the ball before it would touch the bat on its own. Not just the bowler himself, the spectators, the shepherd boy, the fielding players, everyone followed the trajectory of the ball as it arched over the field and fell outside the boundary in the direction where the main entrance to the field lay. But no one returned their gaze to Rizwan this time! No one cheered either! All eyes froze, seeing two military jeeps and one mighty truck entering the field and trundling on the turf heading to the crowd.

One of the jeeps stopped in the center of the pitch while the other one drove further toward the offside, made a U-turn, and halted in front of the batting team sitting in the willow shade. A few of those players had been taken out while the rest were ready to play their innings. The truck wheeled straight to the spectators. About six troopers could be seen inside the troop compartment with its tarpaulin lifted on the back. They disembarked immediately while the military personnel in the jeeps stepped down in a controlled manner.

“Guys from Abramabad, line up here,” one of the troopers, whose face could not be seen clearly under the bright sun, shouted, walking directly toward the non-striking batsman.

The same command was given to the spectating crowd from which the young boys and the married men from Rizwan’s neighborhood abruptly got up and separated themselves from the rest. The troopers checked the identity cards of the sitting men before making the standing ones march toward the jeep. The fielding players, although not belonging to Abramabad, walked quickly toward the center and assembled in front of the jeep. The batting players were also asked to walk toward the center of the field.

Both Rizwan and the non-striker took off their helmets and joined the rest of their teammates. Everyone was perturbed at the scene. It had never happened before in the history of their cricket matches that a match was interrupted by the army. But it had also never happened that a cordon and search op was launched in Abramabad until it was launched. Things happen for the first time before they become routine!

“Now, each of you will state your names, the names of your fathers, and your occupations, one by one,” one seemingly captain-ranked army man spoke sternly.

Rizwan stood at the end of the line of players from the right. He was the first to reveal his identity, and all the players followed suit. The truck crept toward them with a low rumble.

The captain used some mysterious logic to separate shorter and medium-height boys from tall ones and asked them to get into the truck. Rizwan was not sure if he wanted to curse his height for not being either tall or short, or himself for coming out of his house to play cricket.

Eight boys from Abramabad were seated in the back of the truck while all the others watched in fear. No one dared to ask the reason for taking them away. No one bothered about the game being intervened and called off.

A total stillness fell on the field as they watched the vehicles carrying their folksmen driving away.

## 8

Rizwan lifted his eyes at the trooper whose knees touched him as the truck took sharp turns on dirt tracks and unmacadamized roads. None of the boys had spoken since their feet touched the truck's cold metal.

"Sir, may I ask what we have done?" he asked hesitatingly. "I mean, why are we being taken away?" he added after a pause.

The trooper looked back into Rizwan's eyes before shifting to his feet and then back to Rizwan's face. With his eyes fixed on Rizwan, he slouched and pulled a folded gunny sack from underneath the vertical seat and held its mouth open to Rizwan without saying a word. Rizwan peeped into the emptiness of the gunny sack without touching it. He gave another submissive look at the trooper, who seemed to wait for Rizwan to do something, but would not tell what. Clueless, Rizwan turned his head to his left for a hint. He could only see the right side of the faces of a few boys, while the rest were behind each other in a row.

"Hhmm," the lean, dark trooper jerked forward, craned his neck downward with his eyes fixed on Rizwan, and pushed the gunny sack further toward Rizwan.

Not sure how to ask the soldier politely that he could not understand what he wanted him to do, Rizwan started pulling his lower jaw away from the upper jaw and grabbed one edge of the gunny sack. A massive hand came flying from the right side and landed a hard slap on Rizwan's face. Rizwan shook violently and then froze with his neck turned to his left. He touched his face as he looked at the gigantic soldier sitting to the right of the lean one.

"You dumb-asshole. Put your shoes into the bag," the giant soldier, whose head almost touched the truck's roof, shouted.

Rizwan grabbed his shoes lying next to his feet and quickly dropped them into the gunny sack. When the lean trooper extended his arms toward the rest of the boys, they laid their hands on their shoes at once and bundled them into the bag.

Sitting on the exterior edge of the seat, Waseem extended his left arm a little and seized a seam of the dull green tarpaulin that blocked the outside view from them. The trooper seated right in front of him immediately butt-stroked his abdomen,

"What do you want to look outside for? Your funeral procession? Asshole!"

A violent shriek emerged from Waseem's innards and escaped through his mouth. The boy sitting next to him did not dare to help him sit back as he fell into the prostrating position on the metal floor of the truck. We have been driven away farther than where the nearest army camp is located, God knows where they are taking us, and why? He wondered as he felt his feet get wet. Waseem was vomiting blood. The trooper stared at him like a wolf waiting for a rabbit to make a mistake. The boy did not dare to help Waseem, or else he could perhaps receive a blow from him.

“Hhmm!” The lean, dark trooper lifted his torso a little from the seat and pulled a bunch of small black clothes with strings from his butt pocket and passed one to each of them, again without speaking a word.

The boys wore them on their eyes without questioning. Waseem helped himself to the seat, wiped blood from his mouth, and blindfolded himself like the rest.

Rizwan smelled a heavy stench of someone else’s fear on his eyelids. At first, it was only the truck groaning under his weight like a hungry beast that could stop anywhere and devour him. But now it was the patch of darkness pasted upon his eyes that made him feel like whirling down an abyss. But what ate him from inside were the thoughts about their fate once the truck finally came to a halt. He could feel his right side slightly higher than the left side, and his body leaning to his left. Perhaps the truck was climbing up a hill. Are they taking us into the mountains? He thought as he sensed the engine growling louder and heavier, a familiar sound an overloaded bus made when ascending a terrain.

After taking a dozen turns on the curves, the truck finally came to a stop. The boys were pulled apart immediately.

“Move it. Walk straight and faster.” The troopers grabbed them by their shirt-collars or hems or pushed them from behind.

A soothing breeze hit Rizwan’s face and chest as he was brought down the truck. A strange scent of some wild grass entered his nostrils. He lifted his head a little and lowered his eyes to steal a glance at the ground through the tiny opening left on either side of his nose. He could see patches of grass as he was pulled inside a room. As the blindfold was removed from his eyes, he saw the faces of the two troopers who had almost dragged him to the dimly lit room.

“Don’t worry! We won’t kill you!” one of them whispered into his ear louder enough for the other trooper to hear as well. “At least not if you tell no lies,” he added loudly.

They both laughed and left, closing the door behind them.

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“I will bring him back. Please stop crying. Get up. Let’s go home. ...” Rizwan’s father was on the brink of breaking down as he tried to console his wife.

Boba was not the only mother wailing for her son taken away by the army. Raja Begum’s two daughters had seized her arms on either side to stop her from beating her forehead. There was Roshan Lal, squatting on the ground, his cheek resting on his left palm and his right hand holding an empty steel tumbler he had just finished sipping cold water from. Waseem’s mother sobbed against the walnut tree.

With her back against the veranda plinth, she yapped, “Waseem, my dear Waseem, why did you sin going out to play cricket today? If only you had listened to me in the morning and assisted your father in tilling the land!”

The thoughts about what her son might go through at the hands of the army men made her pull her hair out. It was only when her father-in-law entered the courtyard, supporting himself using a staff, that she draped her head in her scarf and crouched behind a bunch of other women.

Raheem's courtyard was filled with mothers, fathers, sisters, and grandmothers who had assembled after someone brought the news of their sixteen-year-old being taken away from the cricket field. They were all equally distraught and apprehensive for their children.

No one lifted the lid off the rice pot that night. The chicken and potato curry that Boba had cooked earlier in the day also stood untouched. Shafeeq Ahmad insisted that Aaqib have dinner before going to bed. But who would have an appetite when their concern for Rizwan was eating them?

"How can I serve food to the rest of us when my Rizwan is perhaps made to sleep without eating anything? Would they even allow him to sleep? Don't you know what they do to boys inside camps? Bring my son back. I don't care how. Bring him. He is my naïve little boy who does not even dare to face a rude person. My Rizwan, poor Rizwan!" Boba went on and on, beating her chest.

"Shut your mouth now, will you? You have not rested your jaw for the whole day. Calm yourself down, for God's sake. He hasn't been killed. And you are not the only mother whose son has been taken away. I will do everything that I can to bring him home. But let the night pass, will you? I will go to the camp first thing in the morning." Shafeeq yelled at his wife, giving her enthusiastic assurances without knowing which army battalion had taken their son, and to which camp.

Shafeeq looked twice at Aqib when he entered the Mosque for Fajr salah. He scanned his face under the dim light of the Mosque lanterns. Ordinarily, he would not have believed seeing his son inside the Mosque before dawn. Prayer just wasn't his thing. Especially not before sunrise! But that morning, he only wondered whether it was his brother's absence that stole Aqib's sleep, the fear that he could be next, or both.

After the salah, Shafeeq Ahmad took the lead in assembling a few men on the cobblestoned floor of the Mosque's lobby. They asked each other if anyone had an idea of which army camp they should visit to look for their boys. They debated going to the nearest police station and seeking the help of the police. Some considered that the best course of action, while others called it unwise.

"Reporting it to the police means making the army more aggressive and risking the lives of the boys." Ahad Sab remarked, turning to Shafeeq. "Name just one case when the police could trace those abducted by the army. The state police are simply powerless before the army. And even if they try to ask around, the army denies the abductions."

Shafeeq Ahmad walked back home with a sleepy head. Boba had been looking for his way the whole time.

“What did you guys decide?” She could not hide her curiosity when Shafeeq took longer than usual to return from the Mosque.

“Nothing. Is the tea ready? My head is aching.”

“I also feel like my head is being hammered.”

“They must have been taken by 66 LL to the camp on the *Zabarwan* mountains,” Aqib interjected.

Shafeeq gave Aqib a pensive look and lifted the teacup to his mouth.