A SUDDEN STORM



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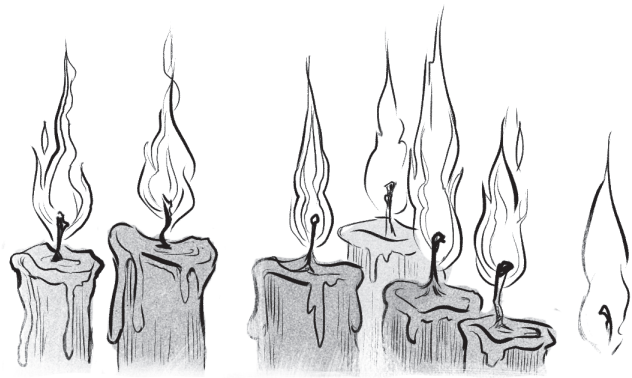


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In memory of Ricky Reel, and for Sukhdev Reel and her family. Still fighting for justice so many years later.

And for all those human beings murdered and hurt in the UK simply because they looked different.



BEFORE

What if you lit a candle for each of your dreams? You stand them in a line, and the flames flicker and crackle. Even when it's cold, or you're not feeling great, you know the candles are there. That keeps you going. The flames light the way in every battle you face, for every problem that knocks you back.

You can't even see the candles, but you know they are there, in your head. And that's all that matters. You know they are there ...

And then a sudden storm. A howling gust of wind. The flames snuff out. Just blown out as though they never mattered. As though you never mattered.

In an instant. Nothing left ...

CHAPTER 1

My house that night was warm and light. It felt safe.

When I got in from school, Dad was in the new kitchen, finishing off the shelves. He was tall with strong hands and a big beard. His clothes were old and dusty, and his brown work boots had holes in them. He looked hot and cross as he tried to get the shelves level.

“Need a hand, Dad?” I asked as I shut the front door behind me.

“No, no,” he said. “Go on up and get changed out of your wet clothes, Arjan,” he told me. “You’re soaking wet! Get ready to go out with your friends.”

“I don’t have to go out,” I said. “It’s not some major thing. We’re just going to watch a film and grab a Nando’s after.”

“It’s your sixteenth birthday, son,” said Dad. “Go and have fun.”

I grinned. “What were you doing when you were sixteen?” I asked him.

"I was farming in Punjab," he told me. "And two years later I married your mother. We didn't have bloody cinema and Nando's!"



He grinned too. "My life was different, boy," he added. "I don't want the same for you."

My parents were Punjabis – they grew up in the north of India. They were Sikhs, and I was Sikh too. That was our religion, and our way of life. Even in England, where I was born.

"I would be proud to be like you," I told Dad.

"Bloody hell!" he groaned as he dropped the spirit level. "Grab that for me, son."

I picked the level up and handed it to him. He looked at me for a moment. Then he hugged me.

"Time moves on, " he said to me. "We are British now, and you have more opportunities than me. I don't want you to waste them. Life is about moving forward. It is about doing well and being happy."

"I know, I know," I joked. "You want your son to be a lawyer or a doctor. Typical Asian parent ..."

Dad laughed. "You daft *bandar*," he said. "I don't care what job you do. Just do your best and be happy. Then I will be happy."

"I can be all of that and *still* help you," I told him.

Dad was a builder and worked long days, sometimes seven days a week. He loved his work, but he wanted more for me.

"I use my hands," he replied. "It's good, hard work. You are clever, boy. You can use your brain. Dream bigger."

"So builders don't use their brains?" I joked.

"Of course we do," he told me. "But you must follow your own path. Now, get going. You'll be late. It's your birthday."

"Are we still having a family party too?" I asked.

"On Sunday," he replied. "At the gurdwara."

Each year of my life, my parents held a service at our local Sikh temple. It was a chance to get our huge family together. To give thanks for our blessings. There was a big party after.

"Cool," I said. "Better get ready for tonight then."

He scratched his head under his grey turban. "Bloody shelves," he said as I went up to my bedroom.