

Screams and shouts rend the air. My nose wrinkles at the stench of burning. Glowing embers float past like winking devils. The moon is low in the sky, swimming in and out of view thanks to the drifting smoke everywhere. The street heaves with men, shouting, yelling, running.

I check my watch: eleven o'clock. My immediate thought is to go straight back. Azeem once told me about something called 'fight or flight'. That's how people usually react when things get dangerous. Run away, or stay and defend yourself. And I definitely don't want to fight.

As though he can hear me, Azeem's voice rings in my head. 'Use that adrenaline to your advantage, Zubair. Go with it. You're not a quitter. Face your fears.'

The Six have been on my mind so much that, in a way, I'm not surprised I'm hearing my eldest brother. But despite his advice, all I want to do is flee that mob.

'You, boy! Move! Quick!'

At first, I think it's still Azeem. But then I spot her – a young girl sheltering in the porch of a nearby house. Even from where I am, I know who she is. My heart leaps.

Stuffing the mat into my rucksack, I head to her. Which is easier said than done. Bodies slam into me from all sides. My eyes are half shut from the smoke; they've also gone skedaddle, crossing so badly I'm struggling to focus. Within seconds I've lost sight of where I'm heading.

'Look up. Fix on one point. Keep moving towards it.' Azeem again.

The moon is peeping above the roof of the house where the girl was standing. Focusing on it, I start walking. My eyes are still wonky, but by creasing my brow I can bring them closer to where they need to be. All the while, I'm jostled and pushed about. I don't stop until I've reached the porch and jump up.

The girl is about my age. She's wearing a dark-green salwaar kameez, with a light-green dupatta round her neck. I blink several times, marvelling at her smooth, unwrinkled skin and a forehead free of that crescent-shaped scar.

Because this is Gran.

Noticing me staring, she pinches me. I protest and with exasperation she shouts that we're in danger.

'What's happening?' I ask, breathless from exertion and smoke. 'Who are these men?'

But even as I ask, I know. I'm in Partition. From studying the subject in history, I'm now in history itself. India has been divided in two, creating the new nation of Pakistan. And I'm on the 'wrong' side. I back into the darkness of the porch. Hordes of men stream down the street, their faces contorted in anger, shouting, cursing, lashing out at anyone in their path. Flames rip through houses, sending beams, walls and roofs crashing.

She fires back her own questions. 'Why are you out on a night like this? Why are you not with your family?' And, to herself, 'What is wrong with the boy's eyes?'

When Gran first came to us she said those exact words to Mum. I force my eyes to uncross. I can understand every word of her rapid-fire Punjabi. I've come a long way. In every sense.

Another group of men rushes past, this time wielding heavy-looking clubs. They chant: 'Hindustan, Zindabad! Hindustan, Zindabad!' Long live India! My insides shrivel.

Azeem whispers again in my ear: 'You have the power inside you. You've got this.'

The girl pulls me back into the shadows. More men run past, this time holding flaming torches. My heart pounds so fast I worry it will burst out of my chest.

Once more, Azeem breaks in: 'Stay calm, Zoo. Breathe. One. Two. Three. Four.'

I follow his directions, focusing on my breathing. Nothing else matters. Breathe.

'I'm trying to find someone,' I say. 'And something.' I can hardly tell her what.

She asks my name. I tell her, then ask hers, even though I know it – Farida. We jump as the crash of breaking glass adds to the cacophony. Men are smashing in windows. Others splash liquid from tins, then touch them with flaming torches. The houses go up in seconds.

As I watch, transfixed, I notice they leave some of the houses alone.

'They attack only the Muslim homes,' says Farida, peering over my shoulder. 'It happens the other way too – Muslims turning on their Hindu and Sikh neighbours. A madness has seized everyone. There are no winners here.' Her eyes glisten with tears reflected in the flames. She swipes them away. 'We have to go. I must find Akram. He said he would wait for me if we got separated.'

Akram. Gran's brother, who was killed during Partition. Gran has never actually said how he died, but the pain is clear on her face whenever she talks about him. Akram – the man who made my taweez.