

**Chapter 01**  
**Ruined Reunion**  
**An Unhappy Reunion**

February 9, 2016, was a fairly ordinary day. My wife saw me off at O’Hare International Airport in Chicago with my two sons securely tucked in their respective car seats. My elder son was six, the younger barely three. Both were there to say goodbye to their dad before his two-week-long trip to Pakistan and had already handed over their wish list of gifts. I had, deservedly, taken two weeks off from work to visit my father and my sister’s family in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. My sister Fiza and her husband Ali, both doctors at PIMS (Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences) in Islamabad, were eager to introduce me to their nine-month-old son.

My flight started boarding at 8 p.m. and was en route from Chicago to Islamabad via Dubai, with a layover of about four hours. I landed at Islamabad International Airport around 8 a.m. local time on February 16, 2016. I went through customs and then headed to the baggage claim. There were too many people already queued around the tiny conveyer belts, which were jittering round and round, making rather squeaky noises. One end of the curved conveyer belt was so small that people were forced to stand shoulder to shoulder, looking grumpy and roughly scolding each other whenever someone made a move for a bag that turned out not to be theirs. The manners widely adopted in Western cultures are rather rare among the Pakistani general public. In developing countries such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka, and even China, people exhibit weak etiquette standards, and shoving and scolding is commonplace in public. Though I grew up in Pakistan, this sort of behavior is still slightly shocking and rather awkward after a long absence.

I endured it for half an hour, standing by the conveyer belt, looking for my baggage. When it pattered toward me at last, I hastily grabbed it and even said, “Excuse me,” to the man who had given me nasty look earlier when I’d accidentally touched his bag. It was about 8:40 a.m. by then, and I knew that my dad, who is always early for his appointments, and my sister Fiza were probably waiting outside—though I was not too sure about Fiza. Although she had asked me

two days earlier on “WhatsApp” about the timing of my flight, I suspected she might have difficulty arriving on time with her infant son in tow.

I began to exit the secure area of the airport and saw a pool of people waiting to greet their loved ones behind sagging chain barriers. In this sea of people, I attempted to spot my father and hopefully Fiza, but both of them were nowhere to be seen. My father is the type who can force his way to the front, where you’ll find him standing sentry, ready to wave his hand at the first glimpse of you. I walked toward the final exit, not worried in the slightest, but I kept my pace deliberately slow, expecting to hear my name shouted across the space.

I had completely exited the secured area and had reached the overly crowded common areas. Now spotting my loved ones or being spotted seemed less likely, but there was no way to head back to the secured area, as that is against airport policy. So, I slowed my pace to a near halt and looked around carefully, finally coming to rest not far from the main exit. I still wasn’t too worried, figuring my father may have gotten stuck in traffic.

Then I heard a female voice calling out, “Bhai!” which means “elder brother” in Urdu. I promptly spotted Fiza waving at me. I smiled and started to move toward her as she left the crowd and moved to meet me. She was alone. Odd. Perhaps Dad was looking for parking. Fiza’s expression did not give me a warm and fuzzy feeling, though. I had expected her to be carrying her son. Where was he? I also thought it strange for my dad to send Fiza alone.

She greeted me with big hugs and pleasantries, but it was not long before I landed on the obvious question.

“Where is dad, sis?”