STAY A LITTLE LONGER

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PROLOGUE

I wrote Dad a letter before he died. It was the second letter I had ever written. The first was to Santa Claus, written in purple felt-tip pen and addressed to Lapland. I was six years old.

I wrote my second letter – the one to Dad – when I was twelve. He had been ill for a year. At first, he seemed OK. Sometimes his treatment made him sick, but nothing too bad. Then he got worse. I remember an ambulance taking him away. After that, he stayed in hospital. He lost so much weight that his bones stuck out, and he went bald.

Dad cried and told me he was sorry all the time. But I knew it wasn't his fault.

"Don't be sorry," I told him. "You'll feel much better soon."

But I knew that wasn't true either.

After one of the hospital visits, Mum sat me down and tried to explain what was happening. I just nodded. Mum tried to say the right things. Tried to stay calm. But I didn't want her to. I *wanted* Mum to be sad, because that was honest. I hate it when people try to protect me from things. And I was sad too – I still am. No, that's wrong. I was *more* than sad. I felt hollow inside. The world around me kept on going, and I felt like an outsider. I couldn't think straight. I couldn't even taste my food.

Dad never saw my letter. He died before I found the courage to show him. That was over a year ago now, but I still have the letter. It isn't very long. It doesn't say anything amazing or clever. It's just my thoughts, put into words.

I didn't want Dad to leave us, to leave me. I didn't want him to be in so much pain. I wanted him to stay. I wanted him to be the Dad he was before things went wrong. I just wanted him to stay a little longer ...

1

"*What?*" the tall lad asked me. "Who calls their dog Milly? Typical girl!"

The lad was smiling but not in a good way. Around his wide mouth he had a small beard, which hung off his chin. His smile reminded me of a goat. I looked up and down the path, hoping to see an adult. But the cold, sunny park was oddly empty for a Saturday afternoon. Normally I liked that, but not today.

"My dog would batter yours," his mate added. He was small and spotty, with too much gel in his hair. He got his phone out and started to film us.

"YouTube, innit!" his friend said.

The lads were Asian, like me. They both wore caps and black puffa jackets, with skinny jeans and trainers. Like it was a uniform or something.

"Just go away!" I said as I wondered why they were picking on me.

They didn't listen. The tall lad kicked out at Milly. She whimpered and hid behind my legs. She was just a puppy – my new pet.

"Leave Milly alone!" I yelled.

"Stupid dog, shit name," the tall lad said.

I started to walk away, but he grabbed at Milly's purple lead.

"*GERROFF!*" I screamed.

"Make me!" he said, and shoved me aside.

I started to cry, and he just laughed at me.

"*What are you doing?!*" I heard someone shout.

An older man stormed towards us. I recognised him – he'd just moved into a house on the same street as me and Mum. But I'd never spoken to him before. He was short and stocky, and looked angry. I was relieved to see him.

"Run!" the tall boy said as he let go of Milly's leash. "Run before Granddad bites us with his false teeth!"

The older man stood between the boys and me.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked. "Why would you pick on a child?"

The tall boy swore.

"You want some licks, bruv?" he asked as he clenched his fists.

The old man shook his head. His arms were thick with muscle, and his hands were huge.

"Don't make me laugh," he said. "Be on your way, son, before I do something I regret."

The smaller boy spoke up.

"You can't touch us!" he said. "Got you on camera, innit?"

The man turned, and I got a closer look at him. He had short grey hair and a scar across his left cheek. His eyes were pale brown with flecks of green.

"Ignore these idiots," he said to me. "Are you OK?"

"I think so," I said.

The lads seemed annoyed at being ignored. The tall one swore a few more times, but the man didn't respond. Soon they grew bored and left.

"Shall I call the police?" the old man asked.

"I'll just go home," I told the man. "I only live up the road."

"I know," he said. "I've seen you around. I can call your dad, if you like?"

I shook my head.

"No," I said. "I ... er ..."

"All right," the man replied. "But I'll walk with you, just in case ..."

I knew to be careful about strangers, but the man wasn't one. He was a neighbour and seemed kind. I thought about something Dad had taught me. Most people are decent, he'd said. You just have to give them a chance. I smiled at my neighbour and nodded.

"I think that would be OK," I told him. "I'm Aman."

"Pleased to meet you, Aman," he said. "I'm Gurnam Singh. Your name is Punjabi, like mine."

I shrugged but didn't reply. Gurnam knelt down to pet Milly. She was wary of him for a moment but soon relaxed. Milly nibbled at his fingers and wagged her tail.

"I always wanted a Golden Retriever," Gurnam told me. "From those toilet roll adverts ..."

"Milly's a Labrador Retriever," I explained, and hoped that I didn't sound rude. "That's the dog from the adverts. But people often get the two breeds confused."

"Really?" Gurnam asked. "I never knew that."

"Did you love those adverts when you were young, too?" Those adverts were my favourites. It was why I chose Milly.

"Ha ha – yeah," Gurnam replied. "But that was a long time ago."

When we got home and Mum opened the door, she looked shocked.

"Er ... *hello*," Mum said as Milly bounced past her legs, yapping away.

"Hi, Mum," I said. "This is Gurnam – he lives a few doors away."

"Yes," Mum said. "I've seen him around. But what's going on ...?"

"Some older boys were being mean to Milly," I explained. "Gurnam helped me."

Mum's expression grew stern.

"What boys?" she asked. "Did you get their names?"

"Just some idiots," Gurnam told her. "I hope you don't mind that I walked Aman home."

"Not at all," Mum said. "Thank you. It's very kind of you."

"I would have called you or your husband, but Aman seemed fine," Gurnam added.

Mum smiled sadly and replied, "It's just me and Aman. Her dad ... he isn't *around* any more."

Gurnam nodded.

"Well," he said. "Better be off. Pleasure to meet you both."

"We should thank you properly," Mum said. "Why don't you come for tea one evening?"

Gurnam smiled. "That would be lovely."

I watched as he walked away.

"What a nice man," Mum said.

"Yeah," I said. "Can I have McDonald's for tea? *Please …?*"

Mum shook her head.

"The amount of chicken nuggets you eat, you'll turn *into* one," she said. "You can have risotto and salad with me."

I glanced out at Gurnam before shutting the door. He stopped and turned. But now he wasn't smiling. He just looked sad.