



CHAPTER 1

Fire isn't the only thing that can burn you.

Fire, at least, tells the truth. It doesn't disguise what it is. What it can do. How it can turn everything in your life into ash in a split second. Sure, it provides heat, warmth. It's a necessity in life. Its tiniest flicker giving the cozy vibes you want on the shortest, coldest nights during Chicago winters—the ones where your mom makes hot cocoa for the family and you snuggle under old kantha quilts watching classic Bollywood movies while snow falls. But for all its cozy comforts, a single lick of flame can scorch the entire earth.

A thin, shiny scar runs along the side of my right thumb. It's small now, barely half an inch long. I was six years old and playing with matches. I didn't even know what a matchbox was. But the red tips of the long wooden matches in the fancy cardboard box with a colorful illustration of a fox and squirrel on the cover attracted my inquisitive hands. I didn't understand what would happen as I struck the match against the side of the box. A satisfying scratching noise

and then a tiny whirl of flame caught and stuck to my skin. My dad answered my screams; a split second later, the flame died out.

He examined the skin, rubbing a burn ointment on it as he calmly explained to me what had happened. How close I'd come to real danger. Fat tears ran down my cheeks and plopped onto the counter. "It's okay, beta," my dad whispered as he cradled me close to him. "But you could've been badly burned. You can't play with matches. I might not always be here to put out the fire." I nodded and snuggled in closer, smelling the whiffs of sandalwood soap he bought in bulk from Patel Brothers on Devon Avenue.

That scar became a kind of fidget. A shiny strip of skin I'd rub absentmindedly. At first, it was puckered and rough. As I got older, the scar grew smaller, smoother, but never completely faded. Some scars never ever go away. Some scars remind you that you let yourself get burned. Some scars remind you that pain is a constant companion.

It was a remarkably regular day for one that would change the entire course of my life. A cold morning in December with a weak sun leaking through the low ceiling of gray clouds. Drips of icicles had formed patches of black ice on the pavement overnight, and my dad had gotten up extra early to throw neon blue salt on the steps and sidewalk. My mom ran the beads of a tasbeeh between her fingers, whispering prayers as she sipped her second cup of chai, a messy pile of books and graded papers next to her laptop, ready for her 9:00 a.m. lecture at the university. Her first cup of chai was usually finished before my sister or I woke up, before my dad sauntered down the stairs, ready for work. My mom liked to take her first cup of tea in the quiet dark of the kitchen by herself. "Chai in the

morning should always bring saqoon,” she told me once when I’d woken early and found her. *Peace*. “That was your nani’s habit, your great-nani’s, and now it’s mine.” When she smiled—in the Indian way, without revealing any teeth—tiny wrinkles showed next to her dark eyes that brightened whenever my sister or I appeared in the kitchen, the sleep still in our voices.

On that deceptively ordinary day, my dad hurried down the stairs, adjusting the collar of his shirt under his gray sweater, which was on inside out. When I told him he was about to commit a fashion faux pas, he shook his head, yanking his sweater off and pulling it back on correctly. It was odd because he was usually meticulous about how he dressed, but maybe it was another sign I’d missed.

My little sister, Amal, was seated at the kitchen island, texting her friends about some ninth-grade drama. I slid a bowl in front of her and poured cereal for both of us.

“Good luck on your presentation today, beta,” my dad said to me. “Your thesis is brilliant.”

I had to write a poetry comparison for AP English. I picked this famous Bengali poem, *Bidrohi*, by Nazrul, and wrote about how it was inspired by Whitman’s *Song of Myself*. The British Raj banned *Bidrohi* because of its anti-colonial and rebellious spirit. And like Whitman’s poem, it’s about how the individual sees themselves as unique but also as part of the larger world. Nazrul’s work inspired revolutionaries. In his time, Whitman was banned, too. Even lost his job because of his poetry. They were both rebels.

I looked at my dad and smiled, noticing the unusual puffy dark circles under his eyes. He’d been working late on a big case the last several weeks. “I am the fury of wild fire,” I said, quoting Nazrul’s poem.

“I burn this universe to ashes,” my dad responded with the next line, then cleared his throat. “One thought . . .”

Oh no. When my dad got that pensive look on his face, it usually meant I was about to get peppered with questions. “Dad, no, please. I know what you’re about to ask. I don’t have time to change my presentation!”

“I’m not saying you have to change anything. But did you consider how each poet presented the role of the hero as the ordinary man?”

I scrunched my face up at him. “Dad! I thought you weren’t going to ask any more questions.”

“That doesn’t sound like me. At all. But in case you decide to pursue this topic for, oh, a master’s or PhD eventually, don’t you think it might be worth interrogating heroism in light of the wars that influenced each writer? Just a suggestion.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks, but I don’t think my five-page paper and slide deck for AP English is exactly PhD thesis-worthy.”

“Yet,” he added. I braced for the follow-up queries, for a mini lecture. When he started down a path like this, it usually didn’t end until he’d gone on about critical inquiry and the opportunities that awaited me at the University of Chicago. I was relieved he was too distracted to grill me any further.

I’d applied early action and received my acceptance the day before. I’d responded immediately. I was officially a Maroon, class of 2027. I was still walking around in a euphoric state while my dad already had my entire life planned. Only he wasn’t planning the future I thought he was.

“But no pressure, right?” I smirked. My dad smiled back at me,

his tired eyes shiny with held-back tears. He occasionally had these embarrassingly weird, sentimental moments. Not gonna lie, I didn't hate it. I was very much Daddy's little girl, always his coconspirator, whether it was for planning Mom's birthday surprises or for sneaking ice cream before bed. We were a little club of two.

"Dad, you have the nerdiest dreams for us," my sister said, shoveling cereal into her mouth.

Mom chuckled and glanced at my dad, suddenly buried in his phone. "All okay? No issue with the brief?" she asked.

My dad was a professor at DePaul Law School but wasn't teaching—he'd created the immigration and refugee justice clinic, and that was his focus. He was working on an asylum case that had been taking up more and more of his time. "Fighting the good fight." He nodded absentmindedly, still gazing at his phone. "The latest SCOTUS ruling is maddening. The entire line of inquiry was wrong. It's Lawyer 101 to—"

Amal and I looked at each other. We guessed he was about to bust out with his favorite mantra and beat him to it: "Ask all the questions. Be relentless in finding the answers."

He chuckled. "Okay, okay. I see my work here is done."

He began to hunt down his keys, which he always misplaced. "Try the pocket of your blue coat," my mom suggested. She was right, as always. Dad thanked her with a quick kiss on the cheek; then, jangling the keys, he rushed out the door, waving goodbye. He seemed to be in an extra hurry. I wondered if it had to do with the message he was absorbed with earlier.

A few seconds later, he walked back in, a blustery gust of wind following him. My sister and I looked up and then turned back

to our breakfasts, only half paying attention to him. “It’s colder than I thought it was,” he said, reaching for the maroon cashmere scarf that my mom had given him for their twentieth anniversary a couple of months before. He’d gotten her a new teakettle. Thinking about it now, she must’ve been disappointed. I mean, a teakettle for an anniversary gift? I can’t be sure because my mom never said anything, not to me anyway. She’s like my little sister that way; she swallows her feelings.

“Very dapper, jaan,” my mom said as he pulled the ends through a loop he made with the scarf.

My dad coughed and then cleared his throat before pausing to gaze at us. “My girls,” he practically whispered, his voice crackling. “My beautiful girls.” I waved away his extreme sappiness as he walked out the door.

We didn’t notice until later that the beat-up brown leather satchel he usually took with him every day was sitting by the front door. He never bothered to come back and get it.

He never bothered to come back at all.

When we all got home, Amal said something about Dad forgetting his bag, and when my mom looked at it, her face fell as if she knew something was wrong. That beat-up old satchel was his security blanket, Mom used to joke. She walked over, opened the bag, and reached in with trembling fingers to pull out a note. I looked over her shoulder as she unfolded the paper. A couple of sentences written in my dad’s neat, blocky handwriting. Words with enough fuel to turn our lives to ash: *I’m sorry. I can’t do this anymore.*

She crumpled the piece of paper in her fist and walked up the

stairs. We didn't hear her sobbing until after she slammed her bedroom door shut.

Then we were sobbing, too.

The cruel act of not being loved back by the person you love the most burns like white-hot phosphorus. Maybe it's not that there was no love, just not enough. Maybe they loved themselves more than they loved you. They might've promised they'd walk through fire for you, and you realized too late that they were the one lighting the match.