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Prologue

1.

New Delhi School, 1998:

Anita tried to quiet her children. Like most of the teachers at her primary school, she had paid little attention to the infrequent crisis drills. She was just a Grade 2 teacher with seven- and eight-year-olds. “Exit to the yard in case of fire” was all she could ever remember. No one had ever said anything about sheltering in place, but it was all she could think to do.

Her children crammed toward the front of the class behind her big wooden desk. Most did not fit behind it. Anita crouched on her knees in front of them, herding them back as far from the entrance door as possible.

The alert had come not from the bells like they had trained but from Ryan, the teacher next door. He had burst into the room in the middle of her lecture, screaming that something was wrong and to hide the children. At first, she thought it a joke, but the panicked look on Ryan’s face told her otherwise. After he had disappeared back into the hallway, all she heard above the children’s muffled whimpers were people running and intermittent screaming. Then, there was nothing for several minutes.

Until the door smashed in.

2.

Three miles out:

Kabir had only been the Inspector of Special Cell for three months. His unit functioned much like SWAT, and the elite investigative branch was a coveted spot within the New Delhi Police Department. It had been a relatively quiet three months, and Kabir had wanted some action to pad his resume. But a school massacre was not what he’d wished for.

“Hurry up, damn it!” Kabir yelled from the back seat of the car. His radio was blowing up as the units on scene relayed cryptic messages from the people exiting the school. It sounded like utter chaos; children and teachers alike ran from the building. Some teachers were carrying children, and some carried just their shame. Most were covered in blood. But all of them had stories that were incredibly bizarre, and the reports of the perpetrator were too fantastic to be true. As was often the case, extreme distress caused extreme distortion, and Kabir knew only to trust himself or his guys.

He finally arrived and began assessing the situation, trying to formulate an action plan and get his bearings as quickly as possible. Twenty police vehicles lit up the busy street in front of the school, and Special Cell units were on scene, gearing up as per protocol. Children were still running out of the school, and officers met them halfway, scooping them up and running back to cover. As he took in the scene, Kabir calculated about fifty meters between the gate and the school entrance. He quickly made his way toward the Cell guys to retrieve his tactical gear from their command vehicle when screams from the crowd stopped him.

Kabir turned and saw a woman crawling out of the double doors of the school. She was bleeding profusely from the head, and a giant mat of dark hair covered her face. There was so much blood that he couldn't even make out the color of her dress. As she screamed for help, two young officers stood from behind their vehicle, ready to go to her. Kabir snapped an order for them to stay put until she made it all the way past the closed door. She had crawled halfway out of the door and was looking around wildly, possibly for her attacker. When all but her right foot cleared the threshold, Kabir gave the order.

The two officers jumped up and ran hard, but they were instantly halted as the woman was violently yanked back into the school. She screamed hysterically, catching the door with both hands and straining against the tremendous pulling force. A moment later, the large metal door closed from behind with blinding speed, severing her hands and head simultaneously and sending a splattering of blood down the landing.

3.

After her classroom door had exploded in, Anita hid with her children behind the desk for as long as she could take it before finally poking her head out of the hole in her wall. As she looked down the hall, she saw a giant blood trail leading from her room to the classroom next to hers, where Ryan taught. She spotted his mangled body lying on her splintered classroom door, and she knew that he was dead. But when she had finally reached his body, it took the full palm of her hand to her mouth to suppress her whimpers.

Ryan lay in a grotesque position. His left arm wrapped behind his body, and his hand stuck out above his right shoulder, as though he were made of rubber. His left leg and right arm had been torn off completely, and his face was smashed into a bloody concave. Anita stood, dumbfounded, staring blankly at the first dead body she'd ever seen. But it didn't take long for her survival instincts to kick in. She snapped out of it and became laser-focused on finding the exit and getting her kids to safety.

She looked down the hallway, and the bloody drag marks confirmed that Ryan had not been killed in an explosion as she had hoped. He had clearly been killed in his class and drug to her door. *But why?* She slowly made it along the wall to Ryan's room, being careful not to step in his blood. When she saw his dismembered extremities lying just inside the open door, Anita choked back the bile. It was then that she realized that Ryan's students were alive and hiding under their desks. Some were sucking their thumbs, some were whimpering, some were catatonic. *Why was Ryan targeted while the children were left safe?*

She quickly forgot about her curiosity and looked to the children. She mouthed the words, "I'll be right back," pressing a finger to her lips and signaling for silence. Quietly, she passed a few more empty classrooms, thankful that it had been yard time for the older kids. Two classes from the exit hall, Anita's composure finally broke. Inside the room, a twelve-year-old boy lay dead.

He had been smashed to bits by a large desk that still rested atop the carcass. His body lay on its stomach, but his head had been twisted ninety degrees around and smashed to jelly, just like Ryan's. Anita vomited and started shaking uncontrollably, still fighting hard to maintain her wits. Tunnel vision and vertigo ensued, and the room spun uncontrollably.

4.

Special Cell finally made it to the classroom hallway junction and lined up flat against the wall, their Heckler and Koch machine guns at the ready. The worst thing they had encountered was not stepping on the head and hands by the front door when they had entered the building. The school was laid out in a sideways T, and all rooms had been cleared up to the educator's hall. The point man used a small telescoping mirror to look around the corner and signaled back to the inspector—there were three individuals in the hallway approximately fifteen meters down.

Kabir, despite his training, had always insisted on being the second man, the man behind point. Most team leaders would be in the middle or toward the rear of the pack, but not him; he desired to be the first through the door whenever possible. As his last finger signaled one to his team, he leaped point and went around the corner.

5.

When Anita heard the door slam at the other end of the hall, her instinct had been to turn and run for the front of the building. She even made a half-turn before deciding to look back and face whatever was coming for her. A girl from one of the older classes was running at her, and Anita could see the horror in her eyes even from fifteen classrooms away. She started for the girl, first at a skip and then at full speed, when a dark figure crashed out of the farthest classroom down, ferociously out of control.

It smashed into the far wall like an animal but was back in pursuit a second later. Anita sped up, operating on pure adrenaline, but the dark figure was closing in on the girl faster than she was. Feeling almost close enough, she reached out to grab the girl, but she ran straight through her arms, half-spinning Anita around from the contact. A moment later, she went spiraling through the air from an even bigger collision. Anita slumped down hard onto the floor, sitting upright against a wall, her mind foggy from the concussion. Her vision went hazy, and she could hear nothing but dull thuds, as though someone was smacking a wet towel on the floor. How long she sat there was never clear, but her focus returned very slowly over the next several minutes.

She wished it hadn't.

Young Arnav, her student from the previous year, stood before her, dripping in blood and smashing down wicked blows upon the girl Anita failed to save. She was dead, and a massive pool of blood was starting to cover the entire hall floor. But Arnav continued dropping hammer fists straight through her face, splattering blood with each raised hand. Arnav had been Anita's favorite student the previous year, or any other, for that matter. Anita suddenly felt a motherly anger wash over her, replacing any fear she'd had just a moment ago.

"Arnav, stop! Stop this now!" she cried.

He didn't stop and continued to jackhammer the corpse. Anita moved in quickly and tried to grab Arnav's massive shoulder in an attempt to restrain him. She suddenly felt a burning in her lungs from a lack of oxygen, as Arnav reached back and lifted her in the air by her throat. She stared into the eyes of the boy she loved so much. The boy whom the other children had made cry with their wicked pranks. The boy who hid in her arms because he was so much bigger than the others. The boy with whom the other kids wouldn't play. She had been the one to comfort him and tell him it would all be all right.

But this was not the same boy, she realized. This boy had white eyes. Gone were the big brown eyes she'd looked into a hundred times. Her vision narrowed, and she started to die. With her last breath, she gasped out, "Arnav, why?"

And then, she went out.

Like a switch turning on the light, the young boy returned, and he released his hold on Anita's throat. She went crashing to the ground and was out cold for several minutes. When she finally woke, lying in front of her in the fetal position and crying uncontrollably was the child murderer, his thumb in his mouth like she'd seen so many times before. She crawled over and scooped up his massive head, placing it in her lap and stroking his blood-soaked hair. Anita held him tight, the two of them sitting on the floor in the pool of his last victims' blood. She was crying, too, and looked down to see that those tender brown eyes had returned and were staring up at her once again.

Then, she looked up to see several guns pointing at her head.

6.

One week later:

It was deemed the most horrific school attack ever recorded in India. Two teachers and three administrators were dead, including the head of the school, as well as two students. All were beaten to death, yet no weapons were used, a fact with which the press had a field day. "Bludgeoned to Death" plastered the headlines. The identity of the perp had been concealed by Special Cell, but it didn't matter; no one would have believed it, anyway.

Kabir was merely treading water to stay above the rising tide of political pressure and maneuvering. As simple as his answers had been to his superiors, the truth—the *real* truth—had still eluded him. The boy, Arnav, ten years of age, had killed all of those people with his bare hands. But how? And more importantly, why? Kabir wanted answers more than anyone, so he dug in.

The boy's parents: respectable, hardworking and loving. Truly the epitome of caring parents. He dug more.

The family's lineage: again, respectable. His grandfather was a surgeon, his grandmother was a consummate caregiver, and his great grandparents were a politician and the perfect wife. No divorces, no allegations and no rumors of any sort. They were charitable, kind and compassionate by all accounts.

How, then, did the boy go off the track?

The child was the biggest baby ever born on record at the old New Delhi Hospital, Kabir had learned through an old newspaper article announcing his birth. He was a good boy, according to every single person he interrogated. He never displayed a single act of aggression, as far as anyone could remember. “Quiet giant” was a constant; “massive” was another. He was bullied, pushed around and made fun of, yet he never retaliated. Several teachers even stated that they’d secretly wished Arnav would’ve stood up for himself.

But he did not. He just seemed inclined to play with the toys in the corner of the room or sit in his classroom and watch the other kids play outside through the window. He knew somehow that he didn’t belong. He always helped the teachers clean up after the other students, picking up the balls in the yard that he never even touched. As far as environmental excuses for the child’s behavior, there were none.

So, Kabir moved to the next category: his strength—purely amazing.

Forensics stated the obvious, that all deaths were exactly how they’d appeared. Arnav used his hands to rip off the male teacher’s arm and leg. He lifted a desk that weighed more than he did above his head and smashed the little boy to bits. The tremendous force generated from the door was enough to sever a head from its neck. Every act was beyond the realm of simple physics, despite the child’s dimensions, which were, alone, enough to baffle.

The musculature of the boy was shocking. He had muscles in his neck, forearms and calves, along with everywhere else a grown man might wish he had. And he was wide. From the way he was put together, you would hardly even notice his height, an extraordinary 5’11. But everyone noticed that he was almost as wide as he was tall. Kabir remembered just how dense he was when he removed Arnav from the teacher’s arms. How was that even possible for a ten-year-old?

Again, Kabir looked at the family for some kind of lead. There weren’t any—no athletes or extraordinary physical specimens; just average people living average lives.

Was he just a freak, then? It was too easy an explanation, Kabir rationalized. There was something there, something he was missing. Was it a coincidence that Arnav massacred those people on his birthday, precisely at the time of his birth? Kabir picked up that fact from the paper he had read. Arnav had been born at 10:30 in the morning, the exact time the lab stated that the first victim had died. But did that matter?

The answers he sought finally came in the form of the victims.

The two murdered teachers, male and female, had been locked in a torrid affair. The male, Ryan, had been a notorious philanderer; the female, who had been so close to escaping, was a married mother of two, who had often flaunted her extramarital relationship to her colleagues. As for the three administrators, Special Cell found that the head of the school was an embezzler, and the other two weren't any better. The male had been rumored to value his time with little boys too much, while the woman had been investigated for the abuse of her own children several times.

Where Kabir was hung up was with the two kids. Nobody likes to speak ill of the dead, and it requires a delicate skill to coax the truth out of people regarding a dead person. But when it comes to children, it's nearly impossible. However, Kabir kept digging and eventually discovered something he didn't particularly want to know.

The kids were notorious bullies, both the girl and the boy, but it seemed that they were not targeted for their treatment of the young murderer. Although they were reported to have been unpleasant to Arnav, he was younger, and their access to him had been limited. Besides, they were too busy terrorizing the kids in their own classes. Numerous records had been kept by the school, documenting many incidents, and there were even detailed reports from afflicted students and parents. By all accounts, they were horrible children.

If it hadn't been for his straightforward interview with the teacher, Anita, most of those revelations wouldn't have ever come to light. She appeared driven by the truth, and it was obvious that she loved the boy.

Kabir reached the end of his investigation with no real answers to offer anyone—just more questions. His only comfort was the fact that he had the bad guy in custody. That is, until he didn't.

Arnav had been kept in a cell at Kabir's HQ since the crime. It had been an extremely emotional week, and the boy cried throughout most of it. Kabir watched him one night, and he slept just like his oldest boy did, curled up with a pillow and a blanket and his thumb in his mouth. Kabir felt sad and wanted to tell the child that his parents were coming and that everything would be all right. It would've been a lie, of course. The parents hadn't been allowed in after the very first day; their emotions were too strong and brought a tremendous amount of chaos to a scene that already had enough. They were removed gently by the Cell guys and hadn't come back.

Since then, no aspect of the case had been handled by anyone outside of Kabir's unit. Then, someone above him made a different call.

Seven days after the massacre, trouble came in the guise of five black suits, five black sunglasses, five black ties and five pounds of shit. They were led by Samar Bachran, Special Commissioner of Police (CP) and commander of Special Cell's entire branch. He was Kabir's superior several grades up, and Kabir hadn't seen the man in six months.

Now, he was here, escorting a Chinese woman slowly up to the building. The strange woman moved with the confidence that comes from someone in charge. She wore her hair in a short ponytail and kept her sunglasses on, even after she'd entered the building.

"Ah, Kabir, I was hoping to find you here," said Bachran.

"Greetings, Commissioner," Kabir replied.

"This is Commander Wu, special envoy to the UN."

Kabir shook her hand, to which she showed no emotion. The men in suits remained dutifully behind her. There was an awkward silence, and Kabir knew that they were sizing him up.

"What can I do for you, Commissioner?"

"Well, yes...Commander Wu and her colleagues are here to collect the boy. They will be handling the investigation from here on out. You are to extend them every courtesy."

Kabir's mind was reeling, but instead of making a cliché protest, he took another tack. "Of course, sir. Whatever is required." He turned his attention to Wu. "So, what is required, ma'am?"

Commander Wu cracked an arrogant smirk behind her shades. When she spoke, it was with a thick accent. "We require everything. All evidence, access to all witnesses, forensics—everything. And we will be taking the child immediately." She paused for effect. "Any questions?"

Masterfully done, Kabir thought. He then said, "Yes, I do have questions, actually. Why would the UN be interested in a homicide obviously committed by a ten-year-old?"

Wu responded, "You are sure he is ten?"

Kabir stated confidently, "Yes. In fact, his tenth birthday was on the day of the massacre."

This bit of information seemed to please Wu, but before Kabir had time to wonder why, her team slowly fanned out in a semi-circle around them. The CP had his back to all of them, so he was unaware of the tactical maneuver being executed. Kabir smiled before slowly clasping his hands behind his back, or so it would've seemed to the uninitiated. Wu, as expected, was not uninitiated; she knew very well that he had a weapon hiding on his waist belt in the small of his back.

She spoke matter-of-factly. "It would seem you have many questions, even though you only asked one. Let me answer all of them for you now. We are interested for reasons that will continue to elude you. You will continue to not understand, yet you will continue to try. In the

end, you will learn nothing more than you now right now, which is not as much as you might think. I would ask you to take it on *faith* that things are the way they need to be, but I can tell you're not one to take much on faith at all. So, we have a problem, don't we?"

CP Bachran felt the tension building and turned around. He now understood the clasped hands behind Kabir's back and decided to diffuse the situation. "Kabir, the instructions for our office have come from the highest authority. We will comply. And when I say we, I mean you! Do you understand?"

But Kabir didn't hear him. You see, Kabir had a problem—one that dated back his entire career. His problem was that he was extremely protective of children. And despite the child's atrocities, the boy reminded Kabir of his own son, and he wasn't going to entrust him to some stray off of the street.

Wu recognized this. "Inspector, might I have a word with you in your office?"

Bachran felt a returned sense of power. "That's a wonderful idea."

"No, I meant Kabir and myself."

Bachran was noticeably hurt but tried to cover it up. "Oh, well, yes, I understand. However, you do realize that anything shared with the inspector must be divulged to me after your conversation."

Wu refocused her expressionless gaze back on Bachran and dropped the hammer. "No."

"No?" Bachran repeated, confused.

"Imagine. You are standing there, right where you are. Suddenly, nobody was there. Just empty desks, lonely chairs, silent phones. Everyone disappeared. You return home, only to find that there's no one there, either. Your two daughters, your wife, your fat dog—all have disappeared. You realize in that instant, as your world literally disappears right in front of you, that it was me that made it happen. And then, you join them. So, tell me, CP Bachran. Do you understand?"

As she finished speaking, she removed her sunglasses for effect. Bachran looked at Kabir for support, but all he saw was crazy, so he reluctantly slinked away to his office.

Wu and Kabir made it into his own office, as the remaining four UN team members moved into young Arnav's cell. Kabir watched them introduce themselves to Arnav and talk to the boy through the two-way mirror. Then, Wu began to explain.

As he listened, his brain wandered around the cosmos, and he was doubly intrigued by the boy's reaction to the strangers now talking with him. For the first time, Kabir saw Arnav show a small, innocent smile, and he finally resembled the little boy he was.

Once Wu's story and Arnav's smile finally set in, Kabir realized one monumental thing—this was the way that it needed to be.

Chapter 1: THE BEGINNING

1.

The shitty thing about being on fire is the cold.

Funny, he thought, as ice water trickled through his blood. The searing pain forced the fight-or-flight synapses in his brain to ignite. He tore at anything he could, trying unsuccessfully to rip off the turnout coat into which he was latched and velcroed. Like it really would have mattered if he'd actually gotten it off; the coat was rated to survive at 1000 degrees for ten minutes, 500 degrees more than a regular fire coat. But he was burning through it, anyway, while the fucking alarm went off in his ear, signaling trouble. No shit. That's the first thing they teach you in fireman school—if you're on fire, you're in trouble.

The sickening feeling of crisp flesh and the smell of pungent, rotten bacon followed. The migraine in his brain screamed at him to escape, even though he couldn't. He was trapped. He started to feel the skin slough off his shoulders and back. The heat penetrated his helmet and mask, searing his nose, throat and lungs.

But you know what, he agonized with his last cognitive thought. *That's not the worst part. The worst part is that they are beginning to eat me...Fuck.*

2.

It's the same feeling you have when you lose your kid. They wander off in the mall, or you get turned around in the park. You look up and instantly know you're in a living hell. Those feelings never go away, not for a lifetime.

These are the feelings the young Captain had when he realized that one of his firefighters was missing. His crew converged on the part of the building that had come down, the only logical place where his missing guy could have been. But it didn't make sense; Jordan was experienced and smart. Why would he have deviated from the plan and wandered off freelancing?

Fear and panic engulfed him, and he and the others tore through the smoldering debris with fantastic success. When they finally got to a small cellar area, they located the body. Not only was he burned to a crisp, but his next-era turnout coat and gear were ripped to shreds.

Grief overtook the Captain. Despite the creeping fire, he ripped off his mask and detached himself from his fresh air supply, the smoke and heat searing his eyebrows and eyelashes right off. Rage led to screaming and smashing uncontrollably through the wreckage and rubble.

His crew reacted quickly, tackling him to the ground in a desperate attempt to restrain him from harming himself any further. He fought them hard for a reason he did not know, eventually succumbing like a rag doll as they drug him over the debris field toward the engine. While he bumped and smashed along, devoid of any feeling, he looked back through the smoke

and saw shadows moving in dark places. Bright eyes could be made out, slinking around the perimeter. Then, they were gone.

The Captain knew at that precise moment that something foul had killed his man, and although he was completely exhausted and unable to move, he knew that that wouldn't always be the case. A promise and a plan forged in his brain as his men lifted him in the air and tossed him inside the engine; whoever was responsible for this, however many there were—he would slice and dice the life right out of them.

And he would never lose another...not ever.