

Chapter 1

Swords of Fire

Brabourne Stadium, Bombay: June 1966

Radar had one thought as the fire broke out.

I shouldn't be here. Imran should.

It had started just after tea was served in the pavilion. They'd settled down in the wicker chairs to watch the second innings. Radar hoped desperately that Banerjee's bowling would pull the chaps out of this muddle. He leaned forward, fists on his knees. Banerjee would do it, Radar was sure. It was a touch annoying that things weren't going better for the home team. It wasn't every day he got the chance to sit in the pavilion on Marine Drive and watch a top-notch cricket match.

Banerjee rubbed the ball on his white trousers. In slow motion, his arm glided backwards. Radar adjusted his tie. Damned hot in here, despite the ceiling fans. And such a drag, having to wear his school uniform, but rules were rules. This was a one-off opportunity. An invitation to the pavilion was

extended to one boy from the school and one boy only, the Captain of Cricket. And that boy had been taken ill.

The ball zoomed through the brilliant blue sky like a guided missile. Silence descended on the crowd. The batsman struck. The sound of leather on willow echoed around the stadium. Radar held his breath as the ball soared upwards again, above the palm trees and down, down, down, towards the scorched grass.

Caught. ‘Howzat?’

Radar let out a whoop and leapt out of the chair, forgetting the etiquette. ‘Well played. Oh, well played!’ He grinned and clapped and grinned again as an elderly gentleman spluttered on his *chota peg*¹. What bad luck for Imran, though, not to see this. Imran Hussain, Captain of Cricket and Captain of School, invalidated out yesterday by a dose of gypsy tummy. But Imran had chosen him, Radar, one form and one year his junior, as his stand-in. Radar grinned again.

Now, what was happening on the pitch? The umpire had declared the visiting team’s batsman caught out, but the fellow was still hovering around the wicket. Was there something to dispute? All right, it was a low catch, but not that low, surely? The cheering faded into a low murmuring, which grew into an angry buzzing, like a wasp trapped in a soda can. The batsman was waving his arms about, beginning to shout, pointing at the fielder. His captain joined him on the pitch, along with the square leg umpire.

1 A half-size measure of whisky

The triumph had turned ugly. Oh, why couldn't they just accept it and play the game? Radar heard boos and yelling from the public stands. He glanced to his left. People were standing and shaking fists. Shouting. The volume grew like a volcano erupting. Radar tensed. His nose twitched.

Something was burning.

He turned to the right. No! A couple of chairs were ablaze on the stand. The spectators had moved away and stood huddled together, too scared to stay, too curious to move. Radar looked to his left, his right, straight ahead to the pitch. What to do?

He caught the eye of one of the officials.

'Sir? Sir – there's a fire –'

'Good God!'

'Now, please, gentlemen, don't panic, but if you'd care to move over –'

'What the devil?'

'Keep calm, keep calm!'

The pavilion filled with the sound of polite, alarmed voices and the smell of smoke. Radar stood, his back to the pitch now. Who cared what was going on there? This was an emergency. What would Imran have done? He had to get out. Any moment there would be a stampede.

Perhaps it was already too late.

To his left, flames thrust upwards from the chairs. Deadly and intent, like swords of fire. Acrid smoke filled Radar's lungs. Up, up, leapt those flames, to the awning, which was soon ablaze.

Radar clapped his hand over his mouth. He tried to blink away the smoke and the fire and the ash and the terror from his eyes. Up the stairs in the stand. He must find the exit. He moved by instinct, driven by fear. He felt himself jostled. The smell of sweat and unwashed bodies mingled with the stench of burning.

‘Him, there. The boy in school uniform!’

Radar heard a rough voice from above. Did they mean him? He glanced around, to see if he could spot any other schoolboys in the crowd. No. The voice hadn’t sounded friendly. He moved to the side, away from the voice, away from the fire.

‘Get him!’

In the confusion of screams and smoke, Radar couldn’t tell where the voice was coming from. He pushed forward with urgency now, no longer caring about politeness or stiff upper lips. Instinct told him the voice belonged to someone who was a worse threat than the developing inferno.

‘Please, let me through. I’m – suffocating,’ gasped Radar.

‘We all are, sir. We all are,’ spluttered a man in a turban, barely recognisable as one of the smartly turned-out pavilion attendants.

Jammed in the crowd from all sides, Radar could no longer move.

And then it came. An almighty shove from behind. Radar felt an elbow in his back. A hand clamped over his mouth. He smelled cigarette-fingers under his nose. He tried to struggle, kick out, but there was no escape.

A sharp jab in his arm. His head swam. He was back at school, lined up in the sick-bay. What was it this time? Smallpox, cholera, typhus?

As the crowd swirled around his vision and Radar began to lose consciousness, he had one thought.

It wasn't me they were after. It was Imran.