



HARDIT SINGH MALIK
WORLD WAR
ONE FLYING ACE

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Prologue

I realized we'd made a mistake as soon as we took off. As my plane, a Sopwith Camel, gained altitude, I lost all sense of direction. Raindrops stung my face, as cold and biting as frozen needles. Four of us began the mission and at first, we were excited and reckless – maybe even a little bit arrogant. But now, my stomach churned with panic. We were guided only by our compasses because the weather was so awful. The clouds were a swirling mass of grey wool, enveloping each plane until we almost lost sight of one another. We should have stayed on the ground. That would have been more sensible. Up here in the sky, we were in trouble...

I managed to stay close to my flight leader, a Canadian called Billy Barker, who was an ace pilot





and expert marksman. He was a fine commander, who was very determined, and I had gladly volunteered to join him on the mission. Now, as the situation worsened, I knew that I had to keep Barker's plane in sight. The Camel's compass would only help me so much. Higher and higher we climbed, until suddenly we broke into a clearing, about 4,000 feet up. I looked around for the other two pilots, but they were nowhere to be seen. My heart sank and I mumbled a little prayer in my own language, Punjabi.

“Satnam Waheguru, Satnam Waheguru...”

Dense cloud played tricks on the mind. Too many pilots had got lost in foul weather; pilots who had flown into enemy territory and been ambushed by the Red Baron's squadrons. Our foes were fearless and brave – and deadly. Perhaps you are surprised that I thought of German pilots as courageous – they were the opponents. However, our time in the skies during the Great War gave us an unexpected connection. Even though we were on opposing teams, we could still respect each other's expertise and daring, as strange as that may seem.

The sudden roar of enemy engines brought waves





of fear, and I felt a little sick. My thoughts began to race. *What if this was the end? What if I failed and let down my family and my comrades, even my country?* I couldn't die here. I just couldn't!

Two, then six, then a dozen German planes entered the skirmish. I clocked Barker's plane ahead of me. He turned left and upwards, veering away from the fast-approaching Germans, readying himself for a battle. I started to swerve upwards, but before I could position myself for a shot, a German fighter dived towards me, with guns blazing.

Again, I attempted to loop up and away, but it was too late. A bullet hit my right leg. I froze momentarily, wincing in pain and surprise. I had no time for shock, however. I had to fight back. The German pilot swept past me and continued to dive. I wondered if he was as terrified as I was. It didn't matter – not up here, and not in this situation. Perhaps, like me, he was young, with a heart full of crazy dreams and high hopes for a future away from the horrors of war. But there was no time for empathy. I gathered my strength, aimed my Vickers guns at his tail and let off a stream of bullets. My aim was spot on, and his plane's tail disintegrated. He began to fall and, as I pulled away, his plane burst into flames.





Now I had a moment to process my situation. My leg was bleeding and becoming stiff, and I could smell petrol. Sopwith Camels were built with the fuel tank under the single pilot's seat. The bullet had passed through the tank and into my right leg. But why hadn't the tank exploded? Was I just lucky, or was someone watching over me that day? As the pressure in my main fuel tank failed, I tried to think clearly. More German planes began to fire at me, and although I could manoeuvre my plane, I couldn't climb above them to escape. Every time I turned the nose upwards, the engine began to cough and splutter.

With no other choice, I had to rely on the emergency tank, which was situated on the wing and fed the engine by gravity. As the German bullets rained in, I did my best to get away. Some of the bullets whizzed past, a few of them very close to my head. Others pelted my plane, again and again, until I thought I would be shot down. I lowered my head in the cockpit and prayed for deliverance.

People often say that your life whizzes past in the moments before you die. Mine did not flash past. Instead, the world around me began to slow and fade, losing colour as my thoughts drifted back to the Punjab, to my family, and to kites and to dragons





that spat tiny balls of fire as they chased me through
the darkness...





Part One – India

One

My first ever memory was of my paternal grandfather's funeral. It was just half-remembered images of him lying in an open casket and my parents, sad and quiet. The thick, sweet scent of burning incense – sandalwood and jasmine – and the repetitive and soothing prayer recited by a Sikh priest. My Baba had been a remarkable man in both his height and his behaviour. An honourable man, well-respected and loved by all. He died before I got to know him, but my parents always told me stories about him.

I was born on November 23rd 1894, in Rawalpindi, Punjab. My birth city would become part of Pakistan after World War Two, but I was

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Indian at birth. Our country was ruled by the British, the jewel in the crown of their Empire. Both my parents were Sikhs, although my father was less devout when I was young. His name was Mohan Singh Malik, and he was powerfully built, with shovel-like hands and a deep, loud voice. Like my Baba, he too was well-respected and had many friends. I remember parties filled with loud voices, food and drink. My father would be the loudest, entertaining his friends with stories and jokes. However, he was very strict with me and my brothers. He would get angry if we got too emotional, especially in public.

‘We can’t let our feelings control us,’ he always said. ‘To be strong, we must control them. If our feelings are on show, people will think us weak, and that only brings disrespect.’

My mother was called Lajwanti Bhagat, and she was very different to my father. In our culture back then, men and women didn’t mix at parties. As my father entertained his male friends in one room, the women sat elsewhere, did not drink alcohol, and were nowhere near as loud. Mother preferred it that way. She was a devout Sikh and happily lived a quiet life. She was very spiritual, and she would pray every day, morning and evening. My father





taught me determination and independence. My mother balanced out his hardiness with her kind and gentle soul, sharing with us spiritual teachings and an understanding of the Sikh faith.

I had an older brother called Teja, and a younger one named Iqbal. We were quite wealthy and would grow richer as my father's business grew. So, we had servants and labourers, and lived a charmed life. Rawalpindi was a city of opposites in those days. The divide between the rich and poor was huge. However, you might have thought otherwise if you saw our neighbourhood. The area, or *mohalla*, we lived in was filled with prosperous Sikh and Hindu families who made their money as tailors and moneylenders, shopkeepers and clerks. But the narrow lanes and alleys around us were often shrouded in darkness, and on rainy or hot summer days, an unpleasant smell would linger in the air.

The houses were dull, too. They were painted in dreary greys and beiges, and often quite ugly. Most could only be reached through tight and gloomy passages that a stranger would get lost in. Some families would try to brighten up their entrances with coloured glass or elaborate carvings, but it made no difference. Rawalpindi was a hectic and claustrophobic old city. Open drains ran through





narrow streets, carrying away waste water. Often, children would relieve themselves in the drains, and during rainy season, they would overflow. Wealthier families, like ours, employed cleaners to remove latrine waste, which was taken away on horse-drawn carts. This was very unhealthy, and cases of typhoid and other diseases were common.

Our house sat along one of those streets. To reach our doorstep, you had to leave the narrow street and walk down an even tighter alley and, beyond that, a dim passageway. There, at the end of this labyrinth, was our home. But I don't mean to make it seem too unpleasant. Although it was often dingy and smelly, our *mohalla* was also full of warm-hearted people and the sound of happy children playing in the alleyways and on the rooftops. The rich aromas of onions frying in fragrant spices, and of dals, rice and fresh hot chapatis filled the air every day. I was lucky. I had a happy and privileged childhood – I even had my own servant. Shiv Ram was a gnarly but lovely old man who liked to tell tall tales. He was strict, too, and would not hesitate to tell me off when I was naughty. Which was exactly what he did one memorable day.

As you entered our house, there was a large, locked room that had bars on the windows. It





terrified me so much that I would run right past it, not looking at the window or door. I was convinced that the mysterious room was haunted. Then, one day, my curiosity took over.

‘It *can’t* be haunted,’ said my older brother, Teja, as we sat playing with wooden blocks, late one afternoon.

Teja was much older than me, and I looked up to him. Father was away on business, and Mother had a friend over and was having tea and *barfi* – sweet confectionery that is eaten across India. My brother wore a serious expression.

‘Mother wouldn’t live in a haunted house,’ he continued.

Sikhs were not supposed to be superstitious, but a haunted house was still a bad omen.

‘I wonder why it’s locked then?’ I replied. ‘Valuables, like gold and jewels?’

‘Or a monster!’ said Teja. ‘But not an evil monster. A pet monster...’

‘A dragon!’ I said excitedly. ‘Maybe we have a family dragon and it lives in that room!’

Soon, I had convinced myself that something magical and wonderful lurked in that room. Teja shrugged.

‘Maybe we should find the key and open it?’ he said.





‘But Mother will be angry,’ I replied. ‘And we’ll get into trouble with Father, too.’

‘Not if they don’t catch us,’ said my brother, winking at me.

We rarely went against the rules, but sometimes it was fun. We just had to make sure we weren’t discovered. Our father was a lovely man, but he was also very strict.

‘But how will we...?’ I began.

‘I know where the key is,’ he whispered. ‘I’ve seen Father put it away. We could stay awake and when Mother falls asleep, we could sneak out of our bedroom and open the door.’

My sense of adventure overtook my fear. I was so excited that my heart started beating faster.

‘That would be some mission!’ I whispered back.

Teja held out his hand for me to shake.

‘Agreed?’ he said.

I took his hand.

‘Agreed!’ I told him.

That night, after Mother had gone to bed, we crept from our beds to our father’s office room. Teja carefully and quietly slid open a drawer on the dark wooden desk. Inside were papers and pencils, amongst other stationery. He rummaged around a little, and then





pulled out a key.

‘Got it!’ he whispered.

The courtyard was dark, the only light coming from a small candle that was burning out. I was feeling less brave now. I was worried about what was inside the mysterious locked room, and anxious that my mother would catch us.

‘Come on!’ Teja whispered.

I followed him across the courtyard to the locked room. The door was made of solid wood and had a metal turnkey lock.

‘What if there *is* a monster lurking inside?’ I murmured, trying not to sound worried.

I was scared by then and wanted to go back to the safety of my bedroom. Our idea no longer felt so great.

‘Shh!’ Teja replied. ‘You’ll wake Mother.’

‘But...’

‘There’s nothing terrible locked inside,’ he said. ‘Probably just valuables or papers.’

He put the key in the lock. The mechanism squeaked as he turned it.

‘Quietly!’ I whispered.

‘I am being quiet,’ he scolded in reply.

The candle burned out, throwing the entire courtyard into complete darkness. I felt a sudden





coldness rush over me, and I shivered. Then, I heard something rustling and my heart pounded even faster.

‘What was that?’ I gasped.

Teja froze. Something hissed, and I was convinced the sound came from behind the still-locked door. Asnake perhaps, or maybe an actual monster.

‘I’m scared!’ said Teja.

‘Me too!’ I replied.

The hissing grew louder, and I turned away, ready to run. Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of emerald eyes glaring at us from the shadows. It was a monster! Its pointed tail twitched and then it bared razor-sharp teeth. The flame of the candle spluttered alight again for a brief moment. It flared long enough for me to see the monster’s eyes flash from green to fiery orange.

‘RUN!’ I yelled, no longer worried that our mother would hear us. Nothing mattered more than escaping this beast that watched us from the shadows.

We sprinted across the courtyard and back to our bedroom. Once there, Teja locked the door, and we huddled together in the darkness, shaking in fright.

‘The key!’ said my brother. ‘I dropped the key! Mother will find it!’





‘I don’t care!’ I replied. ‘I’m not going back out there. The monster will get us!’

‘What was it?’ whispered Teja.

‘I think it was a dragon...’

Next morning, I hesitated before leaving my room. I was sure Mother had discovered the key, and that would mean we were in serious trouble. Maybe if I told her about the monster, she wouldn’t be so angry. If she knew about the dragon, she might not even shout at us. Only, Mother wasn’t waiting for me in the courtyard. Instead, Shiv Ram stood holding the key to the locked room, glaring at me.

‘*Hardit!*’ he scolded.

‘We saw a monster!’ I spluttered. ‘Please, we didn’t mean any harm. It was just a game but then we saw the dragon and...’

The old man’s face was wrinkled and his skin the colour of blackened wood. He shook his head.

‘You are lucky that your father isn’t here,’ he told me.

‘Please don’t say anything,’ I begged. ‘*Please?*’

Shiv Ram shrugged.

‘Who would I tell, young sir?’ he asked.

‘Your mother has gone to the market. Perhaps I should simply replace the key and save you from a





telling-off?’

‘Please, please!’ I agreed.

As Teja joined us, Shiv Ram nodded slowly.

‘Don’t ever disobey your father again!’ he told us.

‘Next time, I will not save you.’

‘But what about the dragon?’

‘Dragon?’ asked our servant.

He chuckled and walked away, leaving us bewildered. We were both utterly relieved that he’d saved us from getting told off, but were still worried about the creature that lurked there.

‘I wonder where the dragon went?’ I asked.

‘Who knows?’ replied Teja.

The answer came that night. The dragon never reappeared in the courtyard. It made its way into my dreams instead.

