

THE JEHLUM BOYS

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Chapter – 20

Life Takes A Turn

Mudassir reached Ghulam Rasool's shop for his evening smoke and tea, but was surprised to find it closed.

He waited a few minutes puzzled, when suddenly the people around him began running helter-skelter. Chaos ensued with people sprinting in all directions and taking shelter in the shops nearby.

Before he could fathom anything it was raining bullets from all sides.

Instinctively he also dashed towards the old hardware shop down the street. The shopkeeper, who was hurriedly bringing the steel shutter down, let him squeeze into the shop just before the shutter hit the floor.

He was the last one to enter.

Ten to twelve persons were already holed up in the small dime store.

With terror writ on their faces, all of them had settled at the far end corner of the shop near the concrete wall.

Mudassir, however stood near the entrance next to a small glass window. It provided a view of the gun battle outside. From that point, he could see the army men in their positions, but was not able to place where militants were hiding.

As he slyly watched the mayhem outside, suddenly a bullet ricocheted from the steel shutter just next to where he was standing, jolting him out of his focus.

A breathless silence ensued within the shop. Scared stiff and dazed all the persons were gaping at Mudassir.

“Come here *Biradir* you can get hit there,” one of them finally gathered himself and whisper-shouted from behind.

“And that could get me into trouble,” the shop-owner added in exasperation, his voice brimming with panic.

Eventually, they persuaded him to leave that spot.

As he was turning to join them, he again stopped. Abruptly.

With horror-stricken face he yet again began looking outside the window. This time he did not appear to worry about a stray bullet finding him.

The group at the back started yelling again, but nothing seemed to affect him now. They watched in horror as he stood there exposing his whole body against the glass.

With cold sweat dripping from his temples each passing moment appeared to swell his horror. Realising that something dreadful had caught his eye, one of the braver of the lot came forward and peeped out of the window.

“SEHAR” Mudassir shouted, his voice reeling with helplessness and despair.

“Is she your daughter *Biradir*?” The man asked looking towards Sehar who was caught in the crossfire and was holding on to a lamppost on the other side of the road.

With eyes closed, her tiny hands were clinging to the lamppost even as bullets were flying past her.

Mudassir did not even bother to look towards him.

“SEHAR” he screamed again banging the window with his hands.

Fearing he might break the glass in his desperation the man tried holding him back. Mudassir however pushed him aside as he bent to lift the shutter.

Meanwhile the shop-owner and two others who were edgily watching them also rushed to stop him.

“Please let me go out,” Mudassir pleaded.

“Your going out could spell doom for all of us,” said one of them.

“You are being too presumptuous. Nothing will happen, I will quietly slip out,” Mudassir tried to reason with them.

“Nothing doing, you are not going anywhere,” the shop-owner yelled, his tone threatening, trying to intimidate him.

With his teary eyes on little Sehar outside, Mudassir struggled with them a bit before pushing them away.

The four regrouped hastily.

Sensing a threat, Mudassir quickly grabbed an iron hammer from the nearby rack.

Holding the hammer, he still pleaded with them.

“Listen to me brothers, please let me go. I will ensure that you all are kept out of harm’s way,” he said. “But....” taking a long pause he looked at each one of them.

“...But if something happens to that little girl outside, I will hold all of you responsible and I swear to Allah none of you will leave this shop alive,” his tone steadily turning menacing, making them stop in their tracks.

A deafening silence engulfed the room before they finally backed off.

As Mudassir bent to lift the shutter, he stopped for a moment. Turning around, he again looked towards the group.

“I am sorry brothers, but I have to go. Trust me, if something goes wrong I will take the blame and not let anything happen to you. Allah Hafiz.”

Throwing the hammer away he lifted the shutter a little bit, just enough for him to crawl out.

The smell of gunpowder hung heavily in the air.

Without wasting any time, he jumped on the parapet separating the shop and the road.

Not a soul was to be seen; only little Sehar holding on to the lamppost who perhaps had not even been noticed by the warring sides.

As he was about to step on the road a bullet swished across his face missing him by a whisker.

Over the sound of howling winds the resonance of gunshots felt even more ear-splitting.

Giddied and stunned, he jumped in the small gap between the shutter and the parapet. Holding on for a few seconds, he again raised his head slowly above the parapet and shouted out to Sehar.

“Sehar, don’t be scared I am here.”

She heard him. Her face brightened up as she opened her eyes, looking around for him.

Meanwhile another bullet popped past him compelling him to duck instantly.

When Sehar’s eyes could not trace him, she started to cry. He waited for a moment before getting up again.

“Sehar! Look here,” he shouted.

This time she saw him and her face lit up.

As hope replaced tears in her eyes, Mudassir could sense that she was gradually loosening her grip on the lamppost while looking towards him.

“NO!” he gestured with his hands. “Stay where you are, Sehar. I am coming there,” he assured her.

Sehar clasped the lamppost yet again much to his relief. Mudassir tried to get up, but again a bullet zoomed past him. Never in his life had Mudassir felt so helpless. Every time he got up a bullet whizzed past him as if someone was keeping a tab on him.

A few excruciating moments later, the firing suddenly stopped.

A complete lull engulfed the area.

Is their fight over, he wondered. Or maybe they have seen Sehar; perhaps better sense has prevailed.

Raising his head a little he looked around watchfully. It was as silent as a graveyard.

Grabbing his chance, he quickly jumped on to the road and ran straight towards Sehar.

She saw him and in her innocent eagerness, she too let go of the lamppost.

“NO SEHAR! Stay there!” he screamed, but he was late.

Sehar was already on her way, sprinting towards him.

Her hopeful eyes were fixed on Mudassir, his mere presence made her completely oblivious to the danger she was in.

In a flash, without any warning, the firing started again.

Caught unawares, Mudassir was shocked.

“SEHAR, GO BACK!” he shouted, but she continued running towards him.

Seeing her in the line of fire, he lunged towards her at breakneck speed.

The bullets flying around him did not deter him. He ran like a man possessed.

He was only a few strides away from her, when Sehar suddenly fell to the ground.

Unnerved, his legs went numb and his heart stood still.

“STOP YOU BASTARDS!” he bawled, looking around in desperation as he covered the last few strides between her and him.

He tried to pick her up, but she moaned in pain. His hands felt a warm dampness under her shoulder.

“Mudassir, something has hit my shoulder and it is paining a lot. Shall we go to the doctor?” she mumbled, barely managing to keep her eyes open.

“Where is Amma, Mudassir” she asked, closing her eyes.

“SEHAR! SEHAR!” Mudassir screamed. “OPEN YOUR EYES..... SEHAR... WE WILL GO TO AMMA. I WILL TAKE YOU...SEHAR?” his voice choked as he patted her face with his bloodied hands.

She opened her eyes, looked at him for a moment, and closed them again. Forever.

Devastated, he held her close to him, his tears blending with her blood as he kissed her face and cried his heart out.

As he hugged her lifeless body, a wave of guilt engulfed him.

Maybe if she would not have seen me she would have stayed put and been saved. I have let her down. Ya Allah! Am I in this world only to let my loved ones down?

“Sorry Sehar, I could not help you cross the road this time. I failed you. I failed you Sehar!” he cried despairingly.

The firing stopped again suddenly.

A bunch of militants came running out of an old dilapidated building. With guns in hands, faces covered with long bandanas, they fled into one of the bylanes.

An unusually tall man with flowing long hair was leading the pack.

A few seconds later, army personnel also trailed them.

Mudassir watched the chase until they were out of sight.

The very thought that one of them must have been the killer shook him, frustrating him at his own helplessness.

Teary eyed, he again looked at her.

Caressing her angelic face a seething rage swept across his body, snapping his soul.

“No Sehar, your death shall not go in vain. These bastards cannot kill you and just walk away in front of my eyes. I will avenge your death, Sehar. I promise you that your Mudassir will not die till he has found your killer and sent him to hell. No matter who he is, I will make him pay for each drop of your pious blood. I swear upon your dead body, Sehar. I swear upon my Allah.”

Twilight set in as the hustle also gradually returned to the place.

People started crowding around him. Most of them had seen the tragedy unfold in front of their eyes.

A few, including Ghulam Rasool, came forward and spread a sheet of cloth on the ground and asked him to lay her on the sheet.

Mudassir quietly looked towards Ghulam Rasool shaking his head, refusing to part with her.

Understanding that Mudassir would not want to create a scene out of her death, which had become a norm of late in such situations, Ghulam Rasool requested everyone there not to insist.

Mudassir cleansed Sehar’s face carefully with his kerchief before picking her up and walking towards her home.

Ya Allah Raham (God have mercy) Ghulam Rasool prayed silently as he watched Mudassir, with little Sehar’s body in his arms, walking into the setting sun.

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